



SAVE YOUR BREATH

KANDI STEINER

SAVE
YOUR
BREATH

KANDI STEINER

Copyright (C) 2024 Kandi Steiner
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without prior written consent of the author except where permitted by law.

The characters and events depicted in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Published by Kandi Steiner, LLC
Edited by Elaine York/[Allusion Publishing](#)
Cover Photography by Ren Saliba
Cover Design by Kandi Steiner
Formatting by Elaine York/[Allusion Publishing](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty-One](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Epilogue Two](#)
[More from Kandi Steiner](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[About the Author](#)

To the ones who wear their scars as badges of honor,
who let their broken pieces shine like stained glass,
and who find their power
in the very things
they thought
made them weak.

This one's for you.

PROLOGUE

The Charade

Aleks

She wanted to hit me.

I wanted to kiss her.

That was how it had always been with us.

“This is just... great. Just fucking perfect,” Mia said, throwing her hands up in disbelief before she sank down into my giant bean bag with a huff. As soon as she realized where she was sitting, she hopped up with a frustrated growl before stomping over to the couch, instead.

She hated that fucking thing, thought it was childish and likely had some assumptions about what she thought had taken place on it. Usually, I found her disgust with it hilarious.

But nothing was funny in this moment.

She buried her face in her hands, shaking her head.

“What am I going to do?”

I didn’t mind seeing her flustered in most cases because I was most often the culprit getting under her skin. Ruffling her feathers was one of my favorite pastimes, if only to see that fire within her spark to life. But in this instance, I hated it, because she was upset over something I had no control over.

Under normal circumstances, I’d toss a smart-ass remark at her and smirk as that perfect mouth of hers gaped open at me, as her cheeks turned red and that little vein in her forehead popped. I knew exactly how to push her buttons, how to make rage pour through that normally put-together woman.

But right now, that side of me I always kept tied up in the basement of my cold, dead heart was thrashing, urging me to go to her, to pull her into me, to hold her and find a way to make it right.

I kicked that motherfucker hard enough to knock him out, snuffing the lights and reminding him why he was locked away in the first place.

Her dark hair fell over her shoulders in a silky curtain as I took the seat next to her. I hovered one hand over her slender back before I carefully, slowly, rubbed it. “I’m sorry.”

Mia froze under my touch.

There it was again, that shock of electricity between us, that zap of heat I felt any time my body made contact with hers.

But just when I thought she might melt into that touch, Mia yanked away, uncovering her face so she could properly glare at me. Those sharp blue eyes of hers narrowed into slits. “Well, you should be. This is all your fault.”

And just like that, we were back to sparring.

“My fault?” I gaped at her, smirking even with my mouth open because I wanted her to feel as ridiculous as she was being. “Mia, it’s a fucking hurricane. What the hell am I supposed to do about it?”

“You’re the whole reason I’m here instead of in New York to begin with. I’m doing all this to save your ass! And now I have to cancel a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden.”

The truth of that seemed to hit her full force, her face going white.

“Oh, God,” she whimpered, burying her face again. “I have to cancel a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden.”

Any desire I did have to comfort her was receding now, held at bay by her accusation. “Saving my ass,” I repeated, tonguing my cheek. “So, this is all about me suddenly? I’m the big bad wolf and you’re just doing this to be a little saint, huh? Nothing at all in it for you?”

“Oh, shut up,” she spat, shoving me away. I barely budged.

“Because I’m pretty sure this was *your* publicist’s idea,” I reminded her.

“Well, *your* agent is the one who made me come here for your stupid game!”

“Made you?” I stood, jaw tight. “You are a woman with free will, Mia. In case you forgot. No one can make you do anything.”

She looked up at me then, her eyes softer, something in the relaxing of her jaw telling me I’d struck a nerve without trying. She was a woman of free will, yes — but she was also a pop star puppet, her strings being pulled by an entire team she paid to keep her career skyrocketing.

That softening in her reminded me so much of when we were younger that I had a hard time taking my next breath.

For a split second, we were both eighteen again.

She was begging me to kiss her.

