

KATANA COLLINS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Wing Woman



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KATANA
COLLINS

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For Becca, Josh, Chandra, Melissa, Lori, Briana, Dawn, and Shalah!
The OG members of my Patreon page!
This one's for you!

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One
∞

HOPE

WHEN I WAS IN KINDERGARTEN, I had this friend who *loved* horses.

I don't just mean she liked them as a hobby... I mean she loved them. Lived and breathed horses.

You know the type, right?

Her obsession extended far beyond the occasional *My Little Pony* playtime.

She took riding lessons and spent more than my monthly rent on expensive riding clothes and gear that would inevitably just get covered in dust and dirt within an hour anyway. Her free time was spent in stables, cleaning, brushing horses, and shoveling horse poop.

She shoveled horse poop... *for fun*.

The concept baffled me in kindergarten.

It still baffled me now at age twenty-eight.

The bad news was ... I was pretty sure my current client was a quintessential *horse lover*.

The good news, however? We were in Texas. Where I was the one in the minority, not her. I had no doubt I could toss a pebble into this crowded bar and find a horse loving guy to be interested in this sweet girl sitting across from me.

Why was that good news?

Well, because she was paying me a lot of money tonight to help her find a date.

“What about him?” I asked. “Ten o’clock behind you.”

I didn’t dare point. Instead, I angled my chin in the direction of a man, mid-thirties, drinking an IPA. His suit was nice. It wasn’t Prada, but also not JCPenney. He had a good job I would guess, but not anything high-powered.

I glanced at horse-loving Maggie sitting across from me. Her long brown hair fell in soft waves around her face. She gave me a nervous smile and quickly turned around to look at him.

“No,” I hissed. “Don’t gawk at him.”

Her hands flew into the air as she grunted in frustration. “Well, how am I supposed to see who you’re talking about then?” She fell back in her chair, grabbed her margarita, and slurped a big gulp through the straw. “This is what I’m paying you for!” she cried and shook her head.

Wow. Most of my clients weren’t great at flirting, but Maggie was especially bad.

Out of habit, I went to twirl my engagement ring, only to be met with bare, smooth skin on my left hand. I flicked a glance down at my finger. Just a few weeks ago, a twinkling diamond would have winked up at me.

So instead of fidgeting with my ring, I brushed my fingers over the Hermes silk scarf I wore draped around my neck. I didn’t have a massive wardrobe like some women. Being from New York meant I had very limited closet space. But I made sure the clothes I did own were quality. Almost every designer item I owned was bought secondhand. It was a hobby of mine. I loved scouring eBay and thrift shops to try and find everything from Burberry bags to Jimmy Choo shoes.

Not only were they more affordable, but it was also fun.

Even still, someday I hoped to shop in the actual stores. To walk into Chanel or Stuart Weissman and buy whatever I wanted without having to

worry about whose stinky foot germs might be lingering on the insoles of the shoes.

“My friends told me I was hopeless,” Maggie said sullenly. “I guess they’re right.”

My attention snapped back to Maggie and the matter at hand.

Focus on your client, Hope. Not your own broken heart. And not your own stupid shopping sprees. After all, I was always better at finding love for other people rather than myself.

Ignoring the lump in my throat, I turned my attention back to Maggie, studying her closely. “You are not hopeless,” I reassured her.

She was beautiful. Naturally pretty. Her tanned complexion had zero foundation and only a touch of concealer around her eyes. A dusting of gray eyeshadow covered her lids with a swipe of mascara on her lashes and a little bit of lip gloss. A late bloomer, without a doubt. I had to be gentle.

Reaching for her purse, she shook her head. “This was a stupid idea,” she said, her voice cracking. “A professional wingwoman? What even *is* that?”

What even is that? That was me. Hope Marcoux-Evans: Professional Wingwoman. I’m like your specialized dating co-pilot. A cockcomplice. A cooter recruiter. Take your pick. Basically, I’m a matchmaker, but I take my job one step further. My clients are the bait and I’m the fishing pole, directing that chum through the fish-filled ocean that is the dating world.

And I am *damn* good at my job.

I darted my hand out resting it over hers. “Maggie, wait.” She froze, responding to my command immediately. “I’m sorry. We’re just getting started. You can’t expect to see results within five minutes of sitting down.”

She dropped her purse into her lap, lowering her voice to a whisper. “I don’t even know what I’m doing here. Paying you five hundred bucks to ... what? Be my pimp?” She shook her head again. “My girlfriends suggested this and... and I don’t think it’s a good fit.”

Her girlfriends. I nearly snorted, but swallowed my animosity. I had two

of the most incredible girlfriends in the world, but prior to them? I hadn't been so lucky. I had groups of "girlfriends" in college who swore up and down they had my back.

Oh, they had my back alright... they also had a knife and stabbed me with it in no time, ditching me at bars the moment some frat bro paid them any attention.

Then Maxie and Carrow came into my life. For the first time, I understood what having good girlfriends meant. But I wasn't so naïve to believe they were easy to come by. "I'm not a pimp, Maggie. I'm a wingwoman. A damn good one, too. Can I take a guess at your situation?"

"I already told you my situ—"

"You told me your friends suggested this because when you all went out, you kept getting overlooked."

"Right," she said.

"Well, let me add to that story with some theories I've got." I lifted my martini—Tanqueray, dry, extra olives, just the lightest coating of vermouth—and took a long sip. "I think you grew into your looks late... a lot like me. You were probably very shy growing up. Had a close-knit group of girlfriends. Most likely the star of your extracurriculars." I leaned back, studying her sculpted arms, long legs and torso. Limbs that were probably long and gangly when she was younger, were now supermodel gorgeous. "Volleyball maybe?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you a *psychic* wingwoman?"

I smiled. "Not exactly. But there's more. You grew into your body later in college. Maybe even after graduation. And suddenly, you started getting attention you didn't know what to do with. Your girlfriends who always saw you as a non-threat in college, were now finding reasons to not include you in their happy hour plans. And when they suggested you hire me, it wasn't because you were having trouble *getting* the attention... it was because you were taking the attention from *them* and they didn't like it. Not only did you

take the attention, but you didn't know what to do with it and eventually the men would give up on you." I took another big sip and then asked, "Am I right?"

She bit her bottom lip, sliding that pink hued lip gloss onto her front tooth. "That's amazing."

I shook my head. It wasn't amazing. It was simply close to my own story, too. Only with my story, my college 'friends' threw me to the wolves out of spite. Watching and laughing as I faltered and failed at flirting. Then they'd swoop in and take the guy that had shown me interest.

I'd been drunkenly left at bars by these so-called 'friends' more times than I could count. Ditched for their one-night-stands and left to find some way home myself. Finally, I got wise. Learned how to dress myself and flirt... and eventually *I ditched them*. For good.

I wasn't going to let Maggie waste as much time as I had if I could help it. By the time I was done with her, she was going to be smarter, savvier, and more worldly than I ever was at twenty-two.

I had all types of clients. Older women whose friends were all married and didn't want to go out. Younger women like Maggie who never gained confidence. Divorcees who forgot the nuances of flirting. Men who needed help finding dates—either generally or to a specific function.

"Here's the thing," I said, leaning in closer to Maggie. "I know \$500 per night is a lot of money. But my goal is not to have you constantly coming back to me for help. My goal is to teach you. Make it so by the time we're done, you understand how to do this yourself and you don't need to rely on me, your girlfriends, or anyone but yourself. When I'm done with you, you'll be your *own* wingwoman."

Her eyes lit up at that, blue and glossy, her eyelashes damned near hitting her eyebrows. "Really? And I won't have to ... like... put on red lipstick or eyeliner or anything like that?"

"You won't have to be anyone but *yourself*."

Her smile widened, genuine and beautiful on both the inside and out.

Finding her a man was going to be easy. But teaching her not to fall for lines and bullshit? That was going to be my challenge.

“Are we okay to get started? Officially?” I asked.

She nodded and I slid a contract across the high-top table along with a pen. “Then go ahead and sign here and here. Payment is usually due at the beginning of our evenings, but I’d prefer it if everyone in here didn’t see you paying me while we get started.”

She nodded and held up her cell phone. “Venmo okay?”

I smiled. “Absolutely.”

She tapped a few buttons and I heard the beep from my phone. “Okay, let’s get started. First lesson—never turn and gawk when I mention a guy. During our time together, I’m going to get a feel for who you like and throw out some of my own suggestions that I think will be a good fit...”

“Because you’re a psychic wingwoman,” Maggie said grinning.

I laughed too. “Something like that. So, let me show you how to look at someone in the room without them noticing. Tell me a random person to look at behind me.”

She sipped her drink as she scanned the room over my shoulder. “Oh wow,” she said. “That guy, over there, with the cowboy hat.” Using her index finger, she pointed to the back corner.

Inwardly I cringed. *Pointing* was never a good idea.

“Okay,” I said patiently. “Watch how I do this.” I grabbed my cell phone, pretending to be busy checking a text message. Then as I was facing the other way, I flicked my eyes up to the back corner booth where she had pointed.

I was momentarily paralyzed by the man I saw. He was sitting, bent over a half-empty tumbler of scotch. Muscles pushed against the 600-thread count white, button-down shirt he wore. One flex in the right direction could tear that shirt in half if he wanted. His dark hair peeked out the back of a dark brown cowboy hat and was long enough to touch the collar of his crisp shirt,

but still managed to look perfectly placed. A spray of stubble peppered his jawline and tattoos peeked out of the rolled up sleeves of his shirt.

Wow. Just... wow.

I lifted my gaze to his and noticed him staring right back at me. A smirk curved his full lips and he lifted his glass in my direction. He looked familiar. Very familiar.

Shit. I jerked back around, facing Maggie who looked at me skeptically. “*That’s* how you subtly look at someone?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks and I cleared my throat. “Uh... no. I got, um, sidetracked.”

She smirked, peeking around my shoulder at the man once again. “Can’t say I blame you. God, those dimples.”

My face flushed and I could practically feel the heat creeping up my chest to my cheeks. “Does he interest you? He could easily be our first target.”
Please say no, please say no...

I had never before had to professionally wingwoman for a guy I was so intensely attracted to. But if I had to, I would. Maggie was the priority here. Now I just had to convince my vagina of that.

Shaking her head, Maggie gave me a knowing smile. “He’s not really my type. Although, the man he’s sitting with? Yes, please.”

I stole another glance over my shoulder, spotting another handsome man standing up and leaving. He was slightly shorter, and a little leaner, but no less sexy. Texas really knew how to raise ‘em, didn’t they?

Unfortunately, the second man was leaving.

Bummer. But at least I got a sense of Maggie’s type.

Her gaze drifted once more over my shoulder in his direction and her eyes widened. “Oh my god,” Maggie hissed. “*Look.*” She pointed with her pinky finger as she brought her drink to her lips. “There are random girls taking selfies with him!”

Sure enough, three different women surrounded Cowboy Hat Man,

pressing their cheeks to his as they snapped a picture from arm's length. An immediate visceral reaction overtook my body and my spine straightened, going rigid at the sight. Was he famous?

My lady boner vanished. I would *not* date another famous guy. Hell no. Never again.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes at the way the girls twirled their hair, pushing their boobs together with their arms as they chatted with him.

I mean... sure. That could potentially work and get the man in bed with you, but where was the nuance? The mystery? You could walk up to just about any man in this bar, grab him by the back of the neck and say, 'Want to go fuck?' and he would have his pants down around his ankles, waddling after you before you could pay the bill.

"Wait," Maggie said. Then she went to work on her phone before her jaw dropped and her gaze darted back to the man. "That's Josh Gabriel. I knew I recognized him!"

I flipped through all the celebrity gossip I had in my brain—which admittedly wasn't much – and I came up empty. He looked familiar, but that name meant nothing to me. "Who?"

Her jaw dropped into a horrified expression and she looked at me like I had just pissed in her Cheerios. "You're joking, right? I didn't recognize him a second ago because his hat was pulled down. But he's a singer. Like, a really *famous* singer."

"Famous singer? Like... Pavarotti?"

Maggie rolled her eyes. "No," she said, drawing out the word to give it about a dozen more vowels. "More like Justin Timberlake meets Blake Shelton. How do you not know Josh Gabriel? Have you been living under a rock?"

She turned her phone so I could see a photograph of him leaning against a wooden fence. A horse leaned over the fence, its large nose pressing against his cheek. "And he is *staring* at you."

Well, that explained why I didn't recognize him. I didn't really listen to country music... or any of those pop top 40 hits. Nor did I pay attention to *E! News* and *Access Hollywood*. However... hot guys who ride horses? That was *very* much my thing.

"A famous country singer is staring at you and you don't care," Maggie said, shaking her head. "There's no way you're from Austin."

I smiled. "You caught me there. I'm here for a couple of months because my dad is getting married." *Again.*

My Father: The Manwhore. It was like a bad TV movie. "And since I'm here for a while, I figured I'd take on new clients, like yourself." Yes, shift the conversation back to business and away from the sexy singer.

Maggie's eyes darted back and forth between me and the stranger. "You don't want to go say hi? He seems into you."

I took a deep breath, pulling myself back together. "It doesn't matter if he's into me. I'm here for *you*. No amount of winks or smiles from a cute guy is going to make me abandon you while we're out."

Maggie snorted and rolled her eyes. "Well, duh. Because I'm paying you not to."

As true as that was, it went so much deeper than that. I leaned forward, catching her blue eyes with mine. "Yes, you're paying me. But even if you weren't, I wouldn't leave you for a hot guy. That's not my style. And any girlfriend worth anything would do the same."

"But... *I'll* be leaving *you* for a guy. Hopefully. Isn't that sometimes what going out is for?"

"Sometimes, but not always. And the sole purpose of why we're here is to find *you* a date, so yes, hopefully you will be leaving with a man one of these nights. Or at least getting his number." My voice lowered, growing even more serious. "I mean this with every fiber of my being. If you're ever in trouble, or uncomfortable with how a man is treating you? Or if you wake up somewhere and you need me to come get you? Call me on this number." I

tapped the contract where my cell phone was listed. “I don’t need a penny for it. If you feel unsafe, I will always be there for you.”

Her eyebrows knotted in the center of her face. “Why would you do that for someone you don’t know very well?” she asked.

I swallowed and my heart broke a tiny bit at the fact that she was asking me that.

“Because it’s what a decent human being does, Maggie.”

“But... I mean, I’ll probably just call one of my friends if that’s the case.”

Her friends. Right. Maybe I’m jaded... hell, I probably am... but those friends? They couldn’t be counted on. *I* could. “Good. You should call your friends. All I’m saying is if they don’t come through for you, *I* will. It’s just a back up. A precaution.” God, I hoped she never needed it. “In fact, go ahead and plug my number into your phone now.”

She seemed skeptical, but did as I said, tapping the screen with her thumbs.

When she finished, I took another sip of my drink and nodded. “Great! Let’s get started. Take a look around and let me know if anyone piques your interest. I’ll do the same.”

When I looked over my right shoulder again, he was gone. Josh Gabriel. All that was left was a half-drunk whiskey on the table and a few twenties slapped down on the table.

Probably for the best. I needed to focus on helping Maggie, not the hotter-than-hell country singer.

Two
8

JOSH

IN A BAR SWARMING WITH PEOPLE, it's hard for one person to stand out.

It's even harder for one to stand out to *me*.

I'm not saying that to be an asshole; it's just how it is. As a pretty well-known singer, I can't go to my dentist without someone offering to suck my dick. Not that I'm complaining. Clean teeth and a blowjob? There are worse things in life.

But typically speaking, if someone is standing out to me in the bar? It's probably not for any *good* reason. They're more than likely either a woman flirting shamelessly with me, a man picking a fight, or a group of fans dying to get a selfie. That's my life.

But this was different. My manager sat across from me. The small booth in the back of the bar was tight and the tops of my thighs pressed against the wood table as I sipped my whiskey. "That's her," he said, his eyes darting to the bar's front door as it swung open. "That's the matchmaker."

I rolled my eyes. The last damn thing I needed was a matchmaker. But my record label had made it pretty clear. This next album *had* to be a hit, or else I was on my own.

I didn't bother to look at first. "Jesus Christ, Matt. I can find my own muse."

Matt shook his head. “No, you can find your own *one-night stand*. But she will help you find a

muse. Someone to stick around for a couple months while you create the next masterpiece.”

I sighed, and turned to steal a quick glance at her. As soon as my gaze landed on those soft curves and long, brown hair, I couldn’t tear it away. My eyes fixed to her as she swept through the bar, claiming a middle table. And I literally mean *claiming* it.

There were two men having beers there and with a flip of her hair and a smile, she convinced them to give her the high top.

Alright, now, that in itself wasn’t magic. A hot chick swindling two men out of their seats? Not all that impressive. But then, afterwards... she did something so curious.

They bought her a drink, but she refused it. Instead, she sent them each a drink and when they looked at her with the same shock as I did, she called out to them from across the bar, “Thank you for the table!”

Rarely in my life had I seen a woman refuse a free drink if she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring – and this chick wasn’t. Furthermore, yes, she was beautiful. But a beautiful woman in the middle of Austin, Texas wasn’t exactly a rare thing either. So why was I so struck by her?

Her mouth turned up into a loose smile; a practiced smile. But her eyes? They were guarded. Locked down tightly as though she wouldn’t dare let anyone in.

“How did you find this girl?” I asked.

“That chick I’m seeing—Jackie. She convinced one of her girlfriends to hire her tonight. They have a meeting or something. That’s how I knew she’d be here. I guess Jackie and their other friends were tired of her cramping their style when they went out.”

Jackie sounded like a real bitch. “Are you serious with this Jackie girl?”

Matt shook his head. “Oh, hell no. She’s fun for a week or two and then

I'll be 'on tour' somewhere to get out of calling her."

Good. Hiring a matchmaker for a friend because she was 'cramping your style' while out? Then on top of that, telling a guy you knew for only two weeks where your friend was going to be that night? She didn't seem like the most trustworthy friend.

And Matt might be my manager, but he was also my best friend. So if he ended up in a serious relationship with this Jackie woman who would tell a random guy she was fucking where her friend was drinking at? Something was wrong with that picture.

He glanced over at the hightop table where the matchmaker was now greeting a young woman. "Damn," he hissed. "Look at that client of hers. She's fucking hot."

"The client who is friends with the current girl you're fucking?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said unironically, not noticing how fucked up it would be to start dating *this* girl next.

I glanced at the girl as well. She was pretty. Young though. *Really* young. "I'd say this Jackie chick was lying. No way that girl was cramping their style," I said. More likely she was jealous of her friend.

"Anyway," Matt continued, "Jackie referred her friend to this woman... Hope is her name. She doesn't call herself a matchmaker though..." He pulled out a business card from his pocket and read it. "Professional Wingwoman. Huh. That's a weird title, isn't it? Anyway, she's here visiting from New York City for a couple of months and looking for clients to fill the time."

I took the card from him and read it aloud. "Hope Marcoux-Evans, Professional Wingwoman." I rolled those words around in my mouth like a marble on a skating rink.

"Oh shit," Matt said, glancing at his watch. "I have a dinner meeting I have to run to." He jumped to his feet, stuffing his wallet into his back pocket. "Just do me a favor and watch her work for a bit. See if she'll be a

good fit.”

I nodded as Matt took off, nearly plowing over a waitress walking by with a few beers.

Hope’s light brown hair fell in waves just a couple inches beyond her shoulders as she leaned in, chatting with her client. I only caught a couple glimpses of her eyes as she turned profile. They were wide; wider than normal and she looked like she belonged as the star of some animated movie where she would sing at weird times and be dressed by birds and mice.

I sat there staring at her for a long time. Too long. I was already pressing my luck as it was being in public like this. The cowboy hat I wore low over my eyes was bound to fail at concealing my identity.

Any minute now, someone in the bar would recognize me; beg me for an autograph or a picture. The fact that I hadn’t had a hit song in years didn’t seem to deter masses of people from swarming. People loved celebrities; even rapidly growing has-beens like me. They were obsessed with them. As though meeting a celebrity somehow elevated their own statuses.

There was maybe a time when I believed in that too. When I was more concerned with being famous than with creating great art. But these days? Fame wasn’t nearly as appealing.

Taking my horse out for a ride on the ranch was. Keeping my mother’s legacy alive with the horse rescue was. Writing a soul-wrenching song was.

Only every time I sat down at my piano or with my guitar, I came up empty. My vacant, blank brain had nothing more to offer this world.

I hadn’t been in love since Jenn, and that was almost ten years ago. Nearly ten years ago, I destroyed her world – broke her heart and left mine an empty shell in the process. And while she was ruined, I wrote my music from it. Took the pain and created something raw and beautiful.

And I became an instant star.

I went on to sell millions of albums, benefitting from our break up while she... *didn’t*.

Well, that was the understatement of the year.

Emotion clenched my throat. I had to recreate that heartbreak in order to write this next album—but this time, I couldn't be so reckless.

I'll fall in love with her. Then I'll destroy what we build to recreate that heartache from ten years ago. The heartache that inspired me to write a best selling record. But I will make sure that I'm the ruined one; not her.

As I lifted the whiskey, I paused, the glass edge pressed to my lips. Hope's client pointed at me. *Huh. Well, that's weird. Does she recognize me?*

Just then, Hope turned, her phone in hand and shot a quick glance up at me. I couldn't help the smirk as it curved on my lips, but I didn't dare look away. Oh, hell no. I wasn't going to play those games. She squirmed in her seat and I noted the way she crossed, then uncrossed her legs.

The thought slammed into me before I had the sense to stop it: I didn't need her to *find* me a muse. *She is my muse.*

Then without warning, she spun, turning her back to me once more.

Oh, this was going to be fun. Just ask Picasso. Any good muse is earned, and not easily either.

I threw down a couple of twenties on the table for Matt's and my drinks and after snapping a few selfies with some fans, I slid out of the bar while texting Matt.

JOSH:

I'm in. I'll reach out to this wingwoman tomorrow.

Three
8

HOPE

THE GLASS SCREEN of my iPhone was pressed between my cheek and shoulder as I fumbled with my grocery bags and keys. “Are you coming home tonight?” I asked.

Dad chuckled. “I am home, Lovebug” he said. “I’ve been living with Viv for a while now.”

I knew that, of course. But he had come back to his condo to stay with me the first few nights I was here.

‘Bonding’ he’d called it. Micromanaging is what I called it.

“Why do you keep this place then?” I asked him.

He was quiet for a moment as I hiked my grocery bag higher on my hip and kicked my car door shut. “Vivian and I talked about it and we both thought it would be a wise investment to hold onto it. Properties around here are going up in value and with the short term rental market being so strong, we thought we could earn a nice side hustle renting it out. Unless of course you wanted to move here full time...”

“Dad,” I warned.

“Okay, okay. No pressure. I’m just saying. It’s here beyond the two months you need it.”

“So then, you won’t be coming back to stay over?” I asked, getting us back on topic.

“I won’t,” Dad reassured me. “I’ll treat that like it’s your apartment for the next two months. No unannounced visits.”

“Okay, cool.” I answered, masking how relieved I was. It wasn’t that I didn’t love my dad—I did, more than anything. But he was a lot to take. And having to live with him for two months might have destroyed us both. Living with each other through most of my childhood nearly did.

Hell, I hadn’t planned on moving back in with my father at age twenty-eight. Yet, here I was. I’d left all of my furniture in New York in the apartment Brent and I shared. He could have it all.

In one night, I packed as much as I could into a few suitcases and hopped on the flight down here to Austin to stay with my dad. It wasn’t the best plan in retrospect. But I needed to be down here for the wedding anyway. And I couldn’t stay in New York. Not when *every* little thing reminded me of Brent.

“You know,” Dad said, “Viv really wants you to be a part of the bachelorette party.”

I swallowed my groan. He’d already brought up this damn bachelorette party three times since I arrived in Texas. He wasn’t quite begging... yet. But when it came to women? They were his kryptonite. And Viv knew exactly where to shove those crystals to bring my dad to his knees.

“Dad, she has three daughters. I’m sure I won’t be missed.” Especially not once the tequila is poured and the banana hammocks go flying.

“Please, Lovebug. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. That’s why you’re here for these two months, isn’t it? To be a part of all these wedding things?”

I gulped. I hadn’t admitted to my dad the truth of why I came down yet. Though I assume he suspected. Occasionally, his eyes would drift to my bare ring finger—which only a few months ago had worn a 1-karat square-cut diamond.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. It wasn’t freaking fair that my fifty-year-old dad was getting to celebrate his fourth wedding while my one

engagement had crumbled like dust in the wind.

And he barely even knew Viv. They'd been dating just shy of a year. I knew Brent for four years and still couldn't cross that finish line.

I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. "Right," I whispered, not able to admit any of that just yet. I got my stubbornness from my dad and compared to him? I was a novice. Minor leagues to his major leagues. Peewee football to his NFL. "I just signed a new client so I have to make sure she doesn't schedule me the night of the bachelorette party." Oh, you can bet your ass she was going to schedule me for that night. Even if I had to offer it pro bono.

I could practically hear Dad's smile on the other end of the phone. "Wonderful, I'll tell Viv!"

"Dad, I said *maybe*—"

"Thanks, Lovebug. She's going to be thrilled."

"Dad! I didn't say yes yet!" But he had already disconnected the call. I sighed, looking up at the orange streaked sky. That was one thing I had to give the state of Texas over New York. Its sunsets were incredible

I hiked the grocery bags higher onto my arms, starting to walk up the cement path toward my front door as the bottom of the heaviest bag gave out, scattering my eggs, cheese, and deli meats across the sidewalk outside of my dad's apartment.

"Son of a bitch!" I cursed, clamping the almond milk against my thigh and rescuing it from the same ill fate as the eggs.

"Here, let me," a low, gravelly voice said from behind me.

I thought I'd been alone in the parking lot in front of my dad's condo. In fact, I was certain of it. I never pull in somewhere without checking my surroundings and yet, there was a man so close behind me that I could smell the minty gum on his breath.

Panic clenched jaw, my heart racing as basic instinct took over. I screamed and without thinking, swung the almond milk behind me, connecting the carton square with the stranger's jaw.

The cardboard container split. Almond milk rained down the man's face and shirt, some of which sprinkled onto me. But the milk container wasn't the only thing to bust open.

When my breathing slowed and my heart rate returned to normal, I blinked and the man in front of me came into my vision.

It was Josh Gabriel.

The singer.

The man from the bar two nights ago.

"What the fuck!?" he shouted, his hand covering a bleeding, split lip.

Well, hell. Who knew I had such a strong right hook?

"Oh my God." The nearly empty carton slipped from my fingers as I covered my own mouth in horror. "I'm so sorry... you—you scared me."

He took a step back and away from me as I tried to hand him a napkin from my purse.

"I-I can be a little jumpy. I'm so sorry..."

"A little jumpy? You went Tarantino on my ass." I cringed. Yep, note to self... a milk carton can draw blood in a pinch.

"On the upside," I said, "it's good to know all those cardio kickboxing classes I'm taking are good for more than just a tight ass."

A smile twitched from behind his hand, still pressed to his mouth. Thank God he was smiling. Some semblance of a smile, at least. People in need of an ambulance or a lawyer don't tend to crack smiles. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He sighed, pulling his hand away from his lip and inspecting the crimson blood staining his fingertips. "I think I'll live." Then his attention moved down to his shirt, which was saturated with almond milk. "My shirt on the other hand..."

"Send me the bill for the dry-cleaning," I said. But as I stood there apologizing amidst my scattered groceries, my gaze jerked back to Josh's.

Wait a minute. What *was* he doing here? There was no way a major pop

star and country singer lived in the same mid-level condo community as my father.

A sudden fear clutched my chest and once again, my heart thrummed as I dove a hand into my purse, clutching my keys. These bad boys could draw more blood than a milk carton, that was for sure. “What are you doing here?” I asked suspiciously and peered around the empty sidewalk, looking for signs of anyone else who may be able to help me or hear me scream.

He didn’t seem to notice the shift in my demeanor, which was good. That could work to my advantage. Instead, he was unbuttoning his shirt, one pearlized button at a time. Then he slid the saturated material off his tanned, flexed shoulders. I swallowed hard, my muscles clenching into a bundled knot of nerves.

Good. God. That was a lot of muscles.

Tanned muscles.

Flexing muscles.

Gulp.

“My manager, Matt, called you earlier today about hiring your services.” He used the shirt to wipe milk off his hand before offering it to me. “I’m Josh Gabriel.”

I tore my eyes away from his bare torso, then my eyes drifted shut for the briefest moment.

I’m such a spaz. Of course. *This* was the high profile ‘famous’ client I’d gotten a call about.

Snapping my eyes back open, I released the keys back into my purse and took Josh’s hand. “Right. I’m so sorry. Your manager only mentioned he had a high profile client who wanted to meet with me. He didn’t say that it was you, *Josh Gabriel*, specifically, though.” I fanned my hand out as I said his name, scrolling it above my head like I was reading it from a marquis.

Josh dipped his chin in concession. “Yeah, sorry about that. He’s pretty intent on protecting my identity.”

“He also didn’t mention that you would be coming by *tonight*. I usually schedule my consultations somewhere public. Like a bar.” Josh and I both bent, crouching to collect my fallen groceries.

Activating every ounce of energy, I tried to not stare at the way his abs flexed with the movement. It was seriously inhuman.

His throat bobbed as he spoke. A single bead of sweat glistening in the setting Texas sun glided a path down the thick column of his neck. “Well, I hope you can understand in my situation, that wouldn’t work so well. Discretion is extremely important and chatting about needing a matchmaker —”

“*Wingwoman*,” I clarified, taking the can of soup he handed me. “Matchmakers have books of clients and they match their clients only with others who have registered with them. I, on the other hand, not only help my clients find good candidates, but I teach them how to talk to those they’re interested in.”

I paused as we both stood up, each with an armful of my fallen groceries. I canvassed him from head to toe. Taking note of everything from the perfectly tousled hair that fell playfully over his ears to the ripped physique, to his Frye cowboy boots that looked well-worn. “You don’t strike me as the kind of man who needs a wingwoman, Mr. Gabriel.”

His lips pulled up into a cocky grin. “Thank you. My situation’s a little... different. And being that I’m recognized just about everywhere I go around here, I hope you can understand I’d rather not have this discussion at a bar.” With a pause and a quick glance around, he added, “Or here on your sidewalk.”

“Of course,” I said, shifting the items in my arms and unlocking the front door. I held it open with my foot, gesturing for him to come into the apartment. I set my groceries down on the counter and motioned to the living room.

Josh followed me inside, his milk-damp shirt draped casually over his

shoulder. He set the groceries he carried down on the counter as well.

Despite my dad's claims that he was planning to Airbnb this place, his stuff was still everywhere. He'd need to do a lot of work before it was ready for short-term rentals.

My heart pounded as I saw my dad's socks on the couch, carelessly flung on the arm of the sofa. I ran over, and grabbed them in my fist, cringing as I tossed them into his bedroom, then quickly shut the door behind me.

"Why don't I clean up those eggs on the sidewalk while you put your groceries away," he said, his southern drawl thick and deep.

I paused, turning to look at him standing there, shirtless in my dad's kitchen. "You're going to go outside and clean up fallen eggs... like that?"

He looked down at his shirtless chest. "Well, I no longer have a dry shirt to wear, so unless you have any better ideas..."

"The eggs can wait while I toss your shirt in the dryer for you—"

"Don't worry about my shirt. It'll be fine until I get home. Now those eggs on the other hand..."

"I'm sure the eggs will be fine for a little while."

He raised a dark eyebrow over blue eyes. "In this Texas heat, you're gonna leave a bunch of raw eggs sizzling on your sidewalk?"

I bit my lip. Shit, he was right. That wasn't a good idea. Even though the sun was setting, it was still hot as hell out there and would be for a while longer.

Well, if he didn't care about being shirtless outside, then why should I?

"Oh, alright." I handed him some towels, a large cup of soapy water, and a plastic bag from my kitchen. Then he disappeared out the front door.

Five minutes later, we both regrouped in the living room and I handed him one of my dad's T-shirts. Because I could not handle staring at Josh's shirtless torso for the next thirty minutes.

He glanced at the New York Giants shirt with a quirk to his lips and quickly shook his head. "Oh no, I can't wear this."

I took the shirt back from his outstretched hand, momentarily speechless.
“Why not?”

“Well to start with, it’s a *Giants* shirt. I’ll get my ass kicked stepping foot in Texas wearing that thing.” He stood up, grabbing his still damp shirt, and headed to my kitchen sink. “Does that dryer offer still stand?”

I stood as well. “Yeah, of course.”

Turning on my sink, he rinsed the almond milk from his shirt. Then after wringing out the excess water, he handed it to me and I popped it into the dryer.

I cleared my throat as we both sat back down on the couch, the hum of the dryer providing background noise. His arms flexed as he threw one over the back of the sofa, leaning casually against the cushions and I couldn’t stop my eyes from wandering down the tight muscles of his abs.

“So, Josh. Tell me a bit about what you’re looking for in a woman.”

A bemused smirk curved his lush mouth.

“Well, I have to be honest with you. I’m not looking for a date.”

That caught my attention. “You’re not?”

He shook his head. “No. You were right when you said I can get my own dates. And I do. Quite frequently, I might add.”

Okay. That wasn’t quite what I’d said. But I marked down the word *arrogant* in my notes. Not that I expected anything less from a celebrity. “What are you doing here if you can get your own dates?”

“What I need goes beyond that. It’s much harder to find, more difficult to vet.”

“What exactly do you mean?”

The ambiguity of his statement had my mind racing. Swimming with all kinds of scenarios. A woman that wasn’t a date and was difficult to vet?

“What I’m looking for is more nuanced. She’d have to sign an NDA.”

Oh, wow. Was he one of *those* men I read about in books? The sort of guy that had dungeons and whipped women and made them call him Master?

I could find a woman who was into that. And it was just the sort of kinky shit I would totally expect a seemingly wholesome and famous cowboy to be secretly hiding.

I narrowed my eyes at him, sitting taller in the armchair. “Why don’t you just spit it out already, Josh?”

Momentary surprise lifted his face, but disappeared as quickly as it came on. “I need a muse.”

“A... muse?”

Well, that was a new one. I’d been asked to find a lot of different partners for a lot of different people... but never a muse.

“Yes. A muse. A woman who will inspire my next album.”

I uncrossed my legs, ignoring the way his gaze scraped over me, as tangible as if he, himself, had been dragging his fingertips over my skin. Even though my brain ignored it, my flesh responded, pebbling with goosebumps. I brushed my palms over my arms in an effort to rub away the gooseflesh like a fleck of dirt.

“Oh.” Well, that wasn’t as bad as I thought. “A muse.” I wrote it down next to the word arrogant and circled it with a scribbled question mark beside it.

I wasn’t really sure what was required from a muse. Much like a girlfriend, it probably differed depending on the man and woman. “So... tell me a bit about what you’re looking for in a... um, a muse.”

He cleared his throat and pulled one leg up over his knee, flashing me a seemingly shy smile. Those full lips curved, revealing a row of flawless white teeth. That same liquid feeling I had experienced in the bar when I first saw him overtook my body again, and for a brief moment, I allowed myself to shiver in the deliciously tense chill that rocked through my core. My blood softened, rushing in quick, streaming pulses through my body.

The soft, early evening light streamed in through the open window, splashing a rosy hue across his tanned face. “Well,” his voice resonated

smooth like the bow across the string of a violin. “According to Greek mythology, there were nine muses... all daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who was known as the personification of memories. The idea behind the nine muses was that each specialized in a different type of art, science, or history. But each one had a talent for helping the Gods of Olympia forget the evils of the world while not losing their past sorrows and identities. Their job wasn’t to numb the pain, but through their song and dance, help the Gods relive, relieve, and heal the tragedies of their past. I want that. I want someone who will inspire me. Not only make me forget for a while or numb the pains of my past, but a woman who will remind me what it is to be alive. Someone who can help me move on from tragedies... not just forget them.”

Wow. That was... gorgeous. I’d never before heard a musician quote Greek mythology before. And though I wasn’t one for country music, if he could express himself that beautifully by simply answering one of my questions? Maybe his music was worth giving a try.

I chewed the tip of my pen, biting a little too hard on the plastic. I had to stop thinking like a woman who was drawn to the man before me and start thinking like his employee. That’s what I was. His *wingwoman*. Not his *woman*. “That’s beautiful. Truly.” He beamed with the compliment. “But, um, it’s not exactly *helpful*.”

“How is that not helpful?” He tilted his head, his smile slipping, and those bright eyes wrinkled into a curious frown. “I want a woman beautiful enough to inspire my music. Smart enough to stimulate my mind. Wise enough to guide me. Patient enough to bear with me. Wild enough to free me, but tame enough to keep me from going over the edge.”

I swallowed my snort. “Oh, is that all?”

His eyes tightened at the corners. “If you’re not up to the challenge, I can find someone who is, Ms. Marcoux-Evans.”

“That’s just... a lot to expect out of one woman.”

He smiled. Just the tiniest smirk of the right corner of his mouth and that

sexy dimple was back. “I expect a lot. But I give a lot, too. Mnemosyne’s daughters, the muses, each specialized in only *one* component of inspiration. I want the real deal—Mnemosyne herself. The personification of memories.”

I tapped my pen to the notebook. “When I asked what you were looking for, I meant more like... blond or brunette? Tall or short? Funny or sultry? Not which Greek Goddess most fits your weird criterion.”

He flashed that smile again and leaned forward, resting his elbows onto his knees. His broad shoulders flexed with the movement. “I see. Seems like I’m more of a big picture guy and you’re more about the details,” he said quietly. His eyes traveled down my body, landing briefly on my neck.

Thick silence filled the space between us and I could feel each one of his slow breaths like I was drinking in his exhalation. Then, clearing his throat, he broke the silence. “Okay then. My big picture criteria hasn’t changed, but I’ll add some details... for you. To start, I’ve always been partial to the girl next door.”

My thoughts went immediately to Maggie and how she had spotted Josh at the bar. Based on her love of horses and the photo on his website with a horse, maybe Maggie would be a good muse for him?

“But not too young,” he added. “I want a woman; not a girl I have to teach.”

Nope, not Maggie, then. And then immediately after, I was flooded with relief. I scribbled *girl next door* down on my notepad. “Good. What else?”

He shrugged and leaned back on the couch once more. “That’s about it. Nothing too Hollywood for me. Everything else we’ve got to discover while we’re out and about.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I really don’t recommend that. Having a list in hand is helpful. There’s so much you don’t know when you’re looking at someone from across a bar. And with you being so high profile—”

“Okay then,” he interrupted, his expression shifting as it moved across my face and body. “I like brown hair. Not too dark, but also not anything

from a bottle. Natural chestnut brown hair.”

I swallowed as heat swirled at the center of my breastbone. Out of instinct, I ran my fingers through my own light brown hair. I’d always considered it mousy. Not blond enough to be striking, but not dark enough to be considered glamorous.

“I’ve always been partial to whiskey brown eyes. A girl who can have a killer comeback ready at any moment, and who can be just as comfortable around me in heels as she is in flip flops.”

He’d just described *me*.

Like... exactly me. My toes wiggled against the foam sole of my flip-flops and I swallowed as that prickly heat in my chest flared into a fireball.

I cleared my throat and at the last minute, remembered to scribble down what he’d said. “Right,” I said, hardly recognizing the throaty rasp of my voice. “Anything else?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “She has to be willing to ride a horse.”

My gaze flicked to his crotch for only a fraction of a second.

Crap. I jerked my gaze back to his eyes and he gave me a knowing wink. “A *real* horse. Although handling *that* might be good, too.” He emphasized the word ‘that’ with a small flick of his hips and grinned at my flushed cheeks.

I scribbled horseback riding down into the notebook, avoiding his gaze and taking deep breaths to calm down my heated skin. “What would it mean to be your muse? What would be expected of her?”

His grin was disarming and curved slightly higher on the right side of his mouth than the left side. “Well, she’d be exclusive to me for the time we’re together. I want someone I’m crazy about. I want to fall in love with her. Real love. The kind of love that makes me unable to stop thinking about her when she’s not around. Where I can’t keep my hands off of her. The kind of love where she’s just as sexy in a baggy T-shirt, cooking breakfast in the morning as she is in a gown on our way to the Grammys. Someone who prefers to

spend most nights quietly at home rather than out being seen. Someone who isn't enamored with me just because I'm famous." He swallowed hard and for the first time since I'd spotted him at the bar the other night, I saw something real behind his eyes. Not just a performance.

"That's not a muse, Josh," I said quietly. "That's a soulmate. You're looking for your soulmate."

He blinked rapidly and just like that, the curtains were drawn once more. Josh the famous musician was back and the man seeking a soulmate was gone. "No," he said, his voice sharper than a knife's blade. "Well... yes. But it's different."

"How?"

He drew in a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, to start with, I'd want her to move in with me relatively quickly. It sounds demanding, I know, but I need a muse to be there when creativity strikes. And since I never quite know when that is..."

"You need her to be at your beck and call?"

Gross.

Normally, that would be tough to find. A woman willing to move in with a man almost immediately? But something told me that with Josh, most women wouldn't object.

Even still, I snorted, and with a shake of my head, I snapped my notebook closed. "I don't run a brothel or an escort service, Mr. Gabriel. If that's what you're looking for, Nevada isn't all that far of a drive."

"Believe it or not, it's not about the sex. She would have her own room. Her own bathroom. We wouldn't have to share a bed *ever*. I can be in love with my muse from afar. In some ways, it might be better if she never falls for me. But you asked what makes a muse different and *this* is what. For me, at least. Like with a painter – sometimes they need their muses to sit and pose for them. And who knows when the mood may strike to create their art. I'm the same way. Sometimes I'll need solitude. Sometimes I'll need her

company to write my music.”

“And what if she has her own job? Friends? Family? Her own life? You can’t expect her to just drop everything to be there when you need her to be.”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” he insisted. “She can have her own life. Hell, I prefer that. How boring would it be if she didn’t? But that’s why her moving in with me is so important. So I get her all the other moments of the day.”

I bit my tongue, studying him for a long beat. Then with a sigh, I opened my notebook back up and resumed taking notes. “Fine. What other expectations do you have from your muse?”

“She needs to be willing to make public appearances. Having the press take her photo can’t be a deal-breaker.”

“Anything else?”

“I would pay for her to keep her current home or apartment, even after moving in with me. Just in case the, um, living arrangement doesn’t prove to be permanent.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are you anticipating it *not* being permanent?” Even though I knew the statistics of the couples that get together with my services, if he was entering a relationship knowing it had an expiration date, that was something I should know.

He paused for longer than I was comfortable with. “A muse is rarely permanent,” he whispered. “And I’ve learned from my past relationships to be prepared just in case.”

I gulped at how much that rang true in my own life. Even though Brent and I had been together for four years, we only moved in together when we got engaged six months ago. If I had found a sublet for my rent-stabilized apartment instead of dissolving my lease, I would be in a very different situation now.

As it stood, flying here to Austin to stay in my dad’s condo was my only option left. I’d crashed with my best friends for a few weeks directly after.

And even though they both claimed it was fine, space in New York City was limited. And their studio apartments didn't lend itself well to long-term couch-surfing.

And for me to find another apartment in New York City? It was going to cost me. \$3,000 a month to be exact. And most apartments require you to put down first month's rent, last month's rent, and a deposit. All together, I needed about nine thousand bucks on top of my normal expenses living in New York—cell phones, metro cards, health insurance. Business was going well, but it wasn't going *that* well to where I had that kind of money in savings.

I looked around the condo that my father was also keeping and I wondered if on some level, after four marriages, that was also why he was holding onto this place. With his track record, he'd be crazy not to.

Josh cleared his throat, bringing me back to the present. "I would feel terrible if I asked someone to move in with me, give up their home, only to have it not work out within a few weeks. Asking someone to move in with you immediately isn't completely reasonable and because of that, I want to make sure that we're being responsible and careful. Just as a precaution."

It sounded like a monologue. Like a well-rehearsed speech. He paused, looking around the apartment. His eyes scanned the large flatscreen TV and the black leather sofa with a cooler beside it. His gaze narrowed. "Is this... is this your apartment?"

"It's my father's. I'm only here for a few weeks." Snapping my notebook shut, I clutched it a little too tightly in my lap. "Well, Josh... may I call you Josh?" It wasn't exactly a question. If we're going out with me as his wingwoman, we needed to be on a first name basis.

"I prefer it."

"Good. Josh, I'm sure I can find you the perfect muse. I can send you a copy of my contract tonight for you to look over. My fee is \$500 a night. Let me know your schedule and we can get our first night out in the calendar—"

He reached into his wallet and five hundred dollars cash, passing it to me from over the coffee table. “How about starting tonight? Right now?”

With a quick clear of my throat, I diverted my eyes, still too distracted by his bare shoulders. “I’m sorry... tonight? I thought you said you had trouble out in public?”

“I do. But now that we’ve hashed out the details, it won’t look like I’m out with a professional matchmaker. I would hope you’re skilled at discretion?”

From behind me, a buzzer sounded. He stood up, walking over to the dryer and pulled his shirt out.

“I’ve built my reputation on discretion,” I said.

“Great. Here in Austin, folks are used to seeing me out and about. Doesn’t mean there won’t be people bothering us for photos and whatnot.” He shrugged into his shirt and there was only the faintest shadow where I had spilled the milk all over him.

Tonight. *Right now*. Well, on the bright side, perhaps I could find this guy his muse and get him out of my life for good.

He was too tempting. And the way he looked at me? A shiver cascaded down my spine. It didn’t seem like he was looking for a muse—it felt like he was looking for *me*.

Which was ridiculous. He wasn’t here to choose *me*. Always the wingwoman, never the woman. And frankly, the few times I *was* the woman, it didn’t end well.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Let me go get changed. Some of that almond milk landed on me too.”

“Just don’t put on anything too fancy. Where I’m taking you, jeans and cowboy boots work perfectly fine,” Josh said, looking me up and down.

I looked down at my jeans, flip-flops, and tank top. Normally, I would put on something nicer. Maybe a small heel; shoes that weren’t overly sexy, but sophisticated. But what I wore with female clients was totally different than

what I wore with male clients. “I don’t have cowboy boots. Well, unless you count my Cole Haan peep toe booties—”

“What do you mean you ain’t got boots? In Texas, that’s the dress code. We’ve got to change that.”

“Well, luckily I’m only here for a couple months, so I doubt anyone will care if I break the dress code—”

“Thought you said a few weeks?” Josh pressed, his mouth pinching.

I shrugged. “I’ll be here until my dad’s wedding and then maybe a couple weeks after.”

I slipped into my bedroom and grabbed a plaid button down shirt from my closet. Something not so revealing.

Being Josh Gabriel’s wingwoman meant making myself as non-threatening as possible to other women. Though something told me that wouldn’t necessarily sway them in their attempts to meet Josh.

Four
8

JOSH

“WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DRINK?” I nearly had to shout over the line dancing and loud music surrounding us.

I watched Hope closely as she looked around, taking in her surroundings. Somehow, she made an understated plaid shirt and jeans look formal. Like a girl in a costume, she simply didn’t belong, even though she was dressed the part.

And she did, in fact, put on those Cole Haan peep toe booties. They were sexy as all hell. Especially when I kept imagining them propped on my shoulders.

But they were no cowboy boots.

“Beer?” she answered, dragging my thoughts out of the gutter.

“Is that a question or a statement?”

With another quick glance over her shoulder, she shrugged. “You tell me. I’m not really sure what else to order here.”

Just what I thought. “They make a mean Texas Tea—it’s sort of like an adult Arnold Palmer with a Texas twist.”

“What’s the Texas twist?”

“Bourbon.” *Lots* of bourbon. “Mixed with pretty much every other alcohol there is.”

“Soooo... it’s a Long Island Iced Tea.”

My eyes narrowed, but I softened the glare with a smile. “Fightin’ words. Careful what you say in these parts, Yankee.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll try your ‘Texas Tea’.” She threw air quotes around the cocktail name, but I was still choosing to take it as a win.

I squeezed my way toward the bar and caught the bartender, Nina’s, eye. It was busy—hell, this place was always busy. She gave me a nod from behind the bar as she poured a beer for someone else. “Your usual?” she called out over the crowd to me.

“Please,” I shouted back. “My usual and one Texas Tea.”

She sent me a thumbs up high in the air and went back to pouring for the other patrons. Turning back to Hope, I hitched my thumb over my shoulder, pointing to Nina. “Best bartender in all of Texas,” I said. “We went to high school together.” I left out the fact that she was one of the few people from high school who still talked to me.

I wasn’t all that popular with my local peers after Jenn and I broke up.

Hope lifted a brow and peeked over my shoulder, carefully watching Nina.

No, not watching... scrutinizing. “Muse material?” she asked, a gleam of hope in her caramel eyes.

I shook my head. “Not a chance.” I wasn’t risking one of the only friends I had left. I had to fall in love with my muse, let her break my heart. And while I cared about Nina, there was no way she could be that person for me. Not to mention, she’d see it coming from a mile away and call bullshit before we’d even had one date.

Somehow, she had managed to stay friends with both Jenn and me. She’d watched from the outside and knew the whole story.

She knew every move I had because she had watched me use them on her best friend—and then on practically every woman in this damn bar.

A piece of Hope’s chestnut brown hair fell from behind her ear, landing across her forehead. Slowly, I lifted my hand, dragging my fingers across her

face and tucking the stray hair behind her ear.

Blinking, she tilted her head to look at me. My heart pounded, blood roaring in my ears as I got lost in those eyes of hers.

And as I stared, falling into a trance, I heard the whisperings of a tune in the back of my mind. A song was coming to me.

I got lost in her eyes, deeply lost in her eyes...

She ducked away from my fingers, still resting at her temple. “Hey,” she said, “no one is going to let you hit on them if you’re acting like you’re here with me.”

The song vanished, disappearing from my brain in a puff of smoke.

Fuck. I needed to start carrying around a notepad if I was going to be hanging out with Hope. “But I *am* here with you.”

“Yes, you’re here with me. But you’re not *here* with me, you know?” she said, dragging out the vowels of the word *here*. Her gaze flicked up and over my shoulder, staring at something on the opposite side of the bar before she finally sighed and added, “You’ll never find your muse if it looks like I’m your date for the night.”

How was I supposed to tell her I’d found her already? That *she* was my muse. Or more importantly, how would I convince her to say yes? She had her guard up... and generally speaking, that was a good thing. Because I could tell she wouldn’t fall in love with me. But I sure as hell could fall in love with Hope if I let myself.

So how did I win over a woman whose walls were so high, she could barely see over top of them?

I coughed into my fist as Nina delivered our drinks. Saved by the booze.

Again, her gaze locked on something over my shoulder at the other end of the bar. Her golden brown eyes flashed as they narrowed and I turned to look in the direction of her glare. “What do you see?”

I followed her line of sight to where a woman and a man were at the other end of the bar, chatting. The woman seemed disinterested, looking at her

phone. The man, on the other hand, seemed very interested and was sitting way too close. The girl scooted her stool away and shifted her shoulders so they were angled away from him.

“Give me one minute,” Hope said quietly. Then hopping off her stool, she waved Nina over to us.

“What’s up?” Nina asked. “That Texas Tea okay for you?”

“Honestly? I haven’t tried it yet,” Hope said.

Nina’s brow popped higher and she flicked a glance at me. Most people would have lied and just said it was fine. But that wasn’t Hope’s style.

“Okay,” Nina said. “What can I do for you then?”

“I’ve been watching that guy down there with the redheaded woman. I’m not positive, but I think he might have slipped something into her drink. She hasn’t been paying attention—”

“Say no more,” Nina said and grabbed a walkie-talkie from beneath the bar. Pressing a button, she spoke quietly into the device before setting it back down and giving Hope a quick nod. “Thanks for looking out.”

Hope nodded in return, giving Nina a fleeting smile that was anything but happy.

“Want me to call the cops or anything?” I asked.

“No need,” Nina said as two large bouncers rounded the corner and stood on either side of the man. They took him by each arm and all in all, he was kicked out swiftly and relatively quietly, all things considered.

Nina slipped the drink away from the startled-looking woman and poured her a new one, tapping the counter. “Keep a closer eye on this one,” Nina said, then dipped a few strips of paper into the discarded drink, placing the tests into a plastic baggie. She handed them to the bouncer and continued on with her job as though nothing had happened.

I stared at Hope, my eyes wide. “You saw that from all the way over here?”

She nodded. “Well, I think I saw him put something in there. I won’t

know for sure—”

“Oh, he did,” Nina confirmed. “That’s what those strips of paper were. They’re a quick test of the drink and if it turns blue, then there’s Rohypnol present. Luckily we have systems in place for this sort of thing. Cops are on their way. I’ll issue a statement later after my shift.”

“I can give my statement too,” Hope said and grabbed a pen from her purse. She scribbled her name and number onto a napkin. “Give them my information and I’ll sign an affidavit of what I saw.”

“Thanks,” Nina said, holding the napkin up and tucking it into her back pocket. “Usually guys like that confess right when they see the strip test. But if not, I’ll give them your info.” Once again, Nina ran off to the other end of the bar where someone called for her.

I, on the other hand, sat there dumbfounded. “Thank God you were here,” I said.

Hope shrugged one shoulder to her ear. “Women need to be diligent about these sorts of things.” Bringing the Texas Tea to her mouth, she swallowed hard, her eyes not quite meeting mine. “It happens way more than most people realize.”

Then in a blink, her worrisome expression vanished and she was back to all business. I could have gotten whiplash from the sharp change in her personality. “So,” she stated, “let’s get started.”

I glanced carefully around the bar, tugging my hat lower over my eyes to avoid being spotted. “And how exactly do we begin this sort of... thing?”

She pressed her lips together, looking around the bar. “Typically, first I try to get a feel for the sort of women you’re interested in. Who do you find appealing, just from a first glance?”

Who did I find appealing?

Hope. I found Hope appealing.

Everything from the way she bit down on her straw as she took her first sip of tea to her keen eye and attention to her surroundings to the way her jet

black eyelashes framed gorgeous brown eyes. Her sexy pouty lips and quick wit. Fuck, the next eight weeks were going to be a bitch.

I never wanted to fall in love again. Never thought I would have to. And if I did, I especially didn't want to have to end it.

I swallowed hard, slugging more of my whiskey than I should have. The problem was, no one cared about music when the artist was happy and fulfilled. People loved the pain. They loved anguish and broken hearts. Happy music didn't win Grammys and that was the damn truth. And this numbed man I'd become wasn't inspiring any form of greatness.

Ruined women were my specialty. And fans came to expect these songs from me.

Ask any of the great artists... the best muse is one that's complicated.

The best artist is one that's heartbroken.

The best paintings, the most widely diverse sets of art, take the viewer on a journey of emotions. No one wants to look at a series of pure happiness. People want the heartache.

Do you think anyone would have cared about the Mona Lisa if she had been laughing in that painting? Hell no.

Except my producers were right. It was tired these days... still harping on the same heartbreak from ten years ago?

It wasn't like I'd been celibate since Jenn. But the supposed heartbreak of a woman I had known all of two nights didn't quite land with my audience either.

My usual stand-by music wasn't working anymore. I needed a revamp of my career; my passion. Or maybe I needed to find a new career altogether if this muse plan didn't work.

My throat grew tight at the thought of giving up music.

While rationally I knew that might be an option, I couldn't stomach the thought. I needed music. It fed my soul in a different way than the ranch did. And they were interconnected.

The music career helped pay for the ranch. Helped keep my mom's legacy alive. The fundraisers helped, but they weren't enough. Not for all the horses that needed our aid and rehabilitation.

One of my favorite songs by the legendary Willie Nelson started playing. Several people around us shouted, throwing their hands in the air and rushing to the dance floor. I gripped my whiskey, taking a sip, ready to let his music take me on a journey. It was quickly broken by Hope's voice cutting through his soulful crooning.

"What in the hell is everyone so excited about?" she muttered. I opened my eyes and peered at her as she glanced around the bar in utter confusion.

Laughing, I stood up, taking her hand and dragging her toward the dance floor. "C'mon, Yankee. Lemme give you a little dance lesson."

She leveled me with a gaze that probably would have worked on most men. But I wasn't most men.

"I studied ballet for twelve years," she said. "Don't think I need a lesson from you."

"I'm not talking about ballet. I'm talkin' the two-step. Around here? Willie Nelson is legendary. His song doesn't come on without you getting on your feet and moving. It's sacreligious."

"Wait... you mean that old guy who wears bandanas?"

I chuckled. "Yep, that's the one. You ever stopped to listen to his music?"

"I'm sure I've heard some of his songs before," she said, shrugging. "I mean, everyone knows On the Road Again."

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes and instead, placed my whiskey in her hand. "Close your eyes," I instructed.

She sighed, but did as I told her.

"Now, sip this whiskey and feel his song. Feel that slow, but toe-tapping beat with each pulse of your heart." I placed my cool palm over her heart and tapped my fingers gently in rhythm with the music. Her chest hitched beneath my hand and I had to swallow a groan as my fingers brushed against the silky

skin of her clavicle.

Slipping my other hand around her waist, I rocked with her to the slow beat and drawl of Willie's voice.

I leaned into her ear, whispering, careful not to compete with his genius words or crooning voice. "Willie Nelson has a song for every life event imaginable. Whatever you're going through, he's got a song for it. He can cut through boundaries and burrow into anyone's soul. He's the musician that taught me how much power we have in creating songs."

She blinked open, looking at me with wide eyes. "You learned from Willie Nelson?"

I couldn't help my grin. It was such a naïve question. "Not personally. But listening to his music taught me more than any guitar lesson my mama and daddy ever paid for."

She stared at me thoughtfully as the song Buddy came to an end. The people slow dancing on the floor erupted in applause—even just for a jukebox song. "Have you met him? Now that you're...you know... *famous*?"

She said the word with such disdain, that it brought all kinds of questions to the forefront of my mind.

"Briefly, once. He was amazing. Kind, generous. Every year, I want to invite him to this benefit thing I do at the ranch. He's a huge Texas fan and supporter—maybe the biggest, but I always chicken out."

Her brows creased. "Hard to imagine you chickening out on anything."

"I know," I said, exaggerating. "I'm so damn manly, right?"

She laughed and handed me back my whiskey. "*Exactly*."

"What about you?" I asked. "What's your story?"

"You're not paying me to learn about *my* history—"

"Hey," I interrupted, "it's my money. Let me spend it how I want to."

She rolled her eyes again, but this time a smile crept in. "I live in New York City. My dad's getting married in a couple of months, so I came down early to uh... to help him with the last minute planning and stuff."

This time I did narrow my gaze at her. “You came down two months early?”

She nodded, but avoided my gaze. “Yep. I’ll head back after their honeymoon.”

Something wasn’t right. Coming down a couple weeks to help before a wedding made sense. Or flying in and out for the various events—bridal showers, bachelorette parties, and what have you. But two months?

I studied her, raking my gaze over her face then down her body. My eyes landed on her hands which were twisting around each other.

Or rather, more specifically, she was rubbing at her left ring finger. Her *bare* left ring finger. Which had a slightly paler hue in a small ring near her knuckle as though she’d recently taken off a ring.

I brought my eyes back to hers which were now staring down at her drink. “Bad break up, huh?” It wasn’t really a question, though. I already knew the answer. And based on her sigh, she knew I knew.

“Bad doesn’t even begin to define it.”

“Is he a cheating bastard?”

She swallowed and circled her fingertip over the edge of the straw, now rimmed with pink lipstick. “Yep. With another Broadway actress. Someone who could help his career, I guess.”

Fucking bastard. I was a lot of things, but I was no cheater. “So, you came here to escape him.” Again, not a question.

“That was one reason. Only—” she stopped herself and shook her head. “No. Tonight’s about you. Finding your muse. Not me and my stupid engagement.”

“Come on. I’m *asking* you. It’ll be easier for me to open up if you do the same.”

After a long pause, she blew out a tight breath through pressed lips. Then, grabbing her Texas Tea, she took a long sip through the reed straw. “Fine,” she said on an exhale. “He’s a Broadway actor. A well-known one. I mean,

he's not as well known as *you*, but by Broadway standards, he's famous. Everywhere I go, there are billboards featuring whatever new show he's in. He's interviewed on talk shows, performs at the Tonys and on Good Morning America. Bars and restaurants have his signed headshot framed on the walls. Not to mention, all the everyday memories. The restaurant where he proposed. The coffee shop where we would read together every Sunday. The karaoke bar where he'd always kick everyone's ass and out-sing them."

I almost snorted. *I dare him to try to out-sing me.*

But one look at her eyes welling with tears and I kept that thought to myself. She rubbed her lips together just before clamping her eyes shut. Then, just like that, after a couple deep breaths, she opened her eyes and the tears had vanished. "Anyway. That's my saga. It sucks, but it's nothing special. Nothing that plenty of other men and women haven't gone through before. I'll be fine."

But there was something in how she said *fine*. I had no doubts she would be fine. But the resolute way she stated it suggested something darker. Like she had vowed to be fine at any or all cost. "Sounds like he was into his own fame a bit too much."

She arched a brow at me. "I haven't met a celebrity who isn't."

"Touché."

If I knew men... and I think I did... there was one thing that would bother any ex. Seeing his ex-fiance trading up with a bigger and better celebrity. Especially one that craved the spotlight as it sounded like her ex did. It sent my mind whirring with ideas.

"Anyway," she continued with a tone of finality to her voice. "Are any women here striking your interest?"

And just like that, we were done talking about her.

I cleared my throat, recognizing her blatant change in subject, and glanced around the bar. Not a single woman in here kicked my heart into overdrive like only a few minutes with Hope did.

“Well,” I said, “I want a woman with her hair color .” I tilted my head toward the bar where a girl was leaning across ordering from Nina. She had curly, chestnut brown hair. Then, I shifted my gaze to where another girl was riding the mechanical bull. She had straight, blond hair with sleek layers just below her shoulders. “But with her *style*.”

Hope’s gaze swept the room right along with me and she nodded with what I was saying. “Her clothing style?”

“Her *hairstyle*,” I clarified. “The clothing style needs to be versatile, as we talked about before. Someone who can dress up and be comfortable in heels on a red carpet, but who can also dress down and come riding horses with me at the ranch.” My gaze swept down Hope’s body to her long, muscled legs, covered in the tight denim of her jeans. Her perky breasts pushed against the buttons of her shirt with just the tiniest bit of cleavage swelling from the top. Enough to catch my eye and stir something behind my zipper, but not enough to be inappropriate. And I’d seen her dressed up the other night in her black pencil skirt, pink sleeveless top, and stilettos. She’d been a knockout then and she was a knockout now.

“Okay,” Hope answered. “Anyone else catching your eye?”

I held her gaze a moment longer, purposefully. Then with a quick swipe of my tongue across my lips, I jerked my head to Nina. “I need a muse who can handle me. Call me on my bullshit like Nina.”

“You know it, baby,” Nina chimed in, overhearing us as she walked by.

I grinned and sent her a wink, which she responded to by flipping me off.

“Okay then,” Hope said, smiling at Nina. Apparently, she liked the idea of me being put in my place.

“And I want her to have her own career. Her own ambitions, but preferably be her own boss so I have time with her while I’m writing this album.”

Hope put her drink down, the sound of it hitting the bar echoed over the white noise of the surrounding conversations. “Okay, I think we’re getting

ahead of ourselves. We won't be able to determine her career tonight in the bar. Just... look around. Pick out a few women that might visually be what you're looking for. Then we'll narrow down the pool of women from there."

I scanned the bar again. I made an effort. Truly. Swear to God. I looked for someone else—anyone else—who may have fit the bill for my muse. But there was no one. Not even the slightest spark of an interest for anyone else here in the bar with me.

No one except the one woman sitting across from me.

I slowly turned my gaze back to Hope who was watching me with intense eyes.

"Well, there is one woman I'm intrigued by."

Her eyebrows jumped and her expression dropped in shock. "Really? That's fantastic. Who?"

I leaned in closer to Hope. So close that our elbows brushed where we were each leaning on the bar. "She's standing really close to us, so I have to be coy," I whispered.

Hope's lips formed an o-shape and I couldn't help but notice the sheen of moisture across them. Wet. Ready. Ready for me.

I swallowed a groan.

Like a pro, she kept her eyes on me, dropping her voice to match my whisper. "Okay. Just tell me where she is and I'll subtly glance her way."

"Well," my lips were so close to her, our faces couldn't have been more than two inches apart. "It's *you*. You're the only woman in this bar I'm interested in pursuing."

Her lips parted as she let out a gasp so quiet, I easily would have missed it if I wasn't paying such close attention to her. "Me?"

I studied her reaction. The way her pupils dilated with the news. The quick swipe of her tongue across her rose-colored lips. The way her breath hitched and her skin lifted in goosebumps that quickly disappeared.

"Absolutely not, Josh. We have a working relationship and that's all. If

this is going to be a problem, then we should void our contract right now. Do I make myself clear?”

I smiled. It was a triumphant smile. Because even though she said no, she didn't see what I saw. Lust. And desire. For the briefest moment, I could tell she wanted to say yes.

Look, I'm not a creep. I would never force a woman to be with me in *any* way. But I also know what I saw. And based on that... Hope Marcoux-Evans will eventually say yes.

She'll become the spotlight of my world.

I'll fall desperately for her—she was exactly my type. So similar to Jenn. And with what she told me about her ex, she's clearly still in love with him, even if she shouldn't be. There was no way she'd fall for me.

Which made us the perfect match.

I'll fall hard...

And she'll shatter my heart beyond repair.

Five

8

HOPE

WAS HE SERIOUS?

He wanted *me* to be his muse? Was this man crazy or just plain stupid?

I know I'm not altogether hideous to look at. I'm even attractive on my good days; plain on my bad days. But weren't muses supposed to be ... stunning? Like if Giselle Bundchen and Megan Fox had a love child.

And let's be real, I'm no Giselle. I'm no Megan Fox. I'm *maybe* Maggie Gyllenhaal on her worst day. Look, Maggie Gyllenhaal is pretty... beautiful even. But she's no Giselle.

So what the hell kind of game was Josh Gabriel playing at right now?

I opened my mouth to speak, but Josh held up his hand, palm toward my face, shushing me with that one simple movement.

I narrowed my eyes, glaring at him. *Not the right move to win me over, Josh.*

And if his smirk was any indication, he knew it too, and didn't care. "You are exactly who I'm looking for," he said.

"You're not listening." I crossed my arms and deepened my glare. "I said *no.*"

"I know you did. But hear me out." He paused, then added, "Please?"

With a scoff, I dropped my arms out of the crossed position and grabbed my Texas Tea to sip... which I had to admit was delicious. Rolling my eyes, I

said, “You have sixty seconds.”

“Sixty seconds? Guess I better make them count.” He took a long sip of his whiskey before putting it down on the bar beside us.

I arched one brow at him. “You just wasted *ten* on your drink. Not a good start.”

He let out a deep breath and rubbed his hands together. “Okay, listen. We don’t know each other well. Obviously. But what I *do* know is that while we were spending time together, no one else in this bar has me intrigued as much as you do. None of the women here are more interesting or more beautiful than *you*.”

I swallowed hard, listening intently to him. He was making me feel special. Wanted. And that was something I hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“ You could gain a lot from this, too.”

I felt my brows deepen between my eyes. “How’s that?”

“You want revenge on your ex,” he said simply. I had the distinct impression he intended for that to be a question, but it came out more like a statement.

Either way, he wasn’t wrong. I was pissed at Brent. And Summer. The actress he traded up for. She was more well-known than him in the New York theater scene.... which was saying something since he was *very* well-known himself.

Even still, she looked good on his arm at parties and red carpet events. The memory of their first picture together burned in my brain. It was plastered all over the *New York Post* with a hideous picture of me beside it looking pathetic. Like the love-lost loser I was.

Breaking me from the awful memory, Josh gently took my hands. The warmth of his palms were comforting wrapped around mine, which were wet and chilly from my sweating, spiked iced tea glass. “For a guy like your ex, dating me will be the ultimate revenge. From what you’ve told me, he craves the spotlight, right?”

I nodded, seeing where he was going with this.

“Exactly.” He gave my hand a gentle squeeze. “So you dating *me* will torture him. Our images will be plastered all over every magazine. TMZ will report on us. He will see you looking fabulous everywhere.”

Heat crept up my chest at the thought. I wanted that more than anything. I wanted Brent to see what he was missing. I wanted him to regret his infidelity and know he made the wrong choice. To know just how badly he fucked up.

Then, as if reading my thoughts, Josh added, “He might even come crawling back to you. Begging you to take him back.” Josh leaned back onto his barstool shrugging. “I mean, that part is your call after our contract is up. Personally, *I* wouldn’t take back a cheating bastard, but that’s just me.”

I swallowed hard and it went down like a glob of wet sand.

Would I take Brent back if he came crawling back? My throat burned at the thought. My brain said no. No way, no how. But my heart—my aching heart twisted at the thought of having Brent back in my life. “And what do *you* get out of this?”

He looked at me like I had three heads. “A muse. I get a muse, a new hit album, and a date for a couple of months that’ll keep women from pouncing on me at events.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to read the subtext of his words. He couldn’t *only* want a muse. No one was that transparent, right? “But...why me? I still don’t understand what the hell it is you see in me, specifically.”

I looked around the bar where I was surrounded by gorgeous women. Women of all shapes and sizes; there was a woman for every taste here. I was not the cream of the crop. And Josh’s infatuation with me was unsettling.

Josh held my eyes as he blinked slowly. A moment of vulnerability slid over his features. “I can’t explain it, Hope. Every time I look at you, lyrics start to pop into my head. The whisper of a melody haunts my brain. No one else has inspired that sort of creativity in me in years.”

“No one else *yet*. You haven’t even tried to find someone here. And

we've only just met."

He smiled in an utterly disarming way. "I love the way your eyes seem to darken as you become passionate. Like warm honey." He dropped my hands and reached up, gently brushing my hair away from my cheekbone. A shiver tumbled down my spine and my breasts tingled at the feel of his touch against my skin. "And the way this piece of hair always finds its way into your face."

I tried desperately to ignore the pinch behind my breastbone. The innate draw I felt toward him. I tried to pretend like my breathing wasn't becoming slower, deeper, and like I wasn't getting lost in his deep cerulean eyes.

Could I do this? Say yes to one of my clients? For the first time in my career, could I allow myself to be *the* woman, not just the *wingwoman*?

I'd been so careful for so many years in the dating pool. So cautious and aware, never falling for the lines. And when Brent and I met, there was no cheesy pickup line. He didn't come on to me or try to impress me. He was just a cute guy who was a waiter, trying to make it as an actor in the toughest city in the world.

I swallowed hard. None of that mattered now.

I thought Brent was different, but I was wrong.

It was all the same and there was no escaping it. Watching my father wed and divorce four women? I guess I didn't expect much good out of people anymore.

You might call it jaded.

I called it realistic.

Look what it got me when I let my guard down and started dating Brent after all these years – a broken engagement. A cheating ex. Not to mention, homeless.

But holy hell, I wanted to say yes to Josh Gabriel. I nibbled my bottom lip, remembering the tight sinews of his bare chest in my living room a mere couple of hours ago.

It would only be temporary—I'd be going back to New York in a couple

months anyway. Why shouldn't I allow myself a bit of fun? Of course, I'd have to return his money, but that wasn't an issue. I could find other clients. I had two months to come up with the money for another apartment. I could do that. Especially down here in Texas where I was staying in Dad's condo for free.

I opened my mouth, not quite ready to say yes, but not altogether about to reject the idea. As I went to answer him, a beautiful woman with hair so blond it seemed to gleam under the lights of the bar stepped between us.

Literally.

She walked right between us, cutting me off from Josh. I stood there, dumbfounded, staring at her perfect ponytail, curled ever so carefully at the ends, not a strand out of place.

"Josh Gabriel?" she asked. Though she wasn't screaming and jumping up and down, there was anticipation in her bright green eyes. Eagerness. Intrigue. "Oh my god, I almost didn't recognize you with the hat hiding your face. Can I get a selfie with you?"

Josh didn't miss a beat. He tilted his head just so, taking her phone from her hands and holding it out in front of them. Then with a quick tug, he pulled her into his side, smiling for the camera. "Say cheese, darling."

Three other women circled around him, like sharks swimming around an injured seal. "I told you it was him!" the blonde said to the other women.

The next thirty seconds blared with a sequence of squeals and *oh my gods* so loud, it nearly burst my eardrums. One by one, the women came forward for their selfies. More of a crowd eventually gathered. They asked him to sing a few bars of his latest song. He grinned wider, leaning casually against the bar, sipping his whiskey, seeming to bask in the limelight in a way that completely surprised me.

This man who was now signing autographs and smiling for selfies seemed so different than the Josh I'd been getting to know these last couple hours.

Then again, hadn't I already proven that I couldn't trust my intuition when it came to this sort of thing? Weren't celebrity types all the same? Whether they were Grammy-winning singers, Broadway stars, or hell, even a YouTube five-minute sensation.

I snorted, shook my head, and turned away.

I'd gotten the impression that Josh didn't want the spotlight. That he enjoyed privacy and he resisted going out in public to avoid situations like this. But right now he seemed to be delighting in it.

A redheaded girl elbowed me aside, craning her neck to get a view so I quickly stepped out of the way, not wanting any part of this scene in front of me.

From behind the bar, Nina caught my gaze and rolled her eyes, tossing the rag against the bar and wiping the wood grains.

"Is it always like this?" I asked her over the loud crowd that kept pushing me further and further to the outskirts of the circle.

"Always. He usually gets one drink in before it becomes a free-for-all. Honestly, it's common knowledge in these parts that this is his watering hole. I think some of these broads come here simply in the hopes of spotting him."

I glanced to my left, now just able to make out his face and cowboy hat over the crowd of women. There was a pang of regret deep in my gut and a part of me, a part larger than I cared to admit, longed for him to notice me. To break through the crowd and come check on me. If I was truly his muse, wouldn't he do that?

But he didn't. He didn't even glance my way.

Nina snorted beside me. "You'd think they wouldn't want anything to do with him since his music is all about how he breaks women's hearts." She shook her head and tossed the rag into the sink behind her.

I raised a brow. "That so?"

"Oh yeah. Wait... you didn't know?"

I shook my head. "I've never actually listened to his music."

It was her turn to raise her brows at that admission. “But... you knew he was famous, right?”

“Well, we’re not actually together. This is business.”

She paused, then quietly added, “It didn’t look like business.”

My stomach turned. She was right. In a matter of hours from our meeting at my apartment, he had flipped our business relationship on its head.

He’d managed to make me question my practices and my way of life and doing business. I swallowed and gave into that awful, sick feeling that rose from deep in my belly up into my throat.

Nodding, I turned back to her. “You know what? You’re right. Thank you, Nina. When he dislodges these women from up his ass, can you tell him my answer is no and that I will return his check to him?”

The corners of her mouth tipped to a small smile. “I’ll tell him. It’s too bad though. I like you. You’d be good for a guy like Josh. You wouldn’t take his shit, I can tell.”

Josh’s words from earlier rang in my ears. *I need a muse who will call me on my bullshit.*

I didn’t answer. I *had* no answer. So instead, I gave her a little wave and backed out of the bar toward the door, pulling my cell phone out of my purse and opening my rideshare app for a car.

Four minutes away. That felt like an eternity. Would he notice I was gone within four minutes?

I hoped not. But even as the thought entered my mind, Josh came barreling out of the bar, calling my name. “Hope! What the fuck, where are you going?”

I remained calm. To the naked eye, no one would be able to tell I was fuming mad. Embarrassed—no, *humiliated*. My breathing was steady, my clutch on my purse gentle. *Calm. Stay calm.*

“I’m leaving,” I answered.

“Why? What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I’m just—”

“Leaving, yeah I heard you.” He paused, staring at me with those cerulean eyes that never once strayed from mine. Like he was challenging me. “Are you mad at me?”

“Nope, not mad.”

He paused, looking confused. “You’re not mad, but you’re leaving.”

“That’s correct. But while we’re at it, unfortunately, I don’t think this business relationship is going to work.” I reached into my purse and pulled out the check he had given me earlier that evening. “Here’s your payment back. It’s clear that the lines are now blurred and that’s not how I operate my business. Good luck finding your muse, Josh.”

His bright blue eyes narrowed, studying me. “Your nostrils are flaring and you’re chewing the inside of your cheek. Still want to claim you’re not mad?”

“I’m *not* mad.”

“Right, you’re just leaving. And firing me.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s hardly firing when *you’re* the client.”

“You’re right. The one being paid usually can’t fire the payee.”

I made an effort to relax my nostrils. Always my tell, my dad claimed. “And yet... here we are.” I held out the check further to him, waving it in the cool night air. “Take your check, Josh.”

“Tell me why you’re mad,” he said and stepped directly in front of me. Not in a confrontational way; it was anything but threatening. Pleading would be a better description. He was pleading with me to be honest.

I sighed. “Again... I’m *not* mad. However, it was clear to me in there that you love the crowd. And it took you several minutes to realize I was gone and even then, I’m going to take a wild guess and say that Nina probably alerted you to that fact.”

He blew out a deep breath from pursed lips. “I’m famous.” He tossed his hands into the air and they fell to the outsides of his thighs. “What do you

expect me to do about that? People want my picture. They want my autograph when I'm out. Sometimes it's cool. Other times it sucks, but it's just a part of my life now."

"I get that," I said, impressed with myself that I was able to remain so calm. "I really do. But you asked why I was leaving and that scene in there made it obvious we aren't a good fit. And it cemented my belief that I am definitely *not* your muse."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a humorless chuckle. "Actually, if anything, you just proved without a doubt that you *are* my muse. A good muse would never let me get away with ditching her for fans. I would introduce her to them. Hold her at my side. Tell them which songs she inspired." He paused, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Then again, you didn't agree to be my muse... so I *couldn't* have done any of that."

"Nor would you have," I said, clarifying. "Not without us having this talk. Regardless, I'm not going to be your muse. And now that I know you think of me that way, I doubt we can successfully work together." Just then, my car pulled into the lot. Thank God. This conversation needed to end. The longer I stayed here in front of him, the more at risk I was of him convincing me to stay.

I opened the back door and slid onto the leather seat, pulling the seatbelt across my chest.

Josh stopped the door just before I closed it. "Wait. What if we work out a deal? I can pay you more—"

"I don't need more money, Josh." That was a bold-faced lie, but he didn't need to know that. "Besides, it seemed to me like you could have tossed a quarter to that crowd in there and found a muse."

He snorted. "I could have tossed a quarter and found a one-night-stand, not a muse. There's a huge difference and I think you know that."

I paused, taking a deep breath into my lungs. "Well, it doesn't change anything—"

“Twenty thousand dollars. As a retainer for your exclusive help over the next two weeks.”

A gulp lodged in the thick column of my throat.

And based on the way Josh’s eyes gleamed, he saw my reaction. “I need to find my muse before the fifteenth or else I won’t have time to write my album. I’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars up front. Right now.”

Twenty. Thousand. Dollars. I was so stunned I couldn’t move. My ass felt plastered to the leather seats as I stared open-mouthed at Josh. His grip on the open car door loosened just slightly.

“Ma’am,” the driver said from the front seat. “Are you ready to go?”

“I—um, just a minute.”

I needed that money. That sort of payment would cover my exorbitant costs for a new apartment in New York City and then some.

“I’m coming with her,” Josh told the driver, then shut my door and rushed around to the other side of the car, hopping in the backseat with me. “I’ll come back for my car after you get home safely. My mama would kill me if I took a woman out and didn’t see to it to get her home.”

“I didn’t picture you to be a mama’s boy,” I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

He was silent beside me and when I stole a glance to my left, he was staring solemnly out the window. “She died seven years ago,” he said softly.

Well, crap. I’m a piece of shit. “I’m sorry, Josh. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He sent me a small, sad smile. For a glimpse, I saw remnants of him as a little boy. That same flash of vulnerability I had briefly witnessed earlier.

“Ma’am?” the driver asked. “Are you okay with him joining us in the car?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, it’s fine.”

The driver nodded and in a thick southern accent added, “You change your mind at any point, just say the word and I’ll pull over and kick him to the curb.”

I smiled, unable to help myself. I liked this driver. A lot. “Understood.” The car slid smoothly out of its parked position and turned onto the road back toward my apartment.

“Well, that guy is terrifying,” Josh whispered to me, leaning across the arm rest.

I raised my brow. “Uber driver and bodyguard. Who’d have thought?”

Josh became suddenly serious once more. “I meant what I said. Twenty thousand dollars,” he said. “Exclusive to me. I’ll deposit it into your account tomorrow. Then you’ll have two weeks.”

“Two weeks or... what? I give you the money back? Then I’m out of two weeks of work with other clients and with nothing to show for it.”

He swallowed, his blue eyes heating like the center of flame. “Two weeks to find me a muse... or you yourself have to become the muse. You keep the twenty thousand either way for that two weeks of work. And if you become the muse, I’ll add on an additional thirty thousand dollars.”

The breath punched from my lungs. I swallowed, thoughts buzzing in my head. I could really, *really* use that kind of money. Twenty thousand for two weeks of work. Another thirty if I agreed to six weeks as his muse.

Wait. *Exclusive*. He said it was exclusive. “I already signed a client for my time here, so I can’t give you exclusivity.”

He nodded thoughtfully, pulling that corner bottom lip between his teeth. “Is there only the one client?”

I nodded. “She’s the only client I’ve signed so far, yes.”

He looked to the ceiling, thinking for a second before he shook his head. “I can live with that. Exclusivity except for her. Sign no other clients until after the fifteenth. If you find me a muse by then, great. If not, you have to sign on for six weeks as my muse.” He held out his hand. “Deal?”

“Not just yet,” I said. “This can’t be some elaborate scheme to get me to consent to being your muse.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, tilting his head innocently. But I saw

right through the naive act of his. He chewed the inside of his cheek and said, “It’s not a scheme. I truly need a new muse. Whether or not you’ll agree to be that muse yourself. And I need said muse by the fifteenth.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Why the fifteenth specifically*, I wondered. Then again, I suppose it didn’t matter. The date provided was just semantics. “You can’t just say no to good prospects because you’d rather have me. If I present you with perfectly good muse options and you come up with stupid reasons to say no or turn them down for no good reason, I reserve the right to refuse to be your muse. In that case, I will refund you half of the twenty thousand dollar retainer.”

He sighed, obviously not happy with my added terms. “Fine. But you, in turn, can’t just take half the money and run. I *am* picky. And specific. So this is subjective. And me turning down potential women isn’t just to get my way, as you might think. I promise, I am out to find a good muse. Right now, you’re her. But I want to find someone who *wants* to be my muse as well. So even though I’m reluctant to do so, I’ll agree to your terms.” He held out a palm to me. “Deal?”

I’d be an idiot not to take this gig. Even with the way his eyes held mine and lowered to my mouth, lingering a moment too long as I nervously licked my lips.

I could do this. For twenty thousand dollars? I could find this man a muse and then never think about him again.

I took a deep breath and clasped his palm with mine.. His hand was warm and soft and as he shook my hand, his fingers grazed across my knuckles, shooting tingles of pleasure up my arm to the tips of my breasts.

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Josh.”

Six

S

HOPE

THE NEXT DAY, I couldn't sleep. I was up at five and went for a three-mile run to burn off my nervous energy. I avoided three calls from my father and instead got on my laptop with a steaming fresh cup of coffee in hand and began Googling Josh Gabriel to learn as much about him as I could.

I studied the women he took to events, but there wasn't a lot to go on. Most of the red carpet photos were of him and his mother with only a few exceptions, most of which were bleach blondes.

In the images, the blondes clung to him, their arms clutched around his waist or touching the breast pocket of his coat. He, on the other hand, seemed to maintain an emotional separation from the women in the images. His gaze would be in the other direction, smiling at cameras while they looked adoringly up at him. Or his hands would be in his pockets while they hung on his arm like a sloth on a branch.

Whereas in the images with his mother, he engaged with her. His hand draped over hers, resting on his elbow. He laughed, his eyes on her, while she threw her head back, smiling. Proud. She had light brown hair and eyes the same beautiful shade of blue as Josh's.

But six years ago, the red carpet images with his mother ended. And with another quick search, I discovered she passed away from cancer. Hence, the following series of blondes I saw in the images.

Okay, so he liked blondes. Despite what he claimed in the bar last night, photos don't lie. And his history suggested blondes. Bottle blondes.

I shook the judgmental thought from my head. It was mean and uncalled for. If being in my industry had taught me anything, it was that women, no matter what their hair color was, are beautiful. End of story. And to judge a woman based on that made *me* the dick. Not Josh.

A gorgeous blonde woman popped into my head. Viv's youngest daughter, Julianne—my future step-sister. She had silky blonde hair down to the middle of her back, striking blue eyes, and cheekbones so sharp, you could shave your legs with them.

She was also sweet. And smart. And owned her own company. As much as I tried to distance myself from Viv's kids, she was the one who didn't take no for an answer.

Yet, my stomach turned at the thought of introducing her to Josh. If they hit it off? It would mean I'd have to deal with them as a couple for every holiday, every family event for as long as my dad stayed married. Which, if his track record was any indication, wouldn't be too long. Even still, it would keep Josh in my life for far longer than I ever wanted.

I took a deep breath and started a new search, looking instead for various well-known society women in the Austin area who might be single. I left a few vague messages with well-known talent agencies and managers in the area, not mentioning Josh by name, but asking if they had a series of headshots they could send over.

But so far the woman that made the most sense as a muse for Josh... was Miss Texas.

She was a good fit. Maybe even the perfect fit.

She was beautiful. Poised. Great at being in front of a camera and red carpet ready. However, based on her Miss America interview, she seemed down-to-earth. A true Texan. And best of all, her "job" right now was being Miss Texas. Her job was making appearances. And doing charity work. But

otherwise, she wasn't working, which meant she'd have time to be there as his muse as needed.

I left a message with her manager, then poured myself a glass of wine and hit play on the playlist of Josh's albums. If I was going to be working for the man, supplying his next muse, I needed to find out what sort of art my client would be feeding. And I wanted to hear what Nina had mentioned—about all his songs being about heartbreak. I didn't want to send a client into a relationship knowing it was guaranteed to spoil like milk.

Who am I kidding? I wanted to know for my own sake. In case I landed in the position of muse myself. I swallowed down my feelings of panic at the thought.

Been there, done that.

I sighed, sliding down into a hot bubble bath, glass of wine in hand, and closed my eyes as the music played. I arranged the playlist specifically to be from his earliest work to his most recent music to get a sense of what his producers were implying: that he had lost his magic.

I've never been one for country music. It was too... I don't know. Twangy. Not my thing. And it was almost like most country singers purposefully exaggerated their accents to fit the genre.

But Josh's music wasn't like that at all. It was soulful. Deep and cutting, and that first album was both gutting and relatable in a dark way that I immediately understood why he won Best New Artist both at the Grammys and CMAs.

It was beautifully written and poignant. And I was left wondering who this Jenn girl was he'd sang about over and over—he even mentioned her by name in one song. She held the key to the sort of muse Josh was seeking. This was the album he was trying to replicate. So *she* was who we needed to find. Not literally, of course... but the figurative Jenn. His next muse.

I also heard the problem with his later albums and understood what his producers were saying. The music became repetitive after the first two

albums. Stale. He sang over and over again about heartbreak and sex. And one-night stands.

And that was it. The depth had gone from an abyss you couldn't see the bottom of to a kiddie pool at the Y. His music went from art to kitsch.

God, I hoped Miss Texas was it. It seemed plausible. Could I be that good at my job? That my first prospect would strike gold with Josh? With a deep breath, I leaned over the edge of the bathtub and sent the email to Josh. Then, with another sip of wine, I sank deeper into the bathtub to relax.

I only got about five minutes of relaxing bubble bath time before my phone rang. I rolled my eyes as I stood up and kicked the drain open. I reached for my cell phone with my pruney fingers, fully expecting to see my dad's number glowing on the screen. Instead, it was Max, my best friend and the woman who was the yin to my yang. While I helped people find their "person," she helped them plan their dream weddings. And our other best friend, Carrow, is a divorce attorney who hated her job so much that she changed careers and began her own private investigation firm catching cheating bastards. Her words, not mine. From hitched to ditched, that's what the three of us specialized in.

I answered the phone, putting it on speaker then slid my arms into my robe. "Hey Maxi Pad," I said, feeling my smile widen as her voice came over the speaker.

"Stop calling me that!" she squealed. "I hate that nickname." My grin widened.

"That's the whole point."

"Okay, fine," she said. "*Hopper*." And just like that, my smile faded. That nickname was also not a good memory.

"Okay, fine," I said. "No nicknames. Truce?"

"Truce."

I twisted my hair into a towel on top of my head, then cinched my robe tighter and walked out of the bathroom. "So, for what do I owe this call?"

“Just... checking in on you. We’ve been worried.”

I gave a humorless chuckle and fell onto my bed. “I’m... fine. I just wish I could talk my dad out of this stupid wedding. He’s been married four times, Max. At some point you’d think he’d give up on the whole nuptials thing and maybe, I dunno, live with a woman for a few years first.”

Max sighed on the other line. “Take it from me, because trust me, I should know. I’ve seen more than my fair share of weddings—weddings of couples madly in love and couples who clearly should not be getting married—nothing you do or say will change your dad’s plans. All you can do is love him and be there for him.”

I groaned. “Can I at least say *I told you so* to him when this marriage blows up?”

“*Hope*,” Max scolded me, and this time I groaned louder.

“Fine,” I pouted and forced myself to sit up in bed.

“How’s it going with your new siblings?”

“Which ones?” There were my soon-to-be stepsisters—Raeanne, Julianne, and Maryanne. Yeah, those were seriously their names. But then there were also the four half-siblings I didn’t know I had until earlier this year. Neil, Liam, Finn, and Addy Evans. My dad’s family from his first wife. A family I didn’t even know he had until recently.

Whereas I was simply the child of an affair. He hadn’t planned on me, hadn’t wanted me. So when my mother passed away when I was just a kid, he was suddenly stuck with custody that he in no way wanted.

I guess you could say he stepped up and did the right thing... for me. But I had no idea that my ‘right thing’ involved him completely abandoning his other family.

I went from being an only child for most of my life to now living some sort of fucked up adult version of *The Brady Bunch*.

“Any of them,” Max answered. “All of them.”

“It took a while, but I finally feel like I’m in a good place with Finn,

Liam, Neil, and Addy. Hell, Addy even seems to actually like me now... and according to Finn, that's saying something because he said she doesn't like *anyone*."

Max barked a laugh. "Then you two are *definitely* sisters."

"Hey! I like *you*. And Carrow."

"Not at first, you didn't! You spent a whole year banging a broom on your ceiling, yelling at us through the vents to keep it down."

I clicked my tongue and picked at a loose thread on my robe. "Well, maybe you shouldn't have been so loud up there. Clomping around in your heels at two in the morning," I muttered.

"I'm just saying, it took a while for us to win you over."

I sighed and rolled my eyes, happy she wasn't sitting here in front of me to see it. "But what about Brent? I liked him immediately."

It was true even though it hurt to admit. With Brent, there was no grumpy banter. No eye rolling when he delivered the cheesy pick up line. No arguing with him when he asked for my number.

I liked him immediately.

She grew quiet on the other line. Max was never quiet. My radar immediately went up. "Max?" I questioned. "What is it?"

She sighed and spat out, "I saw Brent. And his new stupid girlfriend."

I bit down on the inside of my cheek. "It was bound to happen eventually. New York is a weirdly small city sometimes and you live in my old neighborhood." There was a pregnant pause. "Is there more?"

"How much of your stuff did you leave at the apartment?"

"Not a lot. Some furniture until I get a new place, which Brent was fine with. Most of it I brought to your house with the exception of maybe three boxes. Sweaters, coats, those sorts of things. Items I didn't need down here in Texas."

"Ah. Well, I can go pick up those boxes for you if you want?"

My eyes narrowed. "Okay," I said. "Why?"

Again, silence.

“Max,” I snapped, “spit it out. Come on.”

“Okay, fine. She was wearing your leather coat. You know, the Dolce and Gabbana one with the mesh sleeves. I just... I thought maybe I should get your stuff out of there before she steals it.”

I exhaled a heavy breath. “She’s a Broadway star, Max. I’m sure she can afford her own Dolce and Gabbana—”

“You’re right, she can. So why the fuck is she wearing yours?”

Despite my long, slow breaths, anger boiled at the pit of my stomach. You can mess with my apartment. You can take my fiance. But you will not take my designer clothing. “Okay. Yes, I would love it if you were able to go pick up my remaining boxes.”

“Anytime,” Max said quietly.

“I’ll text Brent and let him know you’re coming—”

“No,” she said, cutting me off. “I still have his number. I’ll get in touch directly. You definitely don’t need to talk to him. I’ll text you when I have the boxes and your Dolce and Gabbana.”

I snorted a laugh and shook my head. “Thanks for looking out, Max.”

“And my offer still stands if your dad needs an expert’s help planning this wedding.” I rolled my eyes, smiling at my bestie.

“I will let him know, just like always.”

A knock came at my door and I tilted my head at it questioningly.

Huh.

“Who’s that?” Max asked, obviously hearing the loud knock as well.

“I honestly don’t know.” I eyed the door as I made my way over to peek out the side window.

Like any good Millennial, the idea of unannounced visitors and speaking with people is not high on my list.

There wasn’t anything particularly concerning or worrisome about a knock on the door, of course. But here in Texas where the only people I knew

were my Dad and his new family? I couldn't imagine who it might be.

Through the window, I spotted the back of a delivery guy as he turned away, heading back to an unmarked van.

It wasn't FedEx or UPS. But he was in a clean and crisp uniform.

And left on my doorstep was a largish box, wrapped with plain blue paper and a gold ribbon. "It's... a package."

"Did you order something?"

"No."

I waited until the delivery guy was gone, then grabbed the box and pulled it inside. Smoothing my fingers over the gold ribbon, I noted that it wasn't the cheap kind you find in the ribbon aisle of Michaels. It felt like real silk.

I tugged gently on the end and the bow unraveled to reveal a beautiful gold silk scarf.

"Holy crap," I hissed as my fingers hit the C insignia on it. "The package is wrapped with a Chanel scarf."

"No!" Max squealed. "Chanel?! Do you think it's from Brent?"

I shook my head even though Max couldn't see me. "He doesn't have my address down here."

Heat erupted over my face. There was only one person other than Brent who I knew who might wrap a present in a Chanel scarf...

I lifted the gold embossed envelope and flipped it open.

Give me a muse and I will spend our forever painting her with my words.

-Atticus

I read the card out loud and was met with Max's slow whistle of approval. "I like this guy," she said.

"You would," I joked. "You're a total whore for Chanel."

"Who *isn't* a whore for Chanel?" she shrieked in reply.

I unwrapped the paper carefully and tilted my head, not recognizing the brand name printed on the box... Lucchese. "Huh."

"What?" Max cried out. "What is it? The anticipation is killing me!"

“Have you ever heard of Lucchese?” I asked as I carefully opened the lid. Inside, a beautiful pair of black alligator skin cowboy boots gleamed back at me.

Based on Max’s hiss, she clearly had heard of the brand. “He did not get you Lucchese!”

I lifted the boot in my hand, the leather soft, yet firm all at once. Beautiful and completely impractical. “They’re an expensive brand?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? They’re one of the most designer and expensive cowboy boots you can buy!” she said. “They’re locally made in Texas, too. Send me a pic!”

I wasn’t exactly a cowboy boot sort of girl. And come to think of it, I didn’t think Max was either. “How do you know that?” I asked as I fired off a quick picture to her.

“I grew up in Tennessee, remember?” I heard a ping, then after a moment, Max gasped. “Oh my God, Hope! Those boots run four thousand dollars!”

Four thousand dollars? Was he insane? “Well, I can’t keep them.”

Max groaned. “Don’t give me that whole cliché.”

“What cliché?”

“That whole: *Oh, I couldn’t possibly keep these! It’s too much!*” She raised her voice several octaves, mocking a Disney princess.

“It’s not a cliché! It’s etiquette!” Yet, despite my arguments, I sat down on the couch and slid one of the boots on.

“Says who?”

“Um, Emily Post?” I actually had no idea who made up that rule. I crossed to the mirror and examined my reflection.

Good lord, they were gorgeous. They’re not even my style and I could admit they looked and felt like butter. And also looked sexy with my skinny jeans tucked inside of them. They made my legs look long and slender and the bit of a heel added to my height. I never would have picked them off the shelf, not in a million years. But now that I had them on, I was hooked.

But I couldn't keep them. If I did, it was as good as saying yes to being his muse. Especially with that beautiful Atticus quote he'd tucked into the notecard.

"Goodbye, boots," I said wistfully, tucking them back into the box.

Max sighed. "Byyyyyyye, boots," Max repeated. Then she added, "And I should really go, too."

She blew me a kiss and then hung up. I tossed the phone onto my bed and grabbed some sweatpants and a tank top from my dresser. As I was brushing my hair, my phone rang again.

I swiped to answer, not looking at the name. "What? Is Brent holding my Prada ransom too, now?"

"Not sure what you mean, but if you accept my offer to be my muse, I'll buy you all the Prada you want."

Josh. "Sorry, I thought you were my girlfriend back in New York."

"I get that a lot."

My eyes went to the boots, now tucked neatly back into their box. "Lucchese, Josh? Really?"

I could practically hear his cocky grin over the phone. "Don't you like them?"

I snorted. "Well, they're no Louboutins," I said sarcastically.

"Hmmm, noted," he hummed and I could practically see those dimples divoting his cheek as he pressed his lips together. "Did they at least fit?"

They did fit. Perfectly so. Which brought up a whole other line of questions... like how the hell did he know my shoe size?

"Not the point, Josh."

"I mean, that is sort of the point. If they don't fit, I need to exchange them for a size that does. But I could have sworn you'd be a size seven."

"How do you...? Ugh, nevermind. The point is, I'm not letting you buy me four thousand dollar boots."

"You said you didn't own any boots... other than your Cole Haan.

Which, as pretty as they are, they're not going to be great when you're riding horses with me."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I groaned. "You were able to guess my shoe size? Do you know how weird that sounds, Josh? And... wait, I'm not riding horses with you!"

"You will when you're my muse."

I shook my head and forced my exhale slowly through my pursed lips. It didn't matter what he said. The boots were going back. There was no reason that if I had to ride horses, I couldn't do so with some second hand Fryes like a normal girl.

"Anyway, was there a reason for this call?" I asked, not wanting to argue anymore.

"Yes. I saw my date for this afternoon."

"And?"

It was his turn to sigh. "Miss Texas, Hope? Really?"

I reached for a hoodie, sliding my arms into it. Texas was hot, but that just meant everywhere cranked their air conditioning to frigid temperatures. "She's beautiful. Poised. And she's willing to move in with you under these *unusual* circumstances if things go well between you two."

"A fucking beauty queen," he grumbled.

"You said you would give this a chance, Josh. If you can't do that—"

"Can she ride a horse?"

I swallowed. Damn. The one thing I forgot to ask about. "She's a Texan, born and raised," I answered ambiguously.

"So was my dad and he never stepped foot on a ranch until my mother. That means nothing."

Huh. His dad. That was an... interesting answer. Come to think of it, Josh hadn't mentioned his family at all in our chats, other than his mother that one moment in the Uber. What I knew came solely from my Google searches. Parents divorced when he was nine. And of course, his mother's passing.

“Well, why don’t you take her on a date somewhere that has horses?” I suggested. “You can see for yourself her comfort level and gauge it from there.” It was risky. But half of the photos on her website were of her snuggling up to animals. How different could a horse be from a Great Dane?

“Okay,” Josh said slowly, dragging the word out. “I’ll text you the address of where to arrange our first meeting.”

“Great.” I already knew from her manager that she was very interested. And who could blame her? Publicly dating a celebrity like Josh Gabriel would really boost her image. Hell, it might even help her win Miss America. “Would tonight work for you?”

“Nighttime? Riding horses in the dark?” He gave a snort that was half laugh, half mocking me.

“Okay,” I said, running my fingers through my dripping hair. “You don’t have to make fun of me. But see? This is exactly why I would make a terrible muse for you. I can’t ride a horse. I’ve never even been near a horse.”

“All the more reason why you need proper footwear. And as long as I can teach the woman how, I don’t care if she can’t ride.”

“Great. Noted for when you meet and ride with Miss Texas.”

There was a muffled curse on the other end of the phone before he said, “Look, I’m around today. If she can meet up, I could do it at four or five o’clock before the sun goes down.”

Hm. I could make that work. As long as she was available. “Then if it goes well, you’ll consider taking her to dinner tonight after?”

“If it goes well, yes.”

“Great! I’ll set it up.”

There was a brief pause before he said, “You’ll be there too, right?”

This was sort of new territory for me. I didn’t usually research and set up my clients like this. It was typically more organic of a process. The end result was that I didn’t quite know the protocol under the new circumstances. Especially when said client had it out to recruit me as his muse. But boots or

not, the man had paid me twenty thousand dollars for two weeks of almost exclusive work. If he wanted me there? Then I had to be there.

My eyes drifted to the boot box beside me. Besides, it would give me a chance to return the stupidly extravagant gift he'd bought me.

I cleared my throat, happy to hear it didn't wobble nearly as much as I felt. "Of course. If you want me there."

"I do."

I hated the uncomfortable silence that settled between us. "Okay then. I'll text you back with her availability."

I clutched the hoodie tighter around my body. Even though he was nowhere in sight and couldn't see me, I still felt utterly naked and vulnerable, even here on the phone with him. "And Josh?"

"Yeah?"

"Her name is Daisy Kushner. Not Miss Texas."

I could practically hear his smirk on the other end of the phone. "Daisy Bimbo Kushner. Got it."

Before I could say anything in return, he'd already hung up.

Seven


HOPE

I ARRIVED fifteen minutes early at the address Josh had texted me. A painted wood sign hung from the entrance to a long, dirt driveway. *Anita's Hope Equine Rescue*. As I took the turn, a breeze drifted by, swinging the sign with a long creak.

The sun was beginning its descent from the blue and gold-streaked sky, but the heat was no less overbearing.

At the end of the long dirt driveway, I spotted Josh standing there wearing his signature cowboy hat, boots, jeans, and a blue button down shirt. The orange glow of the setting sun backlit his broad shoulders, and his hands clasped at the small of his back. He was tall and imposing; a pillar of pure confidence.

My body instantly responded to the sight of him, the tips of my breasts tightening and a current of energy shimmering across my sweat-damp flesh.

I put my rental car in park and allowed my eyes to flutter close for the briefest moment while I gave myself a quick pep talk.

My body needed to chill the hell out. Celebrities? Red carpet events? I've been there before and it wasn't worth it. No matter how appealing it would be to make Brent jealous.

Josh lowered his chin, his eyes lifting over the edge of his sunglasses to peer at me as I took my time turning off the car. His face was neutral,

revealing nothing except for the tiniest smirk that kicked up one side of his mouth.

That smirk stirred something deep inside of me. Something I thought had long been forgotten. Something tender, but so raw and rough that it left me feeling more hollow.

Before the meeting with Josh, I could pretend that part of me didn't exist. I'd been doing a good job the last few weeks of pretending it didn't. And prior to Brent? I had mastered the art of compartmentalization.

I exited the car with the boots and Chanel scarf beneath my arm, shutting my driver's side door with a bump of my hip. Stepping within inches of him, I took a deep calming breath. I couldn't show him how much he was affecting me. It was exactly what he wanted.

His eyes fell to the large box under my arm, his gaze darkening while I resisted the urge to scan his body. Because holy hell, it was almost like that button down shirt was tailored to hug the hard, crisp lines of his toned shoulders and trimmed waist.

My stomach erupted into a fury of nerves as I peered up into his bright blue eyes and it was almost like he could see every bit of me as he stood there, still saying nothing. Not a hello. Not a welcome. No form of greeting save for that smirk. That damn smirk. Like he could see through to my soul. See through to my excitement, my nerves, my pain and trepidation.

If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought he could even see my toes curling, pressing against the padded soles of my Givenchy pumps.

He looked at me in a way that I got the impression he not only saw me... but also knew me. Maybe even more than I knew myself. My mind wandered back to his initial statements of wanting me as his muse. About the connection he needed to feel.

Was he right? Did he and I have a stronger connection than most on some cosmic level?

Or could I orchestrate this same feeling between him and another

woman? If I didn't want to be stuck for two months as his muse, I would have to.

It wasn't going to be easy though. Because if *I* felt this, then he sure as hell did, too.

"You might as well put that box right back in your car," he said. "Because hell hasn't frozen over and I ain't taking it back."

"Oh yes you are," I said. "I can't accept this. Not as your employee."

"Why not?"

"Because! It's too expensive. It's inappropriate and it's got to be against some sort of ethics or rules." I knew the etiquette argument was stupid, but I really didn't have anything else.

"In Texas, it's rude to return a gift. So one could say *you're* being inappropriate by not appreciating and accepting the gift."

I swallowed against the hard, knotted lump in my throat and his gaze dropped to my neck. He watched me as I swallowed, forcing the butterfly caught there down to the pit of my stomach, where it joined its other friends bouncing around.

A voice cleared from somewhere behind me and my muscles turned rigid. Someone else was here? Shit.

My eyes briefly drifted closed in a slow blink. Despite these ridiculous feelings of lust, I had a job to do. And I needed to pull it together.

My goal for the next two weeks was to find Josh Gabriel a muse that *wasn't* me. Then I could take my twenty grand, get through my father's fifth round of nuptials, and get the hell out of this weird state.

"I'm Matt," a man said from somewhere over my left shoulder. "Josh's manager. We spoke on the phone the other day."

I smiled in a way I hoped was professional and didn't allude to the fact that I was imagining his client naked just moments ago.

Matt offered his hand to me, which I took in a firm handshake. His brows immediately lifted, eyes flicking to meet Josh's gaze to my right. "She's got a

firm handshake.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Stupid men and their boys club rules.

Sure, a firm handshake implies confidence and business savvy, but I had met many smart, successful women and men who didn't try to break your knuckles with every greeting. It was such an antiquated way of reading people.

“You know what that means?” Josh asked and I wasn't sure who the question was directed to—Matt or me. Neither of us answered him and his smirk tipped higher. “She'd be good at riding horses. Gotta have a firm grip on those reins. Plus she's got the footwear for it now.”

Again, I fought against the urge to roll my eyes and instead took a quick, but deep breath. This right here was the perfect reminder of why Josh and I were not a good match. Yes, there was a physical attraction, but other than that? We were so not compatible.

Everything about his rock n' roll lifestyle turned me off. *Except for those perfectly sculpted muscles.* “Well now that we've covered the oh-so-important topic of my reins-gripping handshake, can we get down to business? Daisy will be here in a few minutes.”

Matt gave me a gesture to continue, while Josh simply leaned against a fence post, flicking at the brim of his cowboy hat.

I set the boots down on a nearby porch, then continued. “So, Daisy won the Miss Texas pageant a few months ago. Her charity platform is *Love Doesn't Hurt* and she volunteers to help raise awareness for domestic abuse survivors. She goes to Miss America in September, so if you are still with her or needing her services at that time, she will need those 10 days off, but she expects you to be in attendance at the event if you are still together.”

I handed him a few images and articles I printed off earlier that day. “She loves animals, and has a couple of dogs, so she was thrilled when I rescheduled this date to an afternoon of horseback riding.”

Josh flipped quickly through the papers, handing them back to me

without hardly reading them. “But what’s her stance on world peace?”

I glared at him and when Matt started to snicker, I spun, directing my glower at him, too. “Get it all out now, you two. All your dick comments mocking her lifestyle and pageant winnings. Because as soon as she pulls down that driveway, you better be the perfect gentlemen.” I pivoted around and pointed a finger at Matt. “Both of you.”

Matt nodded, his smile momentarily dropping. “Yes, ma’am.” Then with a sideways glance at Josh, he added, “I like her.”

Josh eyed me, his gaze holding mine longer than was comfortable, his expression neutral. Unreadable. “Me too,” he said, then his eyes lifted, falling behind me as the crunch of gravel and dirt grew louder each passing second.

“Here they come,” Matt said.

I grabbed the papers and tucked them back into my purse, hiking it high on my shoulder and moving to stand beside Matt—purposefully away from Josh and his burning gaze.

That gaze needed to be directed at Daisy. He needed to shower *her* with that attention. Smirk soulfully at *her*. Not me.

With a calming breath, I lifted my chin a tiny bit.

You can do this, Hope. Everything I was feeling for Josh? It was simply lust. Nothing more. And I’d worked past that before. Never with a client, of course, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t possible.

The F450 truck pulled up behind my rental car and while I fully expected Daisy’s manager to be behind the wheel, Daisy herself opened the driver’s side door and hopped down, her cutoff denim shorts riding high up her muscled, golden-tanned thighs.

“Hey there,” she greeted, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand. She unleashed a blindingly beautiful smile that revealed a row of perfectly bleached teeth.

“You must be Josh,” Daisy drawled, walking over to where Josh stood. “I’m Daisy—”

“Duke?” he finished for her, an innocent smile on his face.

Oh, he was lucky I wasn’t standing beside him. That little comment would have earned him an elbow to the ribs.

She wagged her pointer finger in his face, laughing and tossing glossy blonde hair over her shoulder. “I’d expect a song writer to be more clever than that. I’ve heard that one my whole dang life.”

Doesn’t take any of his shit. Check. I smiled at him triumphantly, but he completely ignored me.

I stepped forward, wanting to put a pin in any other sarcastic introductions Josh may have had in the works. “Daisy, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Hope.” I held out my hand to Daisy and inwardly cringed as she took my hand with a limp wrist.

While that may not bother me, Josh and Matt made it pretty clear they base a lot off of that stereotype.

A man crossed in front of the truck, older than me, perhaps in his late forties and took my hand next. “I’m Bud. We talked on the phone today.”

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you as well. And of course, this is Josh and his manager, Matt. We appreciate you coming by on such short notice.” I turned my head and gave Josh a flash of my death glare. “Don’t we?”

He smiled and nodded. “Sure do.”

“Daisy has an event later tonight,” Bud said.

“There’s a mechanical bull riding contest and the winner gets five thousand dollars to the charity of his *or her* choice.” Daisy beamed.

Well, at least the outfit made more sense now. Then again, it was Texas. For all I knew, she dressed in short denim cutoffs and ankle boots every day.

“What did you have in mind for today? Bud mentioned taking the horses out?” Daisy asked and looked around at a few of the horses grazing in the field beside us.

“You ever been riding? I thought we’d run the horses up to the summit. Or if you don’t know how, we could take one for a walk—”

Daisy snorted and rolled her eyes playfully. “Walk beside a horse? No, sir. Hand me that saddle and let’s get going.” She grinned and didn’t wait for Josh to follow her, heading past him to the stables.

Josh seemed surprised and his eyebrows lifted, his gaze landing on her perfect ass as she passed by him.

Ignoring the jealous flame in my stomach wasn’t easy, but I breathed through it. I had to get used to that if we were going to work together. I was here to help Josh find a woman. A woman who was not me. “Great,” I said. “We’ll wait here while you two get to know each other.”

“Oh no, you’re coming with us,” Josh said, stopping Daisy in her tracks.

“I am?”

“She is?” Daisy said, eyeing me with caution for the first time since she got out of the truck.

Suddenly, I saw the competitive nature take over her expression. The low hooded gaze she gave me. I was no longer her ally. I was now her competition.

“Uh, Josh, that’s not a good idea. You two should talk. Get to know one another—”

“I’m paying for your services. And that doesn’t include you sitting on the sidelines, does it?” He closed the space between us in a mere two steps and whispered down to me. “You are my eyes and ears as well. We’re doing this together. How can either of us be certain if she’s right for this if we’re not both there to determine that?”

I gulped, looking at the stables. The horses suddenly seemed like massive giants towering over us. I had to *ride* one of those? With Daisy and Josh... two seasoned riders? “I’m not exactly dressed to go riding,” I said, gesturing at my black trouser pants and high heels.

“Lucky for you, we keep extra gear here for our volunteers. And it’s a damn good thing you got them new boots,” he added with a grin.

The intensity in his eyes spiraled me into a vortex where I had no choice

but to nod and agree.

Oh, God. What was I doing? Agreeing to go riding when I'd never *ever* been on a horse before.

Oh, boy.

Twenty thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars... I thought over and over to myself as I changed in the outhouse stall beside the stables. The leggings were a little too tight over my curves.

Damn him. He'd forced my hands into wearing these damn boots. I tugged them up over the leggings and sighed, turning to look at myself in the mirror.

I released an uncomfortable laugh as I exited the outhouse and ran a hand over my butt, which suddenly felt very exposed despite the fact I was entirely covered.

Josh stood there waiting and handed me a helmet. With a sweeping gesture, he waved a hand to a trail where three horses were ready and waiting for us.

Daisy was already seated on top of one and looked regal. *Regal* in her fucking denim shorts. She looked like she belonged on a horse. Born to ride, with her spine straight and thin muscled legs tightly drawn in against the horse's sides.

Daisy's eyes fell to my new boots and an eyebrow lifted. "Lucchese? Didn't peg you for a girl who would own a pair of those."

I swallowed. "I... they were a gift."

There. Not technically a lie. But even still, if she'd been wary before when Josh invited me along? She was downright green with envy now.

"Daisy is riding Marigold," Josh said. "Marigold came to our rescue when she broke her leg and had to quit a career in racing. Her owners wanted to put her down. The cost of fixing her broken leg was more than the euthanasia, but we convinced them to "donate" her to us and in exchange they could receive the tax break that would save them more than they gave."

As Josh spoke, he stroked her nose tenderly and she whinnied, shaking her head, black hair swaying with the movement.

“She’s gorgeous,” Daisy said, grinning and leaned down to pet her neck.

“She really is,” I agreed. A part of my heart was touched at the fact that Josh had managed to save her life. To kill an otherwise healthy animal because they no longer served a purpose for you seemed more cruel than I wanted to think about.

“I’ll be riding Bolt,” he continued, pointing to a white horse with gray spots. Matt held onto his reins, feeding him carrots while the horses waited. “We rescued him from a family that had good intentions, but wasn’t prepared for the financial strain and the amount of work owning a horse means.”

Josh guided me over to where a smaller horse waited quietly, tied to a post. “And this... this is your horse today. Gypsy. She’s a special one. We’ve had her here at the ranch for years.” Josh placed a few apple slices in my palm and stepped aside as I approached her.

“Hey, Gypsy,” I said quietly.

“Tuck your thumb under so she doesn’t think it’s food,” Josh said. He tenderly reached out, wrapping his fingers around mine. Electricity skittered up my arm as Josh guided my thumb and showed me how to position my hand.

“There you go,” he whispered, his hot breath skimming over my ear.

Clearing my throat, I held out the apples to Gypsy. She took them gently, leaving a line of drool from her lips to my palm. I laughed and wiped my hand on the leggings, bringing my other palm gently down her nose as she chewed the apples.

“She’s a good girl,” Josh said, taking a step back from me. “She’s older, so she’ll be a nice easy ride for you.”

I lifted a brow. “You’d better be right.”

Eight
8

JOSH

DAISY'S HORSE and mine trotted easily next to each other, keeping pace. While behind us, Hope would barely make it a few feet before Gypsy would stop, drop her head, and graze some of the deliciously sweet, tempting grass.

I kept my eye on Hope, glancing over my shoulder to make sure we hadn't completely lost her, but I couldn't help but delight in her misery.

It was just so damn funny—and adorable. Each time we made eye contact, she would huff and shake her head at me, mimicking a horse in a way I'm sure she didn't intend.

The surge of righteous anger was so potent, I could almost *feel* it coming off of her like the heat emanating from an erupting volcano.

Beside me, Daisy cleared her throat, her gaze following mine behind us to Hope and Gypsy. “So *anyway*,” she said, clucking her tongue, “as I was saying, my talent for Miss America was going to be singing, but there are so many of us who choose singing, you know? I think I need something a bit more original.”

Great. She was a singer too... just like me. Her motivations for accepting this proposal became a lot more clear. Even if she didn't win Miss America, knowing me, dating me, and having me in her corner would easily help launch the next stage of her music career.

Especially since I knew pageant girls, even the ones who win at a state and national level, don't win money. They only win scholarships.

I studied her as she rode the horse, knees squeezed, lifting and dropping with each trot. Her blond hair, which before had fallen around her face and shoulders in soft waves, was now impressively knotted at the nape of her neck below the helmet in a sleek twisted bun.

I nodded, trying to focus on Daisy instead of the cute way Hope kept bouncing uncontrollably with each step Gypsy took. Which admittedly wasn't that many steps.

I told Hope I would give her prospects an honest chance. I promised it. And I didn't break my promises, despite what half the female population of Austin told you.

But truthfully? Gut instinct told me Daisy wasn't the one.

Sure, she was beautiful. But so was nearly every woman I'd been with in the last ten years. Beauty wasn't something I had trouble finding.

She was also poised. Camera ready. She seemed smart enough and driven, but she didn't make my pulse quicken. When we made eye contact, my chest didn't tighten. Her hair smelled good, but it didn't have that subtle scent of flowers and herbs that Hope's had.

And most notably, I wasn't excited sitting here with Daisy. I wasn't imagining what our next date would be, planning when I could see her again.

In fact, it was the opposite. I found my mind wandering to Hope. Thinking about the way those riding pants hugged tight curves and how fucking hot it would be to see her in nothing else but those new boots. My mouth went dry at those thoughts.

Whomever we choose for this muse, she needed to be good enough to make me forget all about my draw to Hope.

And Daisy wasn't it.

But maybe most notably, Daisy seemed too eager to please me. She seemed to want this—want me—more than she should.

Above all, I can't crush another woman's heart in my quest to write a new album. Whomever I choose needs to already be hardened with her guard up, and not likely to fall in love with me.

And based on Daisy's doe eyes, I wasn't sure she was up for that.

Then there was the question of did she like *me* or simply the prospect of dating a famous guy? I'm all for a mutually beneficial collaboration with this, but it was hard to tell with her, especially when she was poised for the stage and groomed to give good answers constantly.

Even still... a promise was a promise. And I had promised to give Daisy a fair chance.

She cleared her throat, yanking me out of my spiraling thoughts.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What was your question again?"

"I said my manager was telling me that you're looking for a girlfriend who will inspire your songwriting."

"That's the uh... goal, yes. I don't know if you listen to my music, or country music at all, but I was engaged once before, until..." my voice faded as I turned to look ahead of us in the direction Diesel was walking. Until what? How much of my past was I willing to divulge to this girl I barely knew?

Puffy clouds billowed in the sky above us as the sun edged closer to the horizon. It was gorgeous out and days like this reminded me of my mom; reminded me of the aching, gaping hole in my heart since she had passed away.

I could practically hear my mother's advice: *She deserves the truth, pumpkin.*

I opted for censored honesty instead of the full truth, even though I could feel my mother's sigh of frustration with me from Heaven.

"Until it ended. It was messy for both of us. And for a while, I wasn't interested in settling down again. I'm still not sure I am. I don't want to sit here and promise a lifetime together—muses are typically a quick burn

lifestyle. They are on fire and full of passion, but that sort of heat isn't sustainable." I was being obtuse, but not purposefully. "Does that make sense?"

"Passion," Daisy repeated. "Sort of the idea when a candle that burns from both ends lasts half as long?"

I nodded as she gave me a fleeting look, batting her lashes, then drifted her gaze down at her hands, running her fingers over her pale pink manicured nails. "So you're not looking for love?"

I swallowed. That was the problem. I *was* looking for love. Love on my end... not hers. And how in the hell did I reveal that without sounding like a psychopath?

With Hope, I knew her heart belonged to someone else. That idiot of an actor who broke her heart and cheated on her. She wanted him back.

Not that he deserved a second chance with a woman like Hope, but that wasn't my call. And she wasn't over him. I could see it in her eyes.

Hope was the exact type of woman I could fall hard for, but I knew she wouldn't reciprocate. I couldn't say the same for Daisy.

"I'm looking for love, but not *everlasting* love," I said quietly. "I don't know that I can ever give someone my heart for life. But I'm a masochist. I crave the feeling of falling in love again. I want the excitement and passion of falling in love, even if I know it will only end in pain."

"But... how do you *know* it will end in pain?" Daisy asked with a disbelieving chuckle. "Maybe it will end beautifully. With a wedding. And a white picket fence."

I clicked my tongue. "I've already got the fence."

"But not the wedding."

I sighed and bent down to give Diesel's neck a pat. "I can live without the wedding."

She blinked, her eyes narrowing as she studied me. After a moment's silence, she said, "Well, at least you've experienced love before. I don't think

I've ever known the feeling. I've had boyfriends, of course. But no one I could really envision myself with forever."

I nodded, appreciating her honesty. But even still, my libido gave a lazy yawn and our chemistry was like a failed science experiment.

I hoped she felt it too. That was the problem with being so famous... people rarely felt a lack of chemistry when they were so starstruck by me.

I didn't mean that in a douche-y way. It's just how it was. When you're famous, you simply never know if someone is in it because of who you are, because of your fame, or your lifestyle. Or hell, even because of your looks.

Okay, yeah, I heard it. That *did* sound a little douche-y.

But it also didn't make it any less true.

And here was this Miss America wannabe who was also a singer. Fame, or at the very least, recognition, was important to her on some level.

"So, what changed?" Daisy asked.

"Huh?"

"You said you weren't interested in settling down again. But here you are, looking for love, at least in the interim. What changed?"

Oh. Shit. Again, I couldn't tell her that my record label was going to drop me in T-minus eight weeks if I didn't produce some Top 40 shit. "Life in the spotlight can be kind of lonely. I mean, sure, I'm always surrounded by people. But sometimes that's when I feel the most alone. It makes it so much more obvious that none of the people circling me are my people. I guess I'm craving the company of someone I trust. Even if it's only for a limited time."

"That's so sweet." She blinked at me, her black spiky lashes fluttering against her cheeks and a bit of mascara flaked off, landing on top of her heavily painted face. "I feel like I could be that girl for y—"

"Seriously, Gypsy? Again?" Hope's shrill voice cut through the thick quiet of the trail and I blinked, resisting a glance back as I heard Hope grunt in frustration. A foul odor made its way to my nose.

I leaned back, calling to Hope over my shoulder. "Oh, yeah, I should have

warned you... Gypsy has a bit of IBS issues. Being an old lady and all.”

“Ugh, gross.” I swallowed my chuckle at the whine in Hope’s voice.

Daisy sighed impatiently and rolled her eyes, flicking at her nails.

Boom. There it was. That’s what I was trying to draw out.

She’s the jealous type. I had a feeling when she first arrived in her F450. An inkling when I watched her eye Hope as they first approached. She took in everything about her from the top of Hope’s sleek brown hair down to her impractically high heels.

It was a generalization, of course, and there are plenty of pageant contestants who aren’t this way—but I had a feeling Daisy liked the spotlight. She wanted it, craved it... and someone else having it was a problem for her.

In my world? That wasn’t okay. I didn’t mind sharing my spotlight—hell, I’d even give it to the right woman. But I needed a woman who was secure. A girlfriend who wouldn’t cry if I was photographed having dinner with my agent, who yes, is a beautiful redhead.

The memory of Hope’s reaction to me taking selfies with my fans flitted through my mind, but I pushed it away. That was a totally different situation. Hope wasn’t jealous of the attention I got. If anything, she didn’t want the attention at all. She just wanted to be valued through that attention.

“Anyway...” Daisy continued. As I gave her a sideways glance, she smiled, practically posed. Like a choreography routine she had memorized. “...I was saying I completely understand what you mean. As Miss Texas, everyone always comes up and tells me—”

“Does she at least move *faster*?” Hope called out again, interrupting. “I feel like I’m miles behind you!”

“If only,” Daisy muttered below her breath.

Now was the real test. Could she handle me halting the attention on her and paying it entirely to Hope? Could she let this happen? I held up a finger. “Sorry,” I said and rolled my eyes. “Let me just get her situated back there.”

Daisy hid it well. The frustration. The jealousy. There was a small pinch

of her eyes as they creased and then it vanished. “You stay here, I’ll go help her,” she said, her voice a little too chipper. Her eyes, a little too wide. Her smile, a little too eager.

Without waiting a beat, she tugged Marigold’s reins and turned around toward Hope, trotting faster than we’d been walking.

Uh-oh. I did the same, turning Diesel around, but I wasn’t fast enough and Daisy made it to Hope first.

I approached just as I heard Daisy giving instructions. “You have to give her a good kick right here.” She leaned forward, taking Hope’s foot in her hand and mimicking where her heel should land. “Don’t hold back. She might be older, but that just means she’s more set in her stubborn ways.”

Hope smiled gratefully at Daisy, completely unaware. She didn’t see the jealousy in Daisy that I’d seen earlier out in front of my ranch.

“Thank you so much,” Hope said, all smiles. “Gypsy is sweet, but she’s driving me nuts.”

“You’ve got to show her who’s boss,” Daisy said.

“Um, that’s not entirely true with Gypsy,” I called out, hoping to intercept before Hope took some really bad advice. That old bat was stubborn and slow... until she wasn’t. Gypsy might be old, but she had some fire left in her.

“Gypsy knows how to gallop when she wants to. And you’ve never ridden before, Hope. Go lightly when you kick at first... build up to that,” I said, finally catching up to the girls.

Hope rolled her eyes as she glanced at Daisy. “I’ve been trying to give her light kicks. It’s not working.”

“Then you’ve got to give her more oomph,” Daisy said, her chin tilted high.

Like I don’t know my own fucking horse? “Hope, trust me. Be careful. Don’t give it more oomph—”

Hope didn’t wait for me to finish. She lifted both her legs and brought

down her heels hard against Gypsy's side.

My sweet old lady erupted in a whinny and took off at a full-on gallop, Hope's screams receding fast as she got further and further away from us.

"Fucking hell," I grunted, then thrust my heels into Diesel and took off after her.

Gypsy was charging away from me at a speed that would have qualified her for the Kentucky Derby.

"Oh my God! Help! Gypsy, stop!" Hope cried, her screams causing the crows to fly out of the trees above us.

Thankfully Diesel was a damn fast horse and earned his name. Galloping after them, we had just about nearly caught up. We were close enough for me to see Hope tugging the reins with one hand and clutching the saddle with the other. "Gypsy, please! Whoa, girl, whoa!"

"Hope!" I shouted. "Stop pulling to the left!"

"What!?" she shrieked.

Unfortunately, the way she was tugging the reins had aimed Gypsy off the path. The horse veered toward the woods where, just our luck, riding this fast got exponentially more dangerous.

Diesel and I had just about fully caught up to her and were rounding in at her side, next to Hope and Gypsy. The woods were only a few dozen feet away and at the speed of which we were galloping, we'd be amidst branches and roots in no time.

"Oh my God, Josh! Help! Help me!" she screamed, her brown hair whipping free from her ponytail and lashing the sides of her face.

I balanced myself on Diesel, holding his reins in one hand and reaching for the center of hers with the other. I had to stop them at the same time or else one, or both of us, could get seriously injured.

"On the count of three, help me tug her reins and say *whoa* really loudly, got it?"

She nodded, clutching the other side of the reins as I counted.

“One, two, three!”

I yanked back on both of our reins. “Whoa, Gypsy!”

For once, Hope actually listened to me and I felt her pull the reins at the same time.

Both of our horses slowed down, but at the last minute, Gypsy swung to the left, sending Hope shoulder first into the trunk of a one hundred year-old redwood.

I saw it like it was in slow motion.

Her wince as she hit the tree.

The whiplash as her head snapped to the right, also crashing into the roughly textured tree bark.

And then she went down.

Nine



HOPE

I **WOKE** up blinking in the dark room, my pounding head and dry mouth the only clues I had as to where I was or what happened.

Typically, those two things meant I'd had one too many martinis. Except, I didn't remember drinking.

I didn't remember going out at all.

I bolted upright, tossing the coarse blanket from my torso and immediately realized my mistake. Pain sliced through my shoulder and as I clutched my throbbing head, my fingers were met with a bandage at my temple. What the hell?

My heart beat faster, slamming against my ribcage. What happened? Was this a dream? Was I reliving my worst nightmare?

I'd been so careful since my senior year of college. Never took a drink from anyone; never drank out of communal punch bowls. Hell, I didn't even drink bottled water given to me if the seal had already been broken.

My breath grew short and my chest tightened as the rapidly increasing rhythm of my beating heart synced up with the pounding in my head.

I clutched at my chest... a shirt. I had on a shirt. Or rather... a nightgown? I dragged my hands down my body and found the shirt went down past my knees. A nightgown. A dowdy one, at that.

I literally didn't think I owned a nightgown in my entire wardrobe.

But the important thing was, I was clothed.

A relieved breath whooshed from my dry, parted lips and tears sprang to my eyes as a sob crawled up from my chest and I dropped my face into my hands.

I felt the bed sag beside me and a hand touched the middle of my back.

I jumped to my feet, screaming, eyes wide, blinking in fear as a light clicked on beside the bed.

Beside the *hospital* bed.

And Josh Gabriel sat on the edge of the bed, staring back at me with wide eyes of his own.

It all came flooding back to me as I stood there, hackles up, defenses raised.

His ranch.

Horseback riding.

Our arrangement.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his hair messy, hands up in surrender. "It's okay, Hope. It's just me. It's Josh."

My breathing slowed and I could feel my chest rise and fall as I intentionally dragged in a long inhalation through my nose and let it out through my lips.

"Josh," I whispered. "Where am I?"

"We're at Austin General Hospital."

"The hospital," I repeated.

He nodded. "There was an accident while riding the horses. You hit your head pretty hard."

"How long was I out?"

"You were in and out of consciousness for about fifteen minutes. And you've been asleep for two hours."

Two hours. That wasn't so long. At least I wasn't waking up to flying cars... although it would have been nice to miss my dad's wedding. Either

way, two hours lost? That wasn't so bad. I heaved a relieved sigh. "That's it?"

Josh's face contorted into a scowl. "*That's it?* The longest two hours and fifteen minutes of my fucking life," he growled and raked his hands through his tousled brown hair. "I shouldn't have made you ride with us. You warned me you were inexperienced and I didn't fucking listen."

The afternoon was coming back to me in bits and pieces. The ranch. Riding Gypsy. My horse taking off after Daisy showed me how to—

"Daisy!" I exclaimed. "What happened with Daisy?"

Josh's scowl deepened and he looked up at me from his palms. "What the hell do you mean what happened with Daisy? She left for her mechanical bull riding event."

"Yeah, but did you two—"

A smiling nurse popped her head in, interrupting me. "You're up," she said, her voice calm and sweet. Then she looked over to Josh. "Told you she wouldn't be out for long. We were monitoring her vitals the whole time." She turned back to me and hitched a thumb over her shoulder toward Josh. "Your fiancé was so worried. I'm going to go grab Dr. Nash and hopefully get you discharged and home in time for dinner."

My brows jumped at that and I slowly turned my head back to Josh, who was now wincing. "Fiancé?" I asked, my voice strangely calm. "Are you crazy?"

He gestured to the now closed door where the nurse left. "They were only allowing family in the room and to know the updates, I had to tell them something." Bringing his hand down against his thigh, his palm slapped the denim hard with a satisfying clapping sound.

I gave him a fake smile. "What a thoughtful personal violation."

"I know, I'm sorry. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't have your password to your phone and I had no clue who to call or how to get in touch with your father."

“But you’re *Josh Gabriel*. And you just told people that you had a fiancé. What if that gets out?”

“It’s not going to get out.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, really.” He pointed back to the door. “That nurse is an idiot. First of all, she had no idea who I was and—”

“And *that* makes her an idiot?”

“No. What makes her an idiot is the fact that *tons* of people fall into comas and don’t wake up, even when their vitals are fine. I should pull my donations from this good-for-nothing hospital—”

“Okay, relax,” I said. The poor guy was obviously stressed and trying to do the right thing, so I guess I could cut him some slack. “You’re not pulling any donations from anywhere. The specs on that would look horrible.” I sighed and eased back down on the bed beside him, closing my eyes against the growing headache. “And you’re right about one thing. We *should* have each other’s emergency contacts. Especially if you’re going to make me ride any other evil hellspawn animals...”

His brow arched and he gave me that adorably signature smirk of his. “Does that mean you, Ms. Prada wearing Hope Marcoux-Evans, would consider getting back up on a horse again?”

I bit my lip. “Maybe. If we went slowly and you give me a horse that doesn’t shit for half the ride.” Bowel movements and near-death falls aside, I was actually kind of enjoying my ride. And Gypsy really was a sweet girl. I mean, I had wanted her to keep up with the group because I couldn’t hear a damn thing Daisy and Josh were talking about. But in a weird way, she reminded me of... well, me. Or at least the me that I’ll probably become as an old woman. Grumpy. Stubborn. Hell, who am I kidding? She reminded me of myself *now*.

There was a knock at the door and then an older man with graying hair entered. “Ms. Evans,” he said, smiling. “I’m Dr. Nash. It’s good to see you

up. You gave us quite the scare.” His gaze shifted to Josh quickly, then he added with a tilt of his head, “Some of us more than others. I thought your fiancé was going to try and fire every one of my nurses until they finally let him in here.”

I smiled and nodded, but even that small movement made my pounding head surge with pressure and I winced.

“Easy,” Dr. Nash said. “We’re going to send you home with some good pain management medicine. In the meantime, do you have someone who can stay with you tonight?”

“Yes,” Josh interjected before I could answer. “She can come home with me.”