I was begging her not to let me.

I knew even then that we were wrong for each other.

I knew even then that we'd break each other's hearts if we ever tried to be more than friends.

"Whatever," she said after a moment. The word was resigned, not laced with any sort of edge, and that upset me more than if she'd screamed it.

I could handle her yelling at me.

I couldn't handle knowing I'd hurt her — even with all the practice I'd had over the years.

She sniffed, waving her hand in the air like I was one of the people paid to wait on her. "Do you at least have some tequila or something?"

"Need to get drunk to face the truth?"

"That I'm stuck in a high-rise condo with my fake fiancé with a hurricane barreling toward us?" She stood, a saccharine smile on her tight lips. "Um, yeah. Drunk is the bare minimum."

She stormed past me and into my kitchen, and I took a deep breath, letting it out as slowly and calmly as I could as I folded my hands together and rested them on top of my head. I stared up at the ceiling, debating converting to the first religion I could think of just to see if there was a god who could save me.

Mia needed to drink to get through this, and I needed to sit on my fucking hands.

Because she wanted to hit me, and I wanted to kiss her.

And with the two of us forced to stay together for the night, I had no idea how the hell I was going to keep up the charade of anything I felt for this woman being fake.

CHAPTER 1

Be A Good Boy

July — Three Months Earlier

Aleks

My phone was burning a hole in my pocket as the team's media relations manager attempted to burn a hole through my *head* with his murderous glare.

Strings: Call me. It's important.

Strings was the nickname I'd given to my only friend in the world back when I first met her. We were just sixteen then — she, an awkward girl with a guitar glued to her hand, and I, a broody asshole with a hockey stick glued to mine.

I knew her as Mia Conaway, my best friend.

The world knew her as Mia Love, world-famous pop star.

Mia's text came through just as I was shoved into the conference room where half of our public relations team, along with our General Manager, were ready to lay into me. I'd had no choice but to put my phone away and wait to respond until after my lashing.

But where I should have been focused on the threats being thrown my way after I'd fucked up — yet again — all I could think about was her.

Despite how close we were in high school, our lives had gone in separate directions over the last eight years, the two of us living on different coasts, and practically in different worlds. Every now and then, our paths crossed — she'd get to come to a game of mine, or I'd catch one of her gigs. Sometimes we'd find ourselves reunited with her parents for a holiday. But for the most part, about the only time we communicated was through a text or a smart-ass comment on social media.

So the fact that she'd asked me to call her, that she'd said it was important...

“You’re bleeding,” Dan Kilman said, rolling his eyes as he fished a tissue out of the box in the center of the conference room table. He handed it to me with a flourish before he was pacing again.

I dabbed at the corner of my lip where it had split, not the least bit fazed.

I was a hockey player, for fuck’s sake.

Bleeding was like breathing for me.

“You also don’t seem like you’re taking any of this seriously,” he added. I’d never seen him look so stern. His pale bald head was glistening from a sheen of sweat as he paced the room, his dark brows furrowed together in frustration. Usually, Kilman was a bright smile and an assuring nod as he sent you to an interview you didn’t particularly want to do but had no option to refuse.

Right now, he looked ready to split the other side of my lip.

“I’m sure Mr. Suter is taking this all very seriously,” our General Manager assured Kilman. Richard Bancroft — known affectionately as Dick — reminded me of a mall Santa. He wore a jubilant smile nearly one-hundred percent of the time, his eyes twinkling, belly jiggling with each little laugh he let loose.

Even now, when I knew he was also fed up with my shit, he looked like nothing more than a proud father ready to defend his son at the principal’s office.

“Listen. I understand. Tensions run high when you’re a man with as much testosterone as you have running through those veins of yours,” Dick said with a guffaw, thumping the table across from me with one large hand. “But... this is going to be your last warning to keep the fights *on* the ice.”

“Last warning,” I repeated, monotone as ever, one eyebrow arching into my short hairline as I assessed him along with the rest of the team. Kilman and Bancroft were taking the lead, the other two staying silent, jotting notes down every now and then. One was Kilman’s assistant and the other was head of our social media. I was pretty sure they weren’t actually writing anything of merit, but rather avoiding eye contact with me. “That sounds like a threat.”