“Oh, no... that’s okay. I’ll be fine once I get back to my place.”

Dr. Nash pressed his lips together. “Obviously I can’t tell you what to do after you leave here, but if you spend the night alone, it will be against my recommendation. Head injuries are serious and can take a turn very quickly. I would strongly recommend you stay with your fiancé for the night. Or if not him, someone else.”

“Hope,” Josh said gently. “You shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

I sighed. If I didn’t stay with Josh, that only left one other option: my father. That alone wouldn’t be so bad. Except these days, my father also came with Viv and all of Viv’s daughters.

I looked over to Josh who was sitting, awaiting my answer. Even though I knew it was killing him, he was more or less patient while I considered my options.

“Okay,” I finally agreed. “I’ll stay at your place.”

Josh breathed a sigh of relief as Dr. Nash scribbled something onto his clipboard. “Great. We’re just going to run a couple more tests now that you’re awake and then we’ll get you out of here soon.”

I’m pretty sure the word ‘soon’ has a different meaning entirely in the medical field. Two and a half hours later, Josh loaded me into the wheelchair

as I glared at him.

“Is this really necessary?” I asked, gesturing to the wheelchair.

“It’s hospital policy,” the same nurse said, still smiling. She sure was a chipper little thing, considering she was working an overnight shift at Austin General.

“See? Hospital policy,” Josh mimicked, then leaned down to whisper in my ear, “Annoying as hell, isn’t she?”

I covered my smile with the back of my hand as he rolled us onto the elevator and hit the button for the main floor.

“Don’t we need to go to the parking garage?” I asked.

Josh shook his head. “We came in an ambulance, so Matt arranged for my driver to pick us up.”

“Your driver?” I repeated. “Don’t tell me I’m leaving this hospital in anything less than a limo.” I glanced down at the new boots, now back on my feet, but paired with sweatpants and a T-shirt from the gift shop.

A smile curved on his mouth. “If my muse wants a limo? Then she’ll get a limo.”

“I’m not your muse.”

He gave a little shrug. “If you say so.”

“*Josh—*” The elevator doors opened and we were greeted by total and utter chaos.

Four security guards greeted us, flanking both Josh and me, while on the other side of the glass doors, a mob of people with cameras awaited, shouting and calling out Josh’s name.

Ten
8

HOPE

“HOW THE HELL DID THIS HAPPEN?” Josh shouted over the roar of reporters and fans calling out to us.

“They all showed up about ten minutes ago,” one of the guards said. “They must’ve been tipped off that you were being discharged soon.”

Josh shrugged out of his jacket and placed it around me, pulling it up over my head. “Here,” he said, “use this to hide your face from the cameras.”

The four guards stayed in a circle around us, trying to shield us from the reporters and paparazzi waiting outside and around the limo parked in the roundabout.

“Mr. Gabriel, is it true you have a fiancé?”

“Josh! Who is that with you?”

“What’s your fiancé’s name?”

“When did you propose?”

Keeping my face covered beneath his jacket, I let Josh and the security guards be my eyes, guiding me to the limo and even helping to lift me inside. It wasn’t until I heard the slam of two doors and all the shouting questions muted like someone had stuck their fist into the horn of a blaring trumpet that I peeked out of the jacket.

“You can take that off now. The windows are tinted,” Josh said quietly.

Using only my good arm, I twisted out from beneath the jacket and

handed it back to Josh.

“So...” I said. “Maybe you were right after all about that nurse being an idiot. But it turns out, she’s an evil idiot.”

“Funny, I was going to say the opposite. She’s an evil genius if she fooled me into thinking she was harmless.”

But there was no humor in his voice. Josh massaged his forehead. “Truthfully, if she was the one who leaked this, then she violated like every HIPAA law in existence. Unfortunately, I don’t think I can prove it was her. Literally anyone walking by the desk in the waiting room could have recognized me and leaked it to the press that Josh Gabriel was at Austin General, visiting his fiancé.”

“True. But only a select few would have known what time I was being discharged,” I said. “The guards said the press didn’t start showing up until about five to ten minutes right before we came down. That’s too big of a coincidence.”

Josh gave a little nod. “I’ll look into it tomorrow.”

The drive only took about twenty minutes after we managed to get away from the press. The sedan turned down the driveway of the ranch, the same sign swinging and now lit by a flood light at the base of the tree.

“Wait,” I said. “You *live* here at the ranch?”

“Well, not *here* here. A bit further down the driveway, just beyond the pasture and the treeline, is my house.”

The car drove us past the stables and curved around where the driveway looped into a large circular shape.

House was an understatement.

It was a mansion set back from the property and almost entirely isolated. Not exactly where I had pictured Josh spending his time. I had seen him in some impressive penthouse in the center of Austin.

And my face seemed to show it as he opened the door. “What?” he asked, his grin widening.

“I just... I guess I imagined you more as a downtown loft kind of guy. Not a mansion set quietly behind a horse rescue.”

He rolled his impossibly blue eyes. “It’s hardly a mansion.”

Were we even looking at the same house? Of *course* it was a mansion. It had pillars on the front porch like something Jay Gatsby would live in. The house itself didn’t seem to fit on the ranch, but I had no doubts he had built it to be exactly what he wanted. And he probably tore down the original farm-style house that came with the property.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “Then it’s a manor.”

He quirked a brow. “Like Wayne Manor? I can get behind that. Makes me sound badass.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Okay, calm down. You so haven’t earned the Batman title yet, buddy.”

“All that means is I’m really good at keeping my identity a secret.” He winked, then he hopped out and bounded around to my door before I could barely get my seatbelt off.

While I did think it was a bit of overkill making me stay the night, I had to admit, my head still felt a little foggy. Even if it was overly cautious, it was comforting to know I wouldn’t be alone all evening. Especially since I wasn’t allowed to fall asleep for several more hours.

Not that I’d be admitting that to Josh anytime soon.

As the sedan drove off, Josh opened the front door to his mansion... or rather, his manor... and a beautiful black, white, and brown Australian Shepherd came bounding outside, hopping around us.

I reached down, petting him as he jumped onto his hind legs to greet me.

“Cash! Off!” Josh scolded.

“Oh, it’s okay. I love dogs,” I smiled down at Cash and scratched behind his ears. “Cash?”

“Named after Johnny Cash.”

“Ahhh. I probably should have guessed that, huh?” When I bent to press a

kiss to his head, he sniffed at my bandage before giving my cheek a lick. “Oh, aren’t you just the most perfect little creature to ever exist?”

It was subtle, but I heard the tiniest exhale from Josh. And when I glanced up, I caught his shocked expression as he stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. You just... you don’t strike me as a dog person.”

Some people might have been upset or annoyed by that generalization, but truthfully, I understood it. I didn’t seem like a dog person to most people. And not just because of my penchant for designer brands and high heels.

When it came to my relationships with people? I could be aloof. Standoffish. My guard was almost always up. The walls around my castle were high and armed. My drawbridge was up. My moat was loaded with alligators.

But animals always brought out the softer side of me.

I followed Josh and Cash as they led me through an impressive looking foyer. As we passed a giant mirror, I got my first glimpse of myself since the accident and I let out a literal gasp. It wasn’t pretty.

My hair was flat from my ears down, except for the roots which bumped up in the back like I had slept on it funny. Hell, I guess I had—passing out in the hospital like I did.

The eye makeup I had so carefully administered earlier that day was now smeared beneath my eyes. My silk Prada shirt was in a plastic grocery bag in my hands and instead I wore a T-shirt from the hospital gift shop because they apparently had to cut me out of my shirt to get to my bruised shoulder.

It all seemed a bit unnecessary, especially considering my shoulder, though sore, was merely badly bruised. Or as the doctors called it: severe contusions.

My head on the other hand—well, I still couldn’t see what was beneath the bandage, but based on the amount of blood that stained my cut shirt, I was going to guess it wasn’t pretty under there.

“What’s wrong?” Josh asked, sidling up next to me.

I shook my head, dropping my gaze from my reflection and held up the bag with my destroyed Prada shirt inside. “Nothing. Just mourning the loss of my wardrobe.”

“Hey... good thing you’ve still got the boots,” Josh said. He smiled with the joke but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“They’re no Prada, though.”

“You *really* like Prada, don’t you?”

I sighed. “What’s not to like? It’s one of the most perfect brands. And someday I’m going to be able to shop in the actual store. Not just buy second hand.”

His cheek twitched. “Noted.” Then, taking my arm, he guided me inside to a den-like area with a huge leather sectional couch and a television so massive that it probably gave movie theater screens a run for their money.

“Here,” he said. “I’m going to situate you on the couch so you can watch TV while I make us some dinner.”

“*You’re* going to cook?” I asked and maybe it was a bit mean how incredulous I sounded. But I couldn’t help it. Didn’t millionaire celebrities have personal chefs to cook for them? And housekeepers and butlers and God only knew who else was helping them manage the mundane day-to-day tasks?

He glared at me. “Yes, I’m going to cook. Don’t worry. My mama taught me years ago and I’m pretty damn good at it.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, playfully narrowing my eyes at him.

“Honest to God,” he said and with his index finger, he drew an X over his heart. “Is there anything you don’t like or can’t eat?”

“I’m not big into pork,” I admitted, which I was pretty sure that fact alone could get me thrown out of Texas altogether.

He looked surprised by that. “Not even bacon?”

I scrunched my nose. “Especially not bacon.”

With a sigh, he shrugged. “Okay, Wilbur is safe tonight.”

I closed my eyes. “Oh my God. Please tell me you don’t *actually* farm and slaughter pigs on the same ranch where you save horses.”

He let out a laugh and his hand skimmed down, resting at the small of my back as he guided me gently toward the couch. The heat of his palm permeated the flimsy cotton T-shirt. Like waves of kinetic energy spiraling off of his skin and bounding toward me, pulsing and buzzing with suppressed desire. “No, of course not.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God. One of my best friends has a pet pig and they are just the sweetest things. I can’t bring myself to touch the meat ever since.”

His brows crumbled in the center of his eyes. “Your friend has a pig? In New York City?”

I laughed as I lowered myself to his couch. “Sort of. She was vacationing in Pennsylvania and found the baby pig on the side of the road. After searching for the owner, the vet made an assumption that the baby pig might have fallen off a truck. So she bought a house in Jersey with a lot of land just so she could keep him. She hasn’t moved there yet because it’s being renovated. So for now, yeah, she lives in Manhattan with her pet pig.” I shrugged. “She’s a nut, but man, she loves animals. But ever since she rescued Petunia, I can’t bring myself to eat any sort of pork product.”

Cash didn’t miss a beat and hopped up on the couch with me, circling a few times before plopping down beside me. “Your friend sounds sweet,” Josh said, grabbing a blanket and draping it over my lap. “Does she work in the city?”

I slid the blanket so it partially covered Cash too. He rolled into the blanket, happily flipping onto his back and offering me his belly. “Only a couple days a week. She works from home mostly.”

He clapped his hands together, moving into the open concept kitchen. “So, no pork. Got it. Anything else you don’t like? Any vegetables off

limits?”

I shook my head. I almost literally ate everything else. “Sky’s the limit.”

He moved to the fridge, pulling out various items as I gave Cash scratches on his belly. “How about chili? I make a mean chili.”

“Works for me.”

Josh got to work chopping an onion and after a few minutes, the knife slowed in his hands. “You sure you don’t want me to call anyone?”

I had considered whether or not I should call my father back at the hospital. But then he’d insist I came over to Viv’s. Or worse, they’d all come over to *his* condo and I’d be stuck with all of them crammed into the small space.

I never turned to my dad for comfort when I was sick as a kid, so why start now?

“No, it’s okay. I’ll call my dad tomorrow and tell him what happened.”

His brows disappeared behind silky brown hair, but he said nothing at my admission, instead, returning his attention to chopping vegetables.

I loved my dad, I did. But he wasn’t exactly the nurturing type. I learned that lesson the hard way when I was eight and woke up sick in the middle of the night with a stomach virus. One sight of my vomit and he puked all over himself too. I ended up doing the laundry for his clothes and my bedding that night myself. I learned early on, it was easier to just take care of myself.

It wasn’t long until the scent of simmering chili filled the room. Josh turned the knob to lower the heat on the stove and came over, sitting next to me where I’d been reading a magazine of *Austin Monthly* sitting on his coffee table and snuggling with Cash.

“So, how’d it go with Daisy?” I asked. “I couldn’t hear anything on the ride because Gypsy was so far behind and, well, you know the rest.”

He shook his head. “Daisy is an attention seeking, spotlight grabbing, jealous wannabe singer. And... not my muse.”

“Wow. Don’t hold back now.”

His gaze locked onto mine, sending a shiver of delight down my spine. “I never hold back.”

Heat zipped down my spine.

“Shocking.” I sighed, thankful the drugs Dr. Nash had given me were kicking in. My throbbing head and sore arm had dulled to a mellow ache. “Then at least tell me... did you *honestly* give her a chance?”

“Yes,” Josh said.

“*Really* though?”

“*Yes.*”

“Josh, she’s beautiful, poised, smart, sassy, doesn’t take your shit—”

“And a jealous, know-it-all, vindictive person,” Josh snapped. “Look, I promised you I would give your prospects a fair chance. But she was glaring at you every time you took the attention off of her. I can’t have someone like that in my life. Especially since part of my job is paying attention to fans and filming music videos with dancers and actresses. She was so obsessed with herself and getting what she wanted, she didn’t stop to think about the danger she was putting you in with her little riding lesson.” He reached up, gently brushing his thumb across my forehead beneath the bandage. “And look what happened.”

I swallowed and watched as his face flushed, the apples of his chiseled cheeks turning from their usual dusty tan coloring to a peachy shade as he grew angrier.

“And do you want to know how I *knew* she wasn’t the one?” His shrewd gaze could have pierced clean through my skin if he’d wanted to at that moment.

“How?” I asked, surprised I was able to find my voice because my throat was drier than the dusty path we’d been on that afternoon.

“Because while *you* were sleeping in the hospital, a song came to me. Lyrics swam in my mind. I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Worrying about you.” He tugged a folded scrap paper from his back pocket and tossed it

down on the coffee table.

Tentatively, I reached out, nervously unfolding it in my shaky fingers.

“It wasn’t Daisy inspiring me to write a song. It was *you*. So, if your goal as a wingwoman is to find me a new muse, then you’ve got to do better than Daisy the Beauty Queen. Because whoever you find has got to be good enough to get *you* out of my head.”

I was speechless. Utterly and totally void of any comeback. Josh pushed a sigh through tight lips before his white knuckled grip pushed off his knees as he stood up and stalked out, saying over his shoulder, “Dinner should be ready in ten minutes. I’ll come get you when it’s done.”

Eleven

8

JOSH

MAN, I was such a shit. Snapping at her like that while she was barely out of the hospital long enough for the drugs to kick in? That was a dick move.

We sat at my dinner table, eating chili in silence with Cash sitting at our feet, looking up at Hope with expectant eyes.

Every now and then, I'd see her gorgeous brown eyes peer up at me from across the floral centerpiece and after what felt like an eternity, she said, "This is delicious, Josh. Thank you."

I shrugged. "You had to eat."

I watched as her throat bobbed with a swallow. "I don't just mean for dinner. For everything. For getting me to the hospital, for taking me in tonight—"

I snorted. "I'm the one who put you in the hospital in the first place."

She shook her head. "No you didn't. It was my choice to ride Gypsy with you. I could have said no when you asked me to come."

"Bullshit," I sneered. "You tried to decline and I basically forced your hand."

She pressed her lips together so tightly the pale pink color blanched. "Well, it was my choice to follow Daisy's stupid instructions." With my spoon midway to my mouth I paused, looking up at her. That was true enough, I guess. "Like a bratty teenager refusing to listen to daddy," she

added, the low lighting of the dining room gleaming in her eyes.

I chuckled at that, unable to stop myself. I felt my blood soften and the room grew suddenly warmer. “Daddy, huh?” It was my turn to swallow. Hard. I felt a swell behind the zipper of my jeans. “Is that what you’re into?” I asked, mostly joking.

“Don’t change the subject. The bottom line is, bringing me back to your house, cooking me dinner, taking care of me... it’s really kind of you. And it goes above and beyond what a client should do for his wingwoman.”

“But it doesn’t go above and beyond what a man should do for his muse.”

“Luckily for both of us, I’m not your muse.”

“Yet.”

She rolled her eyes, but I wasn’t letting her get off that easily.

Next to her on the console table, there was a stack of flyers Matt had left for me. Colorful, vibrant, they needed to be strewn about the city to spread the word about the rescue’s yearly fundraiser.

She leaned over, grabbing one and flipping it over in her hands. “Anita’s Hope Rodeo,” she said. The sound of my mother’s name on her lips made my chest ache like someone took a mallet to my ribcage.

I nodded. “Yep. We do it every year.” It always raised a modest amount of money. Even though it was cheesy to say, every little bit helped. But upkeep for the horses, veterinary bills, stable costs? That takes a ton of money. Money the ranch didn’t have. Hell, money *I* barely had anymore. Each year I had to funnel more and more of my personal funds into the rescue just to keep it afloat. If this muse angle didn’t work in getting my next album into Top 40 territory, I might have to close the ranch.

A lump lodged in my throat at the thought. My mother’s only legacy. The one we had dreamt up as a family before Dad went and fucked it all up.

It couldn’t go belly up. I wouldn’t let it. I’d sell my sperm before I’d let that happen. What did Grammy-award winning sperm go for these days, anyway?

She waved the flier, fanning her face and I could see it in her eyes. An idea was hatching. “We should unveil your new girlfriend at this event,” she said, pushing the flier towards me. As if I didn’t know what it looked like; what it said.

“No,” I said, shaking my head and taking another bite of chili. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not? It’s perfect. Press will be there, your friends, your family—”

“Hope, I said no.” My voice wasn’t loud. I wasn’t anywhere near yelling, but I could feel the tension in my throat as I spoke, low and dangerous.

She jerked her neck back, soaking in my tone. My definitive note. And something in her shifted. Like the bridge to a song, she revealed a sliver more of herself.

And then it was gone. The curtain dropped across her expression, shielding her.

Fuck. She was pulling away from me, emotionally. I was screwing this up already. I wasn’t supposed to push her away. Not yet, at least.

I took a deep breath. Time to slice open a vein. Bleed all over her to show my vulnerable side. It was the only way.

“The horse rescue was my mother’s dream,” I said quietly. “And the yearly rodeo fundraiser was her first idea with it. She loved horses. Next to me, she loved them more than anything. I—” My voice caught and I swallowed down the emotion rising up my throat.

Save it for the sheet music, Josh, I told myself. After a quick second, I managed to pull myself together. “I can’t use her one event—her legacy—in this semi-fake unveiling publicity stunt.”

Hope nodded in understanding, her eyes dipping with the frown. “How long has she been gone?”

“Six years.”

Though it still hurts like it was yesterday. They say time heals all wounds, but I call bullshit on that.

Time didn't heal anything. It only made the wounds fester, get swollen and infected.

"It probably doesn't feel like it, but you're lucky to have had that much time with her. My mom died when I was five. I don't remember a lot about her. Except that her hands smelled like the neroli and rose oil she would use on her cuticles."

I inhaled deeply. Neroli and rose oil. *That* was the floral smell Hope had. I'd been trying to place what her scent was from the moment we first met. "Is that what you wear as well?"

She nodded and her gaze slipped far off somewhere over my shoulder to the window behind me. I knew from countless nights eating at this table alone that you couldn't see a damn thing out that window once the sun set. It was pitch black out there, with the exception of the occasional glimpse of moonlight through the shadowed trees swaying in the breeze.

She looked sad. Not sad in the way someone who suffered a recent loss was sad. But I could see hints of her tragic past in the melancholy tilt of her eyes.

And I didn't just mean the tragic loss of her mom. There was something more. Something deeper and darker that she didn't talk about much.

Even when she smiled, it was never with her whole face. Her mouth still always managed to dip down at the corners, hinting at just the edge of a frown. No matter how wide her smile actually was, it never masked her pain and anger. At least not to me.

I sighed, hating myself a little more for what I was bound to do to her. That drive I had to ruin every good thing in my life was raw and I hated it in myself. Yet I couldn't stop. I was my father's son, after all.

Though when I was with Hope, it was different. It didn't feel like it did when I first met Jenn. And it definitely didn't feel like it did with the other women I'd dated and tossed aside like rotten fruit.

When I looked at her, I didn't feel that aching pull to break her in order to

watch the chaotic beauty of destruction.

Because she was already beautifully broken.

Broken enough to write about.

Broken enough to inspire me, even in the depths of my writer's block.

Some things never change, Josh, I heard my dad's voice ringing in my ears.

Once a cad, always a cad. He wasn't wrong about himself... so why would I think he'd be wrong about me? And in the same way I could see Hope's tragic story written on every line of her face, I knew my dad was right. I was powerless to stop myself.

Like a tornado, I destroyed everyone in my path. It was what I did. And exactly what my dad did too.

The only thing I knew for certain was Hope's tragic past had already healed... and I was bound to shatter it—and her—once more.

"Why don't you write a song about your mother?" she asked quietly.

Her suggestion completely caught me off guard. A breath staggered in my throat as I shook my head.

"I... I couldn't. I could never. It's too painful. Too personal."

She nodded. "I understand," she said. And I thought maybe for the first time... someone I was talking to truly *did* understand what I meant.

"But," she continued, "aren't you trying to tap into pain for this album?"

I swallowed hard and pushed some chili around my bowl as she kept talking. "It sounds like your mom was more than any muse could ever be to you. It sounds like she was your hero."

Emotion clogged my throat and I dropped my spoon into the chili, lifting my eyes to study Hope.

How could one woman be so astute? How could she see so clearly right through me in only two days together? Her gaze drifted up to me and she tilted her head. "What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

But it wasn't nothing. She was so tragically beautiful it made my open wound throb with fresh pain.

Like likes like.

My pain wanted her pain. I wanted to swallow it, absorb it, let it water the seeds of my despair so it could grow and take shape in the form of beautiful music.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe I should write a song for my mom. And maybe... *maybe* for the right woman... the right muse, unveiling her at the rodeo makes sense. Can we play it by ear?"

Hope smiled again. And once more, there it was. The smile that wasn't really a smile. The smile that masked her pain. "Of course."

I knew then I was going to fall madly in love with Hope Marcoux-Evans.

I was going to cherish her.

Then I was going to let her ruin my wasted heart.

Twelve
Σ

HOPE

THE NEXT MORNING I woke up early.

Too early. I must still have been on New York time because the sun was just barely starting to lift above the horizon line. I was pretty achy all over now that the good pain meds had all worn off and all I was left with was over-the-counter painkillers.

I tiptoed downstairs, popping a Nespresso pod into the machine and sliding a mug beneath the stream of strong-smelling brew.

Outside I heard a whinny and Josh's low, rumbling voice saying, "Whoa, whoa, Chestnut."

Cupping my steaming mug in my hands, I crossed to the door, stepping out on the front porch.

I expected to be the only one awake this early. But not only was Josh awake, he was dressed in jeans, a green T-shirt that hugged his muscles, a leather cowboy hat, and outside already working with one of his horses.

Across the yard – if you could call the rolling, sprawling acreage he owned here a 'yard' – he held the reins of a beautiful horse as it bucked around.

Cash was on the outside of the pen, barking as though he wanted to rush in and save his human.

"Easy, girl. Easy," Josh said. His voice carried across the flat, quiet

morning as though he was standing right beside me. “I know you’ve had a rough go. It’s going to be better from now on. I promise.”

When the horse—Chestnut—didn’t stop thrashing, I sort of expected Josh to take control. Dominate the horse... or ‘break it’ or whatever you see people do in movies to break a horse’s rebellious spirit.

Josh didn’t do any of those things.

All he did in response was not let go of the reins and the most unexpected thing of all... he sang.

Lyrics I’d never heard before and a hauntingly beautiful tune poured out of him.

At first, it did nothing to deter Chestnut. But after several seconds, she slowed her thrashing.

Then after a minute, she stopped bucking entirely. Stopped throwing her weight around and jumping like a bunny rabbit around the enclosure.

And Josh kept singing, bringing a piece of apple to her mouth.

With a stomp of her foot and a shake of her head, she took the apple as her glorious jet black mane billowed with the movement.

I walked slowly toward the pen. Like a sailor being drawn to the ocean by a siren, I was mesmerized by Josh’s crooning and his connection to the animal.

He didn’t break focus with Chestnut though. Not for a moment.

Not even when I stepped on a stick, cracking it in half.

“That’s right, girl,” Josh whispered in that hypnotic voice of his.

Slowly, the horse dipped her nose and let him stroke his palm down the front. Minutes later, he had her eating out of the palm of his hand... literally.

While Josh may not have noticed me yet, Cash was another story. The dog charged at me, running figure eights around and between my legs to greet me.

The commotion broke Josh’s concentration and he looked up from Chestnut, blinking in surprise to see me standing there, leaning against the

fence post of the enclosure. “Hope? What are you doing up so early?”

It was a fair question. Hell, I was surprised I had walked up so close to the pen where moments ago this horse had been throwing the equine equivalent to a hissy fit. Especially after getting thrown from a horse just yesterday.

I shrugged. “Guess I’m still on New York time.”

Josh released his hold on Chestnut’s reins and gave her another piece of apple before hopping over the fence like he was an Olympic pole vaulter.

“How’s your head and shoulder?”

“Sore. But both could be worse.” I inclined my chin at Chestnut. “Why is she so worked up?”

“She’s been living in a neglectful situation for a while,” Josh said. “That’s the thing about horses. People don’t realize how much care they need. And a lot of folks who get horses, don’t keep them on their own land. So to care for them either means commuting daily or hiring someone to help you take care of them. Most people choose the latter. Unfortunately for Chestnut here, the previous owners thought they could handle it themselves, but they couldn’t.”

Chestnut finished chewing her apple and came over to the fence where we were standing, hoping for more.

Josh smiled and held out another slice for her to take. “She’s not aggressive. She’s just been ignored for years. Left alone in her shoddy-built stable, sometimes where they didn’t give her enough food. She wasn’t ridden very much, so I think this attention is all new for her. My ranch hands and I have been trying for months to get the family to surrender her to us. We’d sneak onto their property and make sure she had food and water as much as we could. Finally, after months of trying, they sold her to me.”

“They *sold* her to you? They wouldn’t even give her up after all that?”

Josh shook his head. “They paid a lot of money for her. I don’t think they were being evil or anything. Just trying to recoup their losses.”

“But... but if they really wanted her, they would have taken better care of her!”

“Sometimes people don’t realize what they’re getting into. I’m not excusing the behavior. I’m just saying, I’d rather pay the money and get Chestnut the life she deserves than watch her wither away in the situation she’d been in.”

“Couldn’t you have... I dunno... reported them for animal cruelty or something? Had her confiscated?”

“Her situation wasn’t bad enough to warrant that. We’d had them do a few home checks for Chestnut, but there wasn’t anything enforceable yet. All we could do was wait for an owner surrender situation and keep trying to get them to do the right thing. And eventually they did. I thought it would take a lot more time and effort to win her over but...” he added with a grin and cautiously reached out to stroke her velvety nose. “Once I learned how much Ms. Chestnut loved apples, it was smooth sailing. Right, girl?”

I felt him turn to look at me, but my gaze was locked on Chestnut as she happily chewed her apple. She never had to go back to that life. Never had to endure being locked in a stable for days on end or being ignored or hungry. All because of Josh.

His elbow bumped my non-injured arm gently. “You okay?”

I nodded. “I’m impressed. And so glad she found her way to you.”

A thrill skittered across my sweat-damp skin as he held my gaze with a long, slow inhalation. “Me too,” he said so quietly, I nearly didn’t hear him.

“That song was beautiful.”

What I wanted to say was that he was beautiful. Anyone could sing notes. Okay, fine, not *anyone*. But lots of people can sing well. Whereas Josh’s voice made that song what it was.

His eyes dipped to my mouth for the briefest moment before he said, “Did you like it? I wrote it last night.”

“You wrote that last night?”

“About you.”

A storm erupted in my body. My blood rushed faster like the tides gearing up for a rocky evening. Gooseflesh rose in a path down my arms. “You wrote a song about me... last night? When? I was with you almost all night.”

When in the hell did he have the time for that? We got home from the hospital around dinner time. He cooked for me. We ate. Watched a movie until the doctor said it was safe for me to go to bed which was late... midnight. And now we were up with the sunrise.

“I wrote a little bit of it in the hospital and the rest after you fell asleep.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. It didn't feel real. This had to be a set up. He was only saying that to impress me. “How do I know you didn't write that song months ago and recycle it with every new girl you're interested in?”

Blue eyes lowering, Josh frowned and exhaled a low *hmmm*. “One problem with that theory,” he said. “I didn't know you were listening to me. I didn't even know you were awake.”

My brain flipped through what lyrics I could remember. *Hair the color of wheat, whiskey-brown eyes, bewitchingly out of place, her smile a disguise*. It sure as hell sounded like me.

But there were probably a lot of light brown haired, brown-eyed women he'd been with...

Even still, I felt my resolve cracking. I was drawn to him, there was no mistaking it.

His gaze captured mine, gleaming with something I couldn't quite read. His eyes had about fifteen different shades of blue in them and stubble peppered his sharp jaw.

I usually hated stubble on men. It was almost always sharp and prickly, like how I'd imagine kissing a cactus might feel. But on Josh, it looked soft and sleepy.

Silence engulfed us, but unlike most times, it wasn't uncomfortable. I

didn't feel awkward. The moment was thick, lingering in the air like heady cigar smoke.

I should take a step back from Josh.

Why couldn't I step back?

It was like my feet were cemented to this dirt.

And yet, the heated look he was giving me spurred something inside of me like a shot of adrenaline right to my heart.

For several seconds, I allowed myself to stare at the beautifully sculpted landscape of his face. My brain stuttered, not knowing what to make of his crystal blue eyes, his deep, charming dimples, or his carved cheekbones, high enough to give most supermodels a run for their money.

I wasn't only looking at him... I was letting myself truly *see* him for the first time.

His eyes crinkled in concern and he lifted his hand to my cheek and brushed cool fingers across my heated flesh.

I almost leaned into his touch, but thank God, his question stopped me. "Are you dizzy? How's your head?"

The questions pulled me out of my daze. "I'm fine," I said, snapping out of it and stepping back.

Unfortunately, Cash was seated right behind me and with a yelp, I went tumbling backwards as the dog hopped up and barked a warning at me.

Then Josh's hands were there around my waist, catching me.

Yanking me toward him.

Flush to his chest.

And I became fully aware of the fact that I hadn't bothered putting on a bra yet, since I figured there was no way in hell anyone else would be awake yet.

I knew Josh was strong, of course. Muscular. But here, pressed against him, I had a newfound appreciation for those muscles. His chest was sturdy and thick, his stomach flat, but I could feel the lined ridges of a six-pack

outline through the thin cotton of his shirt.

My pulse tripped over itself as his fingers tightened at my waist, his gaze settled firmly on my mouth as our chests heaved against each other with each heavy breath. Then one of his hands lifted, cupping the back of my neck.

He was going to kiss me.

Oh my god, he's going to kiss me.

And what was more startling? I wanted him to.

Reading the moment, Chestnut gave a frustrated exhale and stretched her neck over the fence, bopping Josh between his shoulder blades.

His grin split, making those dimples appear. “Well, if you say so, Chestnut,” he said, his voice low and graveled.

Then, leaning down, he pressed his lips to mine.

Heat scorched a trail from where his tongue slid easily between my lips down my throat, landing in a molten fireball at my core. The moan slipped easily from my mouth, buzzing against his lips.

His potent scent surrounded me and I could taste the remnants of peppermint from his toothpaste as he groaned and hugged me closer, deepening the kiss.

I gasped as his lips tore away from mine and instead he trailed little kisses and nibbles down my neck.

What am I doing?

“Giving in to the moment... for once in your life?” Josh offered, barely even removing his lips from my neck to answer the question I hadn't realized I'd asked out loud.

Panic climbed like an invasive weed up my throat, choking me. “No, we can't!” I said, but it was way too breathy and aroused and based on the *oh come on* look Josh was giving me, he saw right through me.

I pulled away, trying to move around Josh and turn to go back inside, but he held gently onto my arm. “Hope, wait, don't step th—”

Sloosh.

My heel sank into something soft and mucky, slipping out from underneath me.

I fell, landing on my back, right on top of a giant pile of horse shit.

I literally couldn't think of a more appropriate way to finish these last twenty-four hours.

Josh's face came into view over top of me, quite obviously trying to hold in his laughter. "You okay?"

With a huff, I pushed up off the ground. "Yeah."

"You sure? Head? Shoulder? They're okay?" He offered me a hand which I smacked away.

"I'm *fine*. Only thing bruised right now is my ego." And my ass.

No, scratch that. The soft pile of horse crap pillowed my fall quite nicely.

"Okay, then," Josh said, snickering. Then he spun on the heel of his cowboy boot, sauntering back to the house.

"Where are you going? What about Chestnut?" I called after him.

Josh turned around to face me, but didn't stop walking. Instead, he managed this graceful backwards stride that was annoyingly sexy. "My ranch hand will get Chestnut in ten minutes and bring him back to his stable. But after that little display of yours? I've got a song to write!"

Thirteen

∞

HOPE

“HE BOUGHT YOU LUCCHESE?! And a Chanel scarf?” Maggie gaped at me, gripping her margarita tightly in her hand. “You really are the Dalai Lama of dating!”

“Josh and I are *not* dating,” I reiterated through clenched teeth. “I tried to return everything to him, but...”

Well, we all knew how that turned out, I thought with a grimace.

She gasped. “You can’t return a gift like that! It’s sacrilege down here in Texas!”

I swallowed my groan. “Not this again.”

“It’s true. It’s considered really rude.”

“Well in New York, it’s inappropriate to give someone such an expensive gift. Especially when said person isn’t planning to reciprocate. With *anything*,” I added pointedly.

“Yeah, but—”

“But what?”

“It’s Josh Gabriel,” she said. “He’s one of the biggest pop stars of our decade. He’s got the money to spend!”

Did he though? He’d mentioned that he was pouring more and more of his own money into the horse rescue. I mean, yes, he had more money than the average person, but I wondered how much he actually had. How long

could he go before he needed to cut back on his expenses? Hell, if I was his accountant, I'd be telling him to not buy stupid lavish gifts for women he didn't know.

She waved her hand at me, brushing off anything I was about to say. "Well, it's your call. I'm just telling you that down here, it's a big deal to return a gift."

I debated telling her about our kiss, then thought better of it.

I liked Maggie. She was becoming a fast friend. But we weren't quite friends *yet*. She was still my client. She was paying to hang out with me and until I wasn't getting a paycheck for drinking with her, I needed to treat her like a client.

Still, after we finished with our business, I hoped and planned to stay friends with her.

Tipping back my head, I finished the rest of my martini in a gulp.

I usually didn't drink so much so fast while with a client, but it had been one hell of a week.

My shoulder was feeling a lot better and the gash on my forehead was healing well. I'd managed to flip my hair and style it so I could cover the wound. It only needed three stitches and according to my doctor, they will dissolve in another ten days.

I sucked a gulp of oxygen into my lungs and plastered a fake smile on my face. "Today is about *you* finding a date, not me," I said.

"Exactly. Because you already have a date," Maggie reiterated.

I was saved from talking anymore about Josh when the bartender came over to get us another round.

On one hand, four p.m. was a little early for man hunting. But my schedule had been crazy busy with trying to find Josh's muse. Add to that my injury and it was the first time in a few days that Maggie and I managed to squeeze in time together.

"How's your new job going?" I asked her in a desperate attempt to

change the subject.

“It’s great!” she said, beaming. “I really love the news network I’m at, even though covering weekly Sunday night news trivia isn’t my dream position. I talked to some of the other women at the station and they all said they started as trivia girls too, eventually working their way up to weather girls and even anchors!”

I smiled back at her and gave a nod to the bartender as he slid another martini into my hand. “That’s really great, Maggie. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” she said, her beautiful smile causing her eyes to crease. “But I’m sure you’re ready to get down to business.”

We’d already been here at the bar for over thirty minutes, chatting and catching up. “If you’re ready, then I’m ready,” I said. But I truly enjoyed her company. Even still, I was on the clock and we both had somewhere to be in a couple of hours.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the bar and dragging my fingernails over the stem of my martini glass. “I know it’s not super busy in here, but there’s a man sitting in the back corner and he keeps looking over here at you.”

He was cute enough. Dressed casually, but nice. Looked to be about twenty-five or so.

I had no idea what he did for work if he was here at the bar drinking solo at four-thirty on a weekday. But then again, that’s exactly what I was doing, so who was I to judge?

In a practiced sweep, Maggie crossed her legs and stretched subtly with a quick glance over her shoulder at him.

It wasn’t the most nuanced move, but it was a vast improvement from our first night out when she instantly turned and stared at people I mentioned.

The guy was already looking at her though and as she turned to sneak a look, he caught her in the act. A smirk pulled at his cute mouth and he winked at her before bringing his beer to his lips and taking another sip of his

beer.

Maggie whipped back around to face me. “Oh God! He caught me!” she whisper-yelled.

“Yes, but it was adorable. That was the sort of cute catch you want to happen. Now you both know the other is interested.”

“Ohhhh,” she said, pausing to take a sip of her margarita. “So, I need to be obvious, but not too obvious.”

“Exactly.”

She scrunched her nose. “Sounds confusing.”

I shrugged and watched out of the corner of my eye as the man chatted with the server.

Inwardly, I smiled. “How much do you want to bet that in less than three minutes, he’ll send over another margarita for you?”

“What?” Maggie whispered, leaning into me adorably. “He will not!”

“Oh yeah?”

I inclined my chin to behind the bar where our bartender was beginning to make another margarita. Sure enough, less than two minutes later, he was sliding it over to Maggie.

“From that gentleman over there,” he said.

The peachy spray on her cheeks flushed a deeper rose color that matched her lips as her wide blue eyes met mine in wonder. “What do I do now?” she asked.

“Well, lesson number one... you can accept that drink since it came straight from the bartender. If anyone else hands you a drink, you toss that shit away. You understand?”

She nodded, concern twisting her features. “Sounds like you speak from experience.”

My stomach plummeted as anxiety steeped into my bloodstream. A dark, humorless laugh escaped me. “You could say that,” I said.

That concern etched onto her face deepened even more. “I’m sorry.”

I squeezed her arm gently in what I hoped was a reassuring way. Despite the heavy thud of my pounding heart on my ribcage, I took a deep breath. A calming breath. “Thank you,” was all I said. “Learn from my mistake. Don’t be like me. Or rather, don’t be like college-aged me.”

My story wasn’t unique. And that’s what was so damn sad. My story—girl goes out with girlfriends...girlfriends ditch her...girl gets roofied and raped –it was nothing new.

But that night didn’t define me anymore. I had learned from it. And it turned my life around. Gave me my mission in life to help educate others so it wouldn’t happen as much to them.

“Now,” I said, clearing my throat and patting her arm, “go over there with the drink and say hi. Sit down with him.”

“Are you coming?” she asked wide-eyed.

Smiling, I shook my head. “If he wanted *my* company, he would’ve sent me the drink, right?”

“What if I fuck it all up?” she asked nervously.

I nearly snort laughed at the sound of the word fuck coming from Maggie’s perfectly innocent lips. “You won’t,” I reassured her. “And if you do, so what? Consider him good practice. Nothing serious. Be yourself, even if ‘yourself’ is delightfully weird. Okay?”

She gave me a weak smile. “I’ll try.”

Then she was off. Like watching a fledgling leave the nest for the first time, I watched her cross the bar, margarita in hand.

The door to the bar creaked open, light spilling into the otherwise dark bar just as Maggie sat down across from the guy. A man with a massive vase of gorgeous flowers walked toward the bar.

Pretty damn fancy bouquet for a place with peanut shells on the floor. Even still, the arrangement had my favorite color peppered into it... orange. Marigolds to be exact. And what looked like some amaryllis and petunias too.

The delivery man stopped in front of me, setting the vase down next to me on the bar. “Hope Marcoux-Evans?”

“Um... yes?”

“Sign here please.”

He shoved a form and a pen into my hand. Dumbfounded, I scribbled my signature and then he was gone.

That’s when I saw it... another scarf tied around the vase.

This one was Fendi—two slim orange borders around the edge and black and white stripes inside. It was, in a word, gorgeous.

And I knew immediately who it was from without even looking at the simple gold and blue card tucked into the flowers.

What was the deal with Josh and these scarves? I mean, yes, I loved scarves, even the less expensive ones.

I plucked the card from the vase, my knuckles trailing across the velvety petals of the amaryllis, and opened it.

Josh’s masculine print was inside, not some assistant’s flowery cursive.

Hope

noun (hōp) the light at the end of the tunnel. knowing the best is yet to come.

Marigolds for creative inspiration. Amaryllis for muse. Petunias for Hope.

Then at the bottom, he added:

PS: Please don’t make me beg.

PPS: I already ripped the tag off of this scarf, so you can’t return it.

I had to admit, as far as wooing went? He was knocking it out of the park.

I untied the scarf from the vase and draped it over my shoulders.

It was absolutely stunning. Maybe there was something to this southern tradition of not refusing gifts.

I didn’t want to admit it, but Josh Gabriel was chipping away at my resolve.

Fourteen

∞

HOPE

NINE DAYS. Nine whole days had passed since the accident.

Since the kiss.

Five days since the flower delivery. I didn't bring it up to him and he didn't ask. Nothing other than a slight twitch of his brow when he saw me wearing the scarf two days ago.

I had gone full blast in my wingwoman duties. I'd attempted to set Josh up with eight different women. Almost one every night since the kiss.

Every single one of which he found faults with.

I'd also spent the last nine days trying to convince him the rodeo for Anita's Hope Horse Rescue would be the perfect time to announce his new muse. But I was also quickly realizing that with only six days left until the event, I was backing myself into a corner with that deadline. Sure, we'd agreed on two weeks for me to find him a muse, but there was wiggle room with that. Not so much with a charity gala deadline.

Maybe I needed to back off trying to convince him of this. Or maybe, just maybe, the two-week deadline will pass without him realizing it.

Because if his date for tonight didn't work out, I was screwed. I had no other options or ideas for him if he didn't like tonight's date.

Josh had promised me he wasn't being picky for the sake of being picky. I wanted to believe him, but it was hard to imagine that out of all of these

beautiful, smart, talented women, not a single one of them inspired his song writing more than I did.

I exited the condo, freezing as I reached my rental car.

Inside, resting on the front seat was another large white box. Another silk scarf was tied into a bow on top... this time, Burberry.

How in the hell did his people even get *into* my locked car?

I climbed inside and unraveled the gorgeous scarf, inwardly weeping over the fact that I shouldn't keep it.

I clutched the steering wheel hard. So hard the leather bowed beneath my grip as I turned into the small coffee shop parking lot. It was a cute spot my dad had showed me on my first day in town.

It was never super busy, except for the seven a.m. to eight a.m. crowd who grabbed a quick cup of java on their way to work. Other than that, it was mostly empty with the occasional person who stopped in, then quickly went on their way. So when Josh texted me that he wanted to meet up, this felt like the perfect, under the radar spot.

I put my car in park, slid the largest pair of Jackie O sunglasses I had onto my face, and locked the car before entering the coffee shop. I was immediately met with the sound of air whistling from the milk steamer as a strong scent of Arabica circled me.

I walked up to the counter and smiled at the woman behind the counter. She was young, probably college aged with natural auburn hair and a spray of freckles across her nose. My brain went immediately to business as I sized her up. Could a barista be his muse? Sure, she was young and he'd specifically said he didn't want anyone too young, but she was adorable.

As I stood there staring at her, not the menus, she gave me an uncertain look. "Uh... may I help you?"

Shit. Even in my sunglasses, she must have known I was staring. God, I was getting desperate.

I shook my head, digging a hand into my purse and pulled out my credit

card. “Yes, sorry. I’ll have a venti cold brew with room, please.”

From behind me, a low voice rumbled against my ear. “Venti? Where do you think you are, Miss Marcoux-Evans? This ain’t no Starbucks.”

The Texas drawl caused a shiver to glide down my spine.

I glanced to my left, unsurprised to find Josh leaning close to my ear. I rolled my eyes and ignored the way my flesh lifted with goosebumps. The barista gave me an apologizing shrug. “I assume you mean large... largest we’ve got is twenty ounces.”

She pointed at a large plastic cup and I gave her a smile. “Yes, thank you.” Then hitching my thumb over my shoulder, I responded, “I think some people like to play dumb as if they don’t know what those sizes mean.”

Her smile grew wider. “I know what you mean. At this point, don’t we all have Starbucks vernacular in our everyday language? I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s added to *Webster’s Dictionary* soon.”

I liked her. And I didn’t think it was simply out of desperation that she could be a candidate for Josh. I genuinely liked the girl.

She turned around to pour my cold brew and with her back to us, I gave Josh a look, glancing first at him, then back to her, with a quick wiggle of my eyebrows.

He looked confused at first as his gaze lifted past me to where she stood behind the counter. “Her?” he whispered.

“She’s cute,” I mouthed back to him.

He rolled his eyes, sipping a paper cup of something. “You *can’t* be serious? You must really hate the idea of being my muse if you’re stooping to suggesting a bari—”

I clamped my palm over his mouth. “Shhh,” I hushed him. “You don’t have to be a jerk about it. You still have a reputation to uphold, you know.”

Though I couldn’t see his mouth, I could feel his smile beneath my palm. And I could see the way his eyes narrowed, crinkling with the grin.

That was the thing about Josh. When he smiled, he did so with his whole

face, not just his mouth. And the sight of it made my stomach knot with pleasure.

My lungs tightened as I felt his hot breath caress over the skin of my hand. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry at the feel of his lips against my flesh.

He made a low *hmmm* sound that vibrated against my hand and seemingly connected straight to my chest. I pulled my hand back and suppressed the tremble that coursed down my body.

I liked his lips. I liked them way, way too much.

And unfortunately, I now knew how damn good they felt pressed against mine.

“Here you go,” the barista said as she handed me an icy tumbler of cold brew coffee.

Thank God. I needed the cold drink to cool down my heated face.

I smiled and thanked her, taking it to the counter to fix it up with half and half. I felt Josh follow me, standing right over my shoulder as I stirred the creamer into my coffee.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said quietly. “You’re right about unveiling my muse at the charity rodeo.”

Shiiiiit. “I am?”

He nodded and slid his hands into his pockets. “If we find a muse, yes. I don’t have to worry about tarnishing her legacy, because as you pointed out yesterday, my feelings for my muse will be real. Otherwise, I wouldn’t agree to her.”

I grunted. “Well, that’s for damn sure. You’ve given me a run for my money here.”

“Cute,” he said. “But bottom line... you win. Let’s announce my muse as my new girlfriend at the rodeo.”

“Great,” I said.

Woohoo, I thought without enthusiasm.

I won.

I won the small victory that I shouldn't have been fighting for in the first place. "You can go get us a table, you know. You don't have to stand at my heels like a well-trained poodle."

He was silent behind me and I resisted the urge to glance back at him.

Instead, I eventually heard his low chuckle. "I already saved us a table in the back corner. But Hope," his voice lowered and I felt his whiskered chin brush my shoulder as he added, "I'm hardly a poodle." I bit my lip to keep from grinning.

I knew that comment would get under his skin.

"You're right. Poodles are obedient and smart. You're more like..." I turned, making a show of looking him up and down. "A basset hound."

I punctuated the statement with a quick nod, before crossing to the back corner where I noticed Josh's tan jacket draped over the seat.

"A *basset hound*? Those dumb, ugly dogs with the droopy ears?"

I took my seat across from him and shrugged. "Well... what do *you* see yourself as?"

He snorted. "A German Shepherd. Strong. Smart. Badass."

I rolled my eyes and sipped my coffee, getting suddenly serious. "Okay, Mr. Badass. We have bigger problems." Pulling out my phone, I slid it across the table to where an article was posted this morning. The headline stated: *Josh Gabriel's New Mystery Woman* and below it were several pictures of Josh and me out and about.

He glanced at the phone, then back up at me, blinking. "This is a problem?"

I nodded. "We need to find you your muse. And headlines like these aren't helping. They've been constant since I was discharged from the hospital."

He swatted the air, taking another sip of coffee. "That's nothing. People are used to seeing me with a different woman every week. It'll pass."

I sighed. “Right. They’re used to seeing you with *different* women. This article is pointing out, rightfully so, that you’ve been seen consistently with one woman. Namely me. That’s the difference. *That’s* why they’re reporting this.”

And because you told a source that I was your fiancé.

Ever since it got out that Josh was visiting his fiancé in the hospital, the vultures had been circling... even more than usual.

They were dying to know who his mystery woman was and why she’d been in the emergency room. For the paparazzi, not knowing something was the absolute worst. It made the rumors more outrageous and rampant. Everything from Josh was already secretly married to him having a newborn baby he was hiding.

Josh’s mouth twitched, those steely blue eyes locking with mine. “Is that so bad?”

I blinked, my foggy thoughts dissipating. *Was I saying my thoughts aloud again?* “Excuse me?”

“Is it really so bad if they think you’re the one?”

“It is if you’re trying to find a muse.” I paused, glancing up at him. His dark five o’clock shadow scraped over his jaw and my fingers twitched with the urge to brush my thumb across his dimple. “You *are* trying, aren’t you, Josh?”

His hand fell loudly onto the table. “Yes, I’m fucking trying. None of these women are right. None of them inspire me to write any music. Literally, not a single note.”

I sighed deeply. “Do you think maybe you’re not giving them enough time? Maybe you need more than one date to let a muse, I don’t know... take root?”

“I didn’t need more than one date with you,” he said bluntly.

“We haven’t *had* a date,” I snapped.

“Exactly my point.” He tossed a hand in the air before it landed softly

against his denim-clad thigh. “You heard that one song,” he said. “You know being around you is inspiring me. Why are you fighting this?”

“That one song was a fluke,” I tried reasoning with him. I wasn’t a freaking muse. I could barely keep my own life from crumbling and yet he thought I was somehow going to be the glue to keep his together?

“Fluke, huh?” he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small moleskine notebook, tossing it across the table at me. It landed with a soft thump.

I stared at it, somehow instinctively knowing exactly what was in there without cracking the spine.

“That notebook has half a dozen new song ideas. Lyrics, notes, bridges, choruses. None of them are fully cooked yet, but it’s the most inspiration I’ve had in years.”

“Josh—”

“And let’s not forget this.” From his breast pocket, he pulled out a small square napkin with scribbles all over it. This time, he handed it to me.

“What am I looking at?” I asked, avoiding glancing down at the napkin. I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to acknowledge or read the words that might be there.

“I have a confession to make,” he said and pointed to the napkin. “I saw you before we actually met that day at your apartment. I saw you in a bar working with one of your other clients. And in those moments, not even talking to you, having never spoken a word, or held a conversation, these lyrics came to me.”

With trembling fingers, I lifted the napkin, reading the chicken scratch in front of me.

Her hidden smile. Her sheltered eyes.

That shuttered laugh will be my demise.

The lyrics kept going for several stanzas.

It was like poetry. And even though I was far from musical, I could

almost feel the rhythm of the song, simply in the pattern of those words. In the long strokes of the pen he wrote with. I swallowed, but it had a hard time going down. “You wrote this about me?”

He took the napkin from my hand and tucked it back into his pocket. “Yeah, I did. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. As I said, if you were to open that notebook, you’d find the beginnings of at least six different songs, all started since meeting you. So don’t tell me I’m not trying with these other women. I told you from the beginning, I need you to find me someone who makes me forget about *you*. You haven’t done that yet. But it is not for a lack of trying on my part.”

“You’re stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy loop,” I said. “The only reason you can’t write songs about these other women is because you’ve convinced yourself that you can’t!”

A cold look passed over his face and he yanked his fingers into his hair, tugging the messy strands. “You think I *want* you in my head constantly?”

My heart pounded in my chest as I sat there, listening to him talk about me. Sliding the straw in my mouth, I took a sip of coffee distracting myself from his words with the strong cold brew. “Believe me,” he continued, “I’d much rather have a muse who *wanted* to spend time with me, than someone who seems to constantly want to run away.”

I coughed, nearly sending my sip of coffee launching across the table into his face, but managed to swallow it down before that disaster happened. “I’m *not* constantly running away from you. You gave me a job. I’m trying to *do* that job.”

He nodded, licking his lips in a way that felt way too deliberate.

Damn him.

I glanced down at the table, studying the grain of the wood in an attempt to stop staring at his beautiful mouth. That mouth that had just been pressed against my palm moments ago. And against my lips nine days ago. *Focus, Hope. Focus.*

“What are you afraid of Hope?” Josh asked quietly.

I jerked my gaze back to his, meeting his challenging stare. “Nothing.”

A twitch of his mouth. “Liar.”

Josh was sexy as hell. And surprisingly, very sweet... for a famous guy.

But I knew the territory that came with that lifestyle. And I wasn't ready for it again. I didn't know if I ever would be. I wasn't even sure I wanted Brent back after all this.

But it would be nice to make him jealous as hell, I thought.

If I was Josh's muse, it would be purely lust. Lust and revenge on Brent.

Nothing more.

Because even though he was exactly the sort of guy I could see myself falling for, I couldn't let that happen. Never again. “It would be really unbalanced if I were your muse,” I said after a moment of silence. “You apparently have these strong feelings for me. Feelings that inspire you to write. To create. I can't reciprocate those feelings.”

His smile widened. “I'm sort of counting on that, Hope.”

My heart tripped over itself in my chest. “What?”

“I don't *need* you to be in love with me in order to be my muse. In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't fall for me at all.”

I narrowed my eyes at him again. “Then what the hell am I doing here as your wingwoman?”

He shook his head and leaned in across the table. “Look, all I'm saying is that I was able to write multiple songs without you even being around all the time. I'll have a whole album easily in six weeks if I can have some dedicated time with you. Have a few dates. Maybe even see you every day.” Then he pointed at the article on my phone. “And you, in return, would get *this*. How much do you want to bet your ex has already seen this article?”

I rolled my eyes. “Who cares if he's seen it or not?”

“*You* do.”

He had me there. Of course I cared. I could pretend all I wanted that I

didn't, but more than anything, I wanted Brent to think I was moving on in the most glamorous way possible.

But that would be using Josh and that's not who I am.

With my arms still crossed, I slid a glance back at Josh. How did he know me so well already? Or was he really good at reading *all* people, not just me? Regardless, it was incredibly unnerving.

"I doubt he's seen this," I finally said. "He pays attention to New York and LA and that's about it. Country rock stars aren't exactly in his wheelhouse."

Josh leaned forward, pressing his steepled fingers to his lips. "How 'bout this? If he doesn't text you or call you by the end of the day tomorrow, I'll make sure your picture is never seen in the tabloids again."

"Another bet? I'm still climbing my way out of our last bet, Josh."

He put his hands up in surrender. "Fine, it's not a bet. If he *does* reach out, you don't owe me anything in return."

I narrowed my eyes at him and glanced back down at the article. "Did *you* leak these images to the press?" He didn't say anything, but he grew awfully interested in the bottom of his coffee cup. "Oh. My. God. You *did*, didn't you?"

Oh, I could have reached over the table and smacked him right across his perfectly chiseled cheekbone.

Except now with that article out, a simple slap in a cafe would probably garner the attention of more tabloids. The public's eyes were on us constantly.

Looking around the cafe, there were only two other tables occupied. One young girl who had her nose buried in textbooks. And one woman in the corner working on her laptop.

But just because they weren't looking at us at the moment, didn't mean they weren't paying attention. Eavesdropping. Hell, they could have already snapped a photo of us together for all we knew.

“Fine,” Josh whispered. “I leaked this *one* photo. But it wasn’t me who told the press about the fiancé comment or anything except this one image.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I hissed.

He paused. “I mean... yeah. I thought it would.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes as I reached into my purse. After pulling out the file, I slid it over to him with a little more force than I usually would have. “Your date tonight,” I said as he opened the folder.

His face twisted immediately. “A cheerleader?”

I did my best to smile in return. “Not just any cheerleader. A Dallas Cowboys cheerleader.”

He grunted and fell back in his chair, already disinterested.

“You said you’d give this a chance,” I scolded.

“I will. I just don’t feel like you’re hearing me when I tell you what I’m looking for.”

I shot him a look of annoyance as I pulled out her pictures. “She has hair the same color as mine. Similar style and cut. She has a job, yes, but she’s only truly busy during football season. She has a ton of free time for six months out of the year. She can be available for red carpets, but she’s sporty and active. And she *loves* horses, Josh.”

His eyes darted to mine with that. Like none of her other facts and stats mattered except for her love of animals. “She loves horses?”

I held his gaze steady. “Yes. This girl is like me, but better. She’s Hope 2.0.”

His jaw set hard and I could see the muscles working like he was grinding his molars together. With a chuckle that was anything but humorous, he shook his head. “Fine. Where are we meeting her tonight?”

“Dinner at the steakhouse. You have a private room in the back so no one will photograph or see you two together.”

Although at this point, it would behoove me for one of these dates to be photographed and leaked to the press too. It might get the paparazzi off my

back at least.

“Dinner? That’s a little more intimate than any of the other first dates.”

“Well, since I can’t come with you tonight, I thought this would be a good chance for you and her to talk one on one.”

“You’re not coming tonight?”

I shook my head, sliding the folder back into my purse. “Nope. Remember? I shared my Google calendar with you last week and tonight was blocked off. Since we’re running low on time, I didn’t want you to waste the night though. But you’ll have to be on your best behavior.”

He stared at me long and hard, his gaze sweeping down my body in a way that left me flushed. I was already dressed in my leather skirt and sequined tank top. But for the purposes of our meeting, I put a blazer on over it. All he could see was a little bit of bling peeking out of the blazer. “Big date tonight?”

Bitterness cracked at the edges of his question.

“A bachelorette party for my dad’s latest bride.”

His eyes widened at that. “Dad’s *latest* bride? How many other brides have there been?”

“Four,” I stated unapologetically. I was never one to mince words. “This will be his fifth marriage. When you’ve watched your dad marry and divorce several times, you get a little jaded. *But* I’m bringing my other client with me. She’ll sort of be my escape from the party.”

Speaking of Maggie, my phone buzzed with a text from her right as I grabbed my purse.

MAGGIE:

Should I wear this? Or do I go with something fancier?

Two pictures were attached to the text message.

In the first picture, Maggie stood in front of a mirror wearing skinny jeans, boots, and a cute tank top. In the other image, an outfit was laid out on the bed— a cute a-line flower skirt, and an off-the-shoulder white blouse that

matched it.

Even though the second outfit is probably what I would have chosen to wear, it didn't quite fit the vibe tonight. It was perfect for a garden wedding, but not so much for a night on the town with a bunch of girls.

I texted her back, telling her to go with the skinny jeans, then I checked the time on my phone.

I had thirty minutes before our dinner reservation. And I was glad to have that extra time. We were meeting just down the street at a soul food meets Mexican restaurant that my soon-to-be stepsisters swore by.

And that extra thirty minutes I had right now meant I could ditch my blazer in my car, finish my coffee in peace, and get to the restaurant early enough to score a seat for Maggie and me near the exit.

With any luck, we could finish quickly and be out of there before the group piled into the limo to head to the strip club.

There was no way in hell I was going to a strip club with my future stepmother. The fact that she and all her daughters were going was already weird enough. Add to that fact, I was combining this night with a pro-bono night working with Maggie and any man we found at a strip club, if any, were probably not what she was looking for.

Maggie responded almost immediately.

MAGGIE:

Are you sure!? What's everyone else wearing?

"Where are you going for this bachelorette party?" Josh pressed me further.

I stood from the table and picked up my now sweating cup of cold brew coffee. "Nowhere you'll want to be, trust me."

He smiled and his brows shot up. "Strip club?"

I mimed zipping my lips. "I'll never say."

"*You* may never say!" My spine went stiff at the sound of the brassy voice behind me. "But *I* sure as hell will!"

Josh's eyes lit up brightly as his gaze traveled over my shoulder. "And you are?"

I closed my eyes tightly. *This wasn't happening. Please tell me this wasn't happening.*

"My name's Viv! And this gorgeous girl here is about to be my stepdaughter!"

I had to get her out of there... and fast. If loudmouth Viv saw that I was with Josh, she'd be the first one to run screaming to all her friends and neighbors that her future stepdaughter was seen with Josh Gabriel.

It seriously couldn't get any worse.

"Lovebug?" My dad said behind me.

Shit. I spoke too soon...

It just got worse.

Fifteen
L

HOPE

“LOVEBUG?” Josh repeated, his eyes lighting up.

I shot Josh a quick glare, then leaned in to give my dad a quick hug. “Hey, Dad.”

“Look at you!” Vivian exclaimed, grabbing my hands and giving my outfit a once over. “You look hot. Except...” She pounced on me like I was brisket at an all-you-can-eat buffet, tugging at my blazer and peeling it off my shoulders.

“There, that’s better,” she said, tossing my Brooks Brothers blazer aside like it was garbage.

She whistled as she looked me up and down. “Is that what you’ve been hiding beneath all those layers? You look like you’re going out to dinner at that fancy new French place, not grabbing some barbeque at Raul’s, then shoving dollar bills down some banana hammocks at Splash Zone Strip Club.”

Josh could barely contain his glee as he looked at me, eyes bright. “Splash Zone. *Classy*,” he whispered.

“I know,” Viv said, completely missing Josh’s sarcasm. “You get a free bottle of champagne if you buy a private booth. Not that we’re *going* to do that, but Miss Classy here will make it look like we’re the high rollers!”

I looked down at my outfit. The sequin blouse. The short leather skirt.

The high heels.

In New York, this would have been the *perfect* outfit for a bachelorette party. But when I took in Vivian's outfit, I realized just how out of place I probably looked.

“Wow, Viv. You look...” I paused, clearing my throat and at a complete loss for words. “Wow.”

“Thank you!” She gave a cute little curtsy and giggled, snuggling into my dad who looked at her appreciatively.

My leather skirt was tame next to her skintight, ripped jeans that hugged her slim waist and a hot pink zebra tank top straining at the seams, no match for her impressive curves. The entire outfit was accessorized with white fringed boots, massive hoop earrings, a matching hot pink cowboy hat, and enough bangle bracelets going up her arm, that I worried she might not be able to bend her elbow.

“Raul’s, then Splash Zone, huh?” Josh’s deep and rumbly voice echoed behind me.

Oh no. I had specifically been evasive about where we were going.

I spun around, leveling him with a scowl. “What do you care? You’re completely booked tonight.”

Or at least he’d better be. I swear to God if he ditched that Cowgirl early tonight to chase after me, there would be hell to pay.

Pressing my lips into a firm line, I turned back to Vivian, trying my best to ignore Josh, even though I could feel the heat of him moving in at my back.

But when I turned to face my future stepmother, her mouth gaped open, gawking over my shoulder at Josh like she’d only just seen him despite the fact that he’d been sitting here the whole time. “Y-you’re... you’re Josh Gabriel.”

I threw another glare at Josh over my shoulder, but was merely met with a knowing gleam in his eyes as two divots appeared on either side of his

mouth.

With a wink he answered, “Last I checked.”

“Who’s Josh Gabriel?” Dad asked, beautifully clueless as usual. But for the first time in probably my whole life, his inability to read the room had me smirking in triumph. I could have planted a kiss right on Dad’s forehead for that reaction.

But it didn’t seem to phase Josh at all. With a grin, he said, “Well, you sound just like Hope.”

“You... you two *know* each other?” Somehow, impossibly, Viv’s eyes bulged even more.

“No,” I said at the same time Josh answered, “Yes.”

The awkward pause had Josh beaming even more as discomfort radiated up my body... and I was pretty sure it wasn’t the four-inch Givenchy heels I wore.

“Is this the friend you’re bringing to dinner tonight?” Vivian asked.

“What? *No*. What kind of psycho brings a straight, male friend to a bachelorette party?!”

Josh booped his finger on the tip of my nose with a quiet, “So you admit we’re friends?”

Jaw clenched, a snarl rumbled at the back of my throat. He knew damn well I signed an NDA and legally couldn’t tell Viv or my dad he was actually a client. “Fine,” I hissed and swiveled back to Viv and Dad. “We’re friends. Happy? But he’s not the friend coming tonight. That’s Maggie...”

Oh, shit. Maggie. I never texted her back. I yanked my phone free and started typing a response to her.

HOPE:

Trust me. You look great! You’ll fit right in.

Unlike me who, in this outfit, will stick out like a sore thumb.

“Who’s Maggie?” Dad asked. “I thought you didn’t know anyone in Austin. Now, I’m hearing you have not one, but *two* friends.”

He fixed Josh with a withering scowl and for the briefest moment, I saw a crack in Josh's demeanor. The slightest flinch at the thought that someone might not be falling at his feet. Then as quickly as I saw it, it vanished.

I hadn't heard that protective note in my father's tone since my freshman year of high school when senior Luke Williams asked me to prom. The age gap alone was enough to set my dad's teeth on edge, but when Luke came to pick me up with a lit cigarette dangling from his lips, Dad nearly blew a gasket and chased him off our porch.

Admittedly, I didn't really like Luke much. I'd only said yes to prom because it was, well, *prom*. And because most of my life, Dad never seemed to care who I spent my time with.

Even though that night exploded into a fight between my father and me, secretly I'd never been happier that my Dad finally stuck up for me.

I was feeling that weird sense of fatherly protective warmth again right now. With Josh.

"Maggie's a friend I met on one of my first night's here. I told you about her, Dad."

"And this guy? He a *friend* too?" The word friend might as well have been spat with acid.

Vivian linked her arm through my dad's and snuggled into him. "Oh, come on, Rick. She's been here for almost two weeks. She was bound to meet a couple people her own age. I just had no idea it would be Josh Gabriel! You know, I took my girls to see you live once as their Christmas gift. Gosh, it must have been nine... maybe even ten years ago now?"

Josh seemed to pale at the mention of his concert. But always one to cater to fans, he gave her a polite nod and a smile that I'd come to learn in the past week or so was forced. "I hope I gave y'all a good show," he said with a tip of his chin.

"Oh, the best," Viv said. "You were all my girls talked about for weeks. And with every breakup, your music would blare from their rooms on

repeat!” With a sigh, she rested her cheek on Dad's shoulder.

I had to admit, standing there with Dad and Viv, something about this felt different than his other marriages. He looked calmer. More at peace with Viv than with the other women.

And in return, Viv looked at him with adoration.

I cleared my throat, sensing that Josh was itching for a change in topic. “What about you, Dad? What are you getting into tonight? Big bachelor party planned?”

“Oh no,” he said. “Not for me. Not this time.”

Uh-huh. Sure. I’d heard that before.

“Really? No bachelor party at all?”

He shook his head. “Someone has to stay home with the dogs tonight.”

I blinked, taken completely aback. “You have dogs?”

“Three,” Viv said, pulling up a picture on her phone of two little fluffy white dogs and a larger black and white mutt. “Elsa and Anna were mine before I met your dad. And Rick found Ollie here in the middle of the road. He stopped traffic until he could coax the big guy into his car.”

“Anna and Elsa,” I repeated absentmindedly. My dad had a *dog*. Three dogs. What the actual hell? I had begged him to get a dog my entire childhood.

“And Ollie!” Viv chimed in.

I swallowed against my drying throat and said, “Well, I’m surprised you didn’t name this one Olaf.”

“Why?” Viv looked at me blankly.

“Because... Elsa. And Anna?”

Nothing. Complete vacancy in that stare of hers.

“You know... from *Frozen*?” I tried again and glanced back at a very bemused looking Josh.

“I don’t know what that is, dear.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s uh... a movie. A really famous movie. I figured

that's why you chose their names. You know what? Never mind. Forget I said anything."

Wow.

She waved me off. "Anyway, when Rick brought Ollie home, that was the moment I knew he was the one. I knew then I was going to marry this man." Hearts were practically coming out of her eyes as she told the story, looking up at my dad.

He could barely keep *me* alive for eighteen years. And he had abandoned four children from his first marriage... but saving one stupid dog's life in his retirement years won her over.

Um, sure. Whatever, lady.

I cleared my throat and plastered on a fake smile. "Well, aren't you just a regular Dr. Doolittle now, Dad?"

Viv leaned in and gave me a loud, dramatic whisper. "I'm trying to convince him to adopt a house goat next."

"Are house goats even a *thing*?"

Josh barked a laugh. "Oh yes. My neighbor has four goats. Helps keep the lawn nice and trim."

Dad chuckled, even though up until now he'd been pretty quiet. "That's exactly what Viv keeps saying. Almost has me convinced, too, if there's less mowing."

"And you can get fresh goat's milk from it!" Viv exclaimed, clapping excitedly. "We already have the fresh eggs from the chickens!"

"You have chickens?!" I screeched. If the two patrons at the cafe weren't looking at us before, they certainly were now.

How the hell did I not know any of this? And who was this man standing in front of me? My dad was not a farmer. He was not outdoorsy. He was a selfish alcoholic.

Viv clicked her tongue. "Come to think of it, I can't believe you've been here for almost two weeks and you still haven't come by to see the house!"

It'd been almost three weeks, but who was counting?

Dad smiled warmly at me. "You really do need to come see it, Lovebug."

"Besides," Viv continued, "your dad already had his bachelor party a few weeks ago."

I nodded. Now *that* sounded more likely.

"He and my brothers went on a camping trip," Viv continued.

That... did *not* sound more likely.

I snorted a laugh. "No, really, Dad. What did you do?"

He smirked in return. "Have you gone deaf? We went camping. The guys taught me how to fish."

I was truly unsure what to do with that information. Rendered speechless. Which was not a state I was typically in. In the last year since Dad moved to Austin, it seemed like he'd had a complete personality overhaul. If not for his fiery red hair and brown eyes that matched mine, I wasn't sure I'd even recognize him anymore.

"Okay. Welp. This has been a fun catch-up, but I really should get going before dinner." I paused, spinning to face Josh. "And *you* have a date to get ready for."

Josh saluted me. "Yes, ma'am."

"A date?" Dad grunted.

"Yes, sir," Josh answered him with way less sarcasm than how he'd addressed me seconds ago.

My spine went rigid. Oh God. Did I just blow Josh's cover and accidentally break my NDA in my panicked state to get the hell out of this situation?

My dad knew I was a matchmaker of sorts, but he didn't know the specifics. And he never asked. I sure hoped he wouldn't put two and two together.

"But not on a date with my daughter?" Dad interrogated.

"No, sir." Slowly, Josh turned his head to look at me, a sparkle in his

eyes. “Not for lack of trying on my part though.”

My jaw nearly cracked against the wood planks on the floor, my eyes wide and panicked. He did *not* just say that.

Leaning down, Josh tenderly pressed his lips to my cheek in the chastest kiss known to man.

I, on the other hand, barely reacted. I stood there, knees locked. Pins and needles threatening to numb my entire body. “Okay!” I said, my spine too stiff. My voice too shrill. “Well, I’ll see you later Josh.”

“Damn right you will.”

As I was walking away from him, my phone pinged with another text. Figuring it was Maggie, I slid my thumb across the screen to open it.

But there in bold text, was a message from Brent.

He texted me for the first time in over a month.

Just like Josh had said he would. Or rather, like he had bet me he would.

And it only said one word:

BRENT:

Hey.

Sixteen

8

JOSH

THIS WAS QUITE EASILY the worst date I'd ever been on. Not even the worst date that Hope had set me up on, but the worst date *ever*. Of all time. In the history of dating.

"But at practice today, Coach said I was the best flier he'd seen on the field since Rosie Muniz. Now that's not to say I'll be promoted to head cheerleader next year, but he made it very clear that if I played my cards right, it was a possibility."

I lifted my half-finished Glenlivet scotch on the rocks and gave it a good swirl, ice clacking against the edge of the glass with a satisfying clink. "I'm pretty sure your coach is expecting a blowjob in exchange for that head cheerleader position," I muttered.

"I can't believe you said that to me!" If she had been wearing pearls, she would have clutched them.

I snorted, and stared into the amber liquid before tipping it back and finishing the remainder of my fifty dollar pour in one gulp. It burned going down, but that was the whole point wasn't it?

"It's the truth. In the last twenty minutes you told me that this coach has had you over to his house *twice* for dinner when his wife was mysteriously *out of town*." I threw finger quotes around the words to really hammer home the point. "He always finds reasons to have private meetings with you. *And*

he took you shopping."

I set the glass down on the table and leaned forward on my elbows closer to the center of the table. "Men don't like going shopping. We don't like shopping for ourselves. And we definitely don't like shopping for our girlfriends. But we'll tolerate it if we think it'll get us laid. That's the brutal honest truth. Your boss is looking to get into your pants... Or rather, underneath that short little cheerleading skirt of yours." I fell back into my chair slumping, feeling more defeated than usual with this bad date.

Maybe that was a little harsh, but she needed to hear it. Because if she didn't hear it from me, she was going to learn it the hard way. Real soon, too, if I had to guess. Now at least she could have time to make an informed decision. And choose if she wanted to fuck her way to the top or not without being totally blindsided by him when he inevitably made advances on her.

"Maybe he's just a nice guy! Not all guys are pigheaded pieces of shit like you!"

I shrugged. After all, it really was no skin off my dick whether or not she decided to bone this guy. "You can choose to believe that if it makes you feel better. But I think you're going to learn real quickly that I know men a little better than you do. And trust me, all men have pretty much one thing on the brain at any given point of the day."

Damn. Maybe I'd had one too many to drink tonight. I wasn't usually this blunt. At least, not with people I'd just met.

For the first time since this conversation started, she leaned in, mischief glinting in her eyes. She ran a long fingernail down my forearm and gave me a sultry look. "Is that *your* goal tonight?"

"Hell no," I said without thinking.

Next thing I knew, I was soaking wet and sticky, and she was storming out of the steakhouse. Her Appletini dripped down my face and shoulders, leaving a syrupy residue.

"Shit," I muttered to myself. Hope was going to kill me. And if I was

being honest with myself, this was the first time I'd ever actually broken my promise to her. I wasn't trying on this date. Not at all.

Because I *knew*. I knew that Hope was the one I needed. I just needed *her* to realize it for herself. And I was fed up with the whole charade. Date after date, knowing it was a waste of time.

Money couldn't convince her to do this. Even the prospect of an extra thirty thousand dollars hadn't made her jump on it. Jealousy wasn't enough motivation for her. She had seen me on these dates time and time again, and nothing seemed to move her to want to advance this relationship.

There was literally nothing I could do other than keep going as I was and hope she honored the terms of the bet.

Or was there? Maybe she *was* the jealous type... but she knew there wasn't anything to be jealous *of* with these dates because the chemistry was nonexistent. Maybe if she saw me really connect with someone, she'd whistle a different tune.

Besides, after meeting her father and future stepmother, I think I finally found my angle in. Smirking, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted Matt.

In order for this plan to work, I was going to need a clean shirt and a wingman.

A real wingman, not the woman I wanted to win over.



Matt and I got to Raul's just as the bachelorette party was finishing up dinner. Which truly, it wouldn't have mattered if we had missed them. Because I knew they were supposed to be headed to Splash Zone next. Although, knowing Hope, she probably already had a plan to get out of that.

Lucky for me, I ran into Vivian first as she was coming out of the restroom.

“Hot damn,” Matt muttered beside me. “*She’s* going to be Hope’s stepmother?”

I elbowed Matt hard in the ribs. “Dude. Be cool.”

But I knew what he meant. Vivian might be older than us, but she was still stunning. And her outfit, tight as it was, left little to the imagination.

Seeing me, Vivian’s eyes went wide. Only they were quite a bit more glossy, and her face was far more flushed than it was a couple hours ago. Even though she was exiting a restroom, she held a half-empty margarita in her hand.

“Josh Gabriel!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. Half of what remained in her margarita glass sloshed over the sides and landed with a green splat on her fringed white boots.

“Oh no,” she whined, glancing down at her shoes. “These were brand new.”

“Maybe it won’t stain?” I offered, though it was weak at best.

“Aw, sugar!” She bent down trying to wipe away the stain with the palm of her hand. But the angle bending over only caused more of the margarita to slosh out of her glass.

With a frustrated grunt, she stood back up and stomped her stained-boot-clad foot against the wood planks of the floor. “Well, crap on a cracker.”

Sugar? Crap on a cracker? I smiled, thinking Vivian would have gotten along great with my mother.

“I don’t think a Tide stick will fix that,” Matt said.

Someone remind me why I invited him along?

“No, I don’t reckon it will,” Vivian responded. After a final sigh, she smacked my arm like we were old friends. “Unfortunately, I’ve ruined many suede clothing and accessories by spilling a margarita or two!”

I pressed my lips together to stop the snicker that was rising. “Do a lot of imbibing, do you?”

“Not as much anymore! Not since I met Rick. He’s a recovering

alcoholic, you know.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t know that, actually,” I said quietly. I hadn’t realized Rick was an alcoholic, but it explained a lot of the dynamic between Hope and him. And potentially explained the four other marriages.

“Yeah. And I used to be so good at holding my liquor too. Now look at me! Two margaritas in and I’m done-zo!” She paused and seemed to see Matt for the first time, her cheeks turning magenta. “Oh! You brought a friend! Is he a singer too?”

“Not quite. This is my manager, Matt. Matt, this is Vivian.”

Matt’s mouth tilted into a grin as he bent at the waist, lifting Viv’s hand in his. And like a character out of an Austen novel, he placed a gentle kiss on her knuckles. “Charmed.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him away. “Stop hitting on the bride-to-be, Matt.”

Vivian threw her head back and laughed. “Yeah, Matt. I’m old enough to be your mother. But if you like what you see here, I’ve got three beautiful daughters who look like me.... only younger and with less wrinkles.”

“Daughters, huh?”

“Oh boy,” I said, leaning into Viv. “You have no idea the Pandora’s box you’ve unleashed.”

She narrowed her eyes in a glare at Matt. “Oh, I’m not worried. I’m pretty sure this young man knows how to treat a young lady. And if he doesn’t, I grew up on a farm slaughtering pigs. Slicing up one more *pig* in my life won’t phase me one bit.”

I laughed as Matt’s face paled. He clearly targeted the wrong woman this time. Offering Vivian my elbow, I said, “What do you say we go get you a glass of water?”

She slipped her hand around my elbow as I guided her in a direction that I hoped was toward her own table.

Looking up at me with a sly side-eye, she asked, “So, what are you boys

doing here anyway?" It may have been phrased as a question, but her tone suggested she clearly knew *exactly* what we were doing here.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"God no," she giggled.

I barked a laugh.

Man, I like this woman. I liked her a lot. "Well, at least you're honest."

"What I can tell you, is that I can keep the secret from the person who matters. But I do love my gossip." Her smile faded, expression growing serious as she stared up at me and her grip on my elbow tightened. "But if you're here for what I think you're here for... or rather, *who* I think you're here for, then your secret is as safe as the Pentagon with me. Because there's no way in hell I would screw that up or come between you two. And with that girl? You need to tread carefully. She spooks easier than a Przewalski wild horse!"

"Wow. It's been a while since I've heard a good Przewalski reference."

She pointed at me. "I'm serious. I haven't known Hope for long, but she got dealt a bad hand with that arrogant big city ex of hers. I like you. Don't give me a reason to change my mind about that."

"Yes, ma'am."

My smile spread. Who knew I would have such an ally in Hope's future stepmother? "But we should probably go find her before she tries to sneak out the back door or something."

Vivian grinned and held up a set of keys pinched between her fingers. "Oh, I'm way ahead of you."

My eyes went wide. "Are those... are those *Hope's* keys?"

She giggled maniacally in a way that said this woman was not one to be messed with. "Told you, kids. Don't mess with Mama."

Seventeen

∞

JOSH

“WHERE ARE MY FRIGGIN’ keys!” Hope hissed as Vivian and I entered the back room arm in arm.

Seeing how angry she already was without even knowing I was here yet, almost made me turn around and nix the whole plan. Almost, but as I started to pull back, Vivian’s vice grip on my arm locked me in place. “Don’t you chicken out on me now!” she whispered.

Then with a final hard yank of my elbow, she tugged me forward toward the head of the table with her.

“Oh no!” Vivian exclaimed. “You lost your keys? I guess it looks like you’re joining us at Splash Zone after all.”

Annoyance flashed across her features as Hope’s gaze jerked to Vivian’s. Only it wasn’t Vivian’s gaze she found... it was mine. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

Wow, if I thought she was grumpy earlier today, that was nothing compared to *this*.

“Josh is here? Again?!” The friend sitting next to her was the same client I had seen with her in the bar that very first night. Maggie, I think she said her name was.

“Yep,” Hope said, popping the ‘p.’ “He just keeps turning up.”

“Like a good luck charm,” Maggie whispered, a shy smile on her face.

“More like a dirty penny,” Hope answered. Unlike Maggie, she made no effort to whisper or conceal her words from me.

Maggie's wide eyes first fell to me, clearly starstruck. But then they shifted to my left, and her blush turned scarlett when her gaze landed on Matt.

I smirked at my buddy, fully expecting Matt to have not noticed her yet. If history was any indication, I'd have assumed he'd be staking out all the girls in the room, figuring out which one he wanted to talk to first. *First* being the operative word there, because Matt's MO was usually to get as many numbers as he could in one night.

Don't get me wrong, Matt was a good guy. He was always upfront about the fact that he wasn't exclusive and he never cheated on the women he dated.

But still, if I had a sister, there was no way I'd ever let her within ten feet of the guy. And I loved him like a brother.

But when I looked to my left, I wasn't met with his wandering gaze or cocky smirk. Instead, he was staring directly at Maggie. And if I didn't know any better, I would have thought he'd been hit by Cupid's arrow himself.

Well hot damn. Had my best friend finally met the woman who could tame him? Maybe Maggie wouldn't be Hope's client for too long after all. Selfishly, it would work to my benefit if Matt and Maggie started dating. Then I could have Hope's attention entirely to myself.

"Well? Aren't you going to answer me? What the hell are you doing here?"

I'd been standing there like an idiot, staring around the room rather than answering Hope's question.

I opened my mouth to speak, only nothing came out. No smooth retort. No little white lie to get me out of this. It was like my grade-A bullshit generator had blipped out in my brain. "Uhhh..."

Vivan cleared her throat and squeezed my elbow. "I found these two

cuties hanging around outside with nowhere to go. And I figured, what better way to liven up this bachelorette party than to invite Mr. Josh Gabriel himself along to party with us?" Vivian sent me a wink.

Pressing her palms to the table, Hope stood slowly, glaring first at me, then at Vivian. "You're telling me that these two guys just *happened* to be loitering outside the very restaurant where your bachelorette party was happening?"

A server walked into the room with a tray of shots, passing them out to the party one by one. Hope took one glance and waved him off, declining the shot.

"That's right!" Vivian said. "You don't mind if they tag along, do you? I mean, you *did* say you two were friends, right?"

Hope's glare turned homicidal, tightening the lines framing her eyes. I don't know what kind of revenge she had planned for me, but it was clear she was cooking up some ideas.

"Friends," she repeated, the glare vanishing faster than a snap of my fingers. In its place was a frighteningly cheery smile. A smile I didn't trust... not for a second. "Of course I don't mind. I was just surprised to see you. I thought you had a *date* tonight?"

Oh, she knew damn well I had a date tonight. The worst date in the world. I shrugged and gave her my best charismatic smile. "Total dud."

"Is that so?"

"Yep."

The server walked by me, finishing up his round of passing out shots when Hope's hand darted out, snatching the two remaining shot glasses off his tray.

"Something tells me that if you're coming with us to the male review strip club, we're going to need these."

But instead of handing me one of the shots, she tilted her head back and downed them both within seconds.



“Wooooooo!”

Vivian was onstage.

With a stripper.

Riding him like a pony.

And the weirdest part? It wasn't even weird.

I was laughing my ass off and having the most fun I'd had in my life. Male strip clubs were a whole other ballgame versus female strip clubs. First of all, that whole 'hands off' rule at the female strip clubs? Out the damn window here.

These women were touching, licking, petting, stroking... and the dancers would lift the girls up and do all kinds of dirty things to them onstage. Who knew Magic Mike was actually a documentary, not fiction?

The only thing that sucked? Hope would barely talk to me. She sat as far away from me as she could.

But I didn't stop watching her.

I watched as she drank four more cosmos and conservatively placed dollar bills in the g-string of the stripper, then patted his head and waved him away like a grandmother would do to her grandson.

It was adorable.

Again, song lyrics swirled in my head, just the whisper of notes and lines from a song forming. *She doesn't dance on tables, empty bottles and glasses surround her ankles—*

“Hey.” Beside me, Maggie plopped into a seat and grinned at me.

“Um... hey.”

I looked around her for Matt, who was nowhere to be found. “He's in the bathroom,” Maggie said, reading my thoughts. The two had basically been inseparable all night. They weren't making out or running off to get naked in any corners. They were talking. And laughing. A lot from what I could tell.

“Are you having fun?” I asked.

“Actually, yeah.” She pulled her beer to her lips and took a sip from the bottle. “A lot more fun than I expected to have at an old lady’s bachelorette party. Hell, I didn’t even have fun at my sorority sister’s bachelorette party.”

“You and Matt seem to be hitting it off,” I said. Just in case she was getting any ideas about hitting on me while he was gone.

Her smile told me how wrong I was. “I really like him,” she whispered, even though no one in this bar was listening to or cared about our conversation.

“For what it’s worth, I think he really likes you, too.”

I might be breaking bro-code telling her that, but I wasn’t sure I cared. She was sweet. And Matt could use more sweet girls in his life rather than the ball-busting shrews he usually dated.

Although something gnawed at the back of my mind. “You’re Hope’s other client, aren’t you?”

“*Other* client?” she asked, perplexed. Very quickly, I realized my mistake as her expression morphed, lifting with realization. “Oh my God. You hired Hope too?” she hissed, leaning in.

I cringed, but nodded. I’d sort of assumed Hope would have filled her in on some things, but clearly she didn’t. I guess that NDA really was ironclad. Though it took some of the air out of my tires to know that even despite my best efforts, Hope wasn’t chatting about me to any of her friends.

“Why would you do that when you so clearly love her?” Maggie continued.

“Love her?” I sputtered. “I wouldn’t go that far.” Not yet at least. That was the plan, but that usually took more time... didn’t it?

Even still, my heart gave a little sputter like an engine being revved after years of sitting unused in a garage.

Maggie tilted her head. “Oh please. You got her Lucchese. And designer scarves. And flowers. You’re in love.”

So Hope *did* talk about me. She told Maggie about the gifts.

My conversation with the cheerleader drifted back into my brain. *Men don't like shopping*. I quickly brushed it aside. This was different. I was shopping online and having them delivered. Not waltzing around Rodeo Drive like some schmuck in a romcom holding bags of clothes for the woman he loved.

Loved. There was that word again.

“Your friend signed you up for these wingwoman dates, didn't she?” I asked, changing the subject.

Maggie's eyes widened. “My friend Jackie did. How did you know that?” Jackie! That was her name.

I gave a noncommittal shrug. “I have a lot of people who can find out a lot of things,” I said, keeping my answer evasive.

From over her shoulder I saw Matt come out of the bathroom. Oh shit. That's what was bothering me so much... Matt had been dating this girl's best friend. That girl I didn't like. The one who said Maggie was cramping her style and hired Hope as a result.

An uneasy feeling churned in my stomach that this was going to blow up in Matt's face somehow.

I gave Maggie a quick jerk of my chin toward where Matt was walking toward us, as though to say *go get him, tiger*.

Beaming, she hopped up and took off.

Not missing a beat, on the other side of me, one of Hope's future stepsisters sat down.

Oh boy. Vivian had introduced me to each of them, but they all looked so freaking similar and all their names ended with *Anne*. Seriously, couldn't they at least color their hair from different boxes? That'd be a huge help.

Placing long, lean fingers on my arm, one of the Annes launched into talking as though we'd been in the middle of a conversation already. “I cannot believe Josh Gabriel is at my mother's bachelorette party!” she

squealed.

“Um... yeah. Your mom can be pretty persuasive when she wants to be.”

Something Anne snorted. “Don’t I know it. In high school, I didn’t want to run for student body president, but one manicure date with Mom? *Bam*. I was hanging posters and handing out buttons the next morning.”

“Any luck?”

“Well, they don’t call me Madame President of Rutherford High for nothing!”

“They called you Madame President?”

“We’re very formal at there.”

Apparently.

She extended her hand for me to take. “I’m Julianne. I know we met earlier, but it can get confusing with me and my sisters. They call us Irish triplets.”

I breathed a little easier and took her hand in mine, shaking it. “Thank you. I couldn’t remember which *Anne* you were.”

She laughed at that. “Welcome to the club. We used to see how many people we could trick when we were younger. Once, I went out with my sister, Raeanne’s boyfriend and broke up with him for her because she didn’t have the guts to do it herself.”

My eyes widened. “And he fell for that?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, leaning in so close to me I could feel the hot breath of her exhale against my neck. “He was a dumbass though. One of the *many* reasons she was breaking up with him.” Julianne paused and her eyes flitted to where Hope was leaning on the bar ordering another drink. “So, you and Hope are...?”

She didn’t finish the question nor did she need to. The implications of why I was here at this bachelorette party hung heavily in the room with the crowds of girls. However, what they suspected versus what they knew was anyone’s guess.

And what little I knew about Hope? She valued her privacy.

Privacy that had been torn from her when I leaked that photo to the press.

“Friends?” I offered.

Julianne pressed her lips together. “Hmm. Was that a question or a statement?”

“You know Hope... you tell me.”

She chuckled at that and finished what was left of her fuschia drink in one gulp. “That’s the thing. I *don’t* know Hope all that well,” she said, her southern drawl more pronounced now. “But in a matter of weeks, she’ll be family. Hell, with or without the wedding, we consider her our sister now.” Julianne paused and shoved her empty martini glass into my hands. “And in this family, we watch each other’s backs.”

I couldn’t help the grin that tipped my lips. “Is that a threat?”

“Not a threat,” she said, standing. “That’s just the damn Texas truth.”

I stood, too, not backing down. “Well, I’m a Texas boy, too, you know. Born and raised. So lemme tell you *my* damn Texas truth: I’m not going to hurt your sister. If anything, she’s going to hurt me.”

Julianne’s eyes flicked somewhere over my shoulder, surprise widening those bright blue eyes. “Well for once, Mr. Gabriel, I think we agree on something.”

With the slightest lift of her chin, she gestured across the club. I spun slowly, breath knocked from my gut when I found Hope at the bar, flirting with and practically sitting in one of the stripper’s laps.

Eighteen

8

HOPE

I HAD TO ADMIT, even though I was dreading this night for weeks, it was turning out... *okay*. Maggie and Matt were actually really hitting it off from what I could tell.

Dylan, the guy she'd met a few days ago at the bar, had been a good warm-up. But as I suspected, not a love connection. Nonetheless, she had gotten his number. And they'd gone out on a coffee date. It was good practice for her.

And now look at her. She barely even needed my help in knowing how to talk to Matt. For all her concerns, when it came to Matt she seemed easy, breezy, and most importantly, she seemed like herself.

A text from Maxie came through on our group chat with our other bestie, Carrow.

MAX:

How's it going?

I smiled down at my phone as I punched in a quick reply, leaning my elbows on the bar.

HOPE:

Surprisingly, it's kind of fun.

And though cheesy strip clubs definitely weren't my thing, this one

leaned into how ridiculous the acts were. They had themed dances, including but not limited to, Greased Lightning, Top Gun, and Magic Mike knockoffs. In their own way, they were making fun of themselves... which was always something I could get behind.

Find a way to laugh with them.

CARROW:

Good!

Three little dots continued next to her name despite the single word answer. They stopped. Then started again.

Huh. That was weird. Maybe she was texting someone else too?

I looked up as the bartender walked by for the eighth time, ignoring me yet again. I exhaled deeply and plopped down on the stool that opened up.

They were packed, I told myself. He wasn't ignoring me on purpose.

Maybe this was a sign I should stop drinking? I'd already had more than I'd planned to and if I wanted to be sober enough to drive myself home at the end of the night, I should probably stop drinking now.

The Tom Cruise look-alike stripper from the Top Gun tribute slid next to me at the bar, his bomber jacket brushing my arm.

I smiled up at him briefly and scooted over to make room for him.

"Sorry," he said, grinning down at me. "Just trying to grab a bottle of water before my next set."

"They don't have them backstage for you?"

He snorted. "Backstage consists of a few lockers and some cheap Ikea hanging racks. If we want water, they want us to get it out here so we can flirt with customers."

Blech. Seedy. And had to be against some sort of code of ethics for performers, right?

I scrunched my nose. "Well don't worry, you don't have to do that with me."

His gaze slowly raked down my body. "I dunno. Some nights, this job's

not bad at all.”

I cringed. “Was that your idea of a compliment?”

While I knew I wasn’t the hottest girl in the room, *not bad at all* wasn’t exactly my idea of pillow talk.

He laughed at that and shook his head. “Sorry, you got me there. What I meant to say was: Some nights, this job is soul crushing. But nights like tonight? I’m surrounded by the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” He lifted my hand and brushed a kiss to my knuckles.

It might have been romantic by some definitions.

If he wasn’t clad in solely a jacket and banana hammock.

“Better,” I said. “But I still think you say that every night to one sucker in the room who looks like they’ve got a fat wallet.”

Again, the bartender rushed by me without so much as a glance in my direction.

I sighed, tapping the empty martini glass base against the bar.

“Here,” Top Gun said, taking the glass from me and waving down the bartender. “Allow me.”

The bartender immediately rushed over and suddenly I was no longer invisible. “Drake,” he said, “What can I do for you?”

I arched my brow. “Drake?”

“Stage name,” he whispered, then slapped his palm down on the bar. “I would love a bottle of water, Shawn. And for this beautiful girl...”

“A water as well, please,” I said as my phone buzzed against the bar top. Maxie’s name popped up.

I picked up the phone to read the message, but Drake’s groan interrupted me and he brushed a surprisingly soft hand against my wrist gently. “Aw, come on, just water? You waited all this time for a glass of water?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got to get home somehow...”

My words faded as across the room I saw Julianne, my soon-to-be stepsister, sidled up next to Josh, batting her big, stupid fake eyelashes at

him.

The fajitas I ate for dinner soured in my stomach.

She was *flirting* with Josh.

My Josh.

No, no, wait. My *client* Josh.

And of course she was flirting with him. She was raised here in Texas and he was country royalty in these parts. If I was being fully honest with myself, they weren't a bad match. All of Viv's daughters loved animals and horses. From the little we'd spoken, I could tell they were smart girls. Well-educated and fun-loving. They weren't just some vapid, bottle-blondes looking for their MRS degrees. They had goals and aspirations for their life beyond wanting to grow a family. Which they *also* wanted, of course.

Shit.

My phone buzzed again and this time, I swiped my thumb up to look at the message before Drake could distract me again.

MAXIE:

We debated showing you this, but after some deliberation, we figured you'd be more mad if we kept it from you.

My brows furrowed as Carrow's text was next.

CARROW:

Just don't shoot the messengers.

A photo loaded in the text body from Carrow. Page six of *The Post*. A close up picture of Brent, center stage of his latest Broadway show... and he was down on one knee.

Around them, his cast mates... people that I had once called my friends too... smiled and clapped as he offered a ring to Summer who was standing center stage as well, two manicured hands covering her mouth.

But not just any ring. I pinched my fingers and zoomed in.

That mother fucker proposed to her using my engagement ring! The one

I'd thrown back in his face!

But... he had also *just* texted me tonight. A single word... hey.

My stomach turned as I realized he wasn't texting me out of jealousy from seeing the picture of Josh and me. He was texting a *courtesy*. I bet he was trying to give me a heads up before the news of his new engagement broke.

I am such an idiot.

Heat crashed into my cheeks and I hated the fact that my eyes burned around the rims in a way I couldn't stop or control.

"Shawn, wait—" I lifted up out of the stool and stopped the bartender before he could walk away. "I'll also take a martini."

That's what cabs were for, right?

"All right! That's what I'm talking about!" Drake laughed, with a clap of his hands. "And two lemon drop shots!"

"Oh, no. Trust me, that's a bad idea." Me and shots did *not* mix. And I'd already had three since dinner. A fourth would no doubt tip me over the edge.

"Are you sure about that?" Drake asked, then pointed across the room toward Josh and Julianne, as though he knew exactly what was running through my mind. "Because that guy you keep staring at looks like he's moved on."

Jaw clenched, I forced myself to swallow. *He was not mine to want or be jealous of.* Neither was Brent. Not anymore. Even though logically I knew that, someone needed to fill the rest of my body in on that little detail.

I swiveled back around to face Drake, keeping my expression even and unreadable. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," he said, bringing the bottle of water the bartender had dropped in front of him to his lips.

Shawn deposited my martini in front of me as well as the two lemon drop shots.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Julianne's hand on Josh's

forearm, leaning in so close to him, she might as well be licking his ear.

With a deep breath, I tried to slow down my racing heart and the spike of jealousy that coursed through my body at the sight.

If I could set up Julianne and Josh, it would solve all my problems, I tried to reason with myself.

They might actually be perfect for each other. And if connecting them released me of this weird muse bet he held over my head, wasn't that worth it?

Except a piece of you was looking forward to losing the bet, the little voice in my head spoke before I had the sense to silence it.

The idea of making Brent jealous was appealing... especially now that he was engaged, mere months after our engagement ended. It was maybe the most appealing piece of his offer... especially now. I stared down at the image Maxie and Carrow had sent.

Maybe it was time for action. Not because I necessarily wanted Brent back. But because I wanted him to regret what he'd done. I wanted him to grovel and beg for me to take him back, only for me to look him in his stupid eyes and say no.

My phone buzzed, several gifs coming through from my two best friends.

MAX:

Are you okay? Please, truthfully tell me you're okay. If not, we'll be on the first flight down there.

I typed a response quickly, because I knew without a shadow of a doubt they were not exaggerating.

HOPE:

I'm fine.

Hitting send, I blinked back the tears, then snatched both lemon drop shots that Shawn had slid toward us. I downed them both, one after the other. The sickly sweet lemon flavor burned my throat and as I slammed the empty

shot glasses down, I wiped my eyes, happy for the distraction. Happy that most people here would assume the tears were from the shots and not from my stupid broken heart being trampled over and over again by the same asshole of a man.

“Uh, one of those was mine,” Drake said.

“Aren’t you on the job?”

A smirk lifted his mouth. “In my line of work, drinking on the job is not only allowed... it’s encouraged.”

“Fine.” I waved my hand at Shawn again. “Two more lemon drops, please,” I said, then turned back to Drake. “I promise this time one of them is for you.”

He studied me carefully, concern morphing his once jovial expression. “Are you sure? You went from ordering only water to doing three lemon drop shots and a martini in the course of five minutes.”

My eyes found Josh and Julianne once more across the room. They were touching. Innocently touching, sure. But still... her hand draped on his forearm was enough to make discomfort churn in the pit of my stomach.

“Well,” I said to Drake, “if you’re going to be a bear, you might as well be a grizzly, right?”

He blinked, seeming to try to comprehend that, then a slow smile spread across his face. “I like that. Feel like dancing?” he offered me his hand.

The shots worked quickly and a nice tingly feeling surged down to my toes.

I looked around the club, not seeing any area with a designated dance floor. “Here? No one’s dancing. Other than...” I gestured to the stage where several half naked men were gyrating. “You know.”

Drake’s grin widened. “Oh I know. Come on. It’ll be fun.”

With one hand, I grabbed my martini. With the other, I dropped my hand into Drake’s.

I have no idea why I trusted him... but I did.

He gave my hand a little tug and I fell into his lap, our bodies pressed against each other's. I gave a very not sexy grunt and tried to right myself back to my feet. But he merely smiled down at me.

“We dance close here at the Splash Zone, darlin’.”

And everything else that happened after, I had Drake to thank for it.

Nineteen



JOSH

HOPE WAS DANCING.

Hope was dancing on the stage...

With multiple strippers.

“What do we do?” Maggie asked, staring, jaw agape just like me.

“Stick some dollar bills down her leather skirt?” Matt offered, holding up fanned out two-dollar bills.

That’s right. Around here, the strip club ATMs only give out two-dollar bills. So if you ever see someone paying for a coffee with those...? Well, you can take one guess where they’ve been.

“Seriously,” Julianne chimed in. “Should I grab her ass down from that stage?”

“I haven’t known Hope for long,” I said. “But I’m pretty sure if *any* of us try to drag her out of here, it will only make her want to stay longer out of spite.”

On cue, Vivian leaned on the stage, tapping Hope’s bare calf. “Come on, darling. We’re heading home.”

Hope pushed her bottom lip out. “Boooo!”

“Yeah,” the guy she was dancing with echoed. “Boooo!”

“Sweetie,” Viv tried again, “come on now. These girls here are paying to see the men dance. They don’t care about how tight your tush is.”

Hope fanned her face. “She’s right,” she said to the male dancer.

“It’s working,” Maggie whispered as Hope headed toward the steps.

“Mama could convince a rooster to become a feather duster,” Julianne said proudly.

“That’s right,” Vivian said as Hope took her hand, helping her down the stairs. Unfortunately, the male stripper who’d been instigating the whole ordeal followed Hope down the stairs too.

“Mama’s got you,” Vivian added.

My spine went stiff. “Uh-oh.”

“Oh no,” Maggie whispered as we exchanged glances.

Julianne looked at us curiously. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Look, I don’t know a whole lot about Hope,” Maggie said. “But I know she’s not someone who warms up easily or quickly. And she doesn’t consider your mother her *mama*.”

I was already on my feet, working my way through the crowd toward Hope. I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I had a gut feeling it was nothing good.

“Oh, is this your mama?” The dancer asked. “I’m Drake—”

“She’s not my mother,” Hope snapped. “She’s my dad’s flavor of the week.”

Vivian blinked, pulling back like she’d been slapped. “Young lady, you may not agree with me all the time, and hell, you may not even like me, but you will *not* disrespect me. Because like it or not, I’m marrying your father and we will be family.”

Everyone in the audience became eerily silent except for a few low whistles and the thump of the music.

Shit, shit, shit. She was drunk. Way drunker than I had realized. And I knew that even though she *did* feel this way about Vivian, she was going to regret saying it aloud.

I was almost there, dodging and weaving my way through the crowd.

“You will be as much my family as my dad’s other four wives are,” Hope snapped, swaying on her feet and stumbling back into Drake.

His hands found her arms and I watched as he stroked—*fucking stroked her*—like a goddamned cat.

I could kill him.

Drunkenly she batted his pawing hands away, but it didn’t deter him. Instead, he found her waist, pulling her back against him.

Once more, she pushed off of him to try and take a step forward, but he held on tightly as Hope spoke. “It’s great that my father found some semblance of a paternal instinct with your girls. But when I was a kid? He was a dad solely on paper. I basically raised myself. So don’t stand there and feed me shit about us becoming a family. My dad knows nothing about how to be a family.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” Vivian said quietly. “But your daddy is a different man now that he stopped drinking. Something you might consider heeding yourself.”

“Don’t tell me how to be.”

“Hope!” I called out, finally making it to where they stood. “Come on,” I offered her my hand. “Enough. You really want an audience for all this?”

She blinked, awareness registering in her gaze for the first time like she was waking from a dream.

Around us, the music got louder. The dancers took focus on the stage. And the audience members who weren’t part of Vivian’s bachelorette party forgot all about us and the fight that had nearly broken out before their very eyes.

I twitched my fingers, coaxing her to take my hand.

To choose to end the night.

To choose me.

Please choose me, Hope.

But she was an adult and if she wanted to stay, I couldn’t and shouldn’t

stop her. This was her choice to make. “Come on,” I said gently. “Let’s go home. I know a certain adorable shepherd that can’t wait to be the little spoon with you again.”

“Yeah,” she whispered, taking a step forward. “You’re right. We should go home.”

Home. My heart skipped a beat at that word.

Yet again, fucking handsy Drake held on, tugging her back against his chest. “Baby, you’re not really leaving, are you?”

She pushed his hands off of her hips, but he used the opportunity to link their fingers, drawing her hand to his mouth and sucking one of her fingertips between his lips.

I inhaled sharply at the sight, waiting to see what *she* wanted.

If she wanted Drake, I would leave them to it. Mend my broken heart with some Glenlivet at home.

But instead, Hope yanked her hand back, then slapped Drake.

Undeterred, a smile spread along his face. “Oh, I like them feisty,” he said with a chuckle. “I thought we had something here. Are you really saying you don’t want to at least take my number?”

“She’s made it very clear she isn’t interested,” I snapped.

“Is that true, pumpkin?” Drake asked.

Hope sneered at him. “Pumpkin? Darlin’? Is that what you call all the girls whose names you can’t remember?”

He grew serious. “No, *Hope*. That’s what I call you because you said pumpkin pie was your favorite.”

Dammit. Point for Drake.

Hope’s expression softened, but she still took a step back toward me, not quite taking my hand, but clearly making her choice to leave. “Sorry, I was just looking to let loose and have some fun tonight. I’m not actually looking for anything more.”

Behind me, Matt joined us, leaning into my ear. “Dude, we need to get

out of here. Women in the audience are recognizing you.”

“Let’s go,” Hope said, turning to leave.

But fucking Drake, *again* grabbed her other hand and pulled her into him, kissing her.

It only took fractions of a second to hear Hope’s squeal. See the way she pushed at his shoulders, trying to shove him off of her.

I saw red.

The kiss itself only lasted three seconds.

And as Hope shoved him off of her, stumbling back into Matt, I lunged at Drake, my fist flying through the air and hitting his jaw with a deafening crack.

His kiss may have only lasted three seconds...

But my punch would last for weeks.

For both of us.

Twenty
L

HOPE

I **WOKE** up the next morning back in Josh's guest room.

My mouth had the sour taste of day-old alcohol and I was so thirsty I had to practically peel my tongue from the roof of my mouth.

Groaning, I sat up, pressing my palm to my pounding head.

On the nightstand beside me was a large glass of water and a bottle of Ibuprofen.

Thank God.

I popped the cap off, placing two pills on my tongue, then downed half the glass in four gulps.

What the hell happened last night?

Oh yeah. I did shots. Several of them.

And I remembered two martinis at the end of the night. Then, dancing on stage with Drake for several songs before Vivian...

My blood ran cold.

Oh no.

Vivian.

And Drake forcing a kiss on me.

Josh punching him.

Holy shit. What have I done? How many fires did one evening stoke and which person needed triage first?

Was Maggie even okay? Last I saw, she seemed happy enough with Matt, but I made a promise to her that I'd always be there for her.

And last night, I broke that promise.

It was stupid. And so reckless. Drake could have spiked my drinks with anything. I hadn't been watching as diligently as usual.

Not to mention that I'd hurt people in the process. I may not love Vivian or like the fact that my dad's getting married again, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings either. I wasn't a monster.

Well, not *usually*.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, pausing at the fact that I was no longer in my party outfit from last night. Instead, I wore a pink matching shorts and shirt pajama set.

Whose pajamas was I wearing?

And more importantly, who dressed me in them?

I was so not a pink girl.

Folded on the guest room dresser was a pair of denim shorts and a Pink Floyd T-shirt.

Now *that* was more like it.

After cleaning myself up in the bathroom, I dressed in the outfit left for me and walked down into the kitchen.

With a single bark, Cash was on his feet, charging me excitedly. "Hey, buddy," I said quietly, petting his velvety ears. "It's good to see you too."

"You're alive," Josh said, turning the corner, sipping coffee from a navy mug.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Alive like Frankenstein's monster."

He lifted his mug in cheers to me. "Nice job getting that character distinction right. Most people say Frankenstein like he was the monster, not the doctor."

I gave Josh a weak smile and plodded into the kitchen, pouring myself a coffee. "Be straight with me. How bad was last night?"

He grimaced, pulling out a chair and taking a seat at the dining table. “It wasn’t *good*.”

With a sigh, I sat down next to him. Usually, I delight in my first sip of coffee of the day, but this morning, the smell alone turned my stomach. “Let’s start with Drake and the punch... should I expect cops showing up here to arrest you for assault?”

Josh shook his head. “There were enough women in the audience who saw how handsy he was being with you and how he kissed you against your will. They threatened to testify that he sexually assaulted you first. So Drake won’t be a problem.”

I exhaled in relief. “I guess it helps you’re beloved by the community of women and they were willing to stand up to spare you.”

Josh gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Is there footage of the punch? You can’t tell me that people didn’t record that shit with their phones.”

“Well that’s a good news bad news situation. A few people filmed us and posted it. It’s being picked up everywhere...”

“I assume that’s the bad news,” I said. “So what’s the good news there?”

His grin widened. “We look like badasses in it.”

My brows lifted. “We?”

“You fight off a man giving you an unwanted advance. And I ‘defended’ your honor.” He threw air quotes around the word.

“In other words, you look like my hero.”

“Not necessarily. You saved yourself. But... we do look like a couple. Very publicly so. It’s been picked up by just about every site around. So really the bad news here is there’s no more anonymity. Everyone knows who you are. And everyone assumes we’re dating.”

I squeezed my eyes together, trying to make the pounding headache at my temples go away. “Okay, what else?” Let’s rip the Band-Aid off.

“Your sisters were fine. Stunned, but fine.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from correcting him that they weren't even my stepsisters yet. But after my behavior last night? I should probably cool it on the sass. Both soberly and drunkenly. Maybe just cool it on booze altogether.

"Maggie's okay," Josh continued, "Matt made sure she got home safely."

"*Matt?* The guy who clearly wanted to get in her pants?"

Josh put his hands out to calm me in the same way he might try to calm a feral horse. "Matt's my best friend. I promise you, he would never take advantage of Maggie. Plus, she was sober."

Still, I yanked my phone free from the back pocket of my shorts and pulled up Maggie's text thread, sending her a quick message asking if she's alright. "She's still my client and I'm responsible for her. Even if she wasn't paying for my time last night."

"Good thing she wasn't paying you for last night," Josh muttered.

On any other day I would have sent him a scowl. But today? I deserved that.

"And Vivian?" I swallowed the guilt-addled lump in my throat.

Josh held my gaze for a long breath. "Julianne, Raeanne, and Maryanne got her home."

After another pause, I asked, "Was it as bad as I remember?"

"Worse," Josh whispered.

The exhale whooshed from my lips and I lowered my forehead to the table. "I owe her an apology."

"A *big* one."

Rolling onto my cheek to glare at him, I said, "I know."

"Why don't you like her?" Josh asked. "I spent a little time with her yesterday, and I have to say, she's really fucking cool. I wish my stepmom was half as great as she is."

I pushed up and forced myself to take a sip of coffee, despite my roiling stomach. "You have a stepmom?"

"Yep," Josh said, bending to scratch Cash's belly. "And she's every bit as

evil as the ones in Disney movies.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. My mom and dad divorced right before my tenth birthday, after my dad gambled away my mom’s life savings. Then he remarried two years later to his secretary.”

“Yikes,” I said.

“Tell me about it. I wanted her to like me so badly and I knew she really wanted these slippers from the department store. I saved for a whole year to try to buy them for her for Christmas, but she liked, but I didn’t have enough. My dad told me we would split the cost and both give them to her. But of course my Dad bought her other gifts, too.”

“It seemed like your dad was trying, too.”

Josh snorted. ‘Sure, my dad wanted us to get along... for no reason other than it would have made his life easier.’”

I cringed. “Why do I get the feeling she didn’t like the slippers?”

“Not only didn’t she like them, but she berated me for only seeing fit to buy her a single slipper, then she locked herself in the bathroom crying that her stepson only loves her enough to buy half a present for her.”

I gaped at Josh, horrified. I didn’t love all my dad’s wives, but they never treated me like *that*. Some of them thought I was annoying or wished they had Dad all to themselves, but that was the worst I’d had. My issues stemmed more from my father’s behavior than theirs. “That’s... oh my god, Josh. I’m so sorry.”

“What made it worse? My dad took her side. Placated her. Enabled that behavior. And made *me* apologize to *her*.”

If I thought my stomach hurt before, it downright turned over itself at that story. “That’s so awful. Are they still married?”

“They are,” he nodded. “And they’re both still awful.”

“I—I have no words.”

Josh waved off my sympathy. “It’s fine. I barely ever see him and he only

calls now when he needs money. But Vivian's a good person. Maybe you should give her a chance?"

He wasn't wrong. "I know she's a good person," I whispered. "I'd heard it in my dad's voice on our calls how happy he's seemed these last few months with her. But..." I blinked back the tears, blaming my heightened emotions on the hangover. "I was just so taken aback seeing them together before the bachelorette party. Learning things about his life with her I'd had no idea about. He raises chickens, Josh. *Chickens*. And apparently they're getting a goat!"

"And that's... a bad thing?" he asked, honestly seeming to try to understand what I was saying.

"It's not bad." I shook my head. "It's great, actually. But never in my whole life have I known my father to take care of anyone but himself. Hell, he could barely even do that. Half the time as a kid, I had to take care of him when he came home drunk as a skunk. I had to clean the puke off the floor. Roll him over so he didn't choke on his own vomit. And now he's made this miraculous change. He's become the dad I'd always wanted him to be." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "But he made that change for *her*. Not for me."

Josh nodded, sincere comprehension softening his face. He reached out, taking my hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze. "I get it," he said. "That sucks. But take it from me, it doesn't suck as much as having the parent who *never* changes. And Vivian has nothing to do with any of that. She's just a woman who fell in love."

I inhaled a shaky breath. "I know. I'm angry at him. And jealous of her. Jealous that she gets this heroic version of him and I got the drunk asshole for most of my life." I paused. "Which, speaking of taking care of drunk assholes... thank you."

A smile twitched on his full lips. "You're welcome." Then, leaning back, his grin widened. "Want to know how you can make it up to me?"

My groan was stifled by my chuckle. "I'm almost scared to ask."

Intentionally, keeping the suspense alive, he lifted his coffee to his lips and took a long sip before answering, "Agree to be my muse. The press is already saying we're together. And your two weeks are almost up anyway. Might as well wave that white flag now."

I blinked, the smile fading from my mouth. My heart raced, and despite the glass of water I'd chugged when I first woke up, my mouth went dryer than a lint ball. Images flashed in my mind of the texts Maxie and Carrow sent me. Of Brent proposing. Of Brent's stupid one word text.

I remembered the gnawing jealousy of seeing Josh laugh so easily with Julianne.

Maybe it was the hangover. Or maybe it was the adorable, boyish way he was leaning the chair back on two legs. Or the earnest, heartbreaking confession he made about his father and stepmother. But suddenly six weeks of being Josh Gabriel's muse didn't sound so bad.

"Yes," I finally said.

Josh blinked, his cocky grin vanishing instantly. "Wait... what did you say?"

"Yes," I repeated. "I'll be your muse."

Startled, his feet slipped and he literally almost fell back in his chair.

I reached out, snatching his hand in mine before he cracked his head open on these beautiful Spanish tiled floors.

He blinked some more, stupefied over the fact I'd finally said yes to his proposal, or maybe it was because I'd caught him before he fell... I wasn't sure which surprised him more. "You're serious?" he asked.

I nodded, giving him my best smile, and asked, "So what's my first job as your muse?"

He recovered quickly, shaking off his initial shock. "First, you promise me that you'll never see Drake again. Whose *real* name, by the way, is Duane."

“So is The Rock’s.” That reply merely earned me a scowl. This muse thing was off to a bangin’ start. “Okay fine,” I conceded. “Done. I will never see Drake Duane again.” Not like I was planning to ever see that man again or go back to that strip club if I didn’t have to. “What’s task number two?”

“We’re going out. *Tomorrow.*”

“*Tomorrow?* Where are we going? I thought you agreed to unveil your muse at the rodeo—

“I did. But we still have to tease it. And with that video last night going viral, we can lay more groundwork. We have four days until the rodeo... gotta make every one of them count.”

He slid his chair back and stood up. Then, taking his mug to the sink, he dumped out the remaining coffee and deposited the empty mug into his dishwasher.

He pointed at me as he left the room, Cash following at his heels. “Rest up today and feel better. There are some clothes that should fit you in the bedroom, but I’ll send for your things today. Make yourself at home... the pool, hot tub, gym, tennis courts, sauna. It’s all yours to use.”

“There’s a sauna and tennis courts here?” I asked, looking around. The place looked big, but what he was describing felt like commune big.

He ignored my question, his nose already buried in his phone. “Let me know if you’re still not well enough by seven. I’ll have contracts drawn up and emailed to you within the hour.”

He hurried out of the room and Cash paused in the doorway, torn between following Josh and staying here with me. Sensing I needed him more, he trotted back toward me and sat at my feet.

“What have I gotten myself into, Cash?”

Twenty-One

L

JOSH

SHE SAID YES.

Not only did she say yes, but she said it before the bet was even finished. Before the two weeks were up.

I sat in my office, completely flabbergasted by this morning's events. And as a result, I had about ten-thousand things to do, but all I could do was sit there at my desk, grinning like an idiot.

Despite how drunk and horrible she was last night, I feel like I'd gotten to know the real Hope these last ten days. And the drunk girl last night wasn't her.

That was the problem with alcohol. It turned you into the worst version of yourself. Turned you into a monster that you'd never be otherwise.

On the surface, Hope might be all high heels and cold, hard stares, but I'd seen glimpses here and there of her gooey center. The girl who still wore her mom's signature scent of neroli and rose oil after all these years. The beautifully broken soul who just wants a father who will choose her. Love her.

I knew Hope.

Because in some ways, I *was* Hope.

I had drawn up a muse contract with my lawyer two weeks ago. But this one was special, with clauses that I had added just for Hope.

Things such as she had to mount a horse one more time before her six-week tenure finished.

And that she had to join me in the hot tub and sauna once a week.

Within an hour, I had emailed the contract to her. I smiled when, within twenty minutes, she'd messaged me back a draft with her own notes.

Grinning, I read over them.

Most of her changes, I didn't mind.

I grinned where at the bottom of the contract, she had added an addendum: **The payments made to Hope Marcoux-Evans from Josh Gabriel are not in exchange for sexual favors of any sort.**

Cracking my knuckles, I added to that addendum: **However, if any sexual advances are made, it is understood these acts will be consensual and in no way tied to the payment.**

Of course, I would need my lawyer to look over the legalese of that statement, but the essence was there. Hope was not a whore. There was zero expectation of sex as my muse.

But if sex happened, then it was something outside of a business deal.

I could live with that.

I sent that in an email to her first to gauge her reaction.

She responded only with one word: **Fine.**

The response made it sound reluctant and yet, I think there was more to it than that. The door was open for a physical relationship, even if she wasn't ready to admit that herself yet.

With that little victory, I got to work on the other issues she had and exed out some of her notes. Namely, she didn't want to allow a social media photographer to stage photos and videos of us for Instagram and TikTok. She didn't want to accept a clothing budget. And she wanted my staff to be banned from entering the house for the duration of her stay here.

I exed out the first two. They were non-negotiable.

In my email, I detailed my reasons why they were such an important

piece of the contract. She clearly knew fashion and with the events she'd be attending with me, I needed her fashion to be on par with the other celebrities in attendance. That meant Jimmy Choo. Versace. Gucci. And while I didn't say this in the email... that clothing budget added up very quickly. Her salary for these six-weeks could easily be blown on clothing alone.

Then, as extra measure, I hit her with the gut-punch.

If your goal is to make your ex jealous, then being seen on my arm at events is only part of it. You're making him jealous of a lifestyle. And that lifestyle includes designer brands. It includes us showing this life we're supposedly building together on social media. It's the only way to make this believable.

I leaned back, considering the final strikethrough in her notes: my staff not being allowed into the house. On one hand, she had a point. The more people who came in and out meant the more people who could potentially see this was fake. That she was sleeping in a separate bedroom. That it was all an act.

On the other hand, not letting staff into my house in itself was a red flag.

As for the staffing issue, I typed. I can send my chef on vacation. He's used to me getting whims and wanting to cook for myself for weeks at a time.

I need my ranch hands to help keep the horse rescue up and running, but they have never been allowed to come inside my house. Occasionally, they knock on the door if they need me, but they have their own quarters and break rooms near the stables. So they will only see us if we're outside with the horses.

Jamilla, my housekeeper, is another story. She's like a mother to me and sending her away will be a red flag. Not to mention, this is an eight bedroom, one-hundred-year-old ranch house that she cares for on my behalf. She cleans, does laundry, and keeps the house in an order that I could never achieve. If you want me to spend my time writing this album

so we can effectively end this agreement in the aforementioned six-week time period, I need her here. However, rest assured, she has signed an ironclad NDA.

Do you accept these terms?

It took ten minutes before she responded with two words: **I do.**

Attached to that email was the signed contract.

There were so many logistics to arrange, not only for tonight, but for the days leading up to the unveiling of Hope at the rodeo. How much did I want to reveal tomorrow night to the public? How much should we tease the relationship? Should we stage a kiss? Maybe some snuggling and close talking over dinner? Should I hire a photographer to snap the pics so I could control the narrative, but run the risk of getting caught orchestrating them? Or did I allow the media to just do what they do best and find us out and about on their own?

With a groan, I rubbed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. I had a lot to do today.

But for the moment, I wanted to relish in the victory lap.

Victory Lap.

There's a victory lap inside us all. That victory lap will make us fall...

The song trailed in my mind, notes and lyrics weaving and braiding through me.

I yanked open the top of my desk drawer and pulled out a notebook, jotting down the lyric ideas as well as the chord progression that popped into my head.

But like most of my songs, within a minute, the ideas disappeared like curls of smoke being carried away by the wind.

Dammit.

Even still, in the ten days I'd had with Hope, I'd made more progress in my songwriting than the last year.

It was something.

But was it enough?

I spent the next hour or so making arrangements. Calling some of my favorite restaurants as well as my publicist to get her take on how tonight should be handled.

Lastly, I called Matt. “*Dude,*” was all he said as he answered.

“Good morning to you too.”

“It’s no longer morning.”

I glanced at the clock on my wall that read 12:24. “I guess not. How are you? How’s Maggie?”

There was a brief pause, then he answered, “Good.”

“Good? That’s all? Oh no, don’t tell me she’s right there with you? You already took her home, didn’t you?”

He laughed. “Not this time. But we have dinner plans tonight.”

My brows lifted. “Dinner? Doesn’t that go against your ‘no date that can last longer than an hour in the first week ’ rule?” Matt was a strict *let’s grab a drink or a coffee* serial dater. Always cautious. He never wanted to get too serious too quickly and in his mind, dinner was a special date reserved for a girl you planned on being with for a long time.

And Matt was rarely with *anyone* for a long time.

“Well, considering we hung out last night for six hours, I’d say that rule was thrown out the window anyway.”

Cash nosed his way into my office, pushing open the cracked door and trotting in only to plop down at my feet. “I guess that’s true,” I said, keeping my voice even and casual.

It was obvious Matt was hooked. Everything about his interactions with Maggie had been completely different than any other woman.

But there was no reason to point that out to him. Hell, I had no doubt he already knew. Giving him shit about it might cause him to panic and run.

And for the first time in a while, I actually liked this girl. Not that I knew Maggie all that well, but based on our minimal interaction, it looked like she

was good for Matt.

I only hoped he was good for her too.

“So what about that friend of hers... Jackie? Are you going to tell Maggie you were dating her too?”

Matt muttered a curse. “I forgot about Jackie. She thinks I’m in Bolivia.”

“What? Why?”

I could practically hear his shrug on the other end of the line. “It was the first country I could think of when I told her I was leaving.”

“Dude,” I scolded.

“I know. I’ll tell Maggie eventually, I swear. But I at least want to wait until we’ve had a few good dates.”

Good. At least he was planning to tell her. If he was serious about Maggie, then he’d need to come clean. “So where are you two going for dinner?”

“Fratello’s.”

I noted his short one-word answers and slightly clipped tone. It wasn’t like Matt to keep it close to the vest like this. Usually he was calling to brag to me about the fact he’d gotten multiple numbers in one night.

“Okay then,” I said, changing the subject. If he didn’t want to talk about himself or Maggie, I certainly wasn’t going to push the matter. “I won’t take Hope there tomorrow then.”

“You... wait... what?” Matt asked.

Grinning, I leaned back in my chair. “Yep. She said yes to being my muse. I’m planning our first official date tomorrow where we’re going to tease it to the magazines and hopefully get a little buzz. Then at the rodeo, we’ll fully announce it.”

There was a long pause before Matt finally said, “Buddy, I mean this with no disrespect... but after last night, are you sure about this? That one might be more trouble than she’s worth.”

More Trouble than She’s Worth.

I grabbed the notebook and jotted the phrase down, staring at the words on the blue lined notebook paper in front of me.

I tapped the pen against the paper. “You’re the one who set me up with her.”

“No, I’m the one who convinced you to *hire* her to find you a muse. I did not tell you to *make* her your muse.”

He had a point. “I get why you would say that. But there’s no denying she inspires me to write. I’ve written more in these last two weeks than I have in years.”

Matt sighed. “Well... that’s good then.”

He didn’t sound like it was good. He sounded wary. Worried for me.

And I guess I couldn’t blame him. I’d been hanging out with Hope for weeks. I saw the good in her. His only interaction had been her drunken outburst last night.

But even *that*. That drama, that fiery attitude is part of what I was drawn to. I stood up, crossing to the door to peek into the hallway, making sure Hope wasn’t within earshot.

Cash’s tags jingled as his head bolted up and he stared at me, making sure I wasn’t leaving him.

I quietly shut my door, then paced to the window that overlooked my pool. “Part of what I *like* about her is that she’s a bit dramatic,” I said. “I mean... Matt, look... don’t get me wrong, I don’t want her getting drunk and screaming at her family. That’s not the sort of drama I’m looking for. But a muse who’s just happy and beautiful and smiling all the time? What shitty music can that inspire?”

No, that was the whole point of Hope. She was a firecracker. I could light her fuse and wait to see what happened. Some days she might be a bottle rocket. Others? A sparkler... playful and safe, but still crackling with energy.

Those Miss America types she kept trying to set me up with were too prim and proper. It wasn’t that they didn’t have depth. I’m sure they were all

smart and charming and charismatic. And for some musicians, those women might inspire music.

But not me.

“Just be careful,” Matt said. “You’re one bad PR stunt away from losing your label.”

I clicked my tongue. “They say that. But if it’s orchestrated right and paired with an album of top ten hits? I bet they’ll change their tune. And fast.”

I paused as I watched from my window to where the door to the pool swung open. Hope walked out carefully, looking around... probably for me. Even though I’d told her to use the pool, she seemed nervous. Like she was breaking some rule.

I slunk back behind the curtain, still peeking out and watching her like some sort of perv as she slipped the towel from her shoulder, dropping it onto one of the pool chairs. Then her delicate fingers went to the sarong tied at her waist. With a few flicks of her fingers, the billowy silk was tossed aside, revealing her flat stomach and tanned, slim curves.

She adjusted the turquoise two-piece bathing suit I’d put in her room as she dipped a toe in the pool.

Good god, she was perfect. Everything from her sleek brown hair, down her tanned, curvy body, to her painted toenails.

“I’m just saying,” Matt continued, oblivious to the fact I’d gone completely speechless at the sight of her half naked. “She’s a volcano. Yes, she’s beautiful, but be careful of the lava. Because when she erupts, she’ll take down anyone in her path.”

I grinned at the imagery. I couldn’t wait to see her... *erupt*.

Even so, I shook my head at the metaphor. “You’re wrong, Matt.” In this scenario? I was the volcano.

She was going to be collateral damage.

And I hated myself for it.

Twenty-Two

L

HOPE

I SPENT the morning doing the one thing I never thought I'd ever have to do in my whole life: grovel to my future stepsisters.

To my surprise, they were way kinder than they should have been to me after that display last night. Tons of platitudes rolled in via text from Maryanne and Raeanne.

MARYANNE:

Oh my gosh, don't worry about it!

RAEANNE:

You're fine! We've all gotten drunk and said something we didn't mean!

MARYANNE:

We're just glad you're okay!

Only Julianne remained eerily silent. I could see on the text thread that she had seen and read them. But nothing. No response. Not even those three little dots that conveyed she was considering messaging me back.

With a deep breath, I decided to press her more. Because the truth was, I knew it wasn't fine. I knew it couldn't be as easy as a quick apology and all would be forgiven.

And it seemed that Julianne was perhaps the only sister able and willing

to give it to me straight.

I stood up, thinking about how to respond as I stared at the bookshelf in the guest room... or rather, my bedroom for the next six weeks. Romance novels stocked the shelves. An entire row was dedicated solely to Nora Roberts, but many others adorned the shelf space.

HOPE:

Thank you for that, but what I did wasn't fine. And I would really like to find a way to apologize and make it up to, not only your mother, but to all of you. Julianne? What do you think?

I hit send even though my heart was racing. Even though I feared what she was going to say in response. Which was a pretty rare feeling to me. I didn't often send out questions to people that I didn't already know the answer to. Business 101.

But this wasn't business.

As much as I didn't want to admit, this was a family matter.

Finally, for the first time all day, those three dots appeared beside her name.

JULIANNE:

First off, thank you for saying that. Because you're right. It isn't fine.

Second... yes, you do owe her an apology. And not one over text. But the apology itself won't mean shit without action. The best way I can think of for you to apologize to Mama is to get on board with this wedding. Come to the dress fittings. Join us for our weekly brunches. Help us plan the bridal shower. Because it's happening with or without your blessing.

My teeth gnashed together.

I'd been down this road before. I'd done the bridesmaid thing with two of my dad's other weddings. I'd even gotten emotionally attached to his first wife... well, second wife, after Linda Evans, I suppose. I was young and didn't yet realize that this would be his pattern. So I donned the flower girl

dress, grinned happily in all the photos, and bounced excitedly down the aisle, tossing white rose petals and thinking I'd finally have a family again. That this woman could be a mom of sorts, even if she'd never *replace* my mom.

But it turned out Sherry was a bigger drunk than my dad was. And together, they would get wasted, night after night. Our house was more trashed than ever. She'd take off for weeks at a time to go to Atlantic City or Foxwoods Casino.

With each wedding, I became a little more jaded. A little more distant. A little less willing to see this new wife as the savior Dad and I needed to become a family once more.

With Viv, I suspected that when their marriage fell apart, it would have nothing to do with her. Because despite all the shade I've thrown her way and the fact we're as different as two people can be, I can tell she's a great person with a good heart.

A heart that I suspect my father will shatter... eventually.

HOPE:

Understood. When is the next wedding event?

There was no reason to try and deny or hide the fact I didn't support this wedding. I just didn't support it for different reasons than they thought.

JULIANNE:

We have the dress fittings for the bridesmaids in a week and a half on Friday.

Dammit. How did I not know about that? I was a bridesmaid after all. Oh, right. I told them I would order my own dress and have it fitted myself on my own time.

I bit my lip, thinking about my bridesmaids dress that was hanging, completely unopened, in the back of the closet at my dad's condo. I literally hadn't ever opened it or even taken a look at what the bridesmaids dress

looked like. In my mind, it didn't matter.

HOPE:

I'll be there.

With that, I tossed my phone on the bed, then crossed over to the dresser that sat across the room, opening the top drawer. Inside were neatly folded bra and panty sets. 34B. My size.

How the hell and *why* the hell did he have my size underwear already stocking these drawers? Did he so strongly suspect I would fail at our bet and be living here? Or maybe he had a type... slim with small handful-sized breasts.

Or maybe he knew I'd be living here because he had no intention of giving the women I set him up with a fair chance.

I slammed the drawer shut with a huff. Whatever the reason, I was here now. And it was too late to turn back. I'd just signed the contract and sent it over, despite my reticence to some of his terms. He made compelling counterpoints in his arguments though, I'd give him that.

I opened the next drawer down and found three bathing suits—a turquoise string bikini, a one-piece that from the front looked modest, but the back had merely dental floss as a thong, and another one piece with so many straps and chains and keyholes cut out at the stomach, I wasn't even sure how the hell to put it on.

The pool was calling my name. After all, Josh had said to make myself at home

Getting some vitamin D would help me feel better with this hangover. And a cool splash in the pool would be refreshing enough to wake me up so I could get to work transporting my things from Dad's condo over here before our date tomorrow night.

Our date.

I was going on a date with Josh.

Fake date, I corrected myself.

Sure, it might not be a real date... or rather the kind of date that will last and grow into anything more after these six weeks, but *still*.

It was very real the way being near him made my blood soft and my brain fuzzy.

I chose the turquoise string bikini and also one of the wraps folded in the drawer beside the bathing suits.

I wasn't exactly sure which way the pool was, but as I came downstairs, I found an older woman with kind, dark brown eyes and graying hair humming in the kitchen as she cleaned. "Oh," I said, startled and forgetting my manners.

She looked up from the feather duster... seriously, a feather duster. I didn't even know anyone cleaned with those anymore. "Hi there."

"Sorry," I tried again. "You must be, um, Jamilla, right?" I recalled her name from Josh's email just half an hour ago.

"Yes," she said, smiling a wide, warm grin that revealed all of her teeth. "Joshy mentioned we might have a houseguest for a little while."

Joshy? I noted to myself. I'd have to remember that one...

So I could throw it back in his face.

"I'm Hope," I said, stepping forward and offering her my palm.

She took it with a firm grip of her soft hands. "Nice to meet you, Hope. If you need anything, you let me know."

"Actually... can you point me towards the pool?"

"Ah, yes! Follow me."