“It is,” Kilman said. “You’re lucky Coach McCabe is on vacation and we were able to assure him we had this handled because if he were here, my bet is there wouldn’t *be* another warning. Your ass would be out on the street.”

I scoffed a laugh at that, looking from the little man to my GM. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful (okay, so maybe I did) — but who the fuck did this

guy think he was?

I was the lead scorer on our team last season — even more goals than their precious Vince Tanev.

Hell, I was the lead scorer in the fucking *league*.

And we won the Stanley Cup.

This guy was really going to threaten to have me off the team for a little bar fight?

“What Danny here is trying to say is that he has this covered. He and these two stars can handle the media,” he said, with a nod to the silent ones. “And our legal team has already put the pieces into place to get charges dropped.” Dick gave Kilman a subtle warning glare before he turned his gaze on me. “But yes, you heard me right, son.” He flattened his lips like he was disappointed he even had to say this. “If anything like this happens again, we’ll have no choice but to release you. And as it stands, we’ve decided to suspend you for the first two games of the season.”

My lips curled into a snarl of a smile as I shook my head and kicked back in my chair, crossing my right ankle over my left knee and folding my arms over my chest. It was usually the league who did the suspending, and typically only for bad behavior during a game or during the season. Since it was the offseason, and my little bar fight had happened on my own time, the league would stay out of it.

But apparently, my team decided I needed to be punished to learn my lesson.

As if my prior team hadn’t proven I never would.

“If you want to start the season out on two losses, that’s your call to make,” I said.

“You’ve forced our hand!” Kilman raged, but Dick put a hand on his forearm to stop him from continuing.

“We don’t want any of this — the legal trouble, the media attention, or the suspension. But the league won’t stand for us to just let this slide, offseason or not.” Dick steepled his fingers on the table. “You did knock a man out cold, after all.”

I had to fight to keep from scoffing again. If there was one thing I knew about Richard Bancroft, it was that he *loved* media attention. That was why he’d agreed to let local reporter Maven King follow Vince Tanev with twenty-four-seven access during his rookie season. It was why he set up one of our defensemen, Jaxson Brittain, and Vince’s little sister with a season of

interviews after the hockey world found out they were together. It was why he was all but begging our goalie, Will Perry, to allow media coverage of his upcoming wedding after the whole world thought he'd be single forever.

That man wanted whatever would keep his arena full.

But I guessed that didn't include me laying some asshole out after he threw his fucking Long Island iced tea on me.

Begrudgingly, I could admit I overreacted. I was dancing with a fine-as-hell Boomer's regular — I think her name was MacKenzie? — when we were both suddenly drenched. And it couldn't have just been a regular Long Island iced tea, either. No, it had to be a fucking *blue* one — like we were kids at a bar sneaking drinks underage.

Security was typically pretty good at keeping anyone the team didn't want partying with us behind the ropes, but it was a fucking club. Shit happened. Sometimes, an asshole or two got through.

And I was all too eager to handle my own security.

I had a lot of pent-up energy buzzing through me at all times. During the season, I got it out on the ice. In the offseason, I worked it out in the gym. But that wasn't enough. So yeah, give me an excuse to lay a motherfucker out, and I'm going to take it.

I'd grabbed the guy by his stupid, bedazzled polo and cut his laugh attack with his bros short. One of his friends got away with a single sucker punch before I slugged him so hard in the jaw, he spun like a cartoon before flying back into a table and causing bottles to crash to the floor.

Then, I'd knocked out the offender who'd thrown the drink.

I was escorted out of the bar right after, and as they loved to do, the paparazzi had followed me that night. They were always praying for me to fuck up.

Lucky for them, it was my specialty.

And I knew they were all giddy to post the photo of me — skin pale white from the flash of their cameras, blue liquid staining my shirt, my lip split and bloody, and a smirk on my face as I flipped them off proudly.