She led me down a hallway, passing the back door I'd assumed would take me there. Then, opening a door I would have assumed was another bedroom, she gestured to the gym. "The gym connects to the sauna, steamroom, and the pool. There's a pool house as well once you get out there, but I don't foresee you needing to use it too often," she added with a wink.

Despite the fact I'd slept alone in the guest bedroom, a flush still heated my skin ascending up my neck to my cheeks.

With another cheeky smile, she was gone, shutting the door to the gym behind her.

And that right there was why I wanted to avoid any workers coming into the house. Their assumptions, even though they were assumptions we wanted people to make, made me itchy and uncomfortable. Especially since it was all a big ruse... just another word for a big, fat lie.

And for all my bravado, I sucked at lying. As Jamilla noticed, I turned beet red if I had to lie. Lucky for us, she probably thought I was shy about sex. But what happened when they learned my tell? What happened if she ran to the press and told them I hadn't once slept in his bed?

NDA or not, I saw people break those all the time. Especially if they get paid enough for a magazine's cover story or believe they can get away with it.

I walked outside into the oppressive Texas heat, the desert air hot, and the unrelenting sun beating down on the concrete of the pool.

It was nothing like New York.

Even with the harsh, hot sun beating into my pale flesh, it was still more comfortable than New York City. Summer in the city was like walking through a swamp, the air sticky and thick. Very few buildings had central air conditioning, so you were relegated to those awful little boxed window units that hardly worked half the time.

At least here in Texas, there was always an escape from the heat, whether it was indoors with the ice cold air, taking a dip in the pool, or even sitting in the shade. And once that sun went down, the dry air cooled off immediately making the evenings not only comfortable, but downright pleasant.

I shucked off the towel and sarong, then dipped my toe into the pool, sighing at the perfectly cool water temperature.

I waded in, one step at a time, allowing myself to adjust to the temperature before falling into a breaststroke and dropping my head below the surface.

The world fell into a beautifully muffled silence below the water. Peaceful. Serene.

Bubbles flowed from my nose and mouth as I looked at the sky through the rippled, unnaturally blue water.

After a few seconds, the distorted figure of a man peering into the water came into view.

I sputtered and swam back to the surface to find Josh standing at the pool's edge, looking down at me, his cowboy hat covering one startlingly blue eye.

I swiped the droplets of water from my face. "What are you doing here?"

"It's my house," he answered simply.

I rolled my eyes and pushed off the side of the pool, floating on my back. "I know that. But you said you had a lot of work to do today. I assumed you'd be..." I paused and waved my hand flippantly. "Busy. Working."

"Spending time with my muse *is* working," he said and carefully took his cowboy hat off, setting it on top of the tiki bar.

"How sweet," I gave him a fake smile. "You're not the first man to claim being with me was work."

"Self-deprecation isn't your best look." He circled behind the bar and started pouring ice into a blender that he seemed to procure out of nowhere. "Can I offer you a little hair of the dog?"

I groaned and shook my head. "Hard pass."

His grin widened. "How about a virgin piña colada?"

"Now *that* I can handle."

His grin was dazzling. The smile of movie stars. "Handle? Oh, you're not ready for my cocktails. I learned from the best."

"Nina?"

He nodded. "You know it. Before my music career took off, I used to bartend for her."

Working fast, he blended up some ingredients I couldn't see, then poured

the virgin drinks into two coconut cups, bending down to hand me mine first.

I took a sip and holy god, it was heaven in a glass... or rather, a coconut.

He set his down on one of the side tables, then taking the hem of his t-shirt, he yanked it over his head, leaving him, not for the first time, gloriously shirtless in front of me. That torso of his had so many lines and ridges I was pretty sure if I ran my fingers across them, it would strum like a guitar.

I blinked in surprise. I hadn't realized the shorts he was standing there wearing were swim trunks until the very moment when he dove into the water, his body arching over mine like a rainbow.

When he came out of the water, I was in the same spot, still treading water.

Just like in life.

Keeping my head above water. Peddling my feet and arms only to get nowhere and gain nothing but surviving yet another day.

When he emerged from underwater, he swam easily to me, his muscles rippling right along with the water.

I backed up, bumping into the edge of the pool. I lifted my one free hand, steadying myself against the side while I held the coconut cup in the other.

"Tell me a secret," he said. The blue of the water bounced off the blue of his eyes, deepening the hue to a shade that looked nearly inhuman. He looked like a faery or werewolf or something out of this world.

"I don't have secrets."

"Bullshit. Everyone has secrets."

I thought for a moment. "I don't have intentional secrets. There's a lot you don't know about me, but that doesn't make it a secret."

"We'll learn a lot about each other over the next six weeks," he said. "But I want to know something no one else knows."

My jaw ticked. I didn't like demands. And I definitely didn't like them from men I didn't know well. "Secrets are earned. Not given. As per our contract, I am required to stay here in this house, take no other clients,

outside of Maggie, and attend public events with you. Nothing in that contract stated I had to bare my soul to you.”

The tip of his tongue darted between his lips. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. Good answer.”

God, I hated these games. “Why? Wait, let me guess. Because a muse needs to be mysterious? And sexy?”

He shook his head slowly. “It’s not as much about being mysterious as it is making me work for it. My mother always said *when something comes too easy, you let it go easily too.*”

“That’s... profound of her,” I said. I think I would have liked Josh’s mother from what he’s told me.

“It’s a quote from one of her favorite authors, Nora Roberts.”

“That explains the bookshelf,” I said.

He nodded. “The guest room used to be her room.” Then after a moment’s thought, he added. “That doesn’t make you uncomfortable, does it?”

“Not at all.”

And it didn’t.

Without warning, Josh leaned forward and wrapped his lips around my straw, taking a long, playful sip of my drink.

“Hey!” I wrenched it back and away from his mouth, but he held onto his straw between his puckered lips. Still sucking, even as I pulled my coconut away, a little bit of the piña colada dribbled out of his straw landing in the pool water between us.

The slightly yellow, icy liquid spread through the pool water looking like pee.

I scrunched my nose. “Gross, look what you did.”

“What *I* did? It wouldn’t have made a mess if you hadn’t pulled away.”

“You have an untouched drink sitting right over there!” I pointed to his

abandoned coconut he hadn't even taken a sip from.

“Yeah, but yours tastes better.”

“*You* made both drinks! If mine tastes better, then you have no one but yourself to blame!”

With a practice shrug that was clearly meant to look casual, which I knew was anything but, he swam toward me. Gleaming eyes were locked on me as he glided through the water like a shark circling its prey.

Leaning against the edge of the pool, I eyed him warily as he made his way next to me, propping his elbows against the textured concrete.

“I intentionally made yours better. With love.”

“That feels more like *your* problem than *my* problem.”

My straw was still in his mouth, bouncing between his full lips as he chewed the edge.

“Wait a minute,” I said, glancing back at the bar where his cowboy hat rested beside the silver martini shaker. “You made *both* drinks at the same time. In the same shaker. Is yours a virgin too?”

That Cheshire grin widened, the sight so stunningly beautiful it rendered me in awe for the slightest second.

But one slight second was a second too long. He lunged at me, dipping his straw back into my drink and in a movement more fluid than all the water in the pool, he scooped the coconut out of my hands.

“Hey!”

Pushing off of the side of the pool with his feet, he swam swiftly away from me on his back, his arm with the drink elevated above the water.

The implication was loud and clear even without words: *You want it? Come and get it.*

I could chase after him. Splash him coyly and giggle like any other girl in my situation might do and probably *has* done a million times right here in this very pool.

Instead, my gaze went to his untouched piña colada still sitting on the

side table.

It was the obvious answer. He took my drink... I take his.

Game over.

The textured concrete bit into my palms as I leveraged my body weight and pulled myself out of the deep end of the pool. Water sluiced from my body. Dripping would be a gross understatement. A veritable waterfall drained from my soaking wet hair and swimsuit.

Josh's hungry gaze followed my movements as I walked slowly toward where he'd rested his cup and lifted it in my hands.

While a normal glass would have been covered in condensation beads of sweat, the coconut was dry and rough in my palms.

With a quick glance over my shoulder, Josh's eyes narrowed, disappointment at the fact that I refused to play his game curved his mouth into a frown.

But it wasn't that I refused to play. I just refused to play by *his* rules.

Turning, I lunged for his precious cowboy hat and turned it over, balancing the piña colada over the inside. "Put my drink on the edge of the pool or your hat gets it!"

He had barely registered what was happening as he splashed, righting himself in the water. "Whoa! Easy there!"

"You think I won't do it? Try me." I bit my bottom lip, unable to stop the smile from pinching my cheeks.

"That hat was custom made for me," Josh said. And even though I knew he was telling the truth and there was a bit of raw, honest panic in his voice... he still smiled.

I lifted my brow, ignoring the trickle of water that dripped down my temple. "Then I suggest you hand over the hostage."

With narrowed eyes, he slowly began to swim toward the pool's edge.

"Your crime doesn't fit the punishment, Ms. Marcoux-Evans."

"I don't care, Mr. Gabriel. When someone crosses me, I strike back twice

as hard.”

“Noted.”

The hat was sturdy with soft, buttery leather. But the sturdiness of the build didn't mean it was thick or heavy. Quite the opposite, actually. It was lightweight in my hand and the inside was stitched tightly with camel-colored thread, lined with mahogany satin. I didn't want to know how much this hat cost. Probably the same as a new pair of Jimmy Choos. Maybe more.

“What is it about these cowboy hats here in Texas anyway?” I asked. “Why don't you just wear a baseball hat like the rest of the country to keep the sun out of your eyes?”

“Cowboy hats do so much more than just keep the sun out of our eyes,” he said. “Sure, that's one purpose. But a well-made hat will both keep you cool in the hot sun and keep you warm at night. It will be sturdy enough to fan the flame of a campfire or serve your horse water from.”

He was moving slowly in the water, wading his way to the edge. *Too* slowly. He was buying time, trying to formulate his own plan.

“Oh?” I asked innocently. “So it's made to hold liquid?” I tipped the coconut more on its side, the yellow smooth liquid gliding its way toward the edge of the cup.

“Wait, wait!” Josh cried out. “It *can* hold *water*. That doesn't mean it should hold pineapple juice and coconut milk that'll potentially curdle in the hot sun and stink to high heaven for the next two months.”

I pulled back on the tipped coconut cup slightly, uprighting it. “Well then... you know what to do. Set the cup down on the edge of the pool, nice and easy and back away. No one has to get hurt.”

“You don't own any cowboy hats, let alone a good one, *do* you?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Gee, what ever gave me away?”

“Well, for starters, if you did own one, you wouldn't be making such a threat. If you had your own, you'd understand the love and bond a person has

with their cowboy hat.”

“Could I wear mine with pearl earrings and heels?”

“If you’d like. Though I personally think turquoise jewelry would be better.”

“Turquoise?” I’d literally never worn turquoise outside of this bathing suit, which wasn’t even mine.

He made it to the edge of the pool and gently set the coconut down on the edge, putting his hands up in surrender as though I was holding him at gunpoint. “There you go. I kept my end of the bargain.”

“Now swim to the other side,” I ordered.

His eyes narrowed. “That wasn’t the deal.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I ruining your counter plan? How dumb do you think I am?”

We were both still smiling despite the standoff. It was the weirdest, most fun I’d had in a long time.

“Dumb is definitely *not* the word I’d use to describe you,” his voice rumbled. Then, stretching his arms, he did the backstroke away from the coconut.

“Do you like card games, Josh? It feels like a very Texas thing, right? I’m not sure why, though...”

He studied me for a long moment curiously before answering. “Because people associate Texas with those Old West saloons and literally the name of the game is called Texas Holdem,” he said. “But in the Old West, the saloons were notorious for card games like three-card monte, as well as non-card games like high-low, chuck-a-luck, Faro.”

His hand touched the other side of the pool and he paused his little speech.

“That makes sense,” I said as I slowly made my way to the pool’s edge, his hat still in hand. “But, did they ever play...” I paused for dramatic effect. Then, rearing back, I tossed his hat to him as I yelled, “Go Fish?”

There was a splash as he launched up and out of the pool to catch the hat. I wasn't too worried about it getting wet. He'd already said it was designed to carry water and if it was meant to be used in the elements, then surely he wore it in the rain too.

"You little sneak!" he yelled, but he was laughing so hard, I could barely understand him.

I shrieked a noise that I'd never in my life heard come from my mouth—a cross between a girly squeal and a giggle—as I grabbed both drinks, running away from him. He plopped the hat on his head and lunged out of the pool, charging at me.

"You play dirty!" he barked as he closed in on me.

"You should remember that!" I rounded to the back of a lounge chair, putting it between us.

He was way faster than I expected him to be. Or maybe I was just slowed down by the double drinks in my hands and the mesmerizing way the water dripped from his tanned body.

He was only a couple feet away from me, the only thing keeping him from getting me was a single piece of pool furniture.

Eyes bright and mischievous, he said, "You might want to put those drinks down, Ms. Marcoux-Evans."

Tipping my head back, I finished what was left from the half-finished coconut, then set it down on the floor at my feet. But I held the other full cup tight in my hands and shook my head. "I have a feeling this cup is the only thing stopping you from..."

My words trailed off. He stalked me like a panther, slowly, not taking his eyes off of me. As he circled the lounge chair, I did the same, going in the opposite direction while remaining equidistant to him.

"Stopping me from what?"

Despite having chugged half the piña colada moments ago, my throat went totally dry. "From... from getting revenge."

His smile curved higher. “If you think that little coconut is going to stop me, you’ve got another thing coming. Besides... I think you’re forgetting something.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

In an unexpected leap, he jumped over the chair at me. Thick, muscled arms caught me around the waist. His bare hands were like branding irons, hot against my sensitive skin and I gasped as he yanked me flush against him.

We were both nearly half naked. Bare torso to bare torso.

Thigh to thigh.

Only two flimsy pieces of cloth separating the arousal I could feel pressing into my hip bone.

Cupping my jaw, he tilted my gaze up to his. The way the blazing sunlight hit him made him look like an angel. Some fever dream brought to life from too many hours in the desert. The brim of the cowboy hat still on his head shaded his eyes as they gleamed down at me.

I choked on the air that stalled from my lungs, nearly forgetting how to breathe with him so closely pressed against me.

Bending, his lips brushed my ear, eliciting a violent shiver to spasm down my spine.

“I like it dirty,” he whispered.

Then he lifted me up and tossed me into the pool—coconut and all.

Twenty-Three

ℒ

HOPE

I **STARED** at my reflection in the full-length mirror hanging on the closet door and pinched the beautiful lace strap of my brand new La Perla bra.

That's right, he even bought me new underwear. Fancy underwear.

I usually bought cheap bras and panties from Target. I always preferred to spend my money on the clothing people could see, not the stuff no one saw.

Opening the closet, I sighed and ran my hand along the beautiful designer clothes, all hung to perfection. No second-hand purchases in this closet.

On one hand, I knew the moment our six weeks were over, all these clothes were staying here while I moved back to New York. There was no way I was keeping all of them, despite the fact I desperately wanted to.

It wasn't right. He knew that. And I knew that.

Though for a month and a half, I get to play dress up in what is essentially a movie star's closet. And it was amazing.

The question was, what should I wear tonight for this first date? A secret date that's not really a date or a secret at all because we had every plan of leaking images to the press ourselves.

There was a knock at my bedroom door before I could choose an outfit. "One second!" I called out, grabbing the robe hanging closest to the closet door.

After sliding my arms through, I tied the sash at my waist and opened the

bedroom door.

No one was there.

What was there, however, were two more simply wrapped boxes. Pale blue paper, the color of Josh's eyes. A silk scarf tying them both together. And a single envelope of heavy cardstock resting on top with my name scribbled in masculine cursive. Same as before.

Same as always.

I peeked each way down the hall, not seeing Josh anywhere. "You have to stop doing this!" I called out, hoping he could hear me in this mansion.

I was met with nothing but my own echo. With a sigh, I picked up the boxes and set them gently on my bed, first untying the silk scarf. It was thinner than all the others. Far more dainty and meant to be almost a piece of jewelry around your neck.

I sucked in a breath, reading the tag. Hermès.

I folded it carefully and set it aside before opening the card.

Muse is the light, to a poet wandering in dark.

To be someone he writes about, needs to be worth rekindling the spark.

-Sudhir

I opened the first box, only to be immediately met with another card.

Well, that was new. There was no envelope, just a simple note card sitting on top of neatly folded tissue paper.

For my Prada-loving muse...

Your outfit for tonight.

I opened the rest of the tissue paper and held my breath as I pulled out a beautiful pale-blue organza belted midi dress I'd seen at Bergdorf Goodman's earlier this season. It was elegant and beautiful, but also casual enough for a night out. In a word, it was stunning.

I held it up to myself and looked in the mirror. I couldn't wait to try it on.

Gifts or not, I couldn't keep all these. It just wasn't right.

But I sure could wear the hell out of it for the next six weeks.

I eyed the next box, then quickly opened it to find another note card inside on top of the tissue paper.

As you very specifically stated about the Lucchese boots...

They're no Louboutins.

No. He. Did. Not.

My heart fluttered as I peeled away the tissue paper.

Resting in the box, two perfect Louboutin boots sat with their shiny signature red soles peeking back at me.

I nearly wept at how beautiful they were.

I was so caught off guard by the Louboutins, I didn't think to check my caller ID when my phone rang.

"Hello," I answered.

"Hey there, Hopsicle."

My blood froze within my veins. I hadn't heard that nickname in months. Not since the last time I spoke with...

"Brent."

"How've you been?"

How've I been? How've I fucking been?! Was he serious with this shit?

"You mean since you cheated on me and didn't even have the courtesy to tell me yourself?"

Yeah. I had to find out from pictures snapped by the tabloids. Not that normal tabloids cared enough to print them in their actual magazines... but they sure could use those stories online.

And an online bust like that is still enough to launch a grenade right into our lives.

"Yeah," he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about that. I never wanted you to find out that way."

Sorry for how I found out. Not sorry for his actions. *Typical.*

I looked down at the Prada dress, now clenched in my fist and forced myself to relax. To take a breath.

That was the point of this whole charade. To make Brent realize he was a dick and let him know what he was missing out on by choosing *her*.

In order to do that, I had to play it breezy.

Act like I give zero fucks about the fact he's already engaged again.

Engaged with *my* ring.

I swallowed every retort I had ready on the tip of my tongue and instead merely said, "You know, I think it's all really worked out for the best." I kept my voice light. Even. Not a single wobble on any of those words despite the fact I was worried I might throw up all over these new Louboutin boots.

"Wow," he said. "You've... you really seemed to have changed."

"Hm. Have I?" I cleared my throat. "I hope you don't mind that I asked Max and Carrow to pick up the rest of my things."

"Ha, yeah. They came by already. Did a raid of my house to make sure they got every little thing."

Well, not *every* little thing, I thought bitterly. My damn engagement ring was still Summer's bony little finger.

I tittered a laugh, hoping it didn't sound as fake to him as it did in my ears. "I hope they weren't too harsh on you two. You know how they get. So protective of me."

You two. It was a calculated use of mentioning both of them, even if I couldn't quite say her name aloud yet.

"Oh believe me," he said. "I know Maxie and Carrow. They were... well, exactly as you'd expect them to be."

Behind me, I heard the creak of my bedroom door. I must not have shut it when I brought the gifts in. And when I turned, I was met with Josh, standing there, casually leaning against the doorframe with his hands tucked into his pockets.

Like he'd stepped right out of a goddamn *GQ* ad.

He was wearing the hell out of an expensive-looking dark-blue suit which was such a staggering contrast to the white molding he was leaning against

that it took my breath away.

I ran my gaze from the top of his coiffed hair down to the tips of his soft leather-clad feet where they were crossed at the ankles.

“Is that Brent?” he whispered.

Licking my lips, I nodded.

“Told you,” Josh said, his smirk widening.

“So you’re in Texas now, huh?” Brent asked, even though I’d never once told him where I was going. Of course, he could have put two and two together even without ever seeing any of the pictures that were out of me and Josh. He knew my dad lived down here and that his wedding was right around the corner.

It didn’t go unnoticed to me that he hadn’t mentioned his proposal yet. So why else would he have called after all this time if he *hadn’t* seen those images of Josh and me?

“Um, yeah. For a little while. It was only supposed to be for a little bit, but...” my words faded as I met Josh’s bright gaze. “But, uh, I might extend it longer.”

“You like it that much down there?” Brent asked.

He was fishing.

“You could say that.”

Pushing off the doorframe, Josh started his slow saunter toward me until we were toe to toe. He was so much taller than me when I wasn’t wearing heels, I had to crane my neck back to meet his eyes.

“Hang up,” he mouthed, his words barely even a whisper.

I shook my head slightly. Why did he want me to end the call so fast? Wasn’t this the point? To make Brent jealous?

He wrapped his hand around the small of my back, pulling me flush against him, the silk of the robe bunching between his fingers.

Instinctually, my free hand moved beneath his jacket to the broad mounds of his muscled chest, which hitched with a breath as soon as I touched him.

“C’mon babe,” he murmured, so close to me his lips brushed my ear. “We’re going to be late if you don’t get your sexy ass dressed soon.”

His breath skittered across my flesh and I shivered despite the heat.

Then he pulled away, stepping back with a sexy smirk and nodded to the phone in my hand.

The pieces fell into place.

No, more like *crashed* into place.

It was all an act. All for Brent to hear and get jealous of.

I swallowed the dry lump in my throat and hoarsely said, “I’ve got to go, Brent. Good chatting.”

“Hope, I—”

I hung up.

Before he could say anything else. Before he could confuse me more than I already was.

“Good girl,” Josh said with a wink on his way out. The bedroom door clicked shut behind him.

Yep. So fucking confused.

Twenty-Four

Q

JOSH

“SO THERE’S a photographer following us *right now*?” Hope asked, grabbing a piece of cornbread from the center basket and placing it on her plate.

“Yes,” I said. “I was pretty sure someone would catch a cute photo of us naturally out in the wild, but this way, we can ensure the leaked photos are flattering. Plus, it’s a win-win. The photographer is free as long as she sells a photo or two to a magazine.”

“She’s working for free?”

I pushed the butter dish toward Hope. “You can’t have that cornbread without some of their signature hot honey butter. It’s a crime.”

Smiling, she took a dollop of butter and spread it on her cornbread. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“If she doesn’t sell any of the images, then I will pay her for her time. But she *will* sell them. Ever since that last image was published two days ago, my sources tell me the tabloids have been asking around about your identity.”

“So what’s to stop her from selling the unflattering photos too?”

I rolled my eyes and flashed her a look. Did she seriously believe I didn’t enter into this knowing every possible loophole? “Trust me. She signed an ironclad contract. If she sells an unflattering photo, we’ll take every penny she has.”

Hope shifted uncomfortably in her seat and leaned in, whispering, “What if the tabloids find out I’m a matchmaker? I can’t have that getting out. If people can recognize me, I won’t be able to do my job effectively after this all ends.”

I hated to admit it, but after the next six weeks? She was probably going to have a hard time doing anything under the radar. She had no idea what vultures the paparazzi could be. After we ‘break up’ publicly, they’re going to hound her, wanting every little detail of what went wrong and whose fault it was.

Eventually, they would give up though. Back off and let her live her life normally, but people would probably always recognize her. They may not know why she looks familiar, but they’ll stare at her with squinted eyes and wonder where they know her from.

“I thought of that already.” I admitted. “You previously did a really good job of keeping that info off the Internet. And I took care of the rest of the few places that mentioned you by name, so you should be in the clear. So long as no one you personally know talks to the press and tells them, you’re safe.”

My mind immediately went to her ex, Brent. He wanted attention. Sought it out, it seemed. And if he thought he could leverage Hope’s identity to put his face in the magazines too? My money was on him eventually being our leak.

“Not many people know what I do,” she said. “Even my friends and family don’t know much. I’m intentionally very vague. With the exception of my two best friends, I’m even evasive with my father.”

That didn’t surprise me with all she’d told me about her dad.

“What about your past clients?”

“They signed an NDA,” she said.

I pressed my lips together. NDAs were good, but not foolproof. Sometimes people didn’t quite understand or realize how intense they were and can plead ignorance.

Still, I supposed it was better than nothing. And we did our due diligence. It was the most we could hope for.

As she took a bite of the cornbread, her eyes went wide. “Oh wow. This is really good. Who would have thought spicy honey would be so delicious?”

I smiled with pride even though I had nothing to do with the cornbread or how it was made. I’d tried very hard to plan a first date she would like. I wanted it to be quintessentially Texas, but I also knew Hope liked the finer things in life. So somewhere that served great barbeque, but also put linens and candles on the table was a must.

I’d only been to this restaurant a couple of times and though I usually found it pretentious and always left hungry enough that I had to stop for a pizza on my way home, it seemed like the exact sort of place Hope might enjoy.

While she was distracted with the cornbread, I took her in. She was painfully beautiful tonight. Well, always really, but especially tonight.

My gaze slowly trailed down the beautiful dress she wore then back up again, pausing on the silk scarf tied around her neck.

Sensing my stare, she looked up from her cornbread, her hand instinctively going to the scarf at her neck. “Can I ask you something?” she asked quietly.

“Anything.”

“What’s with the scarves?”

My brows lifted. Well I wasn’t expecting that. “Don’t you like them?”

“I love them. It’s just... well, it’s an odd piece of clothing to give with *every* gift.”

I grab my own cornbread square and slather it with hot honey butter. “You were wearing a Prada silk scarf the first time I saw you... and after a little research, I discovered it was from several seasons ago. I thought to myself, someone as beautiful as her? She needs scarves from this season, too.”

“That is both flattering and pretentious of you all at once.”

I tipped my invisible hat her way. “I’m here to serve.”

She was smiling now and I would give my entire bank account to see that smile every damn day. “So because you saw me wearing a scarf once, you decided to buy me a hundred of them?” she quipped.

“Three is hardly a hundred. Would you like a hundred? I can make that happen.”

“No! No more gifts!”

A grin spread across my face. Hell would freeze over before I stopped spoiling her.

Luckily, I didn’t have to argue my case anymore. Our server came out and placed our first small plate down in front of us.

Small being the operative word there.

Hope stared blankly at the beautifully adorned plate in front of her as the server said, “For your first tasting, we have a pan-seared sliver of pork belly atop cheesy grits, drizzled with a fig demi-glaze sauce.”

Sliver was right. The piece of meat was shaved so thin, it was almost translucent.

The server turned to walk away, but Hope stopped her. “Excuse me.” I’d half expected her to ask for a red wine pairing, but instead she said, “I think there’s been a mistake. We haven’t ordered yet. We actually haven’t even seen the menu.”

The server blinked, surprised. “Oh, Ms. Marcoux-Evans, I apologize. When Mr. Gabriel placed the reservation, he specified our pre-fixe tasting menu for tonight. It’s how Chef DeLongue recommends you experience his food. However, if you prefer to take a look at our regular menu, I’m more than happy to bring it for you.”

The server’s tone and words were pleasant enough... they should be, considering how much this place costs.

Hope merely smiled politely and shook her head. “Oh. I didn’t realize

that. The tasting menu is great, thank you.”

After the server walked away, Hope turned her polite smile to me. It was such a stark difference from the smile I had just seen when we were talking scarves. “Sorry about that,” she said. “I didn’t realize you’d already set up the menu for us. This looks great.”

The corners of her smile wobbled. I noted the way her nostrils flared slightly and how she nibbled the inside corner of her lip. Dropping her gaze to the plate, she pushed the tiny bit of food around.

She was lying. And moreover, she was bad at it. This girl should never play poker. The nostrils and cheek nibble were totally blaring tells.

I noted it for later.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, genuinely wanting to know.

“Nothing!” Her voice was a little too sharp. A little too *faux* happy. Especially for a girl like Hope.

She was a cool-headed woman who had fun and pleasures like anyone else, but she didn’t strike me as the kind of girl who would jump up and down and squeal with delight when something pleased her.

Although, that was now my new goal.

Get Hope to squeal in delight.

Then again, if Prada, Hermès, and Louboutin couldn’t make her squeal, I wasn’t sure what could.

“I’m happy to be here, trying one of your favorite restaurants,” she said. And this time, her lie was far more believable. Except for that little twist of her lips that told me she was chewing the inside of her cheek again.

One of my favorite restaurants? What made her think that?

I shook my head. “This *isn’t* one of my favorite restaurants,” I admitted, though I had the good sense to drop my voice to a whisper.

Rumor had it, Chef DeLongue was known to be temperamental. This was not the place to send your food back... even as a celebrity. “Honestly, I thought you would like it and it would be a nice place to have our first date.”

She leveled me with a look. “This is *not* a date.”

I stopped short from rolling my eyes. No matter what, I didn’t want someone to catch me in a moment of exasperation on the night we were supposed to be teasing this relationship to the public.

Instead, I reached across the table, draping my hand over hers. “My point is, this place is one of the nicest in Austin. Which I thought was what you’d want. But if you don’t like it, speak up now and we can go somewhere else. I don’t want you to have to eat food you don’t like.”

I meant it, too. I could admit this place had great flavors, but it was pretentious as hell. Either I took a bite and was left craving more of something delicious I could never get more of. Or I took a bite and wondered just one question: *Why?*

She shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable. “Okay, fine. Here it goes. I hate tapas places and small plates,” she hissed. “I know they’re trendy and I’m supposed to love them, but I just want a full damn meal, you know? Like... if I want a burger, then I want to have a burger.” She held up her hands, indicating an invisible burger that, if real, would have been bigger than her head. “Not some dainty deconstructed slider with croutons sprinkled on top in place of a bun.”

A laugh barked out of me and I covered my mouth with my palm to smother the sound.

It was too late. Several other diners shot me dirty looks. How dare I have an emotion at a decimal level above zero while they enjoyed their sliver of a single almond.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “I’m not laughing *at* you, I swear. I’m laughing because it’s so true.”

My stomach growled as I shoved the single bite of pork belly and small spoon of grits into my mouth. “Tell you what,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “Consider this whole tasting course the appetizer to our real dinner... coming later.”

Her dark brow arched as she brought the spoon to her mouth. “Real dinner?”

I grinned. “That’s right.”

“Is that a plan I see hatching in that brain of yours?”

“Not hatching... fully hatched. I think you and I are more alike than you realize.”

She ignored the bite of pork belly, opting instead for a bite of the grits, her face twisting as she chewed, then swallowed.

“You didn’t like the bite?”

“I can still taste the pork, even in the grits. I didn’t expect a grain to taste so fatty.”

Dammit. I forgot she didn’t eat pork.

“Burgers are fatty, too,” I said, bringing my glass of wine to my lips to take a sip.

“Yeah, but that’s like, hidden fat.” She poked at the discarded the pork belly with her fork. “This just looks like crispy blubber.”

I snorted.

Literally snorted red wine out my nose and right onto the white linen tablecloth.

In turn it made Hope laugh. She ducked her head, covering her snicker with her palm as the server came rushing over with a rag to mop up the dribbles of wine.

“Mr. Gabriel! I’m so sorry,” she said, as though it was her fault I did a spit take of wine all over the table. “Are you feeling okay?”

Am I feeling okay? I put on my best sickly face and shook my head, looking up at the server. “You know, I don’t think I am,” I said. “Chef DeLongue knows what a fan I am of his work, but I’m afraid my palate is affected by this bug I’ve caught. Could I reschedule our reservation for another night?”

“Of course,” the server replied. “Chef will set you up with a to-go

package, of course. You know you're welcome here at any time." She paused and leaned forward, whispering, "Shall I pack your photographer a to-go bag too?"

Hope blinked, clearly surprised that our server was in on the ruse. But of course the restaurant knew. I wasn't about to make the photographer pay for her own Michelin star meal when it was my restaurant of choice.

"Yes, please," I whispered back. "I think we were fortunate enough to get some good shots initially."

"Very well," she said with a nod, then hurried back into the kitchen.

"Was that part of your hatched plan?" Hope asked.

I shook my head slowly. "No, that was just the perfect opportunity to get us out of here sooner, so I took it."

"You're full of surprises," Hope said, tipping back her glass of wine.

"Oh, just you wait." I gave her a wink.



Hope groaned, dropping what was left of her double cheeseburger back on the plate. "That was so good," she said. "But I don't think I can eat another bite without my stomach exploding." She fell back in the cushioned booth, her hand drifting to her stomach.

"Mmmhmmm." I'd finished my burger at least ten minutes ago. Although, I had to admit, I was surprised she ate as much as she did. These burgers were the best around, but they were also massive. Chef DeLongue aside, Texas doesn't do small portions... usually. "I know Texas is known for Tex-Mex and Barbeque, but we know our way around some burgers too."

"Basically what you're saying is that Texas can do it all?" she asked.

I pointed finger guns at her with a click of my tongue. "Now you're catching on."

"Normally I'd argue with you, but that was seriously the best burger I've

ever had in my life.”

I grinned. “You should send your compliments to the chef.”

“You know what? You’re right, I should!” Hope stood up on the seat of her booth and shouted over top of everyone’s heads. “Hey, Nina! My compliments to the chef!”

She did a ridiculous little bow and I reached across, tugging her back down. “Sit down, you nutjob!” But I couldn’t help but laugh too. “Is that Diet Coke laced with something?”

She groaned. “God, no. I don’t think I’ll ever drink again after the bachelorette party.”

Good.

She was clearly exaggerating, but even still, it was dangerous how drunk she’d gotten. Thank God there were so many of us around to get her safely away from fucking Duane.

After a few moments of silence, Hope stared at the unfinished burger still on her plate.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to try and finish that as a way of proving some kind of crazy point?” I asked.

She shook her head, slurping what was left of her Diet Coke. “No. I was just remembering... burgers on the grill was the one food my dad knew how to cook. And cook *well*. It’s maybe my favorite memory with him, the nights he’d grill burgers and we’d eat out on the back deck in our bathing suits, ketchup dribbling down my chin and forearms. It was the only time he didn’t care how messy I got when eating. The only time I wouldn’t get in trouble for making a mess or spilling my drink. Because he would take out the hose and we’d wash ourselves off right there in the small backyard before going back inside.”

“That sounds nice,” I said. “I only met your dad for a second, but he seems like a good guy... now.”

“Yeah,” Hope said quietly, poking at the rest of her burger. “I hope so. I

hope he doesn't break Vivian's heart."

"Maybe he won't. Maybe this time he's really changed."

"Maybe." She gave me a flat smile, the fake kind that tries to convey how fine she is without having to say the words.

That smile is a lie.

I saw that smile on my mother's face every day of my childhood. Every day she had to be married to my asshole father and pretend for our sakes that everything was fine.

Fine.

I hate that word.

I hate that smile.

My fucks-given meter is usually pretty low—even bottoming out at zero most days. That was the problem when you were a celebrity. Everyone needed your help. Every charity needed your money.

Everyone had a sob story.

And most of them were legitimate. But at some point, I had to turn that empathy off.

However, every now and then, someone found a way in.

Guilt sparked in my chest like a piece of flint catching fire. Guilt that I couldn't do more for every foundation that reached out to me. Guilt that I couldn't help my mother or even reassure her back when I was a kid and she most needed it. Guilt that I was setting Hope up to potentially be ruined.

I shook the thought away.

No. This wouldn't be like last time. Hope wasn't Jenn... and I was going to make sure of it.

I tossed some cash onto the table and stood, the old springs creaking and the vinyl of the booth seats cracking beneath my weight. As I climbed to my feet, I held out my hand for Hope to take. "Come on."

She looked at my hand curiously. "Where are we going?"

"Our date isn't over yet."

She looked down at her unfinished food. “It isn’t?”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to repeat everything I say back to me?”

“I don’t know, am I?” she asked, this time her tone mocking its incredulousness. Then, her grin spread fast across her face.

A real smile this time that smacked into me like a heavyweight punch.

“You truly think all I would plan for our first date is a fancy ass meal at a Michelin Star restaurant?”

“*Fake* first date,” she corrected, then stared at me like it was a trick question. “And... yeah. I did.”

“Are you going to correct me that this is fake every time the subject is brought up?”

She slid her soft, delicate hand into mine and stood. “If it’s just the two of us, I am.”

Deep down, I knew it was the smart thing to do... to remind both of us that this wasn’t real. That it wasn’t lasting.

And yet, Hope was strangely addictive. Like that shot of pure absinthe I did in my early twenties. Strong, shocking, dizzying... and I didn’t know whether I wanted to step away from the alcohol or drink the whole damn bottle after I swallowed.

I tilted my head and with her hand in mine, I gave the slightest tug, pulling her into me. Settling my other free hand at her waist and guiding her body with mine, I swayed us both to the slow country ballad that crooned over the speakers of the crowded bar. “And what if it turns into something that isn’t fake?” I asked, intentionally grazing my lips against her ear.

Her chest hitched, brushing against mine with her sharp inhale. “Real relationships don’t typically need contracts and NDAs,” she whispered.

Touché.

“Ahhhh,” I hissed, lacing our fingers and bringing her hand to rest against my heart as we danced to the music. “But what is an engagement ring if not its own very sparkly, binding contract?”

She studied me, her gaze narrowing. “Well then, the moment you offer me an engagement ring in place of our contract, *that’s* when I’ll consider this real. Actually... no,” she said so abruptly that even our dance steps faltered. “I take that back. Engagement rings aren’t binding contracts. People end their engagements all the time and while it’s messy, there’s no steadfast litigation around it. I should know.”

“So if not an engagement rin—”

“A wedding ring,” she said, cutting me off. “*That’s* a binding contract. Hell, there’s even a legal document you sign with the ceremony. So when you put a wedding band on my finger, then and only then, would I consider this real.”

Damn. “So you’re saying that even if we dated for years. Lived together. Rescued eight dogs together... you wouldn’t consider any of that real unless there was a ring on your finger?”

“That’s right.”

“On the surface, it seems like a cynical notion, but I’m not convinced it isn’t also romantic.”

She snorted. “If you say so.”

The flat smile was back, this time not only directed at me, but created because of me too.

I stopped dancing and lifted her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles briefly. “Come on. We have to make it to phase two of our date before they close.”

I was going to get her to smile for real tonight if it killed me. I wanted the shrieking, laughing girl that played around the pool with me.

Twenty-Five

Q

HOPE

“YOU WANT me to ride a mechanical bull? In *Louboutins*?!”

“They’re boots. What the hell else are boots meant for if not riding?”

Josh folded his arms, his biceps flexing with the movement in a way I wasn’t entirely sure wasn’t intentional. I forced my eyes to stay on his, even though I really wanted to sneak a peek at the flex of muscles that pushed against the seams of his Axel’s button down dress shirt with the turquoise buttons. I recognized the brand because my dad was hell-bent on wearing something quintessentially ‘Texas’ to the wedding and I had a bitch of a time talking him out of Shepler’s shirts and into Axel’s instead.

“Unless you don’t think you can,” Josh taunted.

“Reverse psychology won’t get you anywhere.” I matched his stance, folding my arms too.

“It’s not reverse psychology,” he said with a shrug. “Bull riding is damn hard. Even *mechanical* bull riding.”

I glanced over to where a girl in a mini skirt and crop top bucked and swiveled with the leather and steel between her bony knees. Hand in the air, she grinned, sticking her tongue out for her sorority sisters who were all filming her, no doubt, live streaming or ready to post to her social media.

Just as it looked like she had her footing... or rather... seating? The mechanical bull bucked, throwing her off and onto the vinyl padded floor

lining the enclosure.

I scrunched my nose, looking back at Josh. “Yeah, I’ll pass. But thanks.”

“Okay,” he said. “Totally your call.”

As the girl landed, her skirt flew above her hips revealing a turquoise thong and her tanned buttcheeks.

Tanning bed tanned buttcheeks too. You could tell from the pale arched lines beneath the curve of her butt. You only got those lines from tanning beds. I should know, I lived in them in college.

Although it seemed like a hell of a waste of money to go to a tanning bed when you lived in sunny Texas. But what did I know?

“Does everyone in Texas wear turquoise?” I asked.

His smile widened. “Why? Are you starting to like it?”

I snorted. “Hardly. The color itself is fine, but kill me now the day I wear turquoise jewelry.”

Giggling, the girl barely noticed or cared that she had flashed an entire mob of cheering people. She hopped to her feet, straightening her clothes and curtsayed.

“Aw come on. There’s not *that* much of it here.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. I flicked the turquoise button on his shirt to make a point. “I’m *surrounded* by turquoise—from your shirt to the turquoise-stemmed glasses they served wine out of here at the bar to that girl’s skivvies.”

He pulled a face. “Skivvies? What are you, seventy years old?”

“I just said the first word that came to mind!” I argued.

“Look, not to get technical,” Josh pointed to my wine glass, “but the wine glass and the panties aren’t turquoise... they’re teal.”

“Like there’s a difference?”

“Difference? Are you joking?” His mouth gaped open. “Okay, if you’re going to talk out of your ass, then there’s no point in having this conversation.”

He was kidding. I could see the playful smile tugging at his mouth, but I could also tell there was a hint of truth to it too.

“Tell me! I promise I won’t poke fun.” I poked his ribs, and though I shouldn’t have been shocked at how rock hard his obliques were, I was.

“Fine. Turquoise is a stone. It’s opaque. And it usually has other shades of blue and green in the mix, sometimes copper and brown in there too. This,” he paused to tap the wine glass, “is teal glass. Similar color. But translucent. And not a stone.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m calling bullshit on your strict definition. Yes, turquoise is a semi-precious stone, but it’s also a color. You can compare the Adriatic sea to turquoise, because people associate the word with color more than the stone itself.”

“You could say that. You’d be wrong, of course, but you can say it.”

Yanking out my phone, I did a quick search on dictionary.com and held my findings up for him to see. “*Webster’s Dictionary* says it right here: Turquoise: A bluish green color.”

Josh set his beer on the bar in front of us and methodically rolled his sleeves to the elbow. Or maybe more accurately, folded them up to his elbow. They had crisp, sharp lines in each even fold and he compared each arm to make sure they matched. “I’m afraid we’ll have to finish this later.”

Over the speakers, the announcer’s voice crackled and popped, “Thank you, Kayla for that, er, spirited ride!”

“Why?” I asked Josh, yelling to be heard over the announcer.

“Up next, we’ve got a regular here at the *Bang Boom Saloon*—Mr. Josh Gabriel!”

“Because I’m up!”

Next thing I knew, he had his shirt off and was tossing it at me.

The crowded bar lost their ever-loving minds as a shirtless Josh Gabriel made his way toward the mechanical bull.

Girls were literally screaming, reaching out to run their hands along his

muscled shoulders.

In a swift movement fitting of a superhero, Josh launched himself over the railing and into the ring in a single hop as the women continued throwing themselves at him, literally leaning over the railing, reaching for him and screaming his name.

“This is fucking nuts,” I muttered to myself.

“This is nothing,” an older woman said beside me.

I blinked, startled that she was talking to me. Hell, I was startled that *anyone* was talking to me while the living god, Josh Gabriel was about to ride a mechanical bull before their very eyes.

“It’s only Sunday. You should see how rowdy they get on the Friday nights he comes in.” She leaned on the bar, fiddling with her pint glass, filled to the brim with something amber and frothy on top.

“He comes here a lot?” I asked.

She gave a nod, her gray streaked ponytail bouncing. “Oh yeah. Though... he usually doesn’t take off his shirt for the ride.” The lines around her brown eyes deepened as she assessed me. “Something tells me that might be a show only meant for your eyes.”

I snorted. “Hardly.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” I followed her gaze to where she inclined her chin toward the roped off stage.

Sure enough, Josh’s gaze was fixed on me as he held one hand in the air. The bull wasn’t going too fast yet. And I watched as his body curved and moved like fluid despite the jerking motions of the mechanical bull. Smoother than any dancer I’d ever seen live.

“Would be a shame to miss that show, huh?” The woman asked.

Josh winked at me, his tongue slipping across his bottom lip.

Heat flushed through my body like I’d just slammed a shot of whiskey. Quickly, I dropped my gaze to my barely touched wine glass. I hadn’t planned on drinking tonight after my killer hangover yesterday, but it had felt

rude to not order something at a bar.

“How long has he been coming here?” I asked.

“Oh, Josh started coming here long before he was legally allowed to. But ‘round these parts,” she paused to shrug, “we don’t much care as long as everyone’s safe. And I always kept an eye on him. Usually allowed him a sip of whatever new beer I had on tap. Especially back when he was a kid. Rules are a bit stricter now though. Pretty sad story that boy’s got. For the most part, Josh just wanted an escape from that shitty dad of his and I was happy to offer him that.”

“Oh,” I said, realization dawning on me. “You own this place?”

“For the last thirty years,” she said, then offered me her hand. “I’m Rhonda.”

“Hope. Josh’s... friend.”

“Mm-hm.”

I could have pressed the issue more. Insisted that we were, in fact, *just friends*. But then, that would sort of defeat the purpose of this whole night out. Defeat the six-week contract to act as his muse. I was supposed to be leading the public to believe we were together... wasn’t I?

With a tap of her palm to the bar, Rhonda picked up her beer and gave me a polite nod of her head. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Hope. I’m sure I’ll see you ‘round here again.”

“I’m sure you will. It was nice to meet you, Rhonda.”

With her beer in hand, she disappeared into the sea of people, leaving me in a crowded bar alone with only a glass of wine and Josh Gabriel’s shirt to keep me company.

I stole a quick glance at Josh. The bull was going really fast now and his focus was no longer on me, flirting, but he stared down at his hand, gripping the handle at the bull’s shoulders.

I tilted my head and pressed my nose into his shirt inhaling deeply. Man he smelled good. Clean and crisp and yet smoky. Like fresh laundry laid out

to dry next to a campfire.

“Holy shit,” a voice screeched beside me. “That’s Josh Gabriel’s shirt, isn’t it?!”

Uh oh. My first reaction was to panic over getting caught smelling his shirt. But when I looked up and found Turquoise Thong Girl... or rather, Teal Thong Girl... and her entourage of twenty-something sorority friends staring at the shirt in my hands, I realized they didn’t give a shit about me or that I was smelling his shirt like a psycho. They only cared about the fact that I held legendary Josh Gabriel’s shirt in my hands.

“She must have caught it when he threw it toward the crowd!” the redhead beside her said.

“He didn’t throw it into the crowd. He asked me to hold it for hi—”

“Yeah, right. You expect us to believe Josh Gabriel is here with *you*?” Teal Thong Girl said cattily, trying to yank the shirt from my hands.

Luckily, I held onto it, like subconsciously I was ready for her to do that. “I *am* here with Josh.” I gave the shirt another yank, which made her stumble on her wobbly high heels.

I smirked a little at that. Clearly, she wasn’t used to walking, let alone balancing a tug-of-war game in heels. *Novice*. Like a baby gazelle walking on wobbly legs for the first time.

Unfortunately, though I knocked her a little off balance, it wasn’t enough to make her let go of the shirt.

And now her redhead friend was gripping it, too, yanking. “You expect us to believe Josh Gabriel is here with you? Seriously, what are you, like fifty years old?”

“Fifty?!” I screeched. I was used to people thinking I was a little older than my 28 years, simply because I carried myself with a lot more maturity. But *fifty*?

She smiled at my reaction. Dammit. I’d given her exactly what she wanted. She wanted to insult me, fluster me, catch me off guard so I’d let go

of the shirt.

Catty bitches.

It wasn't even about the shirt anymore. Even though I knew it wasn't an inexpensive shirt, I was sure Josh could afford more and probably had a closet full of them.

It was about their entitlement. Like somehow *they* deserved Josh's shirt. And *I* didn't.

From the center of the ring, I noticed Josh had finished his ride and had stayed on the bull the whole time. He had his hands in the air victoriously and when he caught my eyes across the room, his head tilted in question.

Thank God. Not that I needed a man to save me, but it would be a lot easier with him here to smooth out this little situation I'd found myself in.

He hopped over the railing and ran through the crowd trying to get back to me.

The third friend grabbed the shirt too. Another blonde who looked eerily similar to Teal Thong Girl.

The three of them were too strong, and I felt the tiniest tear at the seam of the sleeve.

Just as Josh ran up to us, I let go abruptly, smiling as they all three went down in a pile of tangled limbs and platform, glittery heels.

"Are you okay?" he asked me first, not even caring about his shirt or the pile of coeds on the floor at our feet.

"I'm fine. But these fans tried to steal your shirt."

Teal Thong Girl was the first on her feet, still grasping the shirt in her hands. "We weren't stealing it! We were going to bring it to you after you finished!"

A hush had fallen over the crowd around us and there was a semi-circle gathered to watch the new, more impressive show.

Dammit. Josh and I really had a theme going every time we were out together.

Practiced in his publicity, Josh smiled and took the shirt from Teal Thong Girl. “That’s mighty kind of you, thank you,” he said, his voice dripping with a thicker Texas drawl than I ever remembered him having.

I clenched my jaw, biting down on my tongue. I hated that he was being nice to them after they were so awful to me.

But then again, I understood. We had talked about this last time. He had a reputation to uphold. And after the other night’s drama, punching out a male stripper, he had to be on his best behavior. Poor Matt couldn’t keep following us around and cleaning up the messes that I kept creating for Josh.

Turning to me, Josh said, “I was having Hope here hold my shirt for me though,” he said, his voice so sweet, it was like molasses dripping from a tree.

Teal Thong Girl gulped, panic filling her wide blue eyes. “She was smelling your shirt!” she blurted out, pointing at me.

Why that little tattletale...

“Was she now?” Triumph echoed in the quiet words of Josh’s voice as he slowly turned his cocky grin toward me.

“I wouldn’t say I was *smelling* it,” I defended myself. “I was...” *What the hell was I going to say to get out of this?* “I was sniffing it.”

Josh’s mouth twitched with what I was growing to recognize as a suppressed grin. “Is there a difference?”

I shrugged. “I just wanted to make sure that I didn’t smell bad as a result of holding *your* shirt.”

This time, he didn’t fight his grin. “Are you saying I smell bad, Ms. Marcoux-Evans?”

If I said yes, he knew I’d be lying. He clearly didn’t smell bad. He smelled amazing. “Nope,” I answered quickly. “I was making sure you *didn’t* smell bad. And you don’t. So congrats to you.”

“What the fuck is wrong with her?” the redhead whispered to the other blonde.

Josh's gaze cut briefly to them before he turned to me, holding out the shirt like it was a jacket that I was supposed to put on. "Your sniff test was probably wise since we had such a long day hanging out together. I know you were feeling a little chilly and no one wants to cover up in someone's stinky shirt. But I assure you, mine smells fresh as the day I was born. Ain't that right, darlin'?"

I stared at it blankly. What was he doing?

His brows lifted, encouraging me to play along.

Ohhhh.

He was making a show of this. I didn't know how he knew these girls had been giving me a hard time, but he clearly sensed it. Well, of course he saw the tug of war, but it wasn't like he heard their comments about me being fifty years old or anything.

"Y-yes, I was a little chilly," I said, stuttering a bit. I wasn't as practiced at this improv showmanship as he was. Sliding my arms into his shirt, he dragged the soft cotton up my shoulders. "Thanks... babe."

"Anything, anytime for you," he said with a wink. Bending, he pressed a soft, sweet kiss to the tip of my nose.

Goosebumps soared down my body, even though it was just the lightest brush of his mouth to my skin. We stayed like that, locked in each other's eyes, nose to nose for one breath... two breaths...

My focus was broken when Teal Thong Girl gasped.

I jerked out of his gaze, blushing as the sorority girls stood, mouths agape watching the display.

Clearing his throat, Josh turned back to face the girls too. "Now, I'm happy to sign something for y'all and take a selfie if you want?"

Our moment was long forgotten as the girls squealed, pulling out their phones. Josh spent the next thirty minutes taking selfies with patrons while I took a seat at the bar and snuggled into his shirt.

It really did smell heavenly. *He* smelled heavenly.

Hugging my arms into my body and curling my hands into the soft shirt, I watched as he smiled for the iPhone cameras and hugged those his fans into his sides for the photos, making sure to keep his hands always visible.

He was charming. So charming.

Too charming.

And I was allowing myself to fall under his spell.

The realization slammed into me like diving into the icy ocean in the middle of January.

It was only day one and I was already being charmed by him.

I couldn't let this happen. I couldn't fall for Josh Gabriel.

I was so stupid. He'd said it from the very beginning. It was even laid out in his contracts: I wasn't his girlfriend. I wasn't a date or even his friend.

I was his muse.

Essentially, a glorified employee.

I was here to help inspire him to create music... and look good on his arm for publicity stunts like this.

That was all.

Feeling suddenly sick to my stomach, I shrugged out of his shirt.

I needed fresh air. I needed to breathe. Get my thoughts back together.

And he certainly didn't need me at his side for those autographs.

I couldn't expect him not to pay attention to his fans, but I also didn't have to love it either. I didn't have to sit here in the corner and watch it.

So I left his shirt on the bar next to my untouched wine glass and walked out the front door.

Outside, the cool, evening air hit me and I looked up into the bright blazing stars dotting the inky sky like diamonds scattered on velvet.

My phone buzzed. A text from my half-brother Finn blinked across my screen. He'd sent me a photo of all four of my new half-siblings dressed in fancy suits and a beautiful lavender dress that Addy wore.

FINN:

Our outfits are locked and loaded for Dad's wedding! Get ready... the Evans Family is going to take Texas by storm!

Tears filled my eyes as I laughed, looking down at the photo.

The sad absence of family twisting in my gut.

I knew where I had to go. *Now*.

With a deep breath, I looked back at the bar door. Dammit. I couldn't just leave him again. Josh would kill me.

Rushing back inside, I waved from the back of the crowd, trying to get his attention. "Josh!" I shouted, cupping my hands around my mouth.

But my voice and his name was drowned out by the countless other fans calling out to him. It was worse than when this had first happened at Nina's bar. The crowd was about three times bigger this time and the line to get a selfie with him was at least fifty people deep.

Memories stabbed into my chest. I not only remembered this feeling, but I *hated* it too. This was precisely why I didn't date celebrities.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled slowly, calming down my racing heart.

I could do this.

It wasn't real. He and I weren't really a couple. He had a job to do... and so did I.

"You alright there?"

Rhonda. Again.

I swiveled around, a momentary flash of relief spreading down my spine. "Rhonda! Could you give Josh a message for me when he's done here?"

Her expression twisted. "Can't you give it to him yourself when he's done?"

I shook my head and with a wave of my hand, I gestured at the huge crowd surrounding him. "This could take forever and I need to go. But I don't want him to think I'm running away or mad or anything."

I reached over the bar, grabbing a cocktail napkin and scribbling an address down on it. "Here, give him this address. This is where I'll be!"

This couldn't wait. I wouldn't be able to sleep if I didn't take care of this... now.

Twenty-Six

26

HOPE

I **STOOD** on Vivan's front stoop, pacing.

No, scratch that. My *dad's* front stoop.

He not only lived here now, but he called this place home.

This was happening.

I could accept that. I had to accept that.

Although I was regretting showing up here unannounced.

At a little before ten, it wasn't late. Not by most people's standards at least.

And lights were on inside, so I suspected they were still awake.

It just wasn't my style to arrive unannounced anywhere...

Let alone at my dad's house.

I grabbed my phone, dialing Carrow. She answered on the first ring.

"Oh no, what's wrong?"

"What makes you ask that?"

She sighed and even though to most it would have sounded like she was bothered by a phone call between friends, I knew her well enough to know that was her way of cutting through the bullshit.

"If things were mostly fine, you'd text. If you were looking for reassurance or someone to support your choice, you'd call Max. But calling *me*? You're looking for tough love. You're looking for someone to boot you

in the ass.” A pause. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

She wasn’t wrong though. “I’m standing in front of Vivian’s and my dad’s house, second guessing if this apology should happen right now. Maybe I should have called her first? I could go home, regroup, then call tomorrow and invite her to coffee or somethi—”

Carrow’s snort interrupted me. “Coffee? After that stunt you pulled, you’d better at least spring for brunch. Brunch with bottomless mimosas.”

“So you *do* think I should wait?” I stepped back from the door, a hollow feeling sinking in my gut. The Uber had already driven off. How long would it take another to come pick me up? How long until Rhonda would give Josh my note?

“No,” Carrow said firmly. “The longer you wait, the more awkward it gets. And from what you’ve told me, Vivian doesn’t need or want any sort of formal apology. She just wants to be a part of your family.”

“What family?” I whispered, more to myself than to Carrow.

“Fine,” Carrow said. “She wants to *be* your family. The family you never got as a kid. At least give her a chance.”

I looked up at the peaked roof of the cute ranch house. Though it wasn’t massively large, it was warm-looking and on a lot of sprawling land that even in the evening, I could tell went on for acres and acres.

Off to the side of the house, a quiet chicken coop was surrounded by a fence and barbed wire. I wondered where they would keep the goats if they ever got them. And if she had horses too. Vivian and the Annes seemed like horse girls.

I tried to picture my dad living in this house. Feeding chickens. Milking goats. Walking the dogs. This quaint family life void of alcohol and late nights at the dive bar getting shitfaced.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Rowe,” I said, calling her by her nickname.

“Are you kidding? Of course you can do it. Having a family is much easier than doing things on your own.”

I shook my head. “Not when you’ve been doing it on your own your whole life.”

Another pause. “Remember what you told me when I hired my first assistant and was having trouble?”

I smiled at the memory. Carrow had finally gotten the promotion she deserved... and with it, an assistant to help her with her work load. “You wanted to fire him on his first day,” I laughed.

“That’s right. Because I had a system. And he wasn’t learning my system. But what did you tell me?”

Dammit. I could see the writing on the wall of where this little talk was going and I didn’t like that my own stupid words were going to come back and bite me in the ass. “I said that anytime you have to give up control, it feels impossible. It feels like you’re better off doing it alone. But without their help, you’ll never give yourself the space to grow.”

“Wise words,” Carrow said.

I scrunched my nose. “I hate you.”

“I love you too.” Then, Carrow added, “You’ve had a crazy year. You went from being an only child with a single living parent to learning about four siblings you didn’t know existed. And now you’re adding a stepmom and three stepsisters into the mix. It’s not that you can’t do it. You just need time to adjust to the new normal.”

I sighed and leaned against the railing along their stoop. “I am so smart. My advice is so good, I need it given back to me.”

Carrow laughed, the sound deep and throaty. “Exactly. Now get your ass in there before your dumb dad goes to sleep for the night.”

After hanging up, I lifted my fist to the door and gave three loud knocks that reverberated into the otherwise silent night.

After a moment the door swung open. I’d expected Vivian or my dad to be standing there... but because the universe hates me, it was Julianne who answered instead.

She looked just as surprised to see me there as I was to see her.

“Hope,” she said. Then as quickly as the surprise registered, it vanished. A calm washed over her features and her brows twitched, lifting very slightly.

She pointed down the hall. “They’re in there,” she said. “I was just leaving, but I can stay if you want me to.”

“I...”

My words faded. I honestly wasn’t sure if I wanted her here. Telling her she didn’t need to stay felt like the polite thing to do. She did say she was on her way out after all.

But it wasn’t imposing when it was family... right? Wasn’t that what everyone tried to tell me?

And yet, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t ask her to stay. I couldn’t ask her to be there for *me*. It was too vulnerable.

“I don’t want to keep you,” I said carefully. “And I’d like to talk to Vivian alone first. But... maybe you could keep my dad company for me while I do?”

She seemed suspicious at first. And who could blame her?

“Sure,” she said with a nod. “Come on in.”

I wasn’t sure what to expect seeing Vivian after our fight. If you could call it a fight. It was more like me flying off the handle and airing all kinds of dirty laundry to a woman who had nothing to do with how they got dirty in the first place.

But I did *not* expect her to beam at me when she saw me. Her smile widened, warm and reaching her eyes as she crossed the room to me, hugging me tightly. “Hope, I’m so glad you came,” she said, as though it wasn’t totally weird that I showed up on her doorstep at ten p.m. on a random Sunday night.

If I didn’t know better, it would look like she’d been expecting me to arrive.

My body tensed with her hug, but that didn't stop Vivian.

While normally I might have given her a stiff pat on the back, Carrow's words stuck in my brain like gum on the bottom of my shoe. *Give yourself the space to grow.*

So instead of wriggling out of the discomfort of the hug as quickly as possible, like I would have done in the past, I lifted my arms and hugged her back.

"Oh!" she gasped, her voice alarmed.

I immediately released my hold on her and jumped back. "I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you? Did I squeeze too hard?" I blurted out, my words racing together. "Are you okay?"

I examined her to make sure I didn't break a bone in her slim body. Seriously, a light breeze could knock her over.

"No, sweetheart." I dragged my gaze to meet hers which were wet and wide as she looked back at me. "I was just surprised. Good surprised. It's the first time you've hugged me back."

A sharp sizzle buzzed in my sinuses like drinking a bottle of Coke too fast. I cleared the emotion from my throat. "Yeah, about that..." The words *I'm sorry* dangled on the tip of my tongue, but in the other room, Julianne's laugh echoed down the hall, accompanied by the harmony of my father's laugh. A hearty laugh. A booming laugh.

A laugh I hadn't heard from him in years.

I couldn't do this with him in earshot. "Do you think we could go for a walk?" I asked, hitching my thumb toward the front door.

Vivian's brow arched. "This time of night? Probably not the best idea on this property. We've got some coyote packs who live just through the trees."

"Coyotes?" My eyes went wide. "And they eat people?"

She chuckled. "No, no. But they can be vicious. The wolves on the other hand, they just might eat a person or two."

"Oh my god," I groaned. "What is this place?"

“C’mere,” Vivian waved her hand and walked me into a room off the front entrance, shutting the door behind us. It was a beautifully decorated, plush office. A little frilly and feminine for my taste, but tasteful nonetheless. Ruffled blush-pink curtains swept from floor to ceiling, tied back with cream-colored ribbon. The white tufted couch was decorated with damask pillows in varying fabrics and textures.

“This is my office,” Vivian said.

Two desks sat facing away from each other in either corner of the room. “Whose desk is that?” I asked. It looked slightly less girly than the other. Less frills. Simple white wood. The table top area was neatly stacked with papers and turquoise-colored paper clips.

“That’s your dad’s desk,” she said.

“My dad works in here? *With* you?”

“No, your dad works in here... *for* me. He’s my assistant.”

I blinked. “My dad is working at your interior design firm?” I asked. “My dad? The man who would choose red and black buffalo plaid for literally everything if he could?”

She leaned back and let out a loud laugh at that. “Well, *I* do the designing. But he figures out the carpentry for me and makes some of my ideas come to life.”

Shaking my head, I dropped to the plush couch and let my face fall into my palms.

Beside me, the couch dipped and Vivian’s soft hand draped over my knee. “Hope, honey, what’s wrong?”

“This!” I gestured to the room around us. “This is what’s wrong!” Vivian winced, her expression hurt and confused and I exhaled an exhausted sigh. “I don’t mean it like that, Vivian. I really came here to apologize to you, I promise. And I am *so sorry* for what I said to you last night.”

“Okay,” Vivian said carefully. “But... you don’t like me?” she asked.

“No, it’s not that at all.”

“You don’t think I’m good enough for your dad?”

I snorted and turned, tucking my leg under me so I could face her directly. “It’s the opposite,” I admitted, my eyes welling with tears. “I like you a lot. More than I ever expected to. More than I ever *wanted* to. But I worry that my Dad’s not good enough for *you*.” I whispered the latter part of that sentence just in case he was within earshot.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love my Dad,” I continued. “But I don’t know how much he’s told you about his past marriages—”

“He’s told me everything, Hope.” She slid her palm from my knee to my hand, wrapping it tightly around my fingers with a warm squeeze. “I know all about his other marriages. How quick he was to move on. How terrible many of those women were to you. How terrible *he* was to you at times.”

A single blink. That’s all it took for the tear to slip from my eye and glide down my cheek. “You know,” I repeated. It wasn’t a question.

“I know,” she nodded, tears filling her eyes.

I could feel it in my broken heart.

She saw me.

She knew me.

“My daddy was an alcoholic too. A bad man. He spent most of my life in prison.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, dipping my trembling chin to look at the place where her hand draped over mine.

Her fingers gently scooped below my chin, lifting my gaze back to hers. “You don’t be sorry for me and I won’t be sorry for you. Deal?” Viv asked.

I couldn’t answer. I knew the moment I did, I would lose control and start sobbing. Instead, I gave a tight nod.

“The difference is,” she continued, “my daddy died a bad man. But yours? He’s very different now... something I think he’s excited to show you if you’ll let him. He works full-time. Helps care for the animals. He’s been great to my girls—”

I pushed to my feet and started pacing the room. “I know I should be happy. Thrilled that he’s different. B-but... but if what you’re saying is true, then what this all means is that he was willing to change for you... but not me.”

The sob ripped from my chest as I admitted that out loud. “He loved you enough to be the man you needed him to be, but *I* wasn’t enough to make him better. My love wasn’t enough.”

The comprehension and pity that softened Viv’s face was an even larger gut punch than her words. She opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a soft whisper of my name.

“I really do like you, Vivian. And your girls. But watching all this is hard.” I gestured to the room around me and wiped at my damp cheeks, trying to pull myself together. Trying to stop crying.

“I see that now,” she said, standing slowly.

Hiccuping as I tried to inhale and get my breathing under control, I crossed to the door. With my hand on the crystal doorknob, I paused. “Don’t give up on me, Viv?”

“Never,” she whispered. “Family never gives up on each other.”

With that, I ran down the stairs heading toward the door, not bothering to say goodbye or hello to my dad and Julianne. I didn’t care that it might take an Uber another thirty minutes to get here. Or that wolves might eat me while I waited.

I couldn’t be in that house for another moment. The house where my dad had finally built a life and a family... without me. The vulnerability of what I shared weighed too heavily on me. It was crushing.

I threw open the front door and ran out of that house, plowing right into Josh, standing there waiting for me.

I didn’t even care that I’d left him with a massive group of fans in a bar half an hour ago. I didn’t care that up until that very second, he’d seemed pissed.

I ran into his open arms and sobbed.

Twenty-Seven

27

JOSH

THE NEXT MORNING, I was up before the sun.

Pulling on a worn-in pair of Levi's and grabbing my cowboy hat, I walked by Hope's bedroom where I'd carried her last night when we got home.

I wasn't exactly sure what had happened at her dad's house, but my anger completely evaporated the moment she ran into my arms, crying.

Hell, I had been in a panic when I'd realized she was gone. There'd been a tug on my sleeve as I took another selfie and Rhonda had been there, handing me a cocktail napkin with an address scribbled on it in Hope's handwriting.

I mean, I thought we had talked about the whole celebrity thing. I thought we had come to an understanding that I wouldn't completely ignore or forget about her, but I did have to pay fan service when in situations like that.

I thought she understood.

She told me she couldn't handle it. Maybe I should have listened to her.

As I passed by, Hope's bedroom door wasn't quite shut, just cracked open a few inches. Inside the dark room, Cash slept in her bed with her.

"Traitor," I whispered to my dog. He merely looked up, tilted his head at me, then flopped onto his side and went back to sleep.

I didn't call Cash to come out with me like I normally would for my

morning ride. Better to let him stay there and comfort Hope if she needed it.

Once out in the stables, I saddled up my mom's favorite horse, Snapple. She was the first horse my mom ever rescued. Ten years ago, we found her tied to a fence, no owners anywhere nearby. The poor thing was emaciated, skin and bones. But mom didn't think twice. She immediately got the trailer and brought her back to the ranch. At the time, our stable was run down and barely had a roof. But when I pointed that out to her, Mom simply looked at me and said: then we build her a better stable.

And that was literally what we did. All week, Mom and I bought wood and fixed up the stable to give this sweet horse a better home. Because of Snapple, Anita's Hope was born.

I pulled out an apple from my bag and we both had a quick breakfast before embarking on a slow ride through the woods.

She chuffed as we reached the summit, looking out over the beautiful landscape of Texas just as the bright orange sun edged up over the horizon line.

Mom used to ride multiple times a day to give all the horses she rescued a chance to get out and live beyond the rectangles of their stables. "Is it really rescuing them if they live most of their lives in a cage?" She'd always asked.

When Mom got too sick to ride, I'd tried to take over riding the horses for her. Even though I loved to ride, it took a lot of time to give the animals the devotion they deserved and needed. Mom had been so hands-on most of her life with the rescue... so I also tried to be in her legacy. But at the end of the day, I relied on my ranch hands and the volunteers at the rescue a lot more than I probably should.

Another whinny from Snapple. Bending down, I stroked the soft fur at her neck, the sinews tight and bunched beneath my rough palm. "I miss her too, Snapple."

When we got back to the stables, I felt raw and tight. The kind of intense feeling like my organs were too large for my body.

And when I got like this? I knew I had a song to write. A song that was literally trying to burst out of me.

I ran back in the house, grabbed my guitar, pen, and notebook, as well as a few more apples, then went back to sit with Snapple some more.

Something about being there with her was twisting my lungs. Like being with Snapple was as close as I'd ever get again to being near my mom.

I both hated it and loved it.

I'd avoided this horse for a long time because of that feeling.

But maybe it was time to embrace it. Maybe Hope was right. Maybe there was a song there about my mother. If I could just be brave enough to explore it.

I leaned my guitar next to me, then sat down in the hay outside of her stable, propping the notebook on my knee to write as lyrics flowed out of me.

When the words stagnated, I paused and took a bite of my apple.

A strong, wet nose butted my shoulder. I laughed, looking up at Snapple. "You already had some," I laughed and stroked my fingers between her nostrils.

She chuffed again. "Fine. Just don't tell the others. But I guess Mom's best friend deserves a few extra apple slices, huh? Apples for Snapple."

She took the apple core from my hand, chomping on it.

I laughed, shaking my head at her. No wonder my mom loved this horse as much as she did. They were basically one in the same... taking what they wanted and throwing a fit when they didn't get it in the most adorably playful way.

"What do you think of this song, Snapple? Would Mom like it?"

I grabbed my phone and opened up the recording app so I could listen back and write down what I heard. Then pulled my guitar down onto my lap, strumming a slow, rolling intro to a ballad.

I started humming a melody I'd written down, not bothering to place the exact words into the tune yet, as different thoughts flashed in my mind. Hope

riding a horse. Mom brushing Snapple. My mom teaching me how to make necklaces out of dandelions. Hope laying in the hospital bed. Hope sleeping, snuggling with Cash...

All the visions mixed and swirled together. Hope. My mom. Snapple.

There was something there and yet, it didn't entirely make sense. Hope never knew my mom... so why the hell was I writing a song that weaved the two of them together?

I finished the bit of music with a final strum of a closing chord.

"That's beautiful," Hope said quietly behind me.

I jumped, startled and surprised to see her up already. "Hey," I said, setting the guitar aside and starting to climb to my feet. "You're up."

She stopped me from standing, instead, lowering herself to sit in the hay across from me. "You took care of me," she said. "Again. For the third time now. I swear, I'm not usually so... fragile." A tendril of hair fell from her loose topknot, brushing against her cheekbone.

"You're fragile in the same way a diamond is. A single diamond can cut through glass, but also get smashed into dust." I paused, leaning forward to tuck a fallen strand behind her ear. "Besides, taking care of you after the hospital doesn't count since it was my fault you were there in the first place."

She drew back in utter surprise. "It wasn't your fault."

"Believe me. When you run a horse rescue, it's your responsibility to make sure you pair the rider with the proper horse so they're both at the same level. I neglected to do that." My mom would have whupped my hide if she'd been around to see that. I'd been cocky. I knew Hope wasn't skilled enough to ride. Yet, I was too obsessed with trying to prove some adolescent point that I'd put Hope's safety at risk.

"Okay fine," Hope rolled her eyes. "So... that song. Did your *muse* inspire that?"

I ignored the way she mocked the word 'muse' with a roll of her eyes.

"She did. Or rather, *you* did. You and my mom's favorite horse, Snapple

here.” I patted the horse’s cheek gently.

A smirk lifted Hope’s face. “So just me and a horse, huh?” She narrowed her eyes playfully and booped Snapple in the nose. “Watch your back, girl. He’s *mine*.”

The slightest itch of panic shivered down my spine at her words. “Am I?”

I tried not to notice how stunning she looked in the freshly risen sun. Tanned legs peeked out of billowy cotton shorts and a tank top did little to hide her tear-drop breasts with beaded nipples despite the early morning warmth. A spray of faint freckles fanned across her sun-kissed cheeks. In a word, she was gorgeous.

“That is the point of this whole ruse, isn’t it?” She shot me a lopsided smile as she waved her hand in the air in a dramatic display.

“Right.” The ruse. The bet.

I was nothing more than a job to her... which is exactly how it needed to be.

I tried to smile back at her, but it was forced. Tight.

“Right,” she repeated. If I wasn’t mistaken, her own smile wobbled at that. “We’ll convince them all that what we have is special and once your album is out, I’ll run away. Sink into the background of society once more.” Something dark blazed in her eyes as she spoke. Like lighting flash paper on fire—it ignited, hot and bright, then vanished in a breath, turning cloudy, smoky.

“Speaking of running away...” I glanced up into her bright eyes. “What happened to you last night? Why’d you run off?” A spark of bright hope flashed through me. One second we were a team, fending off those obnoxious fans together. And next thing I knew, she was gone. Right as I was smoothing it over so the headlines tomorrow wouldn’t read *Asshole Country Singer Snubs Fans*.

Ink black lashes fanned over the tops of her warming cheekbones with her slow blink. “You seemed *occupied* with your fans,” she said, her voice

suddenly lacking the same warmth that heated her cheeks to a mauve color. “And I know you need to give them your time and all, but I just couldn’t watch it. I couldn’t watch them fawn all over you. Been there, done that. But I also knew I couldn’t ask you to leave, so—”

A sudden awareness filled me, thick like fog and a slow grin spread on my face. “You were *jealous*,” I said.

“What? *No*.”

“You *were*. Admit it. You were jealous that I was giving my fans attention.”

“Hardly.” She rolled her eyes.

“Then what was it?” I asked. “If it wasn’t jealousy, then what about me taking selfies with fans bothered you so much you had to leave?”

I waited, watching her in the silence as she nibbled her bottom lip in thought. “Okay, fine, it was *sort of* jealousy.”

“Aha!”

“*But*,” she continued before I could take my full victory lap, “not in the way you’re thinking.”

“Oh yeah? What am I thinking then?”

“You’re thinking I’m so infatuated with your handsomeness and talent that the thought of you batting your ridiculously beautiful baby blues at anyone other than me will make me fly off into a jealous rage.”

I lifted my brows instead of answering her right away.

“Then what was it if it wasn’t your average day-to-day jealousy over my ridiculously *beautiful baby blues*?” I emphasized the phrase she used to describe my eyes, a smile threatening to take over my face.

She thought my eyes were beautiful? I relished in how much it must have pained her to have admitted that.

She took a deep breath. “My ex... the Broadway star... he’d get bombarded with fans too. Not to the level you do, of course. But if we were out at the bars after one of his shows, he got swarmed by people who knew

Broadway.”

“I don’t mean to sound like a dick, but are there people who recognize Broadway actors?”

“You’d be surprised. In New York they do. And it was like he intentionally chose to go to the places where theatergoers also attended in the hopes that people would recognize him. He loved the attention.”

“I stopped going out with him after the shows because it inevitably turned into an ego strokefest for him where he’d spend an hour signing Playbills and taking selfies while I drank alone in the corner. After a while, it was easier not to join him at all.”

“So it makes you feel forgotten?” I asked. I knew some of this already, of course. But she hadn’t opened up with this much detail to me ever before. Her vulnerability was refreshingly beautiful.

Her lips thinned. “Yes, but it’s not just that. After I stopped joining him after his shows, there was one night he met a woman. She was a Broadway actress too. A several-Tony-Award-winning blah, blah, blah. And she offered to ‘mentor’ him even though he was already a star in his own right. Her mentee, he started calling himself. One thing led to another and... well, now they’re engaged. He proposed to her only months after ending our engagement with *my* engagement ring.”

“Wait... what? He proposed with *your* ring?”

“He sure did.”

“What a tool. No, he’s not just a tool, he’s the whole damn box. A whole fucking toolbox of an excuse for a man.”

She gave a sad chuckle. “So anyway, I really do understand why you need to give your fans attention, but it’s never going to be easy for me.”

“Hope.” I reached out and took her hand, trying to comfort her, but all she did was shake her head.

I tugged her hand, lifting her up a little and pulled her onto my lap.

She was on her knees, straddling me. Her softest parts nestled against my

hardest parts. My eyes fell to her soft mouth and I scooped my hands into her silky hair, tugging the hair tie from it. Long caramel hair tumbled down her back and over her shoulders.

“Noted,” I whispered. “I will find a way to both not ignore fans or you.” I’d foolishly thought the way I’d defended her in front of those girls would have been enough. I’d claimed her in front of them. Chose her.

But it wasn’t enough. I could see that now. She didn’t trust fans. She didn’t trust fame.

“You don’t owe me that. We’re not a *real* couple—” She shook her head, trying to scoot away from me, but I held her firmly in place on my lap.

“Stop saying that. We’re real, Hope. Very, very real.”

Her breath hitched at my words, but I had to say it. She had to know—to understand—that my feelings for her weren’t a fake.

“You’re *really* my muse,” I said, ignoring her panic-stricken face. “There’s nothing fake about this. About my feelings for you. I don’t expect those feelings to be fully reciprocated, but know that on my end? There’s not a damn thing that’s fake here.”

Her eyes searched mine for a long moment. “That’s hard to believe when a sizable deposit was made into my bank account the other day.”

I nodded in acknowledgment and took a shaky breath. This wasn’t easy to admit. Almost impossible to say out loud, especially after how my relationship with Jenn ended.

“Despite paying you, my feelings for you are very real, Hope. It’s okay you don’t feel the same way about me. Honestly, I don’t expect you to.” I paused, gathering myself.

I wasn’t exaggerating. Somewhere along the way in the past few weeks, I really had started falling for Hope. There was always something magnetic about her, but now? Now I was downright infatuated with her. To an unhealthy level.

“How can you say that?” she whispered. “How can you want to be with

someone you don't expect to ever love you back?" Inky black lashes fanned across the tops of her sun-kissed cheeks, dotted with freckles.

Pain twisted in my chest. She'd all but admitted it right then and there that she didn't reciprocate my feelings.

I closed my eyes, swallowing that pain. Savoring it.

Cataloging it for later so I could write it into a song.

"You inspire me," I whispered. "How can I not be infatuated with a woman as smart, motivated, strong, and interesting as you? How could I not fall in love with a diamond? I want you even though you don't want me because I know deep down it's better if you don't."

"Why?" One word. One word that traveled on the lightest exhale of her breath.

"Because..." But it was the one question I couldn't answer for her. The one piece of myself I couldn't reveal without seeing her run for the hills. So instead, I answered as best and honestly as I could. "Because love is toxic. And I want you to ruin me before I destroy you—"

Before I could finish my sentence, her lips were on mine.

Twenty-Eight
S

HOPE

I KISSED HIM.

I kissed him in the hay where the horses were our only witnesses.

It was unlike any kiss I'd ever had in my life. Even better than the first time we kissed.

His hands were on my face, cupping my jaw tenderly. Air rushed from my lungs and as I gasped, he captured the moment, nudging my lips wider and gliding his tongue against mine.

My entire body buzzed with desire.

His words said he didn't want my affection. Or my love. But his kiss said otherwise.

Love is toxic. Ruin me before I destroy you.

His words were beautiful. Poetry, even though they were cryptic.

A statement like that was powerful; and those words, once you hear them will grow like a cancer inside of you.

Which was why I cut him off.

Still in his lap, I felt the denim-clad hard, steely length pressing between my legs. I rolled my hips, moaning at the spike of heat as I rubbed against him. He murmured, peppering kisses over my jaw before coming back to my lips once more and swallowing the sweet humming whimper pulsing from my throat.

Desperately we latched onto each other, limbs tangling together, arms and legs entwined.

I pushed him back onto the hay, his cowboy hat falling off his head and rolling to the side.

My fingers curled around the buttons of his shirt and with a few flicks of my hand, I opened the buttons, revealing his sleek tanned muscles. Gliding my palms over his bare shoulders, I pushed the shirt off and shivered as I ran my hands over the length of his muscles, landing at the taper of his waist.

His hands scooped up under my shirt and I raised my arms to allow him to tug it off. I wasn't wearing a bra, but the straps of my panties were high up on my hips, peeking out from within the waistband of my sleep shorts.

He paused with a gasp, his eyes scanning over my body as I knelt over him, nipples tightening beneath the heat of his gaze.

I reached over and grabbed his cowboy hat off the ground where it had rolled and placed it on my head.

"Christ," he hissed, reaching up and scraping his thumbs over my pearly nipples. "Look at you."

"I just need some boots and pearl earrings to complete the ensemble," I said, rolling my hips against his hard length.

He grinned up at me and shook his head. "Nuh-uh. We've talked about this already... no pearls. Turquoise. We gotta get you some turquoise jewelry."

I grinned and rolled my hips. "Over my dead body."

"We'll see about that."

Still wearing his hat, I slid my hands down his chest and stomach and scooted back a little, lowering myself to the bulge at his jeans.

With a few quick tugs at the zipper, his cock sprang free, falling heavily into my palm.

I gripped him, wrapping my hand around his thick girth before gliding my flat tongue up his shaft.

“Fuck, Hope,” he growled. “I won’t last long if you keep that up.”

“Well, that’d be a shame,” I said, pumping my fist once more and gliding my thumb over his dewy tip. “Want me to take off your hat?” I teased.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he groaned.

Bending, I licked him again. And again. Teasing and taunting his cock with my tongue. Finally, I opened wide and took him deeply all the way to the back of my throat with a moan.

I sucked him slowly at first, then increased my speed while using my hands to work him at the root.

“You are so fucking gorgeous,” he said. “You should see yourself. Cowboy hat perched on your head, face between my thighs, my cock on your lips. Fuck, Hope.”

Part of me wanted to finish him right there. Suck him dry. Drain him. Feel his tremors of pleasure on the tip of my tongue. But the other, more rational part of me, didn’t want this to end so quickly.

He tugged my hair, pulling me off of him with a hiss. Then curling his thick arm around my waist, he flipped me over so I was on my back and he was bearing his weight over top of me. In a swift movement, he was on his feet, tugging his pants up over his waist.

Then he bent and scooped me up into his arms, thick, strong biceps cradling me.

I squealed and kicked playfully. “What are you doing?! Where are we going?”

“For a girl who won’t even wear turquoise, do you really want our first time together to be in the hay with the horses watching?”

Beside us, Snapple took that moment to snort and stomp her foot. “In theory, it’s romantic.”

“And in reality, we’re gonna be picking hay out of places where the sun don’t shine for days to come. Besides, the ranch hands will be here any minute.”

At that, I squealed and tried to cover myself with my hands. “Then hand me my shirt!”

“Not a chance, sweetheart.”

Still holding me in his arms, totally topless, he started walking toward the stable door.

“Josh Gabriel! If anyone but you sees my tits, I will never forgive you!”

He barked a laugh, but didn’t stop moving. “You’re resourceful, I’m sure you’ll figure something out to cover yourself.”

Growling in frustration, I yanked his hat off my head and used it to cover my chest just in time for him to kick the stable door open and walk across the lawn toward the house.

“Morning Rob,” Josh said.

“Uh... good morning, Boss.” Rob gaped at me, the straw he’d been chewing falling out of his mouth and bouncing off the toe of his weather-worn cowboy boot.

“Oh my god.” Heat slammed into my cheeks, burning as I squeezed the cowboy hat harder against my bare chest, hoping no one could see anything. Then I buried my scarlet face in Josh’s shoulder. “I’m going to kill you,” I muttered into the crook of his neck.

He snickered, his torso bouncing as he kicked the door to his house open. “Lotta death going around between this and you wearing turquoise.”

He climbed the steps to his bedroom easily, as though I weighed nothing, then dropped me onto his bed.

It was the first time I’d seen his bedroom.

I looked around the immaculate room. Clean, sleek, with lots of wood and leather and manly decor. It smelled like Josh too.

He didn’t give me a chance to adjust to my surroundings. Just reached down and yanked the shorts off my body, leaving me there, completely naked, spread out on his bed, except for his cowboy hat barely covering my breasts.

“Payback’s a bitch, sweetheart.”

Twenty-Nine

L

JOSH

OH MY FUCKING GOD. This girl wasn't just going to ruin me. She was going to demolish me. She was going to pulverize me until I was nothing more than dust. Irreparable dust.

The sun streamed in through the window, hitting the strands of her caramel hair fanned out around her.

I stood at the edge of the bed and gently slid my hand between the space where her knees were clenched together. Before I spread her wide and feasted on her body, I found her eyes. "You sure you want to do this?" I asked.

She whimpered and nodded, her top teeth plunging into her plump bottom lip.

"And you know that this is not what I'm paying you for?"

Her eyes widened. "Of course not! I'm not a whore."

I leaned forward. "I know that. It's explicitly written in the goddamn contract. I just want to make it absolutely clear we're both consenting to this."

"Oh," she said with a nod. "Yes... I consent."

"Good," I whispered, then dragged my mouth along hers, kissing her deeply. "Then spread these beautiful thighs for me."

I guided her legs open and she whimpered as I stepped back, removing my hands from her body to fully admire her.

Fuck me.

She was utter perfection. Splayed out on my bed. Perky breasts with rosebud nipples tight and pearled for me. Pink, wet pussy on display, good enough to eat.

No, more than eat.

Good enough to feast on.

She wriggled under my attention, then slid her hands to cover her breasts. Even in the display of modesty, I saw her pinch her nipples, playing with her own body.

“Move those hands or I tie them up,” I growled.

Her already pink cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red.

Exhaling, she removed her hands and instead, stretched them above her head.

Growling, I reached out a single finger and ran it over the seam of her pussy. Her entire body trembled at my touch. I pushed that same finger inside her drenched folds, slick and smooth and all for me. She clenched around my finger, contracting as I pumped it in and out.

My self-control fractured and I brought my face between her legs, gliding my tongue along the same path my finger had just traveled. Gliding it up over her pussy to her clit, I wrapped my mouth around her hot button of need and sucked as her lower back arched off the bed.

She closed her knees around my face, locking me between her thighs.

Pulling back, I nipped the tender skin on the inside of her knees and clicked my tongue. “Nuh-uh, sweetheart. Keep those beautiful legs spread for me.”

She panted, whimpered a response that wasn't quite words, but her knees fell back open as I instructed.

“Good girl,” I whispered, then went back to work, feasting on her pretty pussy, tonguing her clit while pumping two fingers in and out of her slick sex.

It didn't take long before her body clamped onto my fingers, erupting in tremors while she bucked and throbbed beneath me. I drank in her orgasm. Swallowed it. Absorbed it.

Just like Hope herself, it was perfection.

Like pure light exploding from within her.

Once the convulsions subsided, she pushed onto her elbows as I stood, towering over her panting body.

I pushed my still half-undone jeans to the floor and grabbed a condom from my bedside table. Tearing it open, I rolled it onto my length, then crawled on the bed to lean over top of her.

Gripping myself at the base, I glided my head along her pussy and she rolled her hips. Long lashes fluttered shut as I pushed slowly into her.

Her hips arched up, meeting mine, begging for more, but I had to pause. Relish in that sweet moment we'd never get again. The moment when our bodies first connected.

Slowly, I glided into her, agonizing inch by agonizing inch. And just when I'd thought I'd bottomed out, I latched my arm beneath her knee, hitching it up above my shoulder, allowing a few more centimeters of depth.

One hand flew to her breast, tugging at her nipple again. "What did I say about those hands?" I growled. Then gripping her wrists, I pinned them to the bed.

"Please, Josh," she cried, writhing beneath me.

My name on her trembling lips was my undoing. I bent my head, taking that pearled nipple into my mouth, sucking and scraping my teeth against it as I arched my back, pumping into her over and over again.

I noted every part of my body that's touching hers. The nestle of my hips at her thighs. The press of her calf over my shoulder and down my back. Her wrist with her pulse thrumming against the firm grip of my palm.

I set a slow but powerful pace. Rhythmically pumping in and out of her in hard thrusts.

Every whimper, every pant, every cry fed my desire.

She wriggled one hand free from my hold, reaching up to cup my jaw. She tilted my head so my eyes met hers.

Dark and damp like the morning dew on tree bark, she didn't say a word. She didn't need to. She just looked at me as I pushed deeper and deeper inside of her, with so much tenderness and vulnerability in that one gaze it made my heart ache.

She pinned me with that stare. Locked me with her eyes.

"Josh," she whispered.

I saw a world of pain in the depths of that look. I saw the heartache from her ex, choosing fame and adultery over a woman like her. I saw the abandonment of her father. Never feeling like she was enough. Never being chosen.

And I vowed that here in this relationship, she would be cherished.

I would cherish her. I would choose her. Time and time again. And I would make sure by the end of it, she didn't want me.

I was a goner.

A fucking goner.

Quietly I searched her gaze. I wanted more of her. All of her. I wanted everything she would ever give me and more.

I took her lips once more. Not just kissing her, but tasting her soul.

And I came apart inside of her.

Thirty
L

HOPE

FOR THE FIRST time since I'd met Josh, I woke up before he did.

We'd pretty much spent an entire twenty-four hours in his bedroom since yesterday morning.

He was still fast asleep beside me, tucking onto his side, arm slung around my waist, pulling me in close to him. His eyes were closed, a fine line of eyelashes fluttered every so often. Lips as full as I remember, his lower lip rests slightly open, just enough to let a breath escape.

I watched his face for a moment, taking in every curve and angle, his dark lashes. The slight imperfection of his skin; a small pock mark from a childhood fight. I loved it, it was all a part of him.

As he breathed, a soft and rhythmic slow inhale and exhale, his heart beat against my palm, a gentle, steady beat.

He really was ridiculously handsome. Maybe even the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

We had four days until the rodeo event. Four days until we had to step out in front of a whole crowd of people—people who were both strangers, but also Josh's friends and family—and believably be a couple.

Then again, I was lying naked here beside him. Maybe it wasn't such a stretch to be a couple... even if we both knew it wouldn't last beyond these six weeks.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't lie here all morning.

Carefully, I extracted myself from his arms and slid out of the bed, grabbing a fluffy folded robe that was resting on a shelf in the master bathroom.

Like one of the plush robes like you would find at a spa. And he had multiples folded on a shelf in his master bathroom.

I mean, really... who the hell lived like this?

I ran my hands over the gray veined quartz of the sink. A massive tub with jets was nestled into the corner as well as a standing shower with two heads.

Six weeks. I had six weeks to put those both to good use.

Slipping the robe on, I peeked out of his bedroom door to make sure his housekeeper wasn't here lurking around before tiptoeing down the hall back to my room.

I couldn't believe he'd managed to hire a team of people to bring all my things over from my dad's condo. How did they even know what was mine versus what was Dad's?

I perused my clothes, folded in the drawers of the dresser and blushed as I came to a drawer of underwear. Some were mine, and some were completely new, courtesy of Josh's personal shopper.

I quickly chose a pair of jeans, a flirty polka-dot peasant top, and a spring-green cardigan. I added my favorite pair of brown leather boots and some natural, beaded, pearl drop earrings.

I pulled my hair back into a ponytail just as Cash came trotting into the bedroom.

"I thought maybe you got cold feet," Josh said, startling me. I whipped around, surprised to see his eyes were bright, happy, and a deep blue, though his voice was rough, still tinged with sleep.

Although his hair was tousled, looking as if he'd just rolled out of bed, his eyes still dark with sleep, but his smile playful and mischievous. Despite

mussed hair, he was dressed and holding two fresh cups of coffee.

"Cold feet?" I teased. "How could I possibly when you're the bringer of the coffee."

He leaned against the door to my bedroom, a pair of form fitting jeans slung low on his hips and a simple white t-shirt clung to every muscle in his chest.

A slow grin spread over his face and he held up one of the mugs. "Come and get it."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Come over here and find out."

His eyes softened as I walked toward him. Before reaching out for the coffee, I ran my hand up his muscled chest. The cotton of his shirt wrinkled beneath my palm as I glided it up and over his shoulder, landing into his hair that was edging over his ears. "Are you going to get a haircut before the rodeo?"

He grinned. "Why? Don't you like my long hair?"

Quite the contrary. I loved the long hair. "No, I like it this way." I twirled my fingers into it before pulling back and reaching out for the mug of coffee, barely brushing my fingers against the warm ceramic before he pulled it back, holding it above his head and out of my reach. "Nuh-uh. You gotta pay the toll."

I lifted my brows, playing along. "Toll?" I asked.

"Mhmm."

"With pleasure," I whispered.

Pushing onto my toes, I brushed my lips to his, soft and delicate. He tasted like mint and coffee—thick, rich and creamy. Honeyed and sweet like a secret dessert made just for me.

Eyes gleaming, he handed me the coffee, but didn't let me take my first sip. Now with his hand free, he slipped a finger under my chin and tipped my face toward his again, claiming my mouth.

The delicate kiss I'd given him was gone. In its place was pure need and lust as his tongue swept between my lips leaving me weak in the knees.

When he pulled back from the kiss, he finished by brushing a lock of hair out of my eyes, making me shiver.

"I like your hair long too," he whispered.

I sighed into his touch, my eyes drifting closed and almost entirely forgetting about the hot coffee in my hand.

"Drink up," he said. "We've got a big day ahead of us."

I blinked, surprised. This was news to me. "We do?"

He brushed his thumb against my bottom lip before backing out of the bedroom. With a quick ruffle of the fur on Cash's head, he confirmed, "We do."



I was back on a horse.

I didn't realize how panicked I would feel being back up here, but it had only been a couple of weeks since I was hospitalized and the panic was settling in my bones at the idea of riding again.

Luckily, Josh didn't put me back on Gypsy. I was on a sweet horse named Echo who, as far as I could tell, was sweet and docile and loved carrots.

His coat was dusty brown with spots of white and a white diamond in the center of his long, crooked nose... not that it seemed to bother him. His coat was smooth and even and shined in the morning Texas sun. Head held high, his ears perked up and twitched attentively.

The smell of leather, oiled horseshoes, and hay surrounded me.

"Okay, Echo, you stick to a slow trot and stay on the trails and we'll be just fine... you got that?" I whispered, running my palm over the silky fur at his neck. His mane was short and coarse but his coat was smooth underneath.

I got a responding chuff.

Josh tilted his head and I could see the amusement in his eyes. "Echo's never been much of a conversationalist," he teased.

I was too nervous to even give a polite chuckle in response.

"Okay," Josh said. "Ready?"

I glanced around, face heating as several ranch hands, including Rob who had seen Josh carrying me into the house yesterday... topless.

Even with a fake smile glued to my face, my eyes were glassy. My hands shook, trembling to keep the jitters in check. A million red pin pricks stabbed at my skin. The sweat, the anxiety swallowing me up. Panic clawed up my throat.

"Hey," Josh said, this time his voice gentle. "It's going to be okay, Hope. I've got you."

I forced myself to gulp down the large lump that seemed to expand in my throat with every breath.

My hands still shook, but the fear was retreating, even if only slightly. The reins rasped against my palm, scratching my skin.

Then, curling my toes within my boots, I gave Echo a small kick with my heels.

I expected him to lurch forward, but instead, he began a slow walk beside Josh and Snapple.

The jangle of their spurs accompanied the crunch of their hooves against the packed dirt as they walked. Behind us, men's laughter faded away as one of the ranch hands said something funny.

The thrum of my heart beat slower and calmer with each controlled step Echo took.

"You're doing great," Josh chimed in, trotting beside me at an easy lope. "Is this a good pace for you?"

I nodded, too scared to take my eyes off the path in front of us.

"You can loosen your grip on the reins," Josh said, leaning over and

brushing a finger against my white knuckles.

"Oh. Right." I relaxed my grip. Or at least, I tried to.

"Tell me something about you," Josh said. "Something I don't know yet."

I could feel his eyes on me and my cheeks flushed, heat pooling to the surface and settling there. I bit my lower lip and thought for a moment, my mind racing to find something that was revealing, but not too revealing to disclose. "I hate olives."

His eyebrows shot up.

"What? I do!"

"Then why the hell do you always order martinis with extra olives?"

"I like the little bit of saltiness they add to the martini."

"Then why not just ask for a salt rim or something?"

I rolled my eyes. "Because I would look like a psycho! A salt rim with a martini?"

Josh chuckled and shook his head.

"Don't judge!"

"I'm sorry I asked."

I couldn't help the smile that crept onto my lips.

"Your turn," I said. "Tell me something I don't know. Something your girlfriend would know."

His brow arched. "Girlfriend... or muse?"

"Take your pick."

Call it whatever you want, we both knew this was temporary... wasn't it?

"I'll hold you to that," he said. He thought for a moment, darkness clouding his eyes. "I slept with my high school English teacher."

I went silent. Was he serious? "After high school... I hope?"

Josh looked over at me, his body rolling with every slow step of his horse, like the two movements were one. "What do you think?"

I cringed. Wow, that was... wow. "I'm sorry," I said.

He shrugged. "Don't be. It was consensual."

Was it? Could that kind of relationship ever truly be consensual? "Were you at least eighteen?"

He nodded. "It was right after my senior prom. Literally right after. She was one of the teacher chaperones that night. And I was only two weeks away from graduating. All grades had pretty much been turned in. It wasn't traumatic... for me."

But I noticed his words were tinged with regret.

"If you say so."

"I do."

The corners of his mouth turned down and his eyes grew distant. "Unfortunately, we got caught."

"By who?"

"My ex-girlfriend at the time."

"Jenn?" I asked. It was the first name I'd spoken her name aloud to him and based on the twitch of his eyebrow, I don't think he loved that I knew her name.

"How do you know that name?" he asked.

"You sang about a girl named Jenn in your first album. That song Scars and another one I think, you mentioned her by name."

"Oh. I didn't realize you had listened to my music."

"Of course I did. I'm nothing if not thorough."

He cleared his throat, then shook his head. "Well, anyway, Jenn and I didn't start dating until the summer after we graduated high school. The ex who caught me, we had broken up a few weeks before prom because she got asked by the captain of the football team and I think she was hoping to win prom queen with him."

I cringed. "None of this story is good," I said.

"That was a lifetime ago," he added with a shrug.

I tried to force a smile, but it came out crooked and off-center like a first-grader's finger painting.

Instead of keeping up the ruse, I turned my face away from his, staring down at where my hands gripped the reins.

"You're missing the view," he said.

I glanced up, catching the beautiful Texas plains stretched out in front of us. Patches of green and yellow grass, jagged lines of red shale, and the occasional drift of fog through a bend in the creek winding through the trees to my left.

Above us, the blue skies faded into the white of the clouds and the wind blew in gentle waves, lifting the stray hairs off the back of my neck and bringing with it the scent of grass and dust, sharp and wild.

Below me, the clop of Echo's and Snapple's hooves against bare earth was a drumbeat, keeping the rhythm to the rest of nature's symphony. Birds sang in the distance. The whistle of the breeze rustled through the leaves. Some sort of bug clicked with a rattling call and a frog croaked its tune.

I looked back at Josh to find his grin turned on me.

"You're trotting."

"What?"

He gestured to Echo's feet.

Holy hell. I hadn't even realized that we had sped up to a steady trot with our horses. Not only that, but I had relaxed into the ride. I was no longer gripping the reins like this ride was going to be my death.

Instead, they rested loosely against my palms, the leather soft and supple. With each quick trot of Echo's hooves, I bounced, my body loose and following his movements.

It was exhilarating, while also completely peaceful. For the first time since my breakup with Brent, I sighed, my mind nearly blank. There was no spiral of anxiety clawing up my chest, tightening my lungs. No phones to answer, no emails to respond to...

It was just Echo and me and nature.

"I can see how this could be addictive," I said.

"This is nothing," Josh whispered.

"Compared to?"

But he didn't answer me. Didn't even look at me. He merely kept his eyes straight ahead on the path while his smile grew wider.

Then again, I didn't really need his answer, did I?

Forty minutes later, we rounded the corner at the treeline of the ranch. Some of the ride we'd spent chatting and laughing. Other parts? Were totally silent. Like a partner meditation.

And we were both completely relaxed and at ease.

Or at least, we were. Until we turned the corner and trotted toward the stables where a BMW SUV was parked and a man in an expensive-looking suit leaned against the hood, waiting in Josh's driveway.

Even from here, I could tell his tie was silk and his shoes were polished. Not exactly the style you find here at a horse rescue very often.

Cash barked and took off toward the visitor... or rather, intruder. Because if the grim look on Josh's face was any indication, this guy was not welcome here.

Josh quickly dismounted his horse and even though his forehead bunched into a frown, the skin between his eyebrows creasing, he paused to help me down from my horse as well.

Always the gentleman.

He handed the reins to the horses off to Rob, then stalked towards the man in the suit, his lips locking in a thin line.

I started to follow, but he whipped around, halting me mid-step. "Could you take Cash inside for me? This'll only take a minute."

"Are you sure?" I glanced at the man in the suit. "Should I—"

"Don't worry," Josh teased. "He won't bite me." But his tone was forced. Like he was trying too hard to sound light and funny.

"I wasn't worried about him."

Josh frowned, his eyes softening. "Hope... please."

"Fine." With a sigh, I whistled and called Cash's name.

Satisfied that I was letting it go, Josh made his way over to the man as his dog obediently ran back to me, tongue lolling out and smiling in that happy way tired dogs do.

"Come on, boy." I gave him a quick pat on the head as Rob came up beside me.

I looked at Rob. "What's going on?"

"I don't know." Rob shook his head. "But it's never good when Owen Wright comes by."

"Why? Who's Owen Wright?"

"Depends who you ask." Rob paused to spit into the hay, then adjusted his cowboy hat. "Some might call him a businessman..."

I observed as Josh and the man mumbled back and forth, Owen looking around and nodding, Josh's hands in his pockets, but he stood just as tall as I'd ever seen him.

"Yeah?" I asked. "But what do *you* call him?"

Rob looked at me, his eyes sharp and observant. "I'd say he's a bookie. And when he comes 'round? It ain't ever good."

Thirty-One

L

JOSH

I **STARED** at Owen's beady black eyes. The eyes of a vulture, picking meat off dead carcasses to survive.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I paid my dad's debts off to Owen two years ago and pretty much disowned him after that... if one even *could* disown their father.

"You did," he nodded slowly, his eyes trailing over my shoulder to where Hope was taking Cash in the house. "Haven't seen you bring a girl around here in a long time."

"What do you want, Owen?" I snarled.

There was a time I'd have called this man my friend.

But that was before he placed bets for my dad. Took him for all he was worth. Then came to me to settle the debt, threatening to take my father's fingers one by one until every penny was paid back.

I hated my dad...

But I couldn't let that shit happen, not even to my worst enemy.

Owen leveled me with a look. "You know what I'm here for, Josh."

"Fuck," I hissed and thrust my hands into my damp hair. "What's he owe this time?"

Owen and I went to high school together... and even back then, a bunch of us had called him The Bank of Owen in jest for years. He was a trust fund

kid. Always had been. And even in high school if you needed a quick loan, he was your guy.

It wasn't until my old man got in too deep that I realized just how ruthless he was.

"Half a million." His voice dropped, low and rumbling, and harsh, all traces of friendliness gone.

My body went cold despite the sun beating down on us.

Half a million? My fucking father. I should leave him to dig himself out this time. Let Owen rip his goddamn fingernails out one by one. Maybe then he'd stop joining these high stakes poker games.

"I thought you weren't going to work with him anymore, Owen? You promised me."

Owen shrugged, zero remorse in his expression. "You know that old saying about the scorpion and the frog. But look, I'm not here to bust your balls, Josh. You and I go way back. I don't want to lose your friendship."

More like he didn't want to lose the golden goose. "I think that ship has sailed."

Owen sighed. "Your old man joined a game in Fort Worth that my partner was running. He showed up with over two hundred grand... cash. If I had been there, I woulda kicked him to the curb, I swear it."

Which begged the question, where the fuck did Dad even get two hundred grand?

"Fine," I snapped. "If you're not here to bust my balls, then why are you here?"

"To renegotiate."

I glanced around the stables, happy that Rob and the other ranch hands knew well enough to keep my horses away from this man. My eyes flicked to the gun holstered at his hip and a shiver rocked down my spine.

"I know you've got quite a bit of money squirreled away. Maybe paying off half a million is nothing to you. And if that's how you want to do it, then

fine. But trust me, I'm fucking sweeter than Strawberry Shortcake compared to my partner. He'll turn this whole place into a glue factory if he doesn't get his money. And soon."

When I returned my gaze to him, Owen's eyes had narrowed and his lips were pressed together. "Is this your idea of renegotiating?"

"If you choose to not pay in full, we could always use your land and your horses here to pay off the debt."

My glare narrowed. "Use my horses? For what?"

He looked around the sprawling land. "My partner and I have some business ideas. Guided horse tours of the ranch. Tourism in this area is really picking up and to stay on a real ranch or take a tour of the beautiful land here on horseback? Well, people pay a pretty penny for that."

I snorted my opinion of his little plan. "Except I would lose my nonprofit standing."

Owen shrugged. "If you're earning out, who cares? The fines will pay for themselves with the earnings."

"My mom would care, *that's* who. Most of these horses were worked to the bone in their previous lives. At my ranch, they're going to live out the remainder of their days happy and stress-free, just as my mom intended. Besides, you and this partner of yours have money. Buy some land yourself."

He gave me a look. "I know you're smarter than that. You know our money needs... well, it needs to go through some processes before we can spend it."

Fuck me. He wanted me to wash his money for him. That's what this was about.

"When is the deadline?"

"You have until the end of the month," Owen said.

A few weeks. A few fucking weeks to get together half a million dollars. It wasn't impossible. But it also wasn't easy.

"You'll have your fucking half a million by the 30th."

I narrowed my gaze at him. Personally, I had the money. Though my personal accounts were getting leaner and leaner with every one of my dad's debts I had to pay off. And I'd be goddamned if I was going to let my dad or Owen take what my mom had worked so hard to build.

Usually, I funnel most of my personal money into keeping the rescue afloat. But with this hitch, I wasn't sure I'd have enough left to keep the rescue going.

This rodeo gala needed to bring in donations.

More donations than we ever have in the past if I was going to pay off Owen and keep the rescue afloat for another year. As it stood, the money in my personal account would only get us to Thanksgiving.

And now, more than ever, I needed to write my next album.

"You know I'm fucking good for the half a million," I said. "Now get off my property. It is still *my* property."

Owen rapped his knuckles against the fence post, adding, "For now."

Then he slipped into his sleek car and drove off.



Behind the wheel of my truck with Hope seated beside me, I felt much lighter.

Owen wasn't taking this ranch.

He would *never* take the ranch. Over my dead body... and maybe not even then.

"Are you going to tell me who Owen Wright is?"

My grip on the wheel tightened. That was quite literally the last name I expected to come out of her mouth. "How'd you know his na—" I sighed as realization hit me. "Rob," I said. "Rob told you."

"He didn't want to. But I can be very persuasive."

I brought her knuckles to my mouth and brushed a kiss over them. "Don't

I know it.”

“So?”

Damn. No amount of charm would let me off the hook. Not with Hope.

“He’s an old friend from high school.”

There. It wasn’t even a lie.

“Rob said he was a bookie. Are you in trouble?”

Dammit, Rob.

I shot her a look. “He runs a few sports bets and poker games. That sort of thing.”

“You gamble?” She stared at me, incredulous like she couldn’t believe it.

“No,” I said, gritting my teeth. “I don’t gamble. I never fucking gamble.”

Just the thought made my stomach sour.

Turning my attention back to the road, I released her hand and put both of mine on the wheel.

“Okay,” she said. “You might not... but someone does.”

The truck was silent for several moments. “Your dad,” she whispered. I didn’t know how she figured it out, but it didn’t surprise me that she did. She was smart. And I’d made it clear from day one that I hated my dad.

“And because you’re Josh Gabriel, they’ve come to you to settle his debts, haven’t they?”

I could feel the rage radiating off of her like the heat from the sun and nearly just as burning. Rage on my behalf. On my mom’s.

“Something like that,” I said, intentionally vague.

“How much?”

“Hm?” I pretended not to hear her.

“How. Much. Do. You. Owe?”

She really wasn’t letting this go. Reluctantly, I answered her. “Half a million.”

She gasped.

“Don’t worry,” I said, softer this time. “I have the money. I’m going to

pay it off.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What happens after you pay it off and your dad keeps gambling? What happens if next time, it’s a million or two million?”

A question I’d asked myself many times. “When my mom finally left my dad, it wasn’t because of his cheating. It was because he cashed out her life savings and gambled it all away. Every penny she had saved from her store, every hard-earned dime that was meant to go to her dream of starting the horse rescue... he blew it all. We ate beans and rice for weeks after that because Mom couldn’t even afford bread and peanut butter.”

“Josh,” she said softly, her eyes filled with compassion. Her hand came to rest on my forearm, gentle and comforting. “I had no idea. I am so sorry.”

Her expression was so honest and earnest, I wanted to kiss her. Make her forget this world existed.

“What happens if you don’t pay it off?” she asked. “It’s not your debt. What could they do?”

“A lot. These are bad men, Hope. It doesn’t matter that it’s not my debt. They’ll get paid one way or another and they know exactly which sponge to squeeze. They know my weak spots to come after if I don’t pay up.”

“No...” she whispered. “The horses?”

“It’s not going to happen. I’ll pay the damn debt. I’ll pay it ten million times if I need to.”

“You have to stop buying me gifts then. Seriously. And the scarves and shoes and clothes... they’re all going back! Every last one of them!”

I slowed at the red light, smirking and looking over at her once more. “Hope, it’s fine—”

“It’s *not* fine!”

“My label gives me a style budget every year. I have to spend that money or I don’t get the same amount the following year. I’m using that budget on

you.”

Her flushed cheeks paled slightly. “Oh.”

“Plus, you’ve worn them, so they can’t go back,” I added, grinning.

She nibbled her lip like I’d seen her do countless times before. The motion left the edge of her pearly white teeth exposed. My tongue ached to trace the little spot where her teeth sunk into her rosy lip. “Those horses are your family. They need you. They need you a hell of a lot more than I need an Hermès scarf.”

I eased my foot back onto the gas pedal as the light turned green. “They are family,” I repeated with a soft smile. “But if you return those items, the money goes right back into a clothing budget.” I shrugged. “So we’re still at square one... only without a beautiful scarf.”

“And you haven’t gone over your budget yet?” she asked.

“Not even close. I swear on my mother’s life, Hope. The gifts I’ve gotten you have no effect on this debt I owe to Owen. Now, can we enjoy our day and find you the perfect rodeo dress?”

Her guarded expression softened. “Okay.”

We drove the rest of the way in comfortable silence and I couldn’t help but feel relieved when I finally pulled into the parking lot, turning off the truck.

I climbed out and quickly made my way to the other side to help her down. “I’ve never heard of this brand,” she said, looking up at the little boutique sign that said Bonita’s in curly script.

“I can’t imagine you would. It’s a little locally-owned boutique.”

Bonnie poked her head out of the front door, wrinkles forming around her bright eyes as she grinned. Her white hair was piled on her head and secured with one of those claw clip things. “Joshie!”

She ran toward us and cupped my cheeks, pulling me down for a motherly kiss on the forehead. “It’s so good to see you. And this must be Hope!”

She turned toward Hope who shifted uncomfortably beside me. “Hope,” I said, “Meet Bonnie. My mom’s best friend... and business partner.”

“Business partner?” Hope asked, then looked again at the boutique sign.

“That’s right,” Bonnie said. “Bonita’s... Bonnie and Anita. Before she started her horse rescue, she would design the clothes and I would sew them.”

Hope blinked in shock and looked up at me, stunned. “Will there ever be a day I’m not surprised by you?”

Grinning, I kissed her nose. “I hope not.”

“Come on!” Bonnie said, linking her arm through Hope’s.

She started to lead her into the shop, but Hope paused looking back at me, still standing on the sidewalk beside my truck. “You’re not coming?”

“Nope. I figured outfit shopping for a big event is more of a girls’ day out sort of thing.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. But that was only because she had no idea what else was waiting for her.

“Come on, sweetie,” Bonnie said. “The rest of your party is already inside.”

“The rest of my party?” Hope repeated, rightfully confused.

Right on cue, Hope’s best friends, Carrow and Max popped out of the front door.

“Surprise!”

Thirty-Two

∞

HOPE

“DUDE. He’s so in love with you.”

Bonnie merely smiled as the cork popped off the champagne bottle and went flying, punctuating Max’s thought.

“Thanks, Bonnie,” I said, taking the bottle from her and pouring a little bit of champagne into each of the three flutes she had set out.

“Don’t thank me. Thank that man of yours who set all this up.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Of all the gifts Josh had given me, this was the best. Time with my girls. Time to regroup with the women I missed so desperately back in New York.

I wanted to do something for him. I wanted to give him something equally meaningful... I just didn’t know what yet. I didn’t have his resources.

“I’m going to let you girls relax while I gather some of our best items from the back. Anita’s and my favorites aren’t always on display.” Before Bonnie could walk away, she leaned down and gave my shoulder a squeeze, adding, “And I agree with your friend there. I’ve never seen Josh this enamored with a woman.”

“See?” Max squealed, beaming. “He loves you!”

Even though I rolled my eyes, my heart skipped a beat at the thought.

I glanced over at where Bonnie slipped behind a curtain into the back part of the shop.

“He is not,” I whispered. Then I looked to Carrow, the friend who was even more jaded than I was, expecting to be met with a confirming nod.

Instead, she merely lifted her brows. “Oh no,” I groaned. “Not you too, Rowe.”

Carrow leaned forward, lifting the champagne flute delicately between her fingers. “He tracked down your two best friends and flew us to Texas so we could be here with you.”

My mind went immediately to his money issues and I inwardly cringed. Half a million was a lot of money... even to a celebrity, right?

“I could have flown you guys down here. It’s not like I need emotional support shopping for dresses.”

They both gave me a look that implied I was dumber than a pile of bricks. “What?”

“Girl,” Max said. “He didn’t fly us down here just to buy dresses with you.”

I looked around the shop, confused. “Uh... then what the hell are we doing here?”

“He knows how nervous the whole contract makes you,” Carrow whispered. “And he called us because he wanted you to have people you knew at the rodeo when you two were officially announced.”

“It’s really sweet. And goes way beyond some surface level shopping spree,” Max added.

“He... he told you about the contract we have?”

They both nodded.

“He asked us to sign an NDA and then told us everything,” Max whispered.

“Well...” Carrow added. “Not everything.”

“What did he leave out?” I asked.

“He didn’t tell us *why* you agreed to the plan.”

“And believe me,” Max said with a snort, “we asked.”

“Everything made sense except for the fact that our extremely logical friend threw everything to the wind and went along with all this in the first place,” Carrow said.

Warmth spread through my core. “And he didn’t tell you why I said yes?”

“Nope. He just said it wasn’t his place to reveal and he’d let you tell us yourself,” Max said.

Dammit. It really was thoughtful. Why did he have to be so freaking sweet?

“So...?” Max prodded.

“Brent,” I admitted with a sigh.

“Brent?” Max repeated.

“Oh no,” Carrow groaned. “Please don’t tell me this is some awful elaborate scheme to get that cheating asshole back.”

“Not exactly,” I said. “I don’t want him back. Ever. But I want him to grovel. I want him to beg me and realize what he’s missing. And then I want to look him in his stupid perfect eyes and tell him *no*.”

Max gasped. Carrow smiled.

And I lifted the bubbly glass of champagne that Bonnie had poured for us ten minutes prior. “Brent values fame above everything else. It will kill him to see me on Josh’s arm.”

“How diabolical of you.” Carrow clinked her glass to mine. “I love it.”

“But won’t Josh get hurt?” Max asked, concern tilting her expression. “He really likes you.”

“He’s aware of why I’m doing this,” I said, ignoring the pang of regret pinching at my breastbone. “And he’s said multiple times that what we have isn’t meant to last. So even if we do like each other, we both know the expiration date here.”

Max set her champagne glass down, obviously over the celebration already. “That’s so sad.”

Carrow’s eyes narrowed. “I call bullshit.”

Max rolled her eyes and waved a hand at Carrow. "I wouldn't exactly say it like that, but I am curious as to why it would have to end if what you two have is a good thing?"

That same question had been haunting me too. But Josh seemed adamant this wasn't a lasting sort of love. Intense and fleeting. And because of that, I needed to keep myself detached. I needed the wall around my heart to remain solidly in place. "I don't know," I said. "But it's better this way. Brent and I didn't break up that long ago."

Carrow snorted. "Yeah, and *he* already has a ring on someone else's finger."

Max glared at Carrow. "Not helping."

"You two are fucking, aren't you?" Carrow asked, blunt as ever.

"Carrow!" Max gasped.

I barely reacted though. That was Carrow for you, and it wasn't even a surprise anymore. "Yes," I said simply. "We are."

"You are?" Max's wide eyes darted to me now. "Hope! That's prostitution!"

"Shhhh!" I hissed and looked toward the back room. Bonnie hadn't come out yet, but that didn't mean she wasn't back there listening. "It is not. We like each other. We're both consenting adults. And what I got paid for is completely separate from... *that*."

Carrow took a lazy sip of champagne. "I say get it, girl. But just know this whole keeping emotions separate thing? You've never been good at that."

I rolled my eyes. "I can have casual sex!" I hissed and was met with the doubtful stares of both my friends. "I *can*."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Carrow muttered, her disbelief permeating the air.

"Look," I said, "I know this doesn't help my case any but I want to do something special for Josh."

Max squealed and clapped her hands. "Ohhh! I love a grand gesture!"

"Not a grand gesture," I snapped, correcting her. "More like a thank you. And also... okay, look. You can't tell anyone this, but the horse rescue he runs at the ranch is in trouble. We need something big so he doesn't lose his mother's whole legacy."

"What kind of trouble?" Carrow asked.

I worried my bottom lip, not sure how much I should divulge. On one hand, he'd been so good about not revealing my secrets, I wanted to return that favor. But on the other hand, my friends were incredibly resourceful and I knew they could help. We just needed to put our heads together. "He... he has debt he needs to pay off," I said carefully. "Not his own. But it's serious. We have a week to get half a million dollars."

"He's a rockstar... he seriously doesn't have half a million dollars?" Carrow asked.

"He does. At least, I think he does. But I don't know, I just want to contribute in any way I can. Like, I'm just sitting here getting all these designer things—scarves, boots, dresses—and he's fighting for the lives of these incredible horses."

Carrow sat back, draining the rest of her champagne. "Okay. What did you have in mind?"

A slow smile spread on my face. "Before you were a divorce attorney, you worked in entertainment law, right?"

Her eyes brightened. "I did. I worked with all kinds of labels."

A smile split my face. "Well... I have an idea."

Thirty-Three

ℒ

JOSH

“WHAT TIME IS SHE COMING BACK?” Matt sat on my couch with Cash sprawled on his back beside him, shamelessly basking in the belly rubs.

“Dunno,” I grunted, fumbling with my tie in the mirror. I still had four hours until the event. I wasn’t sure why the hell I was already getting dressed other than I didn’t know what the hell else to do with my time until Hope returned.

I hadn’t seen much of her since her friends arrived yesterday and I wasn’t counting on how grumpy that would make me.

She even spent the night with them at their hotel.

I spent all day yesterday in my studio writing while they shopped for their outfits for the rodeo. The first five hours were insanely productive.

But then with her gone overnight?

All that productivity vanished.

If there was ever any evidence I was getting too attached too soon, this was it.

It was like her being gone for a night took all the oxygen from the house.

I’d always said, happiness didn’t produce good songs. Happiness made you complacent. It was in the depths of heartbreak that the real inspiration came. But I needed the happiness first in order to orchestrate the heartbreak.

It'd only been a week, and I had written a couple good songs... but the real genius was yet to come. When Hope left me for good.

And Matt and I both knew that. Because he was one astute mother fucker.

So then it begged the question... why did I have the opposite reaction with her gone last night? Why wasn't the absence of her making my creativity spark?

Because she's not really gone. I knew she'd be back.

"So?" Matt asked. "Am I ever going to hear this song you supposedly finished yesterday?"

That earned him another grunt.

"Come on," he prodded. "The fact you finished *any* song with this girl is pretty incredible. Usually when you're dating someone, you don't write at all."

See? Astute.

"Yeah." Another spike of guilt nailed deeper in my stomach. On one hand, I hated keeping all this from Hope. But on the other, the plan wouldn't work if she was privy to it. "But one song doesn't make an album," I grumbled.

Matt shrugged. "True. But you only really need one song off an album to be a *hit*."

Suddenly my jaw felt like it was going to crack my teeth into mosaics.

He was right. I knew he was right.

And yet, I knew me. I knew my process. This one song was a fluke. Sure, I had the beginnings of songs. Lyrics that would come to me which I wrote down here and there while I was happy with someone. But never had I finished a whole damn song so quickly.

Not until Hope.

But in five weeks time, she would go back to her ex and I'd have ten days in which I would become a recluse and pour over all those random lyrics and chord structures and piece them together over and over again and churn out

ten more songs with ease.

Well, if 'ease' was defined by the gut wrenching pain of having your heart stomped on.

"You're going to have to play it for me eventually," Matt said, falling back against my couch and kicking one ankle to cross at his knee. "Better *now* when I can help you sort out the issues rather than when the label wants to hear it."

With more venom than I intended, I yanked my phone from my back pocket and hit play on the demo I recorded last night in my studio.

The music streamed through my bluetooth and played through the house as I held my breath.

The first song I'd ever written about my mother.

The first time I let those feelings I'd been suppressing for years leak out onto the strings of my guitar.

And it wouldn't have happened without Hope. She pushed me. Challenged me.

Every word, every note, every line, every chord... it was all inspired by Hope.

Even if the song wasn't overtly about her.

The song ended and I couldn't bring myself to look up at Matt just yet. He knew me better than anyone.

"Dude," he whispered.

After my fifth attempt at trying to tie the windsor knot at the base of my throat, I tore the silk off my collar and tossed it aside. Who needed a fucking tie at a rodeo anyway?

"What?" I snapped. It was completely irrational.

"You weren't supposed to fall in love with her."

My gaze whipped to his.

Except I *was*. That was always the plan.

He just didn't know it. He didn't know the extent of my plan.

And I was only a week in. How the fuck was I going to survive five weeks from now when it all ended? Or rather when her asshole ex came crawling back to her and I had to watch as she chose him over me?

Her heart didn't belong to me.

It never did. It never will.

She was bound to leave me. To choose him.

And that was when the real hits would flow from me.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, grinding my teeth together and spinning my back to Matt. "That song is about my mom. That's probably why I was able to write at all this week," I lied. I lied through my goddamn teeth.

Matt shook his head. "Yeah, I know it's about your mom. On the surface, at least. But deeper? It's about Hope too."

Fuck. Sometimes I hated how well that motherfucker knew me.

I stared down at the recording of the song, the little lines across the screen like the still image of a heart monitor. "It doesn't matter," I murmured and shoved the phone back into my pocket. "That song was just for me. We're not playing it for the label."

Matt's eyes went eagle sharp at that. "Excuse me?"

I shook my head. "You heard me. I'm not monetizing my mom's death."

Silence thickened the air between us and Matt pinched the bridge of his nose, deep in thought. "Josh, don't be crazy. The label needs to hear at least one song by the end of next week. And this one is a hit. It's so good, it might even buy you an extra month to write."

Good? It was fucking great.

But it was also completely different than anything I'd ever written in my life.

"But it's nothing compared to what we know is coming," I managed to croak.

It was why I knew Hope was the one, without a shadow of a doubt.

Because I knew her heart belonged to someone else. I knew that even if she gave her body to me, she would never fall for me.

“You wrote one song while you were happy with her. Maybe this is the start of a new Josh? Maybe you’ll write another and then you won’t even have to record this one for the album.”

We both knew that wasn’t going to happen. “Sure. Maybe.”

When it grew silent between us, I turned to find Matt frowning at me.

“How about this? Everyone from the label is going to be at the gala tonight. Play the song there. You always play at least one song anyway, so what better time than this gala to unveil the newest beautiful ballad you wrote about and for your mother? If you play it tonight, then you’re not really monetizing it. Not for profit at least. Just to keep your mother’s horse rescue afloat. And then at least the label will see the progress you’ve been making.”

It wasn’t a bad plan. “I’ll think about it.”

I scrubbed my hand down my face and caught my reflection in the mirror.

I looked rough. Too damn rough to host a charity event where *I* was supposed to be the man in charge.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Matt stand from the couch and walk carefully over to me, scrutinizing me with every step. “She’s moving back to New York right after her dad’s wedding, you know?” he asked me, watching carefully as he said those words. “That’s what Maggie told me.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “I know she doesn’t feel the same way about me. For her, this is just sex. A good time. A paycheck.” I gulped, my throat roping at those words. Because even as I said them, they didn’t sit right. It didn’t sound like the Hope I’d grown to know.” I cleared my throat and added, “And you and I both know the best music is born from heartbreak.”

The break in my voice contradicted my nonchalant shrug.

“She’s going to pulverize you,” Matt said.

She already has.

But before I could answer, a hollow, feminine voice with a Texas drawl

stronger than even my father's spoke from behind me.

"A woman breaking *your* heart? That'd be a first."

I whipped around as Matt gasped behind me, "Jenn."

She was in a ballgown.

Actually...

I squinted and examined the sequined dress that hugged her slim frame.

She was wearing her prom dress. Even though we never dated in high school, she and I had been friends and I remembered the dress from the group photos we'd taken together.

"Jenn," I said carefully, "what are you doing here?"

"I want to come tonight," she said, her voice steady as she lifted her chin a touch higher.

Before I could answer, Matt was stepping in front of me. "No way in hell," he growled protectively.

He already had his phone out, pressed against his ear.

"I wasn't asking *you*," Jenn snapped, glaring at him for the briefest moment before her eyes softened back onto me. "Josh?"

Shit. "Jenn, I don't think that's a good idea," I said quietly.

The hope in her face deflated like a two day-old balloon. "Please," she pleaded. "I won't be a problem. I promise."

My gaze fell to the scars on her arms and I cringed, looking quickly away. "Maybe next year, okay?"

A single tear slipped from the corner of her eye. "You promise?"

I swallowed against the lump at the back of my throat.

"Hello, I need to report a violation of a restraining order," Matt said into the phone.

I snatched the phone out of his hands. "Nevermind," I said to dispatch. "Everything here is fine."

I hung up, then handed the phone back to Matt just as Nina came rushing up behind Jenn. "Josh," she heaved a breath, "I'm sorry. Jenn and I were

grabbing lunch and...well, she just—”

“It’s okay, Nina,” I said, offering my oldest friend a weak smile.

Then, turning once more to Jenn, I said, “I promise that I will truly consider it for next year, okay? But not tonight.”

In truth, despite the fact that I knew everyone on my team would tell me it was a bad idea to invite Jenn, I wanted to. I wanted to put all this behind us. I wanted to move on. Lift the restraining order.

A small part of me wondered if keeping these restrictions in place was what held back her progress.

A sad smile lifted the corners of her mouth. But like everything else about her, it was hollow. “Thanks, Josh,” she whispered.

Just then, my phone buzzed at the same time Jenn’s cell phone gave a chimed beep I recognized to be a Google alert.

A Google alert we both shared... my name.

No. That could only mean one thing.

Jenn’s eyes drifted to her phone, pale cheeks draining of what little color was already there. The dark bruises beneath her eyes seemed to deepen as she snapped her dull green eyes back up at mine. “Who is this?” she hissed.

I winced, not needing to look at the photos she was holding up.

I had picked them myself. Curated them. Chosen exactly which ones to leak to the press of Hope and me out and about. “It’s been ten years, Jenn,” I said. “I’m moving on. You need to, too.”

“Moving on,” she snorted. “You don’t move on. You move through. You tear through women and leave them shredded and alone.”

“Jenn,” Nina said, her voice more gentle than I’d ever heard it with anyone. “You can’t be here. Come on. We need to go.”

Nina gently took Jenn by the shoulders and turned her to guide her out the door, but Jenn broke through, rushing at me. She was so tall she almost stood nose to nose with me. “You’re going to ruin her,” she whispered. “You’re going to ruin her just like you ruined me.”

Gently, I curved my hands around Jenn's arms and pulled her into a hug. She was the one biggest regret of my life. "I'm sorry," I whispered into her hair, raising my eyes to meet Nina's across the room.

Only... it wasn't Nina standing there staring at us.

It was Hope. Her eyes locked on me. And Jenn. In what seemed to be an emotional embrace.

Thirty-Four

Q

HOPE

MY HEART WAS SLAMMING against my ribcage while a white hot knot twisted in my stomach.

I had come rushing back to Josh's house because the photos of us on our date the other night went live. I ran up his driveway and into his open front door, phone in hand, only to find him holding another woman in his arms.

But I was nothing if not a cool cucumber. I prided myself on it. So instead of exploding like most jealous girlfriends would, I put a tight smile on my face. "I'm going to go get dressed for tonight," I managed to say, then turned to make my way up the stairs.

"Hope, wait. It's not what it looks like." Josh ran to follow me, taking the stairs two at a time. As I turned to face him, Matt and Nina ushered the woman outside. But her glare stayed on me until the front door shut in her face.

"It looks like one of your obsessed exes forced her way in to see you. I'm guessing since Nina is here, it's the ex your first album is about... Jenn?"

Josh gulped. "Okay. So it's exactly what it looks like. I'm sorry you walked in on that. But I promise, she and I are nothing—"

"It's okay, Josh," I said, hoping my tone didn't betray me. It was okay because he wasn't mine. That much was blaringly true. "We all have exes, right?"

His gaze hardened as it dropped to my phone in my hand. “I just want to be clear that *I’m* not trying to get back with her or any of my exes.”

“Noted.”

I believed him, but also there was something going on there. I simply didn’t know what yet. And since he didn’t offer any more, all I did in response was nod. “I really do need to get ready now.”

When he didn’t say anything more, I turned and headed for my room.

The rest of the world believed I, Hope Marcoux-Evans was dating *the* Josh Gabriel. When in reality, we were... what, exactly?

It wasn’t exactly a ruse anymore.

But we weren’t officially together either.

It took me about an hour to do my hair and makeup. All the while, my phone blew up with text messages, one after the other, ever since those photos were released as a result.

People I barely knew were coming out of the woodwork to touch base with me even though on our best days, I’d have barely called them friends.

But to have an ex show up at his freaking *house* was next level. Stalker material.

It was pure, dumb luck that I walked up when I did. Originally the plan was to get ready with Carrow and Maxie, but I hadn’t seen Josh much the last few days and I knew how much this rodeo meant to him. So when the photos went live? I knew where I wanted to be.

Here. With him. *For* him.

Now I was realizing how stupid that might have been.

Maybe he also had ulterior motives? More than just needing to write this album. Maybe he was also trying to make his ex jealous.

The thought soured in my stomach just as a text came through, right on cue.

BRENT:

To say I’m surprised would be an understatement.

That was all it said.

He gave me nothing more. No mention of Josh by name. Or why it was so surprising.

HOPE:

Why's that?

Three little dots appeared after I texted him back. Then vanished. Then appeared again.

It took several minutes before his next text came through and I used the time to get my outfit on.

BRENT:

You hated living in the spotlight.

That was a long pause for a short sentence. I took pride in that little victory.

But he wasn't wrong. Luckily, I knew this was exactly what would bug Brent. And I had my response locked and loaded.

HOPE:

No, I hated being pushed aside for the spotlight. Josh doesn't do that.

It was true too. Josh embraced me in the spotlight. Included me.

I still didn't love it. I wasn't comfortable being the center of attention. But at least I didn't feel forgotten when I was with him.

Nothing. No response.

Shit. Even though I'd had that response prepared for days, maybe it was the wrong tactic. Not breezy enough. Too blame-happy.

Gulping, my thumbs flew across my keyboard wildly as I typed out another response.

HOPE:

Not that it matters, it all worked out in the end. We've both found happiness, right?

I held my breath, waiting.

Three little dots appeared. My phone pinged with his response.

BRENT:

Right.

Right.

But did he mean it?

And did I care?

Were Maxie and Carrow right that I was way too obsessed with him? And if he came crawling back, would I forget the plan to say no and embrace him once more?

My thoughts were interrupted by a quiet knock at the door, startling me so much I nearly dropped my phone.

I stole one last glance in the mirror, grinning at the gorgeous outfit Bonnie had picked out for me. Denim shirt. Paired with a feminine, pale-pink skirt that cascaded to my ankles in waves of tulle.

I felt like Carrie Bradshaw in the outfit as I twirled around her store. Paired with the Louboutin boots? It was utter perfection.

Made for a rodeo gala.

I opened the door and swallowed my gasp at Josh standing there. His bolo tie was an unexpected accessory to the otherwise simple, designer suit.

And of course, his cowboy boots. Formal ones, it seemed.

"I have something for you," he said. His voice was low and husky, sending shivers down my spine.

I arched my brow. He'd already apologized about Jenn's appearance downstairs multiple times, claiming she'd just shown up.

I stepped aside, allowing him to enter and as he did, he pulled one hand out from behind his back and plopped a hat onto my head, grinning.

A smile cracked through my otherwise icy demeanor and I spun to the mirror to examine my reflection. "A cowboy hat?"

"We're going to a rodeo," he said simply, his other hand still nestled at the small of his back as he followed me to the mirror. "A cowboy hat is required attire."

I pinched my fingers around the brim and tugged it off my head, noting how soft and supple the buttered leather was.