"If it was *just* this, we'd be fine," Kilman said, calling my attention up to him. "But after all the shit you caused in Seattle, the shit we took for signing you in the first place, and the hell you gave us during playoffs..."

He shrugged, holding up his hands again as if I'd see a zip tie around his wrists.

I wished I cared.

I wished I took their threat seriously, that I was scared straight and inspired to get my act together.

But the truth was that I hadn't felt much since I was a kid.

Hockey was about the only thing in the world I gave a fuck about, but even that felt like a shallow love some days.

Like right now, staring at the two gentlemen I was supposed to respect and fear, I should have been begging for them to trust me to make things right. I should have been pleading for them not to cut me.

Instead, I was almost praying they would.

Maybe then, I'd lose what last little bit of life I was holding onto and just let myself slip away into a drunken numbness forever. Maybe I'd walk willingly into the open arms of an addiction, one of the many I fought daily to stay away from. Maybe I'd hole myself up in some shack on a beach somewhere and become a recluse.

They loved to bring up Seattle, as if I wasn't already aware of the shit storm I left behind there. It was the first team I played for in the league, and though I'd helped take them from a nothing team, to one of the top contenders for the Cup each year, the last thing they were ever going to do was thank me.

Because on the ice, I was a blessing.

Off the ice, I was a curse.

I should have had regrets. I should have wished I could go back in time and get my act together. Maybe I should have gone to therapy or found a productive outlet for my rage. I could have taken up pottery or some shit like Vince Tanev.

But I knew the truth.

There was more of my parents in me than I wanted to admit, their addictions thrumming through my veins no matter how I tried to deny them. At least I'd stuck to alcohol and sex, and I kept a tight enough rein on both to skate by without causing *too* much trouble.

I liked being wild.

I liked feeling *numb*.

I didn't care about anything enough to keep myself on the straight and narrow for long.

And nothing could keep me from that thrill of pushing the envelope just to see how far I could get before someone followed through on their threats.

"Message received loud and clear," I finally grumbled. "I'll be a good

boy. Promise.”

I saluted with the snarky comment, ready to get the fuck out of this room and call my girl.

My girl.

I laughed at myself with that thought. Mia Love was *far* from mine, and yet she was the only person in the world I gave a single flying fuck about.

I cared more about calling her in this moment than I did about saving my career.

Especially because she’d said it was important.

Sometimes, I could close my eyes and see Mia as the shy girl hiding behind her large-framed glasses and scribbling lyrics in a notebook when I first showed up at her house. I had been exhausted from the flight from Switzerland, as scared as I was numb about the whole experience of being flown to America to billet with a family so I could play hockey.

She wasn’t Mia Love, world-renowned pop star, then.

She was just Mia Conaway.

The daughter of the couple who was agreeing to let me live in their home so I had a chance at making a life for myself.

“Am I free to go, or should I go pick a limb off the nearest tree and line up on the wall for a switching?”

Dick laughed where Kilman flattened his lips, very clearly unamused. His assistant snickered but covered it with a cough.

“You’re excused,” Dick said, standing with a grunt. “Keep your nose clean and you won’t hear from me again until the preseason. But don’t be surprised if Coach has a particularly grueling first practice for you.”

He smirked with one eyebrow cresting into his white hairline, like we were buddies and he was on my side. But I knew better.

To Dick, I was just a money-maker. I was a goal-making, fight-starting piece of entertainment who could help put asses in the seats when we had a home game.

He wasn’t my friend.

Then again, no one was.

No one other than a brown-haired, blue-eyed pop star living across the country.

I dialed her number as soon as I pushed through the conference room door.

CHAPTER 2

Ready to Play

Mia

“I swear, nothing would make me happier than to flatten this guy’s micro penis with a hot iron.”

I huffed the insult, face burning as I skimmed the rest of the article written by one of the most prestigious and well-respected writers of *Pop Industry Magazine* — Garrett Orange. He’d received an early listening access pass for my upcoming album, a common practice in the industry.

And, yet again, the shit canoe was trashing me.