It was too much. His gifts were too much, especially now that I knew he was footing the bill for his dad's gambling debt. "Josh—"

"Wait," he interrupted, "there's more."

He held out a small, black velvet box.

"What's this?" I asked, taking the box from him.

"Just open it," he replied, a small smile playing on his lips.

My fingers trembled as I lifted the lid. Inside was a stunning turquoise and pearl necklace. It must have cost a fortune.

"Josh, I can't accept this. It's too much," I protested, my voice a hoarse whisper. I tried to push the box back into his hands.

"It was my mom's," he said, his eyes locking with mine. "They both were. Please, I want you to have them."

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded slowly. For the first time since I hatched my little plan with Carrow and Maxie to help Josh out tonight, nerves clenched my stomach. What if he took it the wrong way? What if I was overstepping?

I gulped as he took the necklace from me and fastened it around my neck. I touched the turquoise stone, cool against my skin.

"It's beautiful," I breathed, turning to face him. Who knew pearls and turquoise would look so damn good together?

"You're beautiful," he murmured, his hand drifting down the ropes of my throat.

"I have one more surprise for you," he said, stepping back.

"Josh, no. You've done enough. No more gifts."

"It's not anything like that," he said, gently sitting me down on the edge of the bed. With a boyish smile, he stepped out to the hallway, and came back in with his guitar slung over his shoulder.

Dragging the trunk a little closer, he perched himself on the edge, balancing the guitar on his knee. "I finished my song," he said.

"You did? The one about your mom?"

"It's about my mom. And sort of about you too."

He strummed the first chord, starting to sing.

The sound of his voice filled the room, sweet and low, transporting me into his world. I closed my eyes as his voice washed over me, surrounding me, each note piercing my soul.

I touched my fingers to the necklace—his mother's necklace as he sang about her golden hair and cornflower blue eyes, feeling her here with us.

With each strum of his fingers to strings, I fell deeper into him. Like I could almost experience what it was to be that little boy who worshiped his mother. Who wanted to keep her safe from the man he shared half of his DNA with.

The world around us had ceased to exist, and there was only us and the music.

As the final chord rang out, I sat in stunned silence, blinking my eyes open. The lyrics were so raw, so vulnerable, tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

I searched his face, studying the way he pulled his full bottom lip between his teeth. Waiting for my reaction. Waiting for my approval.

I didn't know why it meant so much to him. The way he looked at me, his eyes full of love and longing, made my heart skip a beat.

"That was..." The words choked in my throat. Because there were no words to adequately describe how utterly incredible that song was. "You have to play that tonight at the rodeo."

He began shaking his head, but I caught his chin gently. “Josh,” I said, urgency in my voice. “Look me in the eyes and tell me your mom wouldn’t have wanted you to play that song?”

His eyes glistened with unshed tears. “She would have claimed to be embarrassed...”

“But?”

A smile twitched, that dimple of his making an appearance. “But secretly, she would have loved it.”

I nodded. “Then pack your guitar tonight.”

Without a word, he leaned in and captured my lips with his own. With his mouth still brushing against mine, he said, “Without you, there is no art.”

I shook my head, the paths of tears still streaking through my carefully applied makeup. “Bullshit,” I whispered. “You put way too much weight into this whole muse thing.”

He pulled back, staring down at me in shock as though I’d struck him across the cheek. The romantic bubble had popped, but I didn’t care. It was the truth.

“I mean it, Josh. I didn’t do anything. I encouraged you to write about your mother. That was it.”

He shook his head, slowly at first. “I don’t need you to believe in the power of the muse,” he said carefully. “Because I believe in it. I believe in you. Whether you choose to acknowledge it or not, you’re my inspiration.”

I pushed off the bed, moving to the mirror to fix my makeup. But really, I was avoiding his searing gaze.

Guilt snaked its way through my core and my face heated as I thought of the text exchange between Brent and me. Even though it was always part of the plan to make Brent jealous, something had shifted in the last few days.

I hadn’t been sleeping with Josh when I concocted the plan.

And now? It all seemed different.

Wrong.

“You know, if you spent half the time believing in yourself the way you seem to believe in some magical muse power I hold, you might have finished this album a year ago.”

“Maybe,” he said, coming up behind me. Warm, calloused hands skimmed over my shoulder as he scooped my hair over to one side. “But then I never would have met you.”

He bent, pressing his lips to the curve of my neck.

Me. The girl he only wants for six weeks. The girl he wants solely to help him write an album, then send me on his way. His words from the other day in the stable echoed in my ears. *Love is toxic. And I want you to ruin me before I destroy you.*

I had cut him off with a kiss before he could finish. But I didn’t understand this man. How could he be so passionate? So vulnerable and loving and sweet, only to believe it’s all eventually a cancer that will consume you from the inside out.

“What if I don’t want to ruin you, Josh?” I whispered.

His eyes darted up to catch mine in the mirror and it’s like looking into the unexplored depths of the ocean.

He shook his head. “We have a plan.”

“Plans can change.”

His throat went taut and he worked a long, slow swallow.

“What about Brent?”

Heat flushed my cheeks, the shame of my pettiness flashing across my face. “Brent means nothing to me. Besides, he’s engaged.”

He pinned me with his eyes. “That would be a more believable statement if you weren’t turning scarlet right now.”

I pressed my palm to my flushed cheek and shook my head. He was reading this all wrong. Reading me all wrong. I thought he knew me. I thought he understood me.

“Stick to the plan, Hope,” he said, his hand squeezing my hip, then

turning me around to face him. “One week down. Let’s have five more incredible weeks. Then leave it at that.”

“But *why*? If things are going well—”

“My life... my career... has been built on a faulty foundation. I have to tear it all down in order to rebuild stronger. Better.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you stop talking in metaphors for once?”

“The great love stories are fast and intense. They’re an unstoppable train barreling toward a cliff’s edge. A massive wave that will eventually break and crash along the shore.”

“Those are more metaphors. Just talk to me. What are you saying?”

“The greatest love stories that make people *feel* are tragic tales that leave you aching... here.” He pressed his palm to my heart.

I shook my head. “Not all love stories end tragically.”

“Don’t they?” He backed up, grabbing his guitar from where he’d set it aside on my bed.

“If my dad can find an amazing woman like Vivian in this crazy world? Then yeah. There’s hope for all of us. Even you, Josh.”

He paused in the doorway, turning around to look at me from over his shoulder, another small smile graced his face, making hope bounce in my chest. “So if your dad can make it, then we can, too?”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

His smile widened. “Then I guess we’ll have to wait and see how this wedding goes, won’t we?”

I sighed into my smile just as he added, “In the meantime, though, why don’t we make sure these next five weeks are the best of our lives?”

He was out the door, not waiting for my response to leave.

There was a lot riding on my dad’s wedding.

And I wasn’t sure if he was up for the task.

Thirty-Five

∞

JOSH

FUCK. She was changing the plan.

Our plan.

She was supposed to be in love with that asshole ex of hers... make him jealous by using me... then leave me for him so I could write all about my broken heart.

Did she not love him anymore?

On one hand, I'd never felt lighter at the thought of that. Somehow, impossibly, she'd weaseled her way into my heart these last few weeks and I wanted more than anything for her to stay with me and not go running back to that cocksucker ex of hers.

But on the other hand?

I was scared.

I was fucking scared.

And I only had one song finished. One song didn't make a hit album. One song that was the opposite of my brand. It wasn't about heartbreak. It wasn't the soul crushing tune that teenagers would cry over.

I had sent my producers a crude demo of it last night...

...and heard crickets.

Nothing. Not even an email confirmation of receipt.

The knot in my stomach grew three sizes larger.

“Are you nervous?” Hope asked as the limo slowed to a stop outside of the event hall.

I shot her a wobbled smile. “I should be asking you that.”

She shrugged. “It’s a bigger night for you.”

I lifted her hand, dropping a kiss to her knuckles. “For us. There’s still time to back out, you know?”

Her shell-shocked expression was the only answer I needed for me to realize my question came out all wrong. “Back out? Do you want me to back out?”

That question twisted a screwdriver into my damn chest. I ground my teeth and shook my head. “No. I just mean that after tonight, it’s going to get even crazier.”

“Oh.” The scowl loosened off her face, slowly morphing into a confident smile “Then, no, I don’t want to back out. Bring it on.”

Through the tinted windows, I examined the red carpet leading up to the front door of the event hall.

I hated this part. It felt like a perp walk. But everyone, Matt included, said that every great event needed the red carpet walk... especially one being hosted by a Grammy winner.

Needless to say, for the most important night of every year, I’m in a shitty mood as I throw open the door to my limo and exit with a fake smile and an overexaggerated wave.

As the flashbulbs went off around me, I couldn’t help but wonder how many favors Matt had to call in to get this crowd of paparazzi here.

Charity galas in Texas aren’t usually their jam. And our list of celebrity attendees were b-level at best.

I paused beside the door, offering a hand to Hope as she climbed out of the limo.

Then, in long, deliberate strides, we made our way to the top of the red carpet and posed in front of a sign there.

“Josh! Over here!”

“Who’s the mystery girl?”

“Is this your new girlfriend?”

Miranda, my publicist, started the game of telephone for us so that we didn’t have to shout to be heard, telling them Hope’s name.

That was her job.

Our job was to look madly in love with each other.

Not exactly hard to do on my part.

I cupped Hope’s jaw tenderly and dragged her gaze to mine.

Excitement and nerves danced in her glistening brown eyes.

It’s okay. I’ve got you, I tried to convey to her without any words.

I leaned in, but instead of pressing my mouth to hers, I swerved and kissed her cheek, just next to her ear, taking the moment to whisper, “You’re doing great.”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, her body tensed in my arms.

“How long do we have to stand here?” she whispered back to me.

Technically, they wanted me there for photo ops as long as I could stand it. But I knew her best friends were waiting for her inside and this was a lot to take.

Turning one last smile at the cameras, I shouted to everyone, “Thank you so much! What an honor to my mother!”

And with that, I pressed my palm to the small of Hope’s back and guided her inside the event hall where Maggie, Carrow, and Maxie were already waiting for her, squealing.



Most of the night passed in a blur, as these things always did.

I hardly saw Hope. She was whisked away by her friends, while I was stuck at Matt’s side. It was an opportunity to schmooze the higher-ups at my

label, he had warned me.

He wasn't wrong.

I just didn't want to have to do that tonight, here of all places.

"How's Maggie doing?" I asked him when we had a moment alone.

He looked up, catching a glimpse of her across the room chatting with Maxie. "She's great. She loves Hope's friends."

"Good," I nodded. "Good. Can you tell if the producers like the song I sent?"

Matt's mouth pressed into a line and he shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not sure. They've been a little radio silent about it. Even when I try to bring it up to them, they just ask when they can expect the other songs."

Dammit. That was exactly what I was afraid of. It's a new sound. A new image for me. And producers *hated* the uncharted waters of change.

"I'll be back, Matt." I squeezed his shoulder, then headed for the bathroom to take a break. These events were exhausting in a whole other way. The constant glad-handing and schmoozing was a lot for me.

In the bathroom, I locked myself into a stall, just to have a moment alone to calm my racing heart and dry my clammy hands.

Outside of the stall, the door to the bathroom opened and the click of men's dress shoes echoed against the tiled floors.

"This is going to be rough." I recognized my producer, Erik's voice immediately.

"Look, tonight's not the night to have this conversation with him," Micah, my other producer, responded.

I sat straighter, my breath stalling in my lungs.

The water at the sink turned on and I heard some splashing as Micah continued. "It's literally an evening honoring his mother and their horse rescue. Let him have his night... next week we'll break it to him that young women don't want to hear their fucking heartthrob crooning about his mommy issues."

Mommy issues.

The rest of their conversation turned to white noise until after another minute, they finally left.

The ringing in my ears grew louder.

Deafening.

I had no idea how long I sat in that bathroom, but finally I forced myself to go back out to the party.

People were waiting on me.

Counting on me.

Everyone was counting on me. Everyone needed something from me. My label, the horses, my dad, my producers, Matt... hell, even Hope.

“Josh!”

Back in the midst of the party, I whipped around toward the sound of the tinny, high-pitched voice cutting through the white noise of the crowd at the rodeo.

There were so many more people than last year filtering in... something I could almost definitely attribute to the leaked photos and the promise that this mystery woman might be here tonight.

Bitty McGowen, an older woman who was on just about every board imaginable came rushing over to me, kissing each cheek. “You’ve outdone yourself this year,” she said, pointing at me. “And that silent auction? *Finally*. Some pieces I actually *want* to bid on and not just feel obligated to bid on!”

I tilted my head at her. “Oh yeah? What caught your eye?”

Maybe the handmade saddles? I knew Bitty loved riding.

“The Hermès scarf for one!”

“The... Hermès scarf?” I repeated.

I didn’t put an Hermès scarf in the auction. Maybe my assistant slipped it in there? But that was doubtful. She never acted on anything with the rescue without running it by me first.

“Yes!” Bitty clapped her hands excitedly. “Oh, the designer items out there are to die for. Don’t get me wrong, I love a pair of Levi’s as much as the next girl, but there’s just something about Prada, isn’t there? Even if it is from last season.”

Hermès... Prada. My eyes narrowed in thought. Hope wouldn’t have...

Oh who the hell was I kidding? Of course she would have!

“Excuse me a moment, Bitty.” I forced a smile on my face and despite the desire I had to sprint over to the auction room, I kept my footsteps to a brisk, but easy stroll.

The scent of Chanel No 5 perfume clung to the air—no doubt the preferred scent of half the women here tonight.

“Son of a bitch,” I rasped to myself as I scanned the silent auction room.

All of the items I had picked out were here at the auction, of course. But there were dozens more within the room. Usually our silent auction was sparse. A few high end things here and there. A week’s stay at my house in Tahoe. Some signed records and guitars from musician friends of mine. That sort of thing.

But there were added podiums this year... filled with designer clothes and shoes.

More specifically, filled with *Hope’s* designer clothes and shoes.

“Surprise.” I recognized Hope’s reluctant whisper immediately. When I turned around, she was watching me carefully, bottom lip tugged roughly between her teeth.

I refused to acknowledge how my heart kicked up a notch at the sight of her. Or how my inner organs felt like they were shrink-wrapped with Saran Wrap when I stood this close to her.

Nope. Not gonna acknowledge it.

“It certainly is,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Please don’t be mad,” she said. “I wanted to help... to contribute... and so I did it in the only way I knew how. By donating some of the amazing

gifts you've given me."

Her nervous smile faltered, the sight punching me right in the ribs.

"How could I be mad at that?" I whispered.

I tried to mask how tight my voice was. This night was turning into a disaster... and none of it was Hope's fault. But if I wasn't careful, she'd be collateral damage. Like Jenn.

I couldn't let the shrapnel hit her. Not this time.

I forced a smile on my face, then drew my fingers into her hair. "You didn't have to do any of this, but..." My words faded as I took the moment to collect myself.

Because what she did? No... not just what she did, but the core of who she is, touched something buried so deeply inside of me, I'd forgotten it was even there.

"But?" she prodded.

"But the fact you did means so much to me. I'll never forget it."

Her grin widened, blindingly beautiful.

The sight intoxicated me in the space of a tenth of a second.

"There's more," she said, but standing there staring at her, she sounded a million miles away.

"There's more?" I mumbled, repeating her as I hooked a finger into the waist of her skirt and tugging her into me.

With her body pressed against mine, there was no denying the thrumming tension radiating between us. From the moment I first saw her, it existed. And now, getting to know her better? Knowing her heart and brain as well as her body as well as I did, it only intensified that tension, rather than diffusing it.

Her long hair fell around her face in soft waves as she nodded. "I wanted to surprise you with something amazing tonight," she said.

"Mmm." I was barely listening to her. Instead, my gaze was locked on her face, cataloging every exquisite feature. Fluttering eyes. Parted, pouty

lips. Skin so dewy, it practically shimmered in the sexy low light of the party.

I closed my hands around her hips as her tongue darted out, perching on her full bottom lip.

“So,” she continued, “I arranged for a special guest tonight. For you.”

“You’re the only special guest I fucking need, Hope.”

As I leaned down, her gasp filled the space between us and her whimper was the last thing I heard before I took her mouth, kissing her hard.

Publicly.

For all to see.

I distantly registered the sounds of cameras clicking and the flashes of light. Because with Hope in my arms and against my lips, the rest of the world faded away.

Now, more than ever, I needed to stick to the plan.

Fall in love.

Let Hope destroy my wasted heart.

Give the producers the songs they needed—my blood on the sheet music.

A throat cleared beside us.

No. Whoever was interrupting this merely perfect moment could go right to hell—

“Your girlfriend here went through a lot of trouble to get me on the horn,” a raspy, low voice said beside me.

I broke our kiss, blinking as the party—the world—around us came back into focus.

“Not that she needed to,” the raspy voice with the thick drawl continued. “I’m a big fan of your music, Josh. And Hope here said there might be a new song of yours we could play together tonight.”

I stared in disbelief at the outstretched hand... and the man attached to it.

Was this real? Was I dreaming? Did her kiss transport me to an alternate dimension? And for the love of God, was there enough air in my lungs for me to say hello in return if this was, in fact, real?

Because standing here in front of me, at my mother's horse rescue fundraiser... was the legend himself: Willie Nelson.

And he wanted to sing my new song with me. The song about my mother.
The song the producers hated.

But despite the fact that my personal hero was standing right in front of me, the person I couldn't take my eyes off of... was Hope.

She did this.

She thought she was helping, but it was truly the worst thing she could have done for me.

For my music.

... and also the best.

Let the heartbreak begin.

Thirty-Six

ℒ

HOPE

THIS IS HELL.

Like, I'm actually, literally in hell... and it's lined with pink taffeta.

Maggie had swung by my dad's condo to grab my dress for me on the way to the fitting. Why the hell didn't I take a look at this dress sooner? It was *hideous*.

I sneezed and several pink feathers flew into the air, drifting down toward the floor like a puff of dust.

Yep, you heard that right. *Feathers*.

A week ago I'd been wearing couture at the gala and now I was in the cheapest gown known to man.

Half my designer wardrobe was gone... and I'd never felt better about it. Those items helped bring in five more figures than they would have without them. But the real boon was Willie Freaking Nelson.

He even performed with Josh.

A whole week had passed since the gala. Even though I hadn't heard any of his new songs, he was hard at work. His worn, leather notebook was always tucked into his back pocket and even as we sat on the couch, watching TV at night, he would randomly pull it out and start scribbling furiously, every now and then glancing up at me with a smirk.

"Is everything okay in there, darlin'?" Viv called through the curtain of

the dressing room.

“Y-yeah,” I called back. “I just, um, don’t remember your bridesmaid dress being so ... floral themed.”

I literally couldn’t think of a nice way to word it.

The dress was Pepto Bismol pink. The form-fitted satin corset was lined with feathers and was so tight I could barely breathe. It tapered down to my waist, then flared out with what I could only describe as a tufted, poofy skirt.

I basically looked like an upside down cupcake.

“Well get your cute butt out here and let me see all my girls together!” Viv said.

“Yeah!” Maryanne echoed. “We need to see how they all look.”

I took a final deep breath, giving up on trying to fix myself. With a sigh, I threw open the curtain.

I was met with Vivian standing there in her jeans and leopard tank top... and my future stepsisters wearing dark navy understated dresses. They were, in a word, *gorgeous*.

And the complete opposite of what I was wearing.

“Gotcha!” they all shouted at once and then peeled into shrieks of laughter.

Even the sales women were in on the joke, surrounding Viv and my stepsisters and all clapping and jumping up and down with glee.

I glanced at where Maggie sat off to the side, covering her grin with her hand. Vivian had invited her to join us after the bachelorette party, although something told me that was more for my benefit than theirs.

Even still, it was really sweet of them to include Maggie so I’d have one of my friends present.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie said through her laughter. “I couldn’t convince them not to... but you should see yourself!”

Oh, I’ve seen myself.

“So... wait.” I blinked, still somewhat confused. “You’re telling me I

don't have to look like Princess Bubblegum Barbie puked all over me at your wedding?"

Viv waved a hand. "Oh, god no, honey. You'll be wearing this." She held up another one of the understated navy gowns her daughter's were wearing and shoved it into my hands. "Now go get changed. And hurry. We've got some bottomless mimosas to get to!"



Two hours later, we were finishing up brunch and bottomless mimosas and I hadn't looked at my phone once. Which for me? That was saying something. I was usually tied to my phone, constantly checking for work calls and new clients.

Then again, my only other client outside of Josh was sitting right here beside me, sipping mimosas with my soon-to-be sisters. So I really didn't have any reason to pull out my phone in the first place. Unless Josh needed me... but he was supposed to be writing all day.

According to Matt, he had a big day in the recording studio coming up next week where the label wanted to get some tracks down.

"And then," Viv said, giggling, "the goat kicked your daddy! Right in the butt! That's how I knew Elvis was the goat for us!"

Eyes wide, I looked at Vivian. "And my dad went for that? He bought a goat that kicked the crap outta him?"

She nodded, proudly. "He sure did!"

Maggie fell onto my shoulder, laughing. I was, dare I say it, having *fun*.

While Vivan, Maryanne, Raeanne, and Julianne weren't women I would have normally gravitated to, they were all smart, sweet, and motivated.

And I couldn't help but feel a little mad at myself that I had so quickly written them off.

"I can't believe you actually did it," I said with a shake of my head. "You

got a goat.”

“Actually, no,” Viv said with a click of her tongue.

I snapped my fingers and pointed at her. “I knew it!”

I knew my dad wasn't a goat person. Ha! Take that!

Vivian's grin widened and she glanced between all of us before shouting, “We got *six* goats!”

“Six?!” I snorted what was left of my mimosa. “That's not a house anymore... it's a freaking farm!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, goats and horses and chickens...” Raeanne blew a raspberry at her mom. “But what I really want to know is *what's* going on with you and Josh Gabriel?”

“Ooooooh,” Maggie cooed, turning in her seat to look at me. “Me too.”

I stared down at the empty mimosa glass in front of me. Damn. I needed more alcohol to answer this inquisition. On one hand, my instinct was to answer quickly with “nothing!”

Only, it wasn't nothing and I was pretty sure they'd see right through that anyway. Especially since Matt and Josh were best friends. I had no idea what sort of intel Maggie already had.

Besides, telling them it was ‘nothing’ would sort of defeat the whole point of our contract.

“I like him,” I admitted, my face flaming. “It's more than just the physical...”

It wasn't only the way his eyes lit up when he talked about music, or the way his hands moved so effortlessly over the strings of his guitar. Or even the way his voice crooned, gliding over note after note.

It was his heart that got me.

And how patient he was with me.

“Ooooooh!” All the girls around the table cooed like we were in kindergarten again.

Laughing, I buried my bright pink face in my hands. “I should've lied to

you all!" I shouted, then lifted my empty mimosa in the air, signaling to the waiter I needed another.

"Oh hell no!" Maryanne stopped mid-bite of her omelet, her eyes wide. "Don't you dare lie to us."

"I love that you shared that!" Raeanne chimed in with a light squeeze to my knee.

Slowly, my eyes met Julianne's and she gave a single nod. "Sisters don't lie to each other."

"So..." Viv leaned back in her chair, grinning, "Have you two had sex yet?"

"Oh my god," I stabbed a potato off my plate with my fork, shaking my head. "I am not talking about that with my stepmom! Some things have to be sacred."

"So that's a yes!" Raeanne squealed, causing everyone at the table but me to erupt in laughter.

I continued to study my half-eaten breakfast like I was decoding sanskrit.

"What's wrong?" Maryanne asked, then lowered her voice to a whisper. "Is he bad in bed or something?"

"No," I snapped. "Trust me, *that* is not the problem."

Vivian tilted her head to the side examining me. "What is then?"

I dragged my gaze to hers, ignoring the way mine gathered tears. "Brent."

"Your ex?" Maggie asked and I nodded.

"Oh! A love triangle!" Raeanne clapped. "The best romance trope."

Julianne rolled her eyes at her sister. "It's only romantic in books and movies. Otherwise, it's a downright mess."

"It's not a love triangle," I said quickly. "I don't want Brent back. At all. But... he was pretty famous. At least in New York. And it made my life hell. Ultimately, it's why we broke up. I just... I couldn't handle that kind of fame."

Viv made a low mmmm sound and nodded. "And Josh is even more famous than Brent?"

"That's right."

"Huh," Raeanne said.

"That's a pickle," Maryanne chimed in with that nugget.

The rest of the group was silent for a few moments, considering what I'd said. Then Vivian took the lead, her voice level and even as she spoke. "Well, the way I see it, we need to figure out how you can cope with this."

"We?" I snorted something halfway between a laugh and a sob.

"Yes, we," she repeated. "Because it sounds like your relationship with Josh is really special and if that's something you want to continue, then we will help you figure out some solutions."

Julianne picked up where Viv left off. "Mom's right. You can't let fear stand in the way. You can't let your trauma of dealing with Brent's fame and his affair stop you from finding happiness."

Maryanne nodded in agreement before pulling a pen and a business card from her purse. "I work with a guy who specializes in healing trauma," she said as she scribbled a name and email down on the blank side. "I think talking it out with a professional could really help."

I read the name. Dr. Milner. Then, flipping the card over, I saw her name on the front. Maryanne was a social worker. How did I not know that already?

"Thank you," I said, tucking the card into my wallet. The thought of therapy made my insides twist, but that didn't mean she was wrong either.

Lastly, Raeanne leaned in. "My advice is probably what you're going to like the least." She paused for a moment before continuing, a determined look in her eyes. "You should also consider creating an online presence of your own."

"Okay, well now we've really crossed over into Crazyland," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"I'm serious! Starting your own online presence like an influencer would help create a barrier between you and the press."

I gave her a skeptical look. "How so? Isn't that giving them more insight into my life?"

"Yeah, but curated insight. It can be as real or as fake as you want. And by getting the little snippets online, they're less likely to be ravenous for information by coming after your friends or family. Also... by having your own online presence, you position yourself publicly as your own woman. With your own career. Not just Josh's partner who's always lurking in the background. That's when the press really eats you alive."

Our server deposited another round of mimosas as I sat there dumbfounded.

Holy hell... she had a point.

They all did.

My phone buzzed and I looked down to find another text from Brent.

BRENT:

I might have an apartment lead for you. Whenever you're ready to come back to NY.

The truth was, lately I had been thinking less and less about New York and more and more about staying here in Texas.

I'd be lying, though, if I said my change in heart had nothing to do with Josh. And as I'd learned the hard way in the past, turning my life upside down for a man is never smart.

I needed to keep my options open. Picking up my phone, I fired off a quick text back to Brent.

HOPE:

Send me the apartment listing and I'll take a look.

It couldn't hurt to look, right? Keep my options open.

Raeanne cleared her throat, bringing my attention back to the table. "So?" she asked. "What do you say? I can start developing your online persona now, free of charge."

“She’s really good at it,” Viv added. “I mean, I know I’m her mama and have to say that, but it’s also true.”

“Start now?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

Raeanne held out her hand. “Give me your phone, I’ll show you.”

I was skeptical, but she did make some compelling arguments. Reluctantly, I unlocked my screen, then dropped my phone into her hands.

With her head down, she tapped away at my screen. Then after a few beats, she looked up at us like she had forgotten we were all there.

“Go on about your business! Don’t mind me! Everyone hold up your mimosas and cheers to Mama’s soon-to-be nuptials!”

We all did as she said, even though I was the only one confused by it. Even still, it was hard not to smile when Vivian, Julianne, Maggie, and Maryanne were all smiles and giggles as they clinked their glasses to the center. Gently, I added mine to the mix, grinning as we toasted to a long, happy marriage for Viv.

The sound of my phone capturing a photo made my head whip back to Raeanne.

“What was that?” I asked.

She handed my phone back to me, beaming. “That was the sound of your first post.”

I looked down at the image on social media. I was beaming, the center of focus while the rest of us were clinking glasses together and my smile seemed relaxed and genuine.

My skin also looked smoother, hair shinier, and... was I mistaken... or were my lips fuller? “Did you retouch this photo of me?” I asked squinting as I examined it closer.

“Of course,” Raeanne said. “I added the photo retoucher app to your homescreen too.”

“Um... thanks?”

“No problem. It makes you look like you’ve had botox.”

I didn't need botox. I was only in my twenties, I wanted to tell her, but kept the thought to myself.

"Feel free to run any post ideas by me!" Raeanne said. "And I'll even put together a little calendar of things you should post regularly. But basically, you want the posts to be vague and give them just enough to stop snooping around for info. So tonight? Post a cute photo of you and Josh snuggling. They'll lose their effing minds."

"All right, girls," Vivian said, standing up. "I have to hit the restroom and then I need to get back to work."

"Go ahead, Mama," Raeanne said. "We'll wait here for you."

Vivian left the table, crossing the restaurant, leaving me with the Annes.

"Well... thanks," I said again. "If you ever need anything from me, matchmaking services or whatever—"

"Well, actually," Raeanne interrupted, leaning into me. "I was wondering —"

Maryanne cleared her throat beside Raeanne. "Sorry," Raeanne clarified, "We were wondering if you could ask Josh to sing at our parent's wedding?"

Maryanne chimed in and leaned forward on her elbows. "Mama would never admit it, but she loves Josh Gabriel's music."

"Really?" I asked. "She made it sound like you three were the fans and that she took you to his concert ten years ago because she was a good mom."

Julianne smiled. "Well, she is a good mom. And it's true that we also love his music. But I think Mama was playing it cool when she said that. At that concert? She bought every item for sale at the store. Every T-shirt, every album, every hoodie. I think it would mean a lot to her if he sang at the reception."

"Just one song," Raeanne clarified.

"Please?" Maryanne pleaded. "Will you ask him for us?"

I released an exhale as Maggie met my gaze with a reluctant shrug.

We hadn't known each other long, but it was like she could read my

thoughts.

“Okay, fine,” I said. My eyes met Julianne’s soft smile across the table and she gave me a small nod.

“Thank you,” she said.

“But no promises,” I added. “If he says no, I’m not going to push the issue.”

“Of course!”

“We’d never expect you to push the issue! Not with such a new relationship with Josh!”

“What issue with Josh?”

I jumped at the sound of Matt’s voice behind me.

Maggie beamed at the sight of her boyfriend and stood to kiss him as she explained, “Hope’s gonna ask Josh to sing at her dad’s wedding.”

Matt snorted. “I hope you have better luck than I do getting him to perform.”

Huh. Well that was interesting. “He’s not performing for you?”

“It’s like pulling teeth when he’s working on a new album. He thinks everything is shit until...” Matt’s words faded and he pressed his lips together. “Well, let’s just say he gets in his own head about things. But the label wants him to record a song or two so they can get buzz going for the new album and he’s flat out refusing.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

Matt grunted and swiped a hand down his face. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. He’d lose his shit if he found out I talked to you.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “He won’t find out.”

But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t get to the bottom of this mystery.

Thirty-Seven

ℒ

JOSH

THIS NEW SONG had been haunting me ever since the night of the benefit.

I got about halfway through it and then it just... stalled.

Again.

Just as I suspected it would.

Still, I had to admit being with Hope was eliciting more writing inspiration than I'd ever achieved while dating other women.

I imagined it was partially because I knew it would end.

I knew she was still in love with her ex, even if she liked me and was having fun with me... she'd go back to him.

So there was always that rain cloud hanging over me. Always that edge of sadness, even in our happiest moments.

Even tonight. It was quiet. We were laying on the couch together, her laying with her head in my lap while a movie was on in the background, but we were both on our phones.

It should be as simple as that.

But even now, I couldn't help that stab of pain that corkscrewed deeper into my chest as she fit so comfortably into my lap... and my life.

Because I knew it was only temporary.

Temporary...

Words and lyrics weaved in my mind, braiding around my thoughts. I quickly opened my notebook beside me and scribbled furiously.

“What hashtags do you use?”

Hope’s question broke my chain of thought.

I blinked down at her, confused. “What hashtags do I use?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Do you have a special hashtag or anything that you post regularly with?”

I rolled the pen between my calloused fingers. “I don’t really use hashtags. I make posts on my social media and then my team goes in and rewrites whatever they need to. Why?”

She shrugged and went back to typing on her phone. “My sisters think I need an online persona to help keep the media off our backs.”

Sisters. She called them her sisters. Not stepsisters. And she didn’t say it with any sort of eye roll.

That was new.

“I thought the whole point of this was for them to be *on* our backs? To make your ex jealous?”

She pushed off the couch, sitting up. “Well, yeah. And believe me, it’s working. But Raeanne made a compelling argument for using it to funnel only what we *want* them to see.”

I grinned and tossed my notebook and pen aside. “I’m pretty sure *I* also said something similar.” It was why I hired the photographer on our first date night. “You listen to your sisters but not to me?” I teased.

“Consider it the one moment in my whole life where they’ll get through to me when you won’t.”

She was teasing me back. But her words—those words—they swirled around my heart and sent all kinds of images of us in the future together. Us together for her whole life, just as she said. Images I had no business thinking about.

“Can I see your profile?” I asked.

She gasped and clutched her phone to her chest. “What?! No.”

I shrugged and grabbed my own phone instead, opening up Instagram.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Looking up your profile. I assume it’s public if the whole point is to feed them breadcrumbs.”

“Don’t you dare!” She lunged for my phone, but she was giggling as she did so.

I raised my arm above my head. “I have to!” I laughed too, as she climbed up my body like a little spider monkey. “Besides, won’t it look weird if I don’t follow my own girlfriend on social media?”

That made her freeze. Then fall back onto the couch beside me, the leather dipping beneath her. “Crap. I didn’t think of that.”

Absently, almost like she was still processing this information, she handed me her phone.

Only... her social media wasn’t open. Her text messages from Brent were.

They’d been texting today.

As in... a *lot* today.

Including talking about an apartment in New York.

It was the kick in the gut I needed.

Everything with me was a placeholder.

Even though it felt like things between us were shifting, becoming more intense, the fact remained, she didn’t want me... not in the long term, at least.

And at the end of all this? She’d be living in New York again.

Likely with Brent.

Clearing my throat, I set her phone down beside us and opened up her profile on mine, trying to focus on the business of this. Us. The business of our relationship.

The thought made my throat clog into a knot of emotions I had no idea how to untangle.

She had almost ten thousand followers already with only one post so far. A photo of her with Maggie, her stepmom and sisters, though everyone but Hope was out of focus in the image. Hope's smiling face was front and center as they clinked mimosa glasses.

She looked beautiful... but there was something off about her in the photo. She looked like herself, but also not. Like she was... airbrushed.

“Did you photoshop this picture?”

Hope rolled her eyes. “Ugh, yeah. Raeanne posted it. There's some retouching app she downloaded for me? I don't know.”

Fucking influencers curating every aspect of their lives to look perfect was creating more insecurity than ever before. It made me want to throw my phone in the ocean and never open another app again.

“Raeanne's an idiot. The last thing you need is a retouching app.”

She snorted a laugh. “Idiot is a little harsh, but... yeah. She actually had the nerve to ask if you would sing at my Dad's wedding.”

I pulled in a hefty lungful of oxygen and rolled my eyes sarcastically. “The *nerve*. Asking the man who's supposed to be your boyfriend to be a part of your parents' wedding?”

She laughed and smacked my shoulder. “*Fake* boyfriend.”

Fake.

Like I needed the reminder.

If the text from Brent was a right hook, then this was like a heavyweight punch taking me down for the count.

“She doesn't know that,” I said, my voice sounding tight. I cleared my throat and tried again. I glided my gaze down her bare thighs. A test. I needed to see her reaction to me. “Besides, it didn't seem so fake last night.”

Grinning and completely unaware of my internal battle happening, she tucked her hair behind her ear as her face turned scarlet. Something fluttered in my chest, alive and trapped, beating rapidly like it was trying to escape.

“Are you saying you *are* willing to sing at their wedding, Josh Gabriel?”

My stomach sank at her response. She deflected. She didn't agree or say we weren't fake last night. No response other than her blush.

"Of course I'll sing at your dad's wedding, Hope," I answered. I'd do just about anything she asked of me. "As long as they don't mind a song that's ten years old."

Hope laughed, but the sound wasn't exactly a happy one. That was the thing about Hope. Her joy was hard-earned. But when you heard that true laugh of hers? It made it all the more precious how rare it was. Like finding a piece of treasure after digging for weeks.

"Why not sing one of your new songs?" She inclined her chin toward my notebook.

My stomach gave an aching lurch to my throat and my skin went clammy. "Nothing is finished." It was humiliating to admit that out loud.

"You have a few weeks. Besides, you could always sing the song about your mother. It's beautiful and I'm sure Vivian would lov—"

"No." I answered far too quickly, acutely conscious of the way my voice sounded far too strangled.

"Why not?" she asked, innocently enough. Other women might have gotten the hint and changed the subject. Avoided that question altogether. But not Hope.

She didn't hide from uncomfortable conversations.

I could lie. Make up some reason about how it's not relevant enough to their wedding. But looking up into her wide, brown eyes and seeing the way her teeth skimmed over her bottom lip... I couldn't lie to her.

At least not anymore than I already had.

"I wrote that song for me. And for you. But parading my mom's legacy around like that? Making money off the pain of losing her..." I cleared my throat against the thickening of my vocal chords and shook my head. "It's just—"

"Too vulnerable?" She finished my thought.

“Something like that.”

“What would your mom say about that if she were sitting here right now with you?”

Not this again. I coughed out an incredulous sigh. “But she’s not here with me—”

“But if she were.” Hope wasn’t deterred by the raise in volume of my voice. Or the knit of my brow. She stood her ground firmly, but still gently enough to honor what I was going through.

Weirdly, I don’t hate it.

“I think she’d tell me to get my head out of my ass.”

“And?”

“And...” I gulped, not wanting to admit the truth of this. “Vulnerability sells records. Records that will help pay for this rescue she loves... loved... so much.”

Hope gives a quiet nod. “Well then. Josh?”

“Hm?”

Leaning forward, she cupped my jaw. The soft rasp of her painted fingernails on my stubble sent a shiver down my spine. “Get your head out of your ass. Vulnerability sells records. Records that will house and feed so many horses that need you.”

Then she slid her thumb across my cheekbone that was now damp with a single tear I hadn’t realized I’d shed.

I studied her for several long seconds, which only made her tip her chin higher and scrutinize me right back.

“Come here,” I rasped and tugged her into me so we were embracing.

I dipped my chin to her shoulder. Then holding my phone out in front of us, I clicked a few selfies. My damp cheek pressed to hers, unshed tears still in my eyes.

I wanted to remember this moment.

This moment where she pushed beyond my vulnerability and made me

confront one of my many demons.

I wanted this moment forever documented so that years from now when Hope was long gone and just a wisp of a memory, I could look back and remember not only her, but also me. How I looked through her eyes.

“There,” I said, texting her the images. “Post those. But don’t you dare use that app. You’re gorgeous exactly as you are. If I wanted to be with an airbrushed Kardashian, I would be.”

“Will you post it too?”

I tilted my head at Hope. “Have you not followed my account yet, you weirdo?”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “I’m not really a social media person,” she admitted with a cringe.

“Do me a favor and go look up mine.”

I watched her expression as she typed my name in the search bar, then scrolled with her thumbs. I already had three posts up with Hope at the front and center. One of us at the party last night. One picture she had no idea I snapped of her eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich over the kitchen counter post-gala. She’d looked too goddamn sexy in her little sleep shorts and tank top, but with her hair and makeup still fully done.

And then there was one other post today. From about an hour ago. I snapped a photo of Hope when she’d been laying in my lap, her hair fanned out across the denim of my jeans. Her lashes brushing the tops of her cheeks while I ran my fingers through her silky hair.

With a little smile on her face, she looked up at me. “It’s almost like I inspire you or something,” she teased.

“Oh, you inspire me all right.” I launched myself at her and she squealed. But before she could squirm away, I grasped her behind the knees and tugged so she fell on her back before I pressed my body to hers, pinning her against the couch.

Her eyes heated, softening to a honey brown as she slowly blinked up at

me. “You inspire me too, Josh.”

I tilted my head. “I do?”

She gave a slow nod. “I really like you. Actually, I think I might be falling in love with you.”

My eyes flew to hers. All the blood drained from my face.

Where I should be feeling butterflies and euphoria, all I felt was dread.

Dread and guilt.

Wasn't this what I had just been hoping for? The moment she would admit we weren't fake. But saying we weren't faking it versus professing her love for me were two completely different things.

I couldn't protect her if she fell in love with me.

I couldn't make sure she got out of this unscathed.

Her slow blink morphed into confusion. “Is that... is that okay?”

“Yes. Yes of course it is.” My voice was tight and raspy.

It wasn't okay. It wasn't okay at all. She was moving back to New York. And as painful as that was, as much as I wanted to keep her... I couldn't.

Jenn was right. I would ruin her.

I tried to kiss her to mask what she so obviously could see, but even that was tight.

Pushing up from the couch, I ran a shaky hand through my hair.

I didn't know much right now.

But I knew I had to escape her stare.

If I didn't, I'd confess everything to her right now. Right here.

And push her out of my life to save her forever.

“I'm going to head to the studio to write,” I muttered, turning my back on Hope and grabbing my notebook.

“Now?”

Taking a slow, long breath, I turned to face her again, plastering a smile to my face. “Gotta strike while the inspiration is hot,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Isn't the expression when the *iron* is hot?”

“Potato, potahto.”

I bent and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. But before I could pull away, she gripped the neckline of my shirt, keeping me there, nose to nose with her. “Hey,” she said, “you know you can tell me anything, right?”

Gulp.

“Of course,” I rasped.

Reluctantly, she released me.

As I walked to my studio, journal of lyrics tucked under my arm, I couldn’t help but cringe at the fact I’d just lied to Hope... right to her face.

Right now? I don’t know anything.

I especially don’t know how I’ll keep my promise to get her out of this with her heart intact now.

Thirty-Eight
8

HOPE

“SO HE JUST RAN OFF?” Maggie asked me, taking a bite of her Reuben.

Morosely, I pushed some salad around my plate and nodded.

“He said he needed to write some lyrics down.”

She considered that for a moment while chewing. “Well, maybe he did. Maybe you telling him you were falling in love with him inspired him to write.”

“Maybe.” But something was off. Something was really off. Ever since that night, he’d been acting really weird.

In the two weeks since I’d told him I was falling for him, we’d only had sex a few times. And usually I’d wake up to find him in the other room, strumming his guitar, or writing, or in the TV room watching a movie with Cash.

It was just... off. Even though to most people, it probably looked totally normal.

“Have you ever heard the name Jenn?”

Maggie gave me a weird look. “Like in my lifetime have I ever known anyone by that name? Sure.”

I shook my head. “No... in relation to Josh. The night of the gala, there was this girl who showed up at his house in a gown. She wanted to come to

the gala and it was... it was strange. She had this crazy haunted look about her. And Josh's other friend Nina was there with them. The whole thing was just weird."

"Like *Sixteen Candles* weird? Or *Swimfan* weird?"

"More like... *Girl Interrupted* weird."

"Oh."

I nodded. "Yeah. She's his ex. But that shouldn't bother me, right? I mean, we all have exes."

Even still, there was this niggling itchy feeling I had at the back of my mind. Like there was something there. Something Nina had said to me when we first met. But I couldn't remember it.

Speaking of exes, my phone buzzed from its face down position on the table beside me.

Maggie arched her brow at me. "Brent again?"

I turned the phone over and sighed as another text came through from him. He'd been calling regularly and texting nonstop. He'd all but said the words: I made a mistake.

Hope from four months ago would have been dancing for joy at seeing these constant texts coming through. She would have lamented his misery and jealousy. But now? I didn't give a damn about Brent or his new fiancé.

I cared about Josh. And this weird change in his demeanor.

With a sigh, I took a bite of my salad, using the opportunity to chew and think. "Is it weird Josh didn't want me there at the recording studio today?"

Maggie lifted her soda water and took a sip through the straw. "Maybe. Did he *say* he didn't want you there? Or was it just sort of... overlooked?"

"What's the difference?"

"Well, in one scenario, he simply forgot to extend the invitation to you. But in the other, he asked you specifically not to come. There's a big difference."

"He definitely didn't ask me not to come. It was more like the thought of

me coming never crossed his mind."

Maggie clapped. "Well there you go! He probably just thought you'd be bored or something." Wiping her mouth with her napkin, she tossed it aside. "Let's go!"

"Let's... go? Like as in, to the studio? Right now?"

Maggie grinned at me, her blue eyes flashing with excitement. "Yeah, why not? There's nothing like showing up unexpectedly to give someone a sweet surprise!"

"And *I'm* the sweet surprise in this scenario? You have met me, right?" I'd been called a lot of things, but sweet didn't tend to be one of them.

She bit her lip to hide her grin. Then, picking up the menu, she scrunched her nose. "Maybe we should bring him some cannolis too."



Fifteen minutes later, with a box of cannolis in hand, Maggie and I stood outside the nondescript building.

Thank God for Matt being so open with Maggie. Otherwise, I wouldn't have even known the address of where Josh was today.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach as anxiety bubbled up inside me; what if he didn't want me here?

Shaking my head, I took a step back from the door. "This was a mistake. If he wanted me here, he would have invited me."

Maggie looped her arm through mine and tugged me forward with a roll of her eyes. "Don't be silly. He's going to be so excited to see you!"

She was right. I was being ridiculous. Things with Josh and me were fine. So he was a little busy. Who wasn't? And maybe he freaked out a bit when I told him I was falling for him... well, welcome to literally every man I've ever known.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded and followed Maggie into the building.

The interior was sterile and sleek, with soundproof doors leading to various rooms.

We followed the sound of music, walking down a long dark hall until we reached two doors, side by side. One open and the other closed with a bright red lightbulb glowing overhead.

Inside the open door, there were four people sitting around a sound board and looking through the glass where Josh sat on a stool, guitar propped on his knee, singing into the microphone.

I recognized the tune as his mom's song.

He sounded beautiful. The song was so different from anything I'd heard him do in the past. It was filled with happy memories and sweet musings. A glimmer of hope rather than his usual songs that were so melancholy and heartbroken.

"Matt," one of the men in a suit elbowed Josh's manager gently. "You know this isn't the sound we're looking for."

"I know, I know. But you have to admit it's good. It's still a hit."

The other suit sighed and looked at his watch. "Sure, maybe for a singer like LeeAnn Womack. But it's not a guaranteed hit for Josh Gabriel."

"It's not what the fans expect to hear," the woman chimed in.

My throat went thick hearing them talk like that. How could they say that about his song? He'd poured his heart into that tune and they were tearing it to shreds.

A woman at the soundboard leaned forward and spoke into the microphone, pressing a button. "Josh, try that again from measure 102 to the end."

"Hey," Maggie whispered, leaning forward and tapping Matt's arm.

His eyes went wide and with a quick look back at Josh through the glass he joined us out in the hall.

"Hey you," he said, dropping a kiss to Maggie's lips. "This is a nice surprise."

"I hope it's okay we came by," she whispered. "We brought cannolis."

Matt groaned, tilting his head back. "Now it's definitely okay."

"Can he hear us?" I asked, angling my chin at Josh.

Matt glanced at me and though I wasn't sure if I imagined it or not, a wave of apprehension tilted his features.

"No," Matt said. "He probably can't even see you out here, which might be for the best." Then, realizing what he'd just said, Matt added quickly, "I just mean that he's been really nervous today."

I nodded. "I can see why," I whispered.

"This isn't working," one of the men in a suit said to the woman.

"Matt!" the woman called out. "Can we *please* hear that other song he's been working on? The one he said was his backup? I don't even care if it's not finished."

Grabbing a cannoli from the box, Matt kissed Maggie's forehead quickly, then went back into the room.

"He was pretty firm that he didn't want to record that one," Matt said.

"If we don't hear a hit today, then we have no choice but to cut Josh free from the label." The man crossed his arms as he stood nose to nose with Matt.

I held my breath waiting. After a moment, Matt sighed. Then leaning forward, he hit the button and spoke into the microphone. "Hey, buddy. Let's take a quick break from this one. Why don't you sing through that new piece for us? As sort of a warm up?"

"Warm up?" Josh snorted and bent to grab a bottle of water from the floor. Tipping his head back, he took a swig. "We've been at this for two hours. I'm pretty fucking warm."

"I know. But we want to keep things fresh, right?"

Swiping the back of his hand across his mouth, Josh shook his head. "That song isn't ready yet."

"I know, I know. No big deal, okay? We won't even record it."

Matt lifted his finger off the button just in time for the woman in the suit to say, "We *are* recording it though, right?"

"Of course," Matt muttered, jaw tight. "But if he doesn't know we are, it might take the pressure off."

I glanced at Maggie who shifted uneasily on her feet and I knew just what she was thinking. *If he could lie that easily to his best friend and client, could he also lie to her?*

She wasn't wrong to be skeptical.

Since she'd done so much for me this last month, I wanted to be there for her too. "Hey," I whispered and nudged her with my elbow. "It's just business."

Her lips pulled between her teeth. Though she nodded, doubt creased her eyebrows. "Sure. Business."

"And if he lies to you? I'll personally castrate him myself."

That earned me a small smile.

"Fine," Josh muttered. Adjusting his guitar and shifting in the stool, he cleared his throat, then strummed the first few chords of a brand new melody I hadn't heard before.

Josh's fingers ran up and down the fretboard, plucking out the melody. His thumb picked at the strings, each note a haunting, gentle hum as if the instrument was singing a lullaby. The melody streamed from his fingertips in bright, colorful ribbons.

But the lyrics. Those lyrics...

Chestnut hair...

Honeyed eyes...

Does she not know, I'm her demise?

She thinks it's love

But I surmise

She'll soon learn my words were all lies...

My eyes misted with tears at his words as I tried in vain to blink them

away.

Each line struck my heart like a steel blade, lashing, tearing, leaving wounds that stung like acid.

He was singing about me. About our inevitable breakup.

This love she claims

Is mine to take

Will surely cause her heart to break

I'll dance on the grave

Of my mistake

Destruction left within the wake.

Maggie reached for my hand and squeezed. "Hope," she whispered.

But there wasn't anything she could say.

All the proof I needed was right there in the song. In his words.

This was fake.

He was going to break my heart...

No.

It wasn't just that he was going to break my heart. He was orchestrating it. Counting on it. Plotting it like some nefarious scheme.

The music from his first album swirled in my mind. Every song was about heartbreak. Every lyric, every haunted sad note harped on one common theme: Broken love.

"I'm such an idiot," I whispered.

He didn't just want me as his muse.

He wanted me as his fall guy. His punching bag. The next ex in a long string of women used and discarded for his creative gain.

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat, trying to keep my composure. The man I had fallen for, the one I had shared my heart with, was a complete fraud. He never felt the way I did. It was a lie, all of it.

Turning to Maggie, I put on a brave face. "I should go. It's pretty obvious he never wanted me here."

She nodded, concern etching lines onto her forehead. "I'll come with you."

"No, it's okay," I said, forcing a smile. "I need to do this alone."

Before I could change my mind, I turned and walked down the hall, my heels clicking on the polished concrete floors.

Josh had never cared for me. All the nights we had spent laughing and sharing our deepest fears had meant nothing to him. He was a master of deception, and I had fallen right into his trap.

Reaching the exit, I pushed open the door and stepped out into the hot midday sun, burning overhead, mocking me with its bright cheeriness.

I set out for Nina's bar, on a mission. It was only a few blocks down the street.

Barging in through the front door, I marched up to the bar, ignoring Nina as she called out, "Not open!"

"I know," I answered back, smacking my hand to the bar.

She looked up from where she was stocking pint glasses, startled. "Hope? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to learn about Jenn. Tell me about her."

To Nina's credit, the shock in her expression quickly dissolved. She gave a single, understanding nod. "I'll do you one better," Nina said. "I'll take you to meet her."

Thirty-Nine

L

JOSH

AS I PACKED MY EQUIPMENT, I couldn't help the twist of my stomach. I hadn't planned on playing that song. In fact, I hated that I wrote it at all. I hated that the words came to me. That the melody played over and over in my head until I put it down on paper.

I hated that it was all about Hope.

And how despite my best efforts, she still fell for me.

And it was all going to end.

Matt leaned against the doorway, eating a cannoli.

"Thanks for the help packing up, asshole," I muttered.

It was the sort of teasing joke I'd normally make to him that he wouldn't bat an eye at. But today, I had more vinegar in my tone I hadn't intended to be there. Hell, I had more vinegar in my tone with *everyone* these days.

"They loved that last song, you know. But personally? I think you finally knocked it out of the park with your mom's song."

I grunted a response.

"But they only want to send the second song out for solicits," Matt said, pausing long enough to take another grumbly bite of his dessert.

I froze where I strapped my guitar into its case. "You recorded it, didn't you? Despite telling me you wouldn't." I slammed my guitar case shut.

I knew the label would pressure him to record the song about Hope, but I

had hoped Matt would at least hold them to their word. Of course he didn't. I'd been around the rodeo enough to know these fuckers were all liars... even my best friend.

Maybe especially my best friend.

"It's a good fucking song, man. Real good. Right on brand."

"And that's what matters most? Being on brand."

He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "You know the label. They like tried and true. They don't want risks. Putting out a song about your mom is a risk."

"It literally took you weeks to convince me to record that one. I finally relent and now you're telling me it's not good enough?"

"That song is great, Josh. It really is." He glanced at the room through the glass where the executives no longer stood. The room was empty and they had all vacated to go back to the office as soon as we got a good version.

"Those assholes wouldn't know great if it pissed on their boots," Matt whispered. "We'll fight for that to be released with the album too. But they're going to want Decimated as well."

I had to choose. Do I let Hope go? Release the song about our demise? Or do I fight for us?

Her love for me was too much to process. Too fucking much. Especially hearing it right after seeing Jenn's hollowed cheekbones mere weeks before. The vacant stare of her broken gaze. Her gaunt, anemic figure draped with the old prom dress.

All because of me. All because of fucking love.

My mom was covered in bruises from my dad's 'love.' Hand marks and thumb prints around her neck the night he tried to kill her.

Shit.

"I need to talk to Hope first," I said, yanking up my guitar case in one hand. "Before the song is out there."

Cringing, Matt stopped me with a palm to my chest before I could leave

the room. “About Hope...”

“What about her?”

“She might have already heard the song.”

“What do you mean?”

Maggie came stomping past Matt into the room. “He *means* she came down here to surprise your sorry ass with cannolis! We both did!”

“What the hell, Matt? This place is supposed to be invite only. If they’re not on the list, they’re not supposed to be allowed in!”

Maggie’s eyes narrowed at me. “*That’s* what your main concern is? How we got in? Not the fact that apparently your music is all about you breaking Hope’s heart and some supposed lies you’ve been keeping from her?”

Shit. No, no, no. This was not how this was supposed to go down. She couldn’t find out like this.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. “Matt, how could you let them—”

“This isn’t about Matt!” Maggie snapped, poking me in the chest. “Matt is an honest man.”

Nervously, Matt tried to grab her hand. “Baby, let’s take a breath. Slow down.”

“No!” she whipped her hand out of his grasp. “Josh doesn’t deserve to have you as his manager. Or as his friend. And he sure as hell doesn’t deserve someone as amazing as Hope.”

A bitter laugh cracked in my throat. “Well you’re one for three,” I responded.

I wasn’t claiming to be a good guy... but someone saying Matt was the better boyfriend and the one who wasn’t a liar? That was a laugh. The man lied for a living to get what he wanted and needed from clients. Hell, he was even lying to Maggie. Not telling her he’d dated her girlfriend and that he knew all along she had hired a wingwoman.

“One for three?” Maggie repeated. “Meaning what?”

At the sight of Matt's face draining of color, I immediately wished I could take it back.

Shit.

Clamping my lips together, I looked up at Matt's slowly shaking head. "Matt, what's he talking about?" Maggie demanded. "Have you been lying to me about something?"

"Nothing," I grunted, trying to save him. Just because I was miserable and about to launch a grenade into my love life didn't mean Matt had to as well. "It's nothing, Maggie. I'm just pissy, that's all. Please, tell me where Hope is."

Maggie folded her arms, her glare so sharp, she could cut glass with those eyes. "I don't know."

"Maggie!" I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I need to talk to her. Explain..." I cleared my throat. "Apologize. But to do that, first I need to find her."

"I'm telling you the truth. I don't know where she is. She heard your stupid song and ran out of here. All she said was she needed to do this alone."

"Fuck!" I dropped my guitar case, leaving it for Matt to finish packing. "Take my stuff back to the ranch, Matt."

I needed to find Hope.

And explain... what exactly? I wasn't sure.

But I couldn't just leave her out there to fend for herself.

Forty
8

HOPE

NINA DROVE us half an hour to a beautiful stone building set with sprawling bright green grass and a pond, flanked by a tall iron gate and fence that could have easily been the campus of a private college.

The scent of freshly mowed grass and roses wafted into the car's open windows.

Sweet scent of summer in the air, of flowers and pollen. It smelled like a garden after a rainstorm.

The sign above the guarded entrance read *Emerald Pine Retreat: Psychiatric Hospital and Assisted Living*.

"Nina," I whispered. "Where are we—"

"Shhh," she cut me off just as a guard walked up to her window.

"Nina," the guard said. "Didn't expect to see you so soon."

She smiled at the guard, leaning out her window. "I know. But I made brownies and really wanted her to have them. You can take one, too, if you want."

Reaching into her backseat, she pulled out a Tupperware container, popping it open.

Grinning, the guard took one. "Thanks. You know I never turn down one of your brownies."

He waved us through and the gate opened, allowing us to drive forward.

The cobblestone drive wound around the expansive property, allowing glimpses of the manicured gardens and well-cared for grounds. Nina parked in front of the main building and I cautiously made my way out of the car.

Nina grabbed my hand and led me down a path between a line of trees and a stone wall to the front door, holding it open for me.

I stared up apprehensively at the shuttered windows.

"You wanted to meet Jenn," she said. "Well, she's in here."

Despite my pounding heart, I walked up the steps and entered, following behind Nina to the front desk where a pleasant nurse wearing pastel green scrubs greeted us with a smile.

"Nina! Twice in one day?"

Nina returned her smile and popped open the brownie container, offering the nurse one. "You know me, I can't stay away. By the way, this is my friend, Hope. She's here to meet Jenn today. This is the best nurse in all of Texas, Nurse Bella."

Bella gave me a warm smile before leading us down a hallway filled with doors that I assumed each led to the patients' rooms.

My boots clicked against the golden hardwood floors and the cool white walls gave the place a warm, but sterile feel to it. The building's hallways are fragrant with honeysuckle and the building smells of pine, roses, and the damp paper of old books.

Eventually, we stopped at a room with the same nondescript heavy looking door as all the others. "This is Jenn's room," said Bella softly. "Good to see you again, Nina. And nice to meet you, Hope. If either of you needs anything, you just ring for us," Bella added as we stepped inside.

I hadn't noticed how thin and pale she was when I first saw Jenn before the rodeo. The woman I'd briefly seen at Josh's house in a gown looked so different from the woman sitting on the twin bed before us.

Vacant green eyes lit up as soon as she saw Nina enter and her long, stringy dark hair framed her gaunt face, fanning out against the crisp white

scrubs she wore.

My gaze fell to the scars covering her arms and two fresh bandages on her wrists.

The bed creaked beneath Nina as she sat down beside Jenn and handed her one of the brownies, not minding when crumbs fell onto the floor below them. I silently watched as they talked, Nina's voice soft yet strong.

“Jenn, do you remember my friend, Hope?”

Up until that moment, Jenn's expression had been warm and hopeful. Bright even. But when Nina said my name and her eyes turned to me, the entire expression fell sour. “You're friends with her?” Jenn hissed.

“Hey,” Nina said, her tone sharp, but still filled with love. “She's done nothing wrong. And yes, she's my friend too. Just like Josh is my friend. It doesn't mean I don't also love you.”

Jenn dropped her gaze, fidgeting with the gauze taped at her wrists before finally looking back up to me. “Sorry,” she muttered quickly.

I did my best to give her a friendly smile despite the uneasy turn of my stomach. “It's okay. It's nice to meet you,” I said and carefully took a seat in a chair by the window.

“I don't always live here,” Jenn said with a quick gesture to the room.

“Are you from Austin?”

She shook her head. “My family moved here from California when I was in middle school. My brother and sister moved back to California after high school, but my parents are still here.”

What the hell happened to land Jenn in here... and from the looks of the scars on her arms, not for the first time either.

Suddenly, the lyrics from Josh's first hit song, “Scars”, weaved through my mind. Had she started cutting back when they were together?

And he *wrote* about it. In detail.

Made millions off of it with his first album.

My stomach twisted even more.

I thought back to the album I had only first heard a few weeks ago out of curiosity, trying hard to remember some of the song names and lyrics. I vaguely remembered his first hit ten years ago—Beam Patrol.

I'd initially thought beam as in light, but what if it was beam, as in smile? Smile Patrol.

The song was about a woman. *Raven hair, emerald eyes.*

I scanned Jenn's dark brown hair and dull green eyes... eyes that had probably sparkled like emeralds at one point.

Check and check.

A smile like a shooting star—A rare and fleeting sight—It streaks across a velvet sky—dissolving in the void of night.

Sure sounded like it was about this girl sitting in front of me.

As Jenn bit into the brownie, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Had Josh used Jenn's struggles for his own gain, profiting off of her pain? I picked at the edge of my shirt, feeling the weight of the truth settle on my shoulders.

"Did you meet Nina through Josh?" Jenn's voice was soft, fragile, and croaked a little on Josh's name.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I did. How did you meet Josh?"

"In high school. We were friends all four years and started dating the summer after graduation. We were supposed to get married, but... but I fucked it all up."

I blinked, surprised at her answer. "*You* fucked it all up?" I'd been so certain Josh had been the one who had ended things based on... well... I don't know. Assumptions, I guess.

Jenn's face remained impassive, but her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "I cheated on him when we were twenty. Just a few weeks before our wedding." With a single blink, the tears fell down her hollow cheeks.

Nina reached over and gave Jenn's hand a gentle squeeze. "It's ancient history. Josh forgave you, you know that."

"I ruined everything," Jenn said, her voice shaking. "I loved him. And I made a stupid, drunken mistake and ruined my life. He hates me now."

Nina caught my gaze, but continued to comfort Jenn. "No one hates you. Josh loves you... he's just not *in love* with you anymore."

"Because he loves her," she muttered, taking another bite of the brownie.

He doesn't love me, I wanted to say. But this wasn't about me. Pieces were falling into place, like I was finally getting a glimpse of the image a puzzle created. Josh was just a broken-hearted guy who wrote music after his fiancé cheated on him.

But it still didn't explain the song he wrote about *me*.

Nina leaned in closer, giving Jenn a warm embrace. "I've got to get back to the bar, okay? Your mom and I are going to take you to brunch tomorrow though."

She gave her friend a hug and I waved awkwardly, saying goodbye to Jenn.

Nina and I walked back to her car in silence.

"How often does she, um, come to stay here?"

Nina shrugged, pulling the seatbelt across her sternum. "Off and on for the last ten years. Any time she relapses and starts cutting." She paused, starting the car. "Or worse."

"All because she cheated on him and he broke off their engagement?"

With her hands clenching the steering wheel, Nina shot me a quick look. "It's not just that. Josh's entire first album is about Jenn. Every goddamn song about her and her cheating. And his biggest hit song is all about her death. He wrote this macabre fake story all about how if she could take her own life, only then he could remember her fondly." With a shake of her head, Nina put the car in reverse and pulled out of the parking spot. "It's what gave her the fucking idea to try to kill herself. This most recent attempt was her fourth try. All because of that fucking song."

I watched the hospital fade from view in the side mirror in horror. "He

couldn't have meant for that to happen," I whispered. "Maybe if he talked to her—"

"He has. Many times," Nina said. "But the damage is done. Impulsively, with a broken heart, he wrote that song and put it on YouTube when he was a nobody performing in seedy dive bars. Practically overnight, the song went viral. Every label wanted to sign him... as long as they got *that* specific hit song on a record. And selfishly, he said yes. He said yes to producing that song on his album. Most people don't really know what that song is about and how detrimental it was to Jenn's mental health. And to be fair, Josh didn't know how it would affect her either. But now, no matter what Josh says to her, no matter what *any* of us say, Jenn believes the only way for Josh to truly forgive her and think of her with love is for her to take her own life. He says he wishes he could take it back and that he never wrote that song. But at the end of the day, he *did* it. And he can't take it back. Her mental health isn't his fault... but also, it kind of is."

"Oh my god."

The lies he referenced in his song today... was this what he meant? That he'd been keeping this secret from me?

The situation was way worse than I ever thought. But suddenly, it was all making sense. Everything Josh had been saying... or not saying... all clicked together.

I want you even though you don't want me because I know deep down it's better if you don't.

He'd said that to me. Those exact words. Right before he'd also said *love is toxic. And I want you to ruin me before I destroy you.*

The memories flooded into me like a broken dam.

It was like he believed he was jinxed. Like this one mistake with Jenn had convinced him that not only was he not deserving of love, but he would always be this curse for women.

A self-fulfilling prophecy, if anything, given that song he'd just written

about me.

Nina put her blinker on and took a right turn toward Main Street. “He’s sorry, of course. He apologizes constantly, but the community here in Austin who knew Jenn before that song was released have never forgiven him. I think I’m the only person who went to high school with both of them who doesn’t hold a grudge against Josh.”

She slowed to a stop at a red light, taking the moment to look over at me. “Just promise me... whatever songs he writes about you, don’t take them literally. Because no matter how hard he tries to change his image, he’s still just the emo boy who wants to be loved and can’t forgive himself for what he did.”

“Then why make the same mistake again?” I asked Nina. “Wouldn’t he learn from that mistake and not write that sort of music anymore?”

“Because men are stupid?” She snorted. “Because he believes he’s poisonous. Because he thinks it’s the only music people want from him. Because watching his dad beat his mom to a bloody pulp year after year is the real heartbreak he writes about in the subtext of all his music. Pick one. There’s a million reasons.”

My stomach twisted with the imagery. He’d definitely alluded to the fact that his dad had been abusive. I just didn’t realize *how* bad it was.

“I need to find Josh,” I said, grabbing my purse from the floor of the front seat as Nina parallel parked in a spot right in front of her bar.

“I think he found you.”

I jerked my gaze up to find Josh sitting on the stoop of Nina’s bar with his head in his hands.

Forty-One

L

JOSH

WORDS, *Josh. Say words. You can do this.*

But as I stood to greet Hope, words escaped me. How much had she heard? What did she know?

I glanced at Nina who gave me a hopeless shrug and said, “She deserved to know the truth.” Then she disappeared inside her bar.

“I deserved to know the truth from *you*,” Hope added.

Which part of my truth though? How much had Nina told her?

“About?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

I sighed. “Can we at least talk about this on our way back to the ranch?” I gestured to my truck. “For reasons I’m sure you understand, it’s not exactly a conversation I wish to have out in public.”

She gave a single nod, then climbed into the passenger side of my truck.

Well, that was one battle won. Easier than I expected.

Easier than I deserved.

The drive back to the ranch was silent and I was grateful when we got there that Rob and my other ranch hands had finished for the day and were already gone.

Still not saying a word, Hope got out of the truck and, without looking at me, walked into my house.

Slowly I followed her. A notch formed at the base of my throat as she knelt down to say hi to Cash. Not a quick pat on the head... no. She nuzzled him. Hugging him and burying her face in his neck.

Like it was goodbye.

Then she stood and looked me square in the eyes. "Okay," she said, "talk."

"What do you want to know, Hope?" I managed the words through my clenched jaw and burning throat.

"*Everything*. Starting with the 'lies' you wrote about in that new song. What lies are you keeping from me?"

"Everyone has secrets," I answered vaguely knowing it wouldn't appease her. But at least it might buy me some time. Time for what exactly? I wasn't sure. I knew how this was going to end. How it was *always* going to end. That was the whole plan after all.

So then why did I feel so sick to my stomach? Why did the thought of Hope leaving right now, two weeks early, send my mind into a spiral? Especially when it was always the plan to have her leave me.

Hope leveled me with a look, her honeyed eyes turning downright lethal. "You have five seconds to start talking."

"Or?"

With a humorless laugh, she shook her head. "This is usually the point where I'd threaten to leave you. To walk out that door and never look back."

That was the plan. Let her leave.

She took a step towards me. One single step. "But that's exactly what you want, isn't it? You want me to give up first? To walk out the door so you can lock yourself up and write the next hit album."

How could she know that?

Tears filled her eyes and with a single blink, one rolled down her cheek. "Because you believe you're toxic. And you think you need to be heartbroken to create the best art."

Shocked, I slumped against the wall. How the hell did she interpret all of that from one single song?

“I went to visit Jenn today,” she said, the change in her voice notable.

I jerked my gaze back up to meet hers. “You what?”

But how—

Nina. Fucking Nina.

“You had no right to do that. Meeting you could spiral Jenn back into—”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone snooping. But that’s your fault. If you had talked to me, told me what happened, I wouldn’t have had to resort to sneaking around to find her. So tell me, is that the only lie you’re referencing in your song? Or is there more?”

I snorted. “What? That’s not enough for you? Me writing a song about the fictional suicide of my ex that turned into a self-fulfilling prophesy? I’ll never forgive myself for that. Jenn cheating on me was terrible, but she didn’t deserve the sort of vitriolic hate that’s been spewed her way by my fans ever since.”

From within my white knuckled grasp, my phone buzzed with a text from my father.

Impeccable timing as always, Dad.

DAD:

Owen mentioned he didn’t get the final payment yet.

“Fuck, one second,” I muttered to Hope and typed a quick response. One catastrophe at a time.

JOSH:

Funds have been transferred. They can take a couple days to clear.

And I still had a few days of the deadline left.

Exhausted, I turned my attention back to Hope. Her gaze darted to my phone briefly before she shook her head. “I was about to say if you can’t

forgive yourself, how the hell can you expect Jenn to?”

Expressionless. *Keep my face void of emotion*, I told myself.

This breakup was happening earlier than it was supposed to... sooner than I was ready for. But it *did* have to happen. “I don’t expect Jenn to ever forgive me. Don’t you see that? I don’t deserve her forgiveness. Everything I have in my life is because of that awful song. Every dollar, every success, every album, every horse I’ve saved is because I threw her under the fucking bus! And now?” A laugh bubbled up from inside of me.

A maniacal, bitter laugh.

I backed away from Hope and fell to a seat on the arm of the couch. “Now the label needs more of that. More heartbreak. More songs to sell to the stations.”

“Enter me, right? The next sucker who would fall for your bullshit and whose heart you would break?” Her completely flat eyes fell on me. I’d never seen her like this before. Distant. Cold. Usually being in Hope’s presence was like looking up at a rainbow. But rainbows were fleeting. Rare, quick flashes of beauty and joy that eventually fade away entirely. Just like love.

How did we get here? How did this all go so wrong, so fast?

“No. You were not supposed to get hurt. You weren’t supposed to fall for me. We were supposed to make your ex jealous and you would go back to him, remember? You were supposed to choose him. Love him. Not me. That was the plan!”

The change in her expression happened within a fraction of a second. At the sight of her shocked face blinking rapidly, I realized she was never privy to the plan. Yes, of course, I hadn’t wanted her to know I’d planned on this ending badly... but it was almost like she wasn’t even aware of her side of things... to win Brent back.

“You didn’t include me in any of the plans you made. You knew exactly how these six weeks were going to go and never filled me in. I thought we were partners. A team. But teammates *share* the game plan, Josh.”

She flicked her eyes to the ceiling, collecting herself as her fingers brushed across the turquoise stone resting on her décolletage. My mother's stone. My mother's necklace. "It's time for a new game plan, wouldn't you say? One that I'm a part of? One that doesn't require you to keep breaking your heart and hurting those you love over and over again?"

The edge of the armrest bit into my upper thigh. "There is no other plan," I said. "The producers only want one thing from me. They hated the song about my mom. The Josh Gabriel brand is one thing and one thing only... loneliness. Misery. Heartache."

"So change the fucking brand, Josh!" she seethed. "Reinvent yourself."

"Like it's that easy." I pushed off from the couch, heading to the kitchen to pour myself a whiskey.

Just as I raised the two-finger pour to my lips, Hope wrenched it out of my grasp and dumped it down the sink, white-hot fury in her gaze.

"Are you my keeper now? Cutting me off like you're my sponsor?" I reached for the whiskey bottle again, but she was faster than me, grabbing it by the neck and hurling it across the room.

It hit the wall, shattering and spraying glass and bourbon every which way.

"What the fuck, Hope?!"

"I watched my dad pour whiskey every time something got hard."

I tore open the closet and grabbed the broom from inside, shaking my head. "I'm not your drunk-ass loser of a dad. If I have a single drink when I'm stressed it's not the same thing."

"Maybe not, but that's how it starts," she snapped. "And I need at least *one* man in my life who doesn't turn to the bottle when life gets rough!"

The wet glass pushed slowly into the dustpan with each sweep of the broom. I stared at the mess. The shards of glass coated in glossy amber liquid. "You need this from me," I repeated on a snort. "Welcome to the club. Everyone needs something from the famous Josh Gabriel. Why should you

be any different, right? My label needs a hit song. The horses need my success. My dad needs me to pay off his debts. And *you*. You needed my image to make Brent jealous.” I lifted the full dustpan of glass and dumped it in the garbage.

“That was your idea,” her voice cracked right along with her veneer.

“And it worked like a charm.”

“You’re an asshole.” Tears slid down her cheeks.

“I sure am. Nina tried to warn you, didn’t she?”

I watched her throat bob with a thick swallow. “I came here to level with you, Josh. To give you a chance at a real life. With *me*. People might need you... but I think you need me too. You just won’t admit it.”

A flicker of hope caught in my heart like the single flame of a dying candle.

“I do need you, Hope,” I said, my voice brittle but sharp, like those shards of glass at the bottom of my trash can. “I need you to *leave*.”

She took a cautious step closer to me. Blood thundered in my ears and my chest hitched with my breath. “Don’t,” I warned her.

But she ignored me with a shake of her head. “I don’t care if you don’t forgive yourself yet for Jenn. *I* forgive you. Let that be your step one, Josh. All you have to do is say yes. Say yes that you can love me too.” Her hands cradled the sides of my face. “Say yes and write beautiful music about love and joy rather than heartbreak and despair. Choose me. Choose us. Choose to be happy.”

A thousand kites took off in my stomach, catching the flame of that single candle and spinning and whipping around.

She loved me. She saw a future with me.

A future that could be wedding bells and white picket fences and horse rescues. And babies.

The image swelled in my mind of Hope pregnant with my baby.

I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to think of how goddamn happy I’d

be. Trying not to imagine us in the future cooking together. Taking our kids on rides with the horses, then snuggling on the couch for family movie night. Tucking our babies into bed, then sneaking away to make love quietly.

No, I couldn't sit there and think of how I'd look into the depths of her brown eyes as she lifted her hips to meet my thrusts. Squeezing her smooth thighs around my hips as I came, both of us hoping for baby number three.

These thoughts were dangerous.

Because they weren't real.

Just as she brushed her mouth over mine, my cell phone rang.

The fantasy evaporated.

The storybook illustration of us smeared like chalk paint in a rainstorm.

I looked down at my phone, face up on the counter beside us. Micah... my producer.

Hope shook her head, her eyes shiny and glistening like she was looking up at me from beneath water. "Don't," she whispered. "Josh, if you answer that phone right now, then you've made your choice. And it isn't me."

Happily ever after didn't exist.

Bzzzzz.

I'd seen it time and time again. My friends who were already divorced.

Bzzzzz.

My mom covered in bruises that my dad gave her.

Bzzzzz.

Jenn cheating on me.

Bzzzzz.

Me, crushing her under the weight of her own guilt.

Bzzzzz.

Happily ever after was the moment the book closed. They didn't go on to talk about the screaming fights. Crippling debt. The infidelity.

Bzzzzz.

And if Hope stayed with me, I'd poison her too.

No, I'd much rather remember her like this. I'd rather remember her as the rainbow than watch her fade into nothing.

"You had it right the first time, Hope... I'm an asshole," I rasped.

Then, blinking back my emotions, I pressed the phone to my ear. "Micah, hi."

I closed my eyes against the barely audible gasp she released. She trusted me to choose her... and I broke that trust.

"Josh! That song you wrote, *Decimated*? Wow. Your fans are gonna go nuts for it."

Seconds later when I opened my eyes, Hope's back was turned, her hands fiddling with the necklace at the back of her neck.

I clenched my jaw as she set the necklace onto the coffee table, then without looking back at me, she walked out the door.

"With your permission, we're going to release it as soon as possible. The stations are going to go berserk!"

My throat bottomed out to my stomach as the door shut behind Hope.

"So? What do you say? Can we release that song?"

Releasing that single would be the final nail in the coffin.

Which was exactly what we... *she*... needed.

My mind spun watching her leave, but I forced myself to feel nothing.

"Go ahead. Release it."

Goodbye, Hope.

Forty-Two

L

JOSH

I SAT IN MY STUDIO, shrouded in darkness.

Usually, I liked to write with some candles lit around me. A few small lamps turned on for mood lighting.

But this time, the mood was dark. Dark like my heart. Dark like my mind. Like my creativity.

Cash sprawled out on the floor at my feet while I strummed random chords on my guitar absently. He was the only friend I really had left after what I had done.

Despite everything going to plan, my brain was blank. No songs came to me at all. No ghosts of lyrics haunted my thoughts.

Which was unheard of.

This was the stage in a breakup where I should be in my most creative state. I should have had at least five songs written within a week, post breakup. If it had been ten years ago, my entire album would have been done by now.

I'd had just over a week since Hope and I ended things to churn out some new songs, but so far all I had done was stare at my blank sheet music in the darkness of my studio.

At this rate, my label was going to drop me and there would be no hope in saving my mom's rescue or paying off my dad's inevitable next gambling

debt, or hell, even saving my own damn career.

With a glance at the clock, I sighed. Ten-thirty at night. Not late for me, but it was pretty worthless to keep sitting here doing nothing.

Giving up for the night, I slid my guitar back in its case and ducked my head between my knees, feeling suddenly lightheaded.

Cash looked up at me, wide brown eyes full of concern and way too adoring for the piece of shit that I had been these last few weeks.

“Don't look at me like that, buddy,” I said. “I don't deserve your love.”

“You sure as hell don't, but we all love your stupid ass anyway.”

I yelped and jumped to my feet, startled to see Matt standing in the doorway of my studio.

“How the fuck did you get in here?” I asked.

He hitched his thumb over his shoulder. “I ran into Rob as he was heading out for the night. It's not like you to work your ranch hands until ten p.m. Why are you avoiding your mom's horses?”

I shrugged, not looking at him. “Rob gets compensated for the overtime,” I muttered.

“I don't doubt that, but it's not what I asked. Bottom line is, while you've been hiding away, the rest of us have been working to the bone to save your sorry ass.”

I could have sat there and argued with him. God knows we'd done that enough in our time together. But what was the point? Instead, I stood up and gave Cash a quick scratch at his scruff. Then I exited my studio, stomping into the kitchen to make some coffee.

“Can't help it that the muse isn't striking,” I said, grabbing the coffee pot and filling it with water. Nevermind the fact it was after ten... I needed a coffee fix. And despite everything, Hope's parting words stuck with me. I'd been avoiding reaching for the bourbon.

“Maybe because for the first time in your life, pushing away the people you love isn't working,” Matt said, following me into the kitchen.

It was annoyingly reminiscent of what Hope had told me just over a week ago.

I shut the water off and dumped the filled pot into the coffee maker while shaking my head. “No. This is my brand. This is what I do: heartbreak. Emo sad music. That's what fans expect from me.” I regurgitated what Micah had said to me on the phone last week. What I'd overheard him saying at the gala.

My newest single was already being blasted on every radio station across the nation. Why the hell did I agree to play that for them? It basically just solidified my “sound” for another ten years while I toured with this new stupid album.

I put the coffee pot back on the hotplate, then grabbed the bag of fancy coffee grounds. It was from the coffee shop where Hope and I had met for a meeting over a month ago.

I stared at the logo ignoring the prickle in my throat. “The fans want me to bleed on the page,” I said, continuing. “They want to listen to my music while they cry tears in their beers and relate to me on the most human, soul-crushing level. And what's more, that's what my label wants too. Hell, you heard them! I played them the song for my mom. The one filled with sweet memories and happy times that would be perfect for a mother and son to dance to at a wedding. They don't want it. They liked the song about Hope. The one about lies and deceit. *That's* what they want. *That's* what they'll shell out the big bucks for. And *that's* what will keep our businesses alive, both yours and mine.”

Matt tossed his hands into the air, grabbing the bag of coffee grounds out of my hands and tossing them against the backsplash. “Well then maybe it's time for a new fucking label! You ever think about that? Did you ever stop and consider that maybe *you've* outgrown your original twenty-something emo bullshit sound?”

Jesus Christ. What was with everyone throwing shit and making a mess in my kitchen?

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. In all honesty, I hadn't thought that. I didn't realize that was an option... leaving this label. Finding a new producer. Even with Matt's permission, it didn't feel possible. It was hard enough to find a label the first time. It wasn't as easy as just signing new contracts.

"You expect me to just leave my label? Start anew somewhere else with people who've never heard of me?"

"You're Josh Gabriel. Trust me, buddy. Everyone has heard of you."

I grabbed the dustpan and started sweeping up the spilled grounds from the counter. "It doesn't matter anyway. It's not like I'm over here writing tons of happy fucking songs that celebrate Hope's and my wonderful relationship."

"You're right, you're not. Because you've never *tried* to. Plenty of musicians make their living off of celebratory, happy music. Look at Pharrell. Garth Brooks. Dolly Parton. Even your beloved Willie Nelson."

"We're not actually comparing me to legends are we?" I scoffed.

"Not yet. But we could be... eventually."

Why was I fighting this so hard? What was I so afraid of?

I scooped the spilled coffee grounds into the dustpan and dumped them in the garbage. "What the hell would that even look like? I wouldn't know a healthy relationship if it bit me in the ass."

"You dumbass," Matt said. "You *had* the healthy relationship. You had it for four weeks. And you spent most of it wondering when and how you could end it and break your own heart. But in the process, you not only broke yours... but you broke Hope's, you broke Maggie's... and you broke mine." He paused, glancing down at Cash who gave a little whimper and cocked his head at us. "Hell, I think you even broke the goddamn dog's heart. And Cash was the happiest dog I'd ever seen before Hope left."

I looked up, seeing my best friend for the first time in over a week. I mean, *truly* seeing him. He looked as rough as I did.

Mussed hair, dark shadows beneath his bloodshot eyes. Sallow, gaunt cheekbones. “Shit,” I muttered. “I’m sorry. No word from Maggie yet either?”

He shook his head. “Your little outburst at the studio tipped her off. And as soon as she found out I had dated her friend Jackie and had this secret intel on her hiring Hope, she took off. Refusing to answer my calls and texts.”

“I’m sorry.” He was right... that was my fault too. If I hadn’t opened my big mouth, she never would have found out about that.

Matt waved my apology off. “I should have told her sooner. If you hadn’t spilled the beans, Jackie would have eventually. I’m blaming you, but it’s my own damn fault for lying to her.” He paused, his grip on my granite counters tightening. “And I shouldn’t have lied to you either. Sorry for that, buddy.”

“Please don’t apologize. Not after everything I’ve done.”

Matt stepped forward and pulled me into a hug. “No apologies then. From either of us.”

I clapped him on the back and pulled away, wiping the mist from my eyes. “At least not to each other. Sounds like you might owe one to Maggie.”

“Yeah, if she’ll ever take my calls again.”

“She will.”

He popped a brow higher. “How do you know?”

I shrugged. “She’s a romantic. You’ve just got to come up with a grand gesture.”

“And what about Hope?”

“Hope’s not a romantic. She’s a cynic, like me.”

Matt tapped his palm to my chest. “Then I guess you’ll have to try harder than a simple grand gesture. Maybe start by writing that happy music, huh?”

I rolled my eyes and started the coffee again. “You’re just saying that because you want my new record finished.”

“Guilty.”

“Besides, how the hell am I supposed to write music about being happily

in love when... well, we're not."

"You're still in love, Josh. Whether or not you're with her. And from what I saw, you had a notebook filled with potential lyrics when you two were together. Start there."

Start there. Like it's that easy.

Even still, I plopped down on my couch with my guitar and Cash curled up on the other end while I strummed. Closing my eyes, I pictured Hope, trying to remember better times together. Happier times.

There was a whisper of a melody. Something bright and optimistic that didn't at all fit me or who I am... or rather, *was*. Hell, it didn't even fit Hope. I was faking it. Forcing it.

I squeezed my eyes tighter and kept forging forward. There was a song here, goddammit. Hope and I were happy together... so why couldn't I put that into a sound?

Frustrated, my ringtone pulled me out of my abyss.

I blinked, first struck by the time... midnight. Damn, I'd been at this for almost two hours. But secondly, I noticed Nina's name blinking on my caller ID.

I swiped my thumb across the screen and answered hesitantly. "Nina? What's wrong?"

"Josh!" A deep voice bellowed.

"Um... yes. Who's this?"

Whoever it was sounded drunk as a skunk.

"It's Rick! You know, Rick Evans... Hope's father."

Rick was calling me? I knew Hope had given my number to him in case of emergency, but his calling could only mean—oh my god. "Is Hope okay?"

I was already on my feet.

For a man who was a recovering alcoholic, it sounded like he fell off the wagon and got trampled by the horses too. "Where are you, Rick? Why are you calling from Nina's phone?"

“Give me that,” Nina’s voice snapped on the other end of the line. “Josh? This guy’s drunk at my bar and has no phone or wallet on him. And he’s claiming he knows you.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “That’s Hope’s dad. Tell Rick to sit tight. I’ll be right there.”

Forty-Three

L

HOPE

MAGGIE HAD her feet propped in my lap as I carefully painted her pinky toe.

Her head was buried in her phone and we were both only half-watching the true crime documentary on Netflix.

“He’s calling again,” Maggie said, waving her cell phone in the air.

“Matt?”

“Yep. That makes three times in the last hour for anyone keeping track.”

“Stop wiggling! Unless you want Passion Pink on the bottoms of your feet too. And for the love of God, if his calling is bothering you that much, just block him already.”

She raised an eyebrow at me, but at least she stopped shifting while I tried to paint her toenails. “Does that mean *you* blocked Josh?”

“That’d be pretty pointless since he’s never called, wouldn’t you say?” I finished the final layer of topcoat with a flick of my wrist. “But hey, next time Matt texts, do me a solid and tell him to answer my freaking messages. I’m going to go crazy if I don’t find a way to return this stupid money to Josh somehow.”

Maggie tossed her phone onto the coffee table with a sigh. “I don’t know why you’re so hellbent on returning that money. You did your part. You were his *muse* or whatever.” She twisted her face with the word, mocking it. If I

hadn't been so raw, I would have laughed.

"I didn't do my part though. The contract was for six weeks... and I left after four."

Maggie scooped a handful of M&M's and popped them into her mouth. Speaking with her mouth full, she said, "No, he kicked you out after four weeks. There's a difference. And judging from that stupid song that plays on a damn constant loop on every radio station, he got what he needed from you."

That was what hurt the most. He used me. While I was falling for his dopey lovesick eyes and every line he gave me, he knew it was all just an act. He knew we were sabotaged from the start. He knew it so much that he'd already started writing songs about our demise while I was busy falling in love.

I shoved my feet up into Maggie's lap and handed her the nearly black nail polish I had chosen for the wedding. Might not be the most traditional color, but with how I was feeling, they were lucky I was still participating at all. "My turn."

Before taking the nail polish, Maggie leaned forward. "I need another hit," she said, her bloodshot eyes wired.

"You sure? You've had four tonight already."

Seriously, she held my gaze and nodded. "Hit me." Then as she opened her mouth, I took the can of Reddi-Wip and sprayed it directly into her mouth.

"Okay, gimme your feet," she said, the words barely understandable through her whipped cream-filled mouth.

I laughed for the millionth time this week; despite my broken heart, Maggie could make me giggle. I never thought I'd find another best friend on par with Carrow and Maxie, but Maggie was the real deal. Matt was an idiot to lie to her.

"Hey," I said, nudging her with my toe. "If you did decide to forgive

Matt, that'd be okay, you know? We don't both have to suffer fools."

The truth was, what Matt did was dumb. Deceitful. Kind of slimy. But I could also see he kept that secret because he was so damn afraid Maggie would leave him if he told her. And before he knew it, he was in too deep. I could also see how deeply he cared for her... maybe even loved her.

Maggie shrugged, avoiding my gaze as she shook the nail polish bottle. "We'll see."

"I'm just saying, don't feel like you have to stay miserable and alone just because I am."

She tilted her head, regarding me quietly. "You could try again with Josh, too, you know."

"I put it all out there. He made his choice. But this thing with Matt?" I gestured to her buzzing phone. "He's really trying to make it up to you."

Her mouth twitched. "He is, isn't he?"

"How long are you going to punish him?"

She gave me an impish smile. "Maybe a few more hours."

The knock at my dad's condo door caught us both by surprise.

Who the hell was knocking at the door at nine p.m. on a Wednesday night?

Maggie was literally the only person who ever surprised me these days.

Julianne, Maryanne, and Raeanne all knew the basics of what happened between me and Josh... or at least they knew it ended... so they were giving me space. Thank god. As much as I had come to accept my dad's impending nuptials, going to a wedding when you were broken-hearted was the absolute worst.

I sighed, standing up from the couch. Whoever was out there was about to find me wrapped in a terry cloth robe, half a bottle of wine deep, a mud mask on my face, and wet polish on my toenails.

I paused the serial killer documentary, then peeked out the peephole... but there was nothing but black.

Someone was covering the peephole.

Under normal circumstances, this might not have been alarming. But after watching Matt call Maggie obsessively and one hour into a serial killer documentary, my senses were heightened.

I reached for the closest heavy thing beside me... one of my dad's golf umbrellas.

It wasn't exactly a major weapon, but the heavy wood handle would do in a pinch.

"Who's out there? I'm armed with a deadly weapon!"

Maggie whipped her head around to look at me wielding the umbrella.

"Deadly?" she whispered.

"Texas is a gun-state!" I whisper-yelled back to her. "They don't know what I'm packing here!"

"Oh my *god*, you're so dramatic." Carrow's voice came from the other side of the door.

"Just open up!" Maxie said next. "We know you're in there holding a frying pan or something equally stupid."

"Carrow? Maxie?!" I flung the door open. "You're not supposed to get in until tomorr-OH!"

When I opened the door, I wasn't only met with my two best friends.

Three men and a woman jumped from the bushes beside the condo, all yelling, "Surprise!"

I screamed.

Screamed literal bloody murder while taking a swing with the umbrella at the beefiest, most muscular man reaching out toward me, clocking him right in the temple.

"Hope! Hope! It's us! It's your siblings!"

Panicked and panting and holding the umbrella like a baseball bat, I took in the scene before me.

My brothers and sister all stood before me, cowering, backing up as

Carrow and Maxie pulled the umbrella out of my grasp. Neil, my dad's oldest son from his first marriage, rubbed at his temple where I'd struck him. "Told you guys surprising her was a bad idea."

"Neil?" I blinked back the tears that formed in my eyes. "I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay," he waved off the injury and tugged me into a hug. "I was a stuntman for years... this cranium's had more of a beating than that in its lifetime."

"Hey," Liam said, stepping forward. "At least we know you can fend for yourself out here." He wrapped his arms around me, too, joining in on the hug.

"Yeah," Finn added, "you've got that fight or flight thing down." Finn dove like a golden retriever puppy into the group hug.

With a roll of her eyes, but a good-natured smile, Addy was the last to join in on the hug. "I told these idiots we shouldn't surprise you at nine p.m. on a work night. But no, no one listens to the fiery redhead."

Of course I knew they were all coming for the wedding. I knew I'd be meeting them in person. I just had no idea it would be here. Tonight. While I was in a robe and mud mask. But I didn't care. These were my siblings. They were my people.

Through my tears I asked, "How did you arrange this?"

"We happened to be on the same flight as your friends," Finn said as we all pulled out of the hug.

Liam coughed into his fist. "They hatched a plan on the flight so that after we landed and got set up in the hotel, we would then surprise you and Dad."

Maxie chewed her fingernail. "A plan I'm realizing was better in theory when we were a couple glasses of champagne deep."

"No," I said, hugging Maxie and Carrow into me. "It's perfect. Thank you." Then I turned to look at my siblings. "But Dad's not here. He's living with Vi—"

"Vivian, yeah we know. We surprised him first," Finn said, wincing.

“Unfortunately, that surprise went even worse than this one if you can believe it,” Addy said.

I grimaced. “Worse than an umbrella to the face?”

“Yep.”

“Yikes.”

A flash of concern knotted in my stomach. An unease I couldn’t quite place. Dad was doing really well... and he had Viv there. He’d be fine. Even with this little emotional surprise.

“Well come in!” I waved them inside and hugged the robe tighter around me.

Unfazed, Maggie popped up from where she’d watched the whole thing from the couch and waved. “Hi, everyone!”

I pointed to the bedroom. “I’m just going to change and wash this mask off. Make yourselves at home.”



A couple hours later, I waved from my front door as everyone left to head back to their hotel rooms. Shutting my door, I turned the deadbolt then slumped against it. That was surprisingly easier than I had suspected—hanging out with my siblings for the first time in person rather than via Zoom.

And now, this condo felt even more empty than usual.

I tidied up, putting away wine glasses. Luckily, I had one more bottle of wine to offer to my guests, but I had happily stopped drinking two hours ago. I picked up a fallen blanket, folding it before I realized I didn’t have my phone on me. I had brought it into the bedroom when I went to change after everyone arrived and I must have accidentally left it in there.

Sure enough, there it was, sitting face down on my dresser.

When I picked it up, there were two new voice messages waiting for me.

The first was from Brent.

“Hey,” he said, his voice crisp and clear. The exact voice you could imagine belting out long notes from *The Phantom of the Opera* for the Broadway stages. **“I know you said you were fine, but seriously. These tabloid speculations about you and Josh breaking up are relentless. Trust me, I know from experience how they can be.”**

I snorted to myself and rolled my eyes despite my ex. Always managing to throw it in there how he’s also famous. A fact he won’t let anyone forget. **“Anyway, I just wanted to check in on you and let you know the apartment here in New York is yours if you want it. My broker emailed you the paperwork today.”**

The deep breath I took faltered, trembling in my lungs.

New York. It was what I wanted, right? What all this had been for in the first place? But suddenly, I didn’t feel like leaving. Even without Josh in my life, Texas suddenly felt more like home.

Maggie was here. My sisters were here... my dad and Vivian. Besides, once I managed to return Josh’s fee, I’d be right back where I started. Broke. And alone. **“I also thought I’d let you know that I have an audition out your way and I’ll be passing through Aust—”**

I yanked the phone from my ear and jammed my finger onto the delete button.

Message deleted, the robot voice said.

I didn’t want to hear anymore from Brent. My paparazzi scheme to make him jealous had worked *too* well. He was texting and calling me more than he had back when we were together for God’s sake.

Meanwhile, the one person I wanted to call me has been radio silent for the last two weeks. Unless you count the *actual* radio... in which case, I’d heard his voice crooning about me constantly.

Next message... the robot voice said.

“Hope, it’s Josh. Don’t hang up.”

Every muscle in my body went rigid at the sound of his voice. It was like a ghost saying my name. Slightly raspy, like sleep had been evading him for days like it had been me. So different from Brent's crisp, clear voice, Josh's had some mileage. That emotionally wrung quality that rockstars embraced.

It made my skin heat and tingle from scalp to toe.

I glanced down at the screen, noting the time he had left the message. About twenty minutes ago.

"It's your dad," his message said. That heat in my belly turned frigid like an icy blast hitting me all at once. **"He's at Nina's and he's drunk. I'm on my way to get him now."**

I grabbed my things and ran out the door to Nina's.

Forty-Four

L

JOSH

I GOT to Nina's in record time. Just as I was walking in, a text pinged from Hope.

HOPE:

I'm on my way. I'll meet you there.

Seeing her name, her words on my screen, made my heart clench painfully in my chest.

I'd be seeing her in person in a matter of fifteen minutes. Her dad's condo was only a short drive from the bar.

It was Wednesday night and the bar reflected the quietness of a work night. One table of two couples on a double-date. Another table of a few college-aged girls. And with the exception of one person, they were all pretty mellow. Except for Rick Evans who sat at the bar singing along with Faith Hill at the top of his lungs.

Behind the bar, Nina raised her brow at me. "This belongs to you?" she asked.

"Yeah," I muttered, sliding onto the stool beside him. "Lemme settle his tab," I added, tossing down my credit card.

"Josh!" Rick exclaimed, hooded eyes widening just a touch when he noticed me there. "You came!"

“Hey, buddy,” I said, dropping my palm to his shoulder and giving him a steadying squeeze. “I’d ask how you are, but I think it’s safe to say you’ve seen better nights, huh?”

He blew out an exaggerated breath and drained the rest of his whiskey. “You can say that again.”

I slid the tumbler out of reach and instead nudged the abandoned cup of coffee toward him. “Wanna tell me about it?”

“My kids,” he muttered. “I saw them today.”

My spine straightened. “Hope? Is she okay?”

He waved a hand. “She’s fine. Well, not fine. She’s in that cookie dough ice cream phase of her breakup where she just wants to watch movies and paint her nails.”

I smiled at the thought of her huddled over a pint of ice cream, thinking about me. I didn’t feel so alone in how depressed I’d been.

“I don’t mean *her*,” Rick continued. “I mean my other kids.”

Still confused, I asked, “Julianne, Maryanne, and Raeanne?”

“Noooooo.” His head drunkenly flopped around as he dragged the word out. “My kids from my first marriage. The ones I abandoned to raise Hope.”

Oh. *Oh shit*. That’s right. “And they’re here for the wedding,” I said, piecing it all together.

“I knew they were coming, of course,” he slurred. “But I had a plan. I was going to see them tomorrow. I had speeches prepared. Apologies at the ready. But they surprised me instead. Showed up at my house to say hello.”

“That must have been overwhelming.”

“I felt blindsided. But I deserve it. And I don’t deserve them.”

“Don’t deserve who? Your kids?”

“My kids, Vivian, *her* kids. I don’t deserve any of them.”

He whipped his head up from where he’d dropped it on the bar and spun to look at me. “You know, my kids from my first marriage, they all turned out great... *despite* me. Just like Hope. And now what? I just think I can do

this all over again? Marry for the fifth time and actually make this one stick? It's ridiculous. I'm a joke."

"You're not a joke, Rick," I said gently, nodding at Nina as she slid my credit card back to me. "You love Vivian. You've transformed. Built a whole new life here. A new you. Hope told me, she didn't quite believe it at first, but she's so proud of you."

He snorted. "I doubt that."

"She is," I said. "I wouldn't lie to you."

At that statement, he lifted his gaze to me once more, an expression of fatherly protectiveness sweeping over his face. "You wouldn't lie? Pshhhh. That ain't what I've heard about you."

I froze, locked into his deep brown eyes, so similar to Hope's. "I guess I deserve that. But Hope and I had an agreement. It was six weeks. That was it. After that, she would go back to New York. Get back together with that Broadway baby of hers—"

"Brent?" Rick pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, then paused to take a sip of coffee before adding. "She doesn't love that guy. I doubt she ever did. Don't think I ever saw my daughter truly in love... until you."

Funny things swirled in my stomach at that statement. I both loved and hated it all at once.

"Doesn't change the fact she's going back to New York soon," I said, ignoring the frog in my throat.

"If that's true, then it's news to me," Rick grumbled.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Was he lying? Keeping it from me when she was planning to move? But why would he do that? He had nothing to gain, did he?

"Heard that song o' yours on the radio, by the way," Rick added. "Pretty goddamn depressing if you ask me. I hope the one you wrote for our wedding is happier than that."

I raked my hands through my hair. “Your wedding?”

Rick slapped his palm on the bar. “Don’t tell me you didn’t write it!?”

“I—I didn’t think I was still invited. After everything that happened, I mean.”

“Hell, I don’t even know there is a wedding anymore,” Rick muttered. “But if there was, it’d be a damn good place to win back my daughter’s heart.” He gave me a knowing look.

I rolled my eyes. “I think a wedding is the *last* place to win Hope over.”

Rick chuckled and took another sip of coffee that seemed to be working wonders for him. “That one’s on me unfortunately.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “If you grovel to Viv and convince her to take you back, I’ll be there singing on your wedding day. But I have to admit, inspiration isn’t hitting like it used to. I’m not exactly known for writing happy music about love and commitment.”

Rick finished his coffee and slid the mug away from him. “Well I’m not known for feedin’ chickens or taking care of puppies or interior design or goat wranglin’, but here I am. Better at it than I ever thought possible. Sometimes the things we’re not known for are exactly what we should be doing with our lives.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Actually, no. It’s the hardest damn thing in the world for me to say. Look here, this wedding song... it doesn’t have to be *happy*.”

I raised my brows. “It doesn’t?”

“No. It just needs to be hopeful. You can be in your darkest days, but instead of leaning into the despair, look forward to the future. Write about the optimism of days to come. Your first hit was fictional about a girl taking her life, right?”

My throat clenched. “Yeah.”

“Well... this can be fictional about your happiness. Create *that* story. Who knows...” He leaned in, gently jabbing his elbow into my ribs. “Maybe

by writing it into the song, you'll manifest it to be your reality."

Just like I had almost manifested Jenn's suicide.

I wiped at my weary eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Yeah, right. A lying asshole like me doesn't even deserve to win your daughter back."

Rick shrugged. "Well, if a drunk asshole like me still deserves a second chance with my kids and Vivian... then you do too. Our two realities don't exist in a vacuum. So which is it, Josh? Do we get the girl? Or do we live our miserable lives alone? You with your music... me with my whiskey."

His words struck me like a mallet to the head. Did I deserve Hope despite everything? Could that even be possible?

On cue, the bells over the door chimed and Hope's voice filled the empty bar. "Dad!"

A rainbow entering a darkened room.

The sight of her after all this time was the fresh spring water after weeks in a desert. She was a ray of sunshine peeking through storm clouds.

And the moment I saw her, lyrics and melodies slammed into me, faster than I could scribble them down on the napkin beside me.

Forty-Five

L

HOPE

“DAD! ARE YOU OKAY?” I rushed over to where he was slumped at the bar and inspected him.

Eyes: bloodshot. Skin: clammy. Breath... *whoa*. Whiskey. *All* the whiskey.

“I’m fine, Lovebug. Other than being a damned idiot and falling off the wagon hard.”

“You’re not an idiot—” Both Josh and I spoke at once.

Time slowed as from over my dad’s head, my eyes slowly met Josh’s for the first time in weeks.

I wasn’t prepared.

I wasn’t prepared for the sharp blue depths of his eyes. Or the way his hair had grown out just a bit more, curling over his ears and falling across his forehead. I wasn’t prepared for the quick flash of dimple as his mouth curved at the sight of me.

How dare he look this good while I had spent the better part of a week crying into a pint of ice cream and basically being a living, breathing cliché.

He was hunched over several napkins scribbling what looked like lyrics in his messy cursive. Curiosity ached at my core, but I forced my gaze away from them. If they were anything like his last song, I wanted nothing to do with it. Or him.

“I *am* an idiot,” Dad said. “I’m an idiot for blowing a year of sobriety. I’m an idiot for risking everything I’ve built with Vivian.”

“You’re not risking anything,” I said, pulling my credit card out of my purse to hand to Nina. I’d been through this before and rookie mistake number one is leaving without settling the bill.

Nina waved me away. “Josh already settled the tab.”

Great. Just great. Add on another hundred bucks to that fifty thousand I owed to Josh.

One thing at a time.

I inspected the area around my dad. We’d seen way worse in our life together. At least he could sit up and maintain eye contact tonight. And he hadn’t vomited... yet.

Even though he was clearly drunk, this wasn’t anything a little coffee, tylenol, and a few hours of sleep couldn’t fix. “Dad, Vivian *never* has to know about this. I’ll text her now and tell her you were hanging out at the condo with me and Neil, Liam, Finn, and Addy and forgot your pho—”

“Not this time, Lovebug,” Dad said. “You’ve been taking care of me long enough. It’s time for me to face the music.”

He slowly stood from his stool, swaying on his feet. Both Josh and I grabbed his elbows to steady him, but he shrugged us away. “I’m okay, I promise. Hope, can I borrow your phone? I want to step outside and call Viv.”

“Dad—”

“Don’t you *Dad* me. I may not deserve Vivian, but *she* deserves my full honesty. And we’ll see where we’re at then. In the case she doesn’t want me to come home tonight, can I stay with you, Bug?”

“Of course,” I whispered. “It’s *your* condo, Dad.”

I watched, shell shocked as he shuffled out the front door, my cell phone in his hand.

“Is your dad going to be okay out there alone?”

“That,” I stopped to point at the door slamming closed behind him, “is *not* my dad. That is some alternate dimension, parallel universe Rick Evans.”

A slow, rolling laugh rumbled from Josh as he stared at me with an amused grin.

Honestly, I was trying to keep it together. Focus on my dad and get the hell out of here. But with Josh standing merely inches away from me, I was failing miserably at playing it cool.

My stomach tumbled within my belly.

“Hope—”

The moment he said my name, it was ice water dousing the fire. “I’m glad I ran into you,” I blurted out.

Ran into you. Like this was an accident and not some messed up evening where my ex, if you could even call him that, got called in to take care of my drunk father.

I yanked my checkbook from my bag and started scribbling Josh’s name on it.

“What’s that? What are you doing?”

“I am giving you your money back.” I punctuated each word as I wrote out the amount. Then I ripped the check out and shoved it at Josh.

When Josh turned to face me, he stared at me for several silent beats, not taking the check from my hands. “You’re trying to give me the money back.”

“Yes. With our contract voided—”

“You already refused to take what was left of the gifts I gave you,” he said, point blank.

That was true. The Annes had offered to get my things for me and I gave them explicit instructions not to take a single thing that Josh had given to me. What was left of them after the auction, at least. It was nice to know they listened to me and didn’t take a few things for themselves.

“That’s right,” I said, waving the check around. “And now I’m refunding you your money.”

Josh's laugh was humorless and quiet as he grabbed the check, then tore it into a dozen little pieces and tossed them into the air.

They floated around us like snowflakes falling from the sky.

"Hey!" Nina shouted from the bar.

But he didn't remove his scowling gaze from mine. "Sorry, Nina. I'll sweep them up later."

"Damn straight you will," she muttered.

I didn't dare blink away from his little staring contest first. Eyes still on Josh, I heard Nina disappear through the door into the kitchen.

"Take the damn money, *Josh*."

"Not a chance, *Hope*."

"Arg!" I threw my hands up in frustration. "You are infuriating, you know that?"

"That is your money. You did the job. You earned the paycheck. Just like those clothes were—*are*—yours too. They're waiting for you whenever you're ready to collect them. Or I can just ship them up to your apartment in New York."

"What are you talking about? I don't have an apartment in New York."

Josh rolled his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. Brent's apartment. He got one for you, didn't he? Does that mean you're moving in together?"

I narrowed my eyes at Josh. "How do you know all that?"

"So it's true, then?"

"I—I'm not having this discussion with you. Where I go or who I live with is none of your concern anymore! You made your choice, Josh. Live with it. And take back your damn money."

"No."

I let out a frustrated growl, throwing my hands in the air. "I'm not going to win this fight, am I?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

Gathering my thoughts, I took a long, slow breath and looked around the

mostly empty bar. There were still a few tables of people finishing up their last call round of drinks. But other than that, it was just Josh and me.

My eyes landed on the napkin beside him, the pen discarded absently next to my dad's empty cup of coffee.

Rainbow girl

Shines so bright

Ray of sunshine, ray of light

Though we bicker, though we fight

You're my flicker of hope

At the end of the night.

My heart fluttered. Those lyrics didn't sound like his other songs.

"How's the song writing going?" I asked him, point blank. According to Josh's timeline, a couple weeks post break up should mean he was almost done with the whole album.

"Not great," he admitted.

Inwardly, I fought the battle between clashing mindsets—the urge to pump my fist in the air at the fact I might have evaded any more songs about me, and the instinctive spike of compassion for Josh. This meant he only had five days left to finish an entire album or else his label would drop him... and he might lose the horse rescue.

"You know, sometimes you just need a change of scenery," I said. "Get out of your stuffy studio. Take the horse out for a ride. Hell, write a song about Cash. Just... anything to break out of your comfort zone. Maybe you've been going about it wrong."

"Maybe... maybe I chose wrong."

Maybe he chose wrong.

"Maybe I should have chosen *you*," he continued.

I wasn't sure what brought on this change of heart.

When I looked up, he was three inches closer to me, his elbow brushing mine. The touch lingered for one breath... two breaths... and it surged

goosebumps up my body. Every cell in my body hummed in his vicinity.

“Why didn’t you?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

With his swallow, I followed the line of his throat, hypnotized by the bounce of his Adam’s apple and the nervous tick at his jaw. “Because I thought I didn’t deserve you. Hell, I still don’t know if I do, but your dad...” He paused, his gaze drifting briefly to the door. “He had a lot of insights.”

My heart took off at a gallop, slamming into my ribcage as he lowered his head slowly, dipping his mouth to mine. But our lips didn’t touch.

He hovered, his mouth centimeters from mine, as the molecules between us sparked to life.

The music crooning over the speakers of the bar stopped, the DJ’s voice on the radio blasting through our moment. “And because it’s the song everyone’s talking about and requesting... here’s the new Josh Gabriel tune!”

That song.

That fucking song.

Despite everything, I still cared for Josh. Deeper than I cared to admit even to myself.

It was also why I couldn’t be trusted around him.

I wasn’t rational.

I wasn’t thinking clearly.

Clearing my throat, I stepped back. “What’s done is done. You made your choice. Now you have to live with the consequences.”

Josh didn’t look surprised in the least bit. He simply nodded, eyes glossy, resigned to his fate.

I turned to go outside to wait with my dad, but Josh’s voice halted me mid-step. “I’ll see you Saturday.”

Slowly I turned to face him. “Saturday?”

“The wedding.”

I shook my head. “No... you’re not... I mean, you can’t—”

“Well, provided there still is a wedding.” His gaze drifted to the door

where my dad stood beaming, giving us a drunken thumbs up. “But something tells me Vivian and Rick will be just fine.”

“Josh, this is so incredibly inappropriate—”

“I made the wrong choice,” Josh said, cutting me off. “I messed up. I know that. And I can accept the consequences, even if they break my heart. But don’t confuse me respecting your space with apathy. When it comes to you, I’m anything but indifferent.”

“Even if the consequences break your heart,” I repeated his words. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

He blew out a heavy breath, then grabbed his scribbled-on napkins, shoving them in his pocket. “I thought so, too, but I was wrong. And a wise woman once told me I can’t expect anyone else to forgive me if I don’t first forgive myself. I’m not there yet, but I’m working on it.”

“Hey, that sounds like something you would say, Bug,” my dad chimed in, blissfully clueless as always.

With a quick parting smile and a final flash of that dimple of his, Josh disappeared through the door.

What the *hell* was I supposed to do with that information? Seriously. It was a lot to process all at once. Josh was sorry. He chose wrong. He’s coming to my dad’s freaking wedding.

I fell into the closest booth, head in my hands.

“Good news,” Dad said, his words still a little slurred. “The wedding’s still on. And Vivian wants me to come home tonight.”

“That’s great, Dad,” I said, not lifting my head.

“I mean... don’t get me wrong. She’s *pissed*. But she said she knew the moment Neil, Liam, Finn, and Addy showed up on our front door that I might have a rough night.”

“Yeah. That’ll do it.” I stared at the wood grain pattern on the table. *Don’t cry, don’t cry...* all I’d been doing was crying for the last week and I was so sick of it.

“I really did try calling my sponsor, Bug. I called him eight times but I forgot he was on a plane tonight.”

With tears in my eyes, I looked up at my dad. “Why didn’t you call *me*?” All my feelings, all my thoughts that had been tamped down for years bubbled to the surface. Pressing my hands to the table, I tried to ground myself. “You always manage to call me and rope me into this shit *after* you’re drunk! Why can’t I also be your person when you’re finally sober? Why do Vivian and the Annes get the best parts of you and I get *this*!”

“The Annes?” He asked after a moment.

“The Annes! Julianne, Maryanne, Raeanne...”

“Heh. That’s what you call them?” His slow smirk was the reality check I needed. This wasn’t the time. Or the place. Hell, maybe he was drunker than he seemed. Maybe he wasn’t even registering my words.

I wiped my fingers across my damp cheeks and shook my head. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything. I’ll take you back to Viv’s—”

Dad’s hand landed gently over mine. “I told Vivian I wasn’t coming home tonight. I told her I wanted to spend the next two nights with you at the condo.”

My mind went blank at that. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re my daughter and I love you. I’d been giving you your space while you were here because it seemed to be what you wanted. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned with Vivian and this sobriety... sometimes it’s when someone is pulling away that we need to hold them even closer.” His voice cracked as a tear fell from his eye. “I’m sorry I never held you close enough, Bug. I’m sorry I was never the father you deserved. I’m sorry you spent a lifetime cleaning up my messes.”

He stood up from where he was sitting across from me and slid beside me, wrapping thick arms around my shoulders. “After twenty-eight years, it’s time I took care of you for once, don’t you think?”

I bit the corner of my mouth, shaking my head. “Take care of me? I’m

fine.”

Dad nodded, but didn't release me from the hug. “I know you are. I know how skilled you are at the fine art of suppression. Again, that one's on me. In order to release our emotions, we have to feel safe enough to be vulnerable. I know it may take time for you to feel safe with me—”

A sob tore from my chest.

I buried my face in my Dad's shoulder and cried while he held me, rubbing my back in slow circles.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when I finally pulled back from his hug, I could barely see through my raw, swollen eyes.

“Seriously,” I said with a hiccup. “What sort of alternate dimension Rick Evans are you?”

Dad's chuckle rumbled against me.

“Sober Rick Evans,” he said.

I drew back and gave him a look.

“Okay,” he rolled his eyes. “Not sober *tonight*, unfortunately. But almost years of the program and therapy really sink in eventually.”

“I can see that.”

His smile faded and he lifted his thumb to wipe the tears from my cheeks. “I know you think Vivian and the girls get the best of me... but you, Hope. You *are* the best of me. Nothing can replace that. You grew into this amazing woman despite having me as a father. I'll apologize as much as you need me to for that. But also, I'm not going anywhere, Lovebug. You might be all grown up, but you'll always be my baby girl who loves gummy bears in her pancakes. And you'll always have a home here in Austin.”

I squeezed his forearm, pulling my keys from my pocket. “C'mon, Dad. Let's go home.”

Because he was right about everything he said. All of it—Austin was home.

For the first time in my life, I felt settled and complete in a city.

And it had nothing to do with the hunky country singer seeking to get in my good graces again.

Nope, not in the least.

Forty-Six

L

HOPE

“DAD, COME HERE,” I said, laughing. “Your tie is all askew!”

I was already fully dressed in my bridesmaid gown, hair and makeup done, and I was bouncing back and forth between the bridal suite and where my dad was getting ready with my brothers.

I smacked the back of my hand against Finn’s shoulder. “Were you seriously going to let him go out looking like this?” I teased.

Finn snorted, glancing at me in the reflection of the mirror. “I can barely get *my* damn tie on!”

I smiled up at Dad as I straightened the knot at the base of his throat. We’d had the greatest three nights together. We ate junk food and watched movies and Neil, Liam, Finn, Addy and all their respective partners joined us for lunch and dinner.

Last night after the rehearsal dinner, we made pancakes at midnight.

It wasn’t all easy.

I confronted him about some of my traumas.

And he responded thoughtfully. Listened. And sometimes cried.

But for the first time in my whole life, watching him prepare for multiple weddings, this was the first time I knew in my heart that it was right.

Vivian was it for him.

She was his happily ever after.

Meanwhile, my unhappily ever after was relentlessly texting me. Several times a day, Josh would send me one-liners. Quick lyrics from what I assumed were songs he was writing.

But there was never any context.

JOSH:

Held hostage by whiskey eyes...

JOSH:

Tanned arms that hold me close.

JOSH:

It's easy letting you rob my dreams...

“There,” I said, patting my palm to Dad’s now straight tie. “Now you’re perfect.”

“Thank you, Bug. Who knows? Maybe the next family wedding will be *yours*.”

With a snort, I looked around at my four siblings... all who had amazing partners they were clearly wild about. They were leaps and bounds closer to a wedding than I was.

“Well, I’d say I need a *boyfriend* first.”

My discarded phone buzzed from the table beside Liam.

Looking down, he asked, “Who’s Josh and why is he texting about your *Neroli oil neck and rosehip lips*?”

“Oh my god.” I rushed over and flipped the phone so it was face down. As if that could erase the last ten seconds of humiliation.

“Dude,” Finn said, rolling his eyes at his brother. “Even *I* know not to peek at a girl’s texts.”

“I’m sorry!” Liam said, gesturing at my phone. “It was right there when I looked down.”

“It’s okay,” I reassured him as quickly as I could despite my rapidly heating cheeks.

“It’s so not okay,” Neil muttered beneath his breath.

This time, it was Liam who turned beet red. “I really am sorry.”

“I *know*.” I recognized the fear in his voice. The relationship with my siblings was still so new and fragile. Something as small as this wasn’t going to destroy us. “Seriously, Liam. We’re fine.” I pushed onto my toes and kissed his cheek briefly.

Grabbing my phone from the table, I backed out of the room. “I have to go check on the flowers,” I said before shutting the door behind me with a heavy exhale.

Okay, fine. It was an excuse to get away from that scene in there, but Maxie did ask me to make sure the flowers were set up and check on the bouquets. She was busy helping Vivian get ready and I could use a break from my extremely large family. I loved them... truly I did. But it was a bit overwhelming going from being an only child to having four sisters and three brothers.

Flower arrangements seemed like the *perfect* break.

The bouquets were lined up in the vestibule, just outside of the open French doors of the chapel.

I lifted the first one, noticing the ribbons wrapped around the stems had twisted a little.

I wasn’t sure if Viv was a bridezilla or not, but I knew Maxie would absolutely shit a brick if she saw these. I got to work straightening the ribbons.

I was on my third bouquet when a throat cleared from behind me.

My heart fluttered.

Josh?

Was he here? Would I speak to him? Would I forgive him?

I wanted to. I so desperately wanted to trust him. Forgive him. Be with him.

I tried to pretend like the thought didn’t send a display of fireworks off in

my chest.

I slowly turned around, ready to face him. Ready for the conversation I thought might never come. “Jo—*Brent*?!”

“Babe,” he said as casually as if we hadn’t packed up our lives together and moved on. As if he hadn’t cheated on me, then proposed to that girl with my ring. It was funny though... I hadn’t thought about that or the ring or even cared in some time.

Involuntarily my nose scrunched as he took a step closer. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I left you a message,” he said seemingly genuinely surprised I wasn’t running into his arms and thrilled to see him. “I had an audition in Texas and said I’d stop by the wedding. The invitation was still up on the fridge.”

“And you thought it would be okay to crash my dad’s wedding? That I’d even *want* you here?”

He tilted his head. “Don’t tell me you’re still with that twangy country singer after that song he released about you.”

“I—”

“Look, Hope,” he cut me off, stepping in and wrapping thick hands gently around my biceps. “We both acted rashly. I think we needed to get some things out of our system, you know? We were too young to get engaged. Too inexperienced.”

Frozen. I was utterly frozen.

Josh was right. The damn plan worked *too* well.

I shrugged his hands off me. “Which engagement might you be referring to, Brent? The one with me? Or her?”

He sighed and shook his head. “That was just a publicity stunt.”

I nodded aggressively as if that made any sense. “Does *she* know it was a publicity stunt? Hell, does she even know you’re here in Austin at my dad’s wedding?”

“This isn’t about her—”

“Of course it isn’t. Just like it probably wasn’t about *me* when you were seeing her behind my back?”

I stomped over to the front doors and flung them open. Dozens of paparazzi came rushing at us snapping photos, flashbulbs going off. They’d been out there for hours. I always had one or two tailing me when I was out and about in Austin... the crappy parting gift of Josh’s newest hit song.

But with Josh coming to the wedding today to sing? The number of paparazzi had tripled.

“It’s about them, isn’t it? Getting your face out there? Getting seen?”

Brent was immediately posing, smiling for the cameras and gliding his hand around my waist. Through his gritted-teeth smile, he said, “Babe, we can talk about this later.”

“Actually, we can’t. Consider yourself uninvited to the wedding.”

I turned to walk back inside, but Brent grabbed my hand and with more force than I was used to, he pulled me in for a kiss.

“Mmph!”

As hard as I pressed the heels of my hands into his shoulders, I couldn’t push him off of me. It wasn’t like the movies. It wasn’t as easy to break a damned kiss as you might think.

Finally, I pried him off of me, but I wasn’t sure if it was because I was successful in stopping the kiss or if Brent had pulled back at the same time.

That’s when I saw Josh. Standing in the sea of paparazzi, holding his guitar case.

I saw the moment Josh’s eyes connected with Brent. It was like invisible brass knuckles socked him in the gut. He took a step back, like he was preparing to retreat.

I shook my head and mouthed, “It’s not what you think.”

He turned around, starting to walk away. Panicked, I did the only thing I could think of and yelled, “That’s Josh Gabriel there! Stop him!”

The paparazzi abandoned Brent and me for the main event and swarmed

Josh, snapping constant pictures.

From over the heads of all the photographers, he slowly turned back to face me, his brows lifted.

“I was just going to get my amp out of the truck,” he said, hitching his thumb over his shoulder.

I nibbled my bottom lip, mostly to stop myself from laughing or crying, I wasn't sure which. He pushed through the photographers, making his way up the stairs to me. “I know what you look like when you want to be kissed, Hope Marcoux-Evans. And that sad excuse for a kiss wasn't it. In fact, I wrote a whole song about that face.”

“Did you?” I asked, breathless. Because this was what I'd been reduced to. A breathless wisp who could only just barely repeat his words back as questions.

“This face,” he said, cupping my jaw. I whimpered at the feel of his touch on my skin. I'd missed it so much. Missed him so much.

“You really hurt me, Josh. You chose your image... your brand over me. And even though I know it wasn't the same thing, it felt like Brent all over again. Choosing fame, someone who could get him more seen—”

“Um,” Brent said, stepping forward, “that's not quite true—”

“Shut up, Brent!” we both growled at the same time.

“I know I hurt you,” Josh said. “I'm so sorry. I'm going to spend the rest of our lives proving to you that you can trust me. You've changed me for good.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe in us.

But I was also terrified.

“How do I know?”

“You don't,” he whispered. “And I know that's scary. But I'm asking you to give me a second chance. Because you may not know my heart... but *I* know my heart. Let me prove it to you.”

I sniffled against the moisture in my eyes.

“I left my label,” he said quickly.

My gaze snapped to his and suddenly the pressure of everyone watching us weighed a thousand pounds on my shoulders. “You what?”

“They didn’t like my new songs. Any of them. So I left.”

“But... the rescue. Your ranch—”

“I found a new label and they love these songs. They love every new song. The ones about riding. About my mom. I even wrote one about Cash as per your suggestion,” he added, laughing. My heart tightened at the sound and how much I loved that dimple on his cheek and smile spreading across his full lips. “But most of all, they loved the songs about *you*.”

I didn’t pull away as his hand at my jaw slid down to my bare neck, grasping me tighter, pulling me in closer. “You wrote a song about me?”

“I wrote multiple songs about you. About this heart. These eyes. These lips—”

“Rosehip lips and a neroli oil neck?” I offered, my eyes darting around to the dozens of photographers snapping pictures of every second of our reunion.

“That’s right. My wingwoman... who ended up being my woman. The only question left is if you want me to be your man?”

I took a deep breath, looking back at the entrance to the wedding venue. My family was piled around the door, all watching. I hadn’t even realized how much our audience had grown. But everyone was there, even my dad and Viv with their backs to each other so they weren’t actually ‘seeing’ each other before the wedding.

“Baby girl!” Viv called out. “If you don’t kiss that cowboy right now, one of *us* just might!”

“Speak for yourself,” Neil muttered beside her.

I laughed, dropping my forehead to Josh’s chest. I never imagined happiness like this. Family like this.

He pulled back, his gaze sweeping over me. “Your outfit is missing

something, you know...”

From his pocket, he pulled out his mother’s necklace. The one I had left behind the night I left his house.

“May I?”

I nodded, my breath hitching at the feel of his fingers brushing my neck as he clasped the necklace onto me.

I brushed my fingers to the turquoise stone resting at juncture of my clavicle. “Several weeks ago, you said if my dad and Vivian can make it, then we can too...”

Josh’s gaze shifted quickly to my dad, then back to me. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“I think it’s safe to say they’ve made it.” I pushed onto my toes, pressing my smile against his.

“I dunno,” he muttered against my lips. “They haven’t said I do yet—”

“Shut up and kiss me, cowboy.”

And that was just what he did.

Epilogue

L

JOSH

A YEAR LATER...

I made my way up to the bridal suite and with a closed fist, I gently tapped my knuckles to the heavy wood door.

“Who’s there?” Hope sang from within the walls.

“Just me,” I said.

On the other side, I heard some rustling, then after a click, the door creaked open. “Hey, you.” She beamed at me, leaning against the door.

A growl tore from my throat.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, my gaze trailing over the lavender silk dress that hugged every inch of her tight curves. Her smooth skin, now more tanned after living a year in Texas with me, nearly glistened and a few caramel colored freckles dotted across the bridge of her nose and cheeks. “You have no right looking this damn good at your sister’s wedding.”

Her mouth twisted into a smirk as she grabbed me by the tie and tugged me into the room, seizing the opportunity to ravish my mouth.

Hell, I wasn’t one to question it. This visit to New Hampshire had been amazing, but our alone time had been severely limited.

So limited that I was beginning to wonder if perhaps this wasn’t the right weekend to pop the question.

Yes, *that* question.

The square-cut antique diamond was burning a damn hole in my pocket for the last seven days. I thought for sure last night, sitting on the docks overlooking the lake would be *the* night. But then as I looked down at the old dock with its cracks and large crevices with the deep, murky lake below... I thought better of it.

I was nervous, with sweaty, shaky hands. What if I dropped the damn ring as I got down on one knee?

No. No dock proposals.

Then I thought maybe I could propose after dinner last night as we walked on the beach, but we were quickly interrupted by her siblings looking to bring the cooler down and bond over the fire pit.

I pulled back from her kiss, the zipper of my tuxedo pants pressing painfully into my growing cock, and looked around the bridal suite. “Where the hell is everybody?”

She shrugged. “Ummm... Addy’s soon-to-be stepdaughter is downstairs hanging out with her boyfriend. And Enzo and Haylee are helping Addy pee, I think.”

“Uhhh. I’m sorry... they’re helping her *pee*?”

Hope rolled her eyes at me. “It’s a girl thing. Her dress is big and it takes two people to hold it up...” She waved her hand at me. “Just, nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

I didn’t care about the particulars. I was just happy to have a moment alone with Hope.

One of our first and few moments alone all week.

She was perfectly done up. I was in a tuxedo. The ring was in my lapel pocket.

Everything here, right now, was almost perfect. Outside, the sky was a cheery, sunny bright blue and a breeze drifted in through the open window, catching one of her tendrils and blowing across her face.

My insides spun like an out-of-control top.

I loved her more than words. More than any lyric. I'd spent the last year of our relationship showing her just how much I loved her and how I'd never stop proving to her I deserved that rare second chance she gave me... gave us.

Tilting her head, her eyes narrowed, taking in the sweat dotting my brow. "You're sweating."

I cleared my throat and touched a finger to the single drop of sweat at my temple. "Yeah... I guess I'm hot."

She gave me a funny look. "It's way cooler here than in Texas."

"Yeah..." *Think, think, think.* "But it's a dry heat down there."

It was the best I could do, even though it was a beautiful, breezy seventy-two degrees here in New Hampshire.

Lucky for me, she shrugged it off and booped her finger to my nose. "Can you do me a favor? I buckled my shoes too tight and they're pinching and my nails aren't quite dry yet. Can you loosen them for me?"

"Of course."

I dropped to one knee.

Down on one knee in front of the woman I loved... with a ring in my pocket.

This is it.

I first fixed her shoes. No one wants pinched feet while they're being proposed to, right?

Then I stayed there for another breath. Gathering myself. Calming my thunderous heart.

"Hey, weirdo," she said on an adorable laugh, just as I was reaching into my lapel pocket.

Tapping me with her freshly buckled strappy heel, she asked, "What are you still doing down there? If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were proposing."

She grinned down at me, cackling a laugh. "Oh my god, could you

imagine? Proposing to me here? At my sister's wedding?!"

Her laugh stopped as abruptly as it began, her eyes falling to my face.

My extremely pale face. It was like a wad of Bubble Yum had lodged at the base of my throat.

Her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Josh, no!" she whispered.

The Bubble Yum popped, now landing in my stomach with a sickening thud. *No*.

Then, even more frantic, comically wide-eyed, she waved her hands, shaking her head. "Not no! Not no! *Yes*. Absolutely unequivocally my answer would be yes if you were proposing but you *cannot* propose to me at my sister's wedding!"

"I... I can't?"

What in the ever-loving hell was going on?

Bending, Hope tried to pull me up by the elbow to stand, but I didn't budge. I think I was too shell-shocked to move just yet. "Addy and I have only known we were sisters for a couple of years. I love her and I don't want anything to jeopardize the bond we're building!"

"And us getting engaged will jeopardize that?" Nothing was making sense anymore.

"Us getting engaged at her *wedding* might! This is her big day. I don't want to steal her thunder—"

From behind Hope, Addy came out of the bathroom. "Boom, boom, motherfuckers," she said, smiling at both of us.

Hope released my elbow, whipping around to face her sister. "Addy!"

But Addy was nothing but smiles. "You two getting engaged today would make this weekend *better*. *Seriously*. We've missed out on so much of each other's lives, I think I speak for Neil, Liam, and Finn, too, that we would love to be here to celebrate this with you."

Hope shook her head. "But we're celebrating you today."

Addy shrugged. "I can spare five minutes of my day. But only if I get to

watch.” Then, inclining her chin at me, she added, “Go ahead, Josh.”

Shit. The pressure was really on now.

Hope turned her wet eyes to me. Sure, Addy had given the okay, but I wasn’t moving forward unless Hope gave me the same consent.

I waited, lifting my brows in silent question at my girlfriend.

Nibbling her bottom lip, she nodded. Just once. One single nod.

Still down on one knee, I reached into my pocket and I presented Hope with the ring I’d spent months picking out. Even though she’d all but said yes already, I was still shaking with nerves.

“Hope,” I said. “I’m a man of a lot of words. I’ve made my living off of words. You’ve heard literally a dozen songs where I’ve expressed my feelings for how much I love you. During the time of writing those songs, I looked up *Webster’s* definition of the word Hope. It said: *To believe, desire, or trust*. There are no three better words to describe you, Hope. You made me believe again. Believe in myself, in love, in family. Desire... you are a walking epitome of desire for me. And trust. The biggest one of all. I’ve spent the last year working to earn your trust again and I will continue to do so every day of our lives. Your love has taught me what true trust is. And if you let me, I want to spend the rest of our lives living in the embodiment of belief, desire, and trust. Will you marry me, Hope?”

“Yes,” Hope whispered, reaching out a trembling left hand toward me. “I’ve always hated my name,” she added, looking down at me with misty eyes. “I always thought it was kind of woo-woo and annoying... until now. I think this is the first time I’ve ever liked the sound of my name. From your lips.”

Grinning, I slipped the ring on her finger, then launched to my feet, sweeping her into my arms and spinning her around despite her squeals.

I took her mouth, kissing her long and deep, drinking her whimpers.

We ended the kiss, pressing our foreheads together.

Hope’s mouth moved against mine as she whispered, “I have one

request.”

“Anything.”

“The whole ‘I’ll continue trying to earn your trust every day of our lives’... you’ve earned it,” she said, her chuckle softening the words. She raised her hand with the engagement band and wiggled her ring finger. “*Officially*, wouldn’t you say?”

My smile grew wider as I shook my head no. “You once said to me that you will only consider this real when I put a wedding band on your finger. Then and only then.”

“Then I vote we elope. And *soon*.”

I sighed against her. “That can be arranged.”



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About Katana



Katana Collins is a USA Today bestselling author of over twenty novels, novellas, and comic books in a variety of genres. She is most known for her sensual contemporary romances and her wildly popular comic book— *Batman White Knight Presents: Harley Quinn* with DC Comics.

When she was younger and stole her mother’s Harlequins to read beneath the covers with a flashlight, she wanted to read about the tough as nails heroine. The perfectly imperfect girl with quirks and attitude and sass. And the anti-heroes who were anything but “Prince Charming.” Forget the knight on a white horse ... she wanted the bad boy on a motorcycle.

An avid animal lover, she lives in Portland, Maine with her kind of mean cat, derpy lab-pitt mix, mellow chihuahua, and very *not* mellow cairn terrier puppy. Oh, yeah... there’s a husband somewhere in that mix, too. She can usually be found in a coffee shop with her nose buried in a laptop wearing

fabulous (albeit sometimes impractical) shoes.

She loves connecting with book lovers like herself, and fellow sassy storytellers, so feel free to drop her an email, visit her on her website. She also loves connecting on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) or in her [reader group, Kat's Kittens!](#)