I seemed to be his favorite subject, ever since I was the ripe ol’ age of nineteen. While he loved to write glowing pieces on the boy bands and rock stars closest in competition to me, all he ever seemed to want to talk about in my case was how I was a lover scorned with trite songwriting.

Add in the fact that he was best buddies with my darling actor of an ex-boyfriend, and it shouldn’t have been a surprise to find the scathing, three-page review of my upcoming album as his latest viral post.

And it *wasn’t* a surprise.

But it did piss me off more than usual.

“*“Save your money for what I suspect will be yet another female rage fest of a tour, complete with glitter bombs and obnoxious lyrics only twelve-year-old girls could love,”*” I read out loud, and that did it. With a frustrated growl, I turned my phone screen black with one click before slamming it down on the teak table in front of me.

What is wrong with this guy?

I couldn’t figure out what I’d done to affront him so, to make it where I had this target on my back that he loved to chase. The only reprieve I’d had from his critique had been when I was dating Austin, and even that was short lived. I had a feeling Austin had made him promise to hold his tongue only long enough for him to get what he wanted from me.

As soon as we broke up, Garrett was back to being a prick.
And Austin never did anything to stop him.

My publicist and I were sitting in my private oasis of a backyard, the fountain from the pool and the soft waves from the Pacific Ocean beyond providing a serene symphony — but nothing could calm me in this moment.

I buried my face in my hands, trying to force a slow breath.

I popped back up just as quickly.

“Are they ever going to get tired of this shit?” I asked Isabella. She was my publicist and one of my closest friends. I’d learned early on in life — especially in this career — that most people couldn’t be trusted. But Isabella had earned my trust almost immediately, and more importantly, she’d kept it.

Because she truly was looking out for me. She cared about me. She wanted me to succeed, to be happy — and I’d seen her willing to sacrifice what would have been the bigger *money-making moves* in order to insure my health and well-being.

That alone gave her a permanent spot in my inner circle.

Isabella offered me a sad, sympathetic smile, the California wind blowing softly through her hot pink hair. She had light brown skin, honey gold eyes, and more piercings and tattoos than an entire motorcycle club combined. She was the kind of beautiful that could stun you speechless and also scare you just a little bit, just enough so you didn’t dare fuck with her.

I envied that.

I, on the other hand, was very much the American girl next door. Long, silky chestnut hair, tan skin that mostly came from genetics rather than my time in the sun, bright blue eyes and, blessedly, naturally long lashes. My lips were just plump enough that my team never harassed me to get fillers, and I had a single dimple on my left cheek that I’d always loved — along with a beauty mark right above it.

Ever since I was fifteen, I’d been called *cute*. Not hot, not sexy, not rich in feminine power and talent.

Just cute.

Not that I *minded* being cute. Being cute was fun.

But sometimes, I wondered how long I’d have to age before another adjective would be used to describe me.

“You’ve been at this for seven years, *mi amor*,” Isabella said. “What do you think?”

I heaved another sigh, shoulders deflating. I knew the answer to the

question I'd asked her. I just hated it. When I'd first rose to stardom as a teenager, I didn't understand much. I kind of laughed off the criticism while licking my wounds in private, trying to pretend like none of it mattered. That was what a good little pop star did, right? I was to smile and be amiable, never confrontational. I was to stick to my music and never have an opinion on anything else.

Now, with a few albums and years of touring experience under my belt and with a fanbase I'd worked tirelessly to nurture, I was starting to have a change of heart.

I didn't want to be the girl who smiled and said it was all just fine.

I wanted to be the lion that roared back and bit anyone who came too close.

"It's just... *God*, it's so frustrating," I said. "I've won album of the year twice. I've sold out stadiums across the world. I am consistently one of the highest streaming artists on every music platform. I write my own music, my own lyrics, and orchestrate my own tours. I sing *and* dance live for *hours on end* without using auto-tune." I shook my head, staring at my phone like it was a friend who'd betrayed me. "And yet, all they want to talk about is fucking *nonsense* — me still being hung up on Austin."

"It appeals to the masses."

"The male masses," I filled in for her.

"Female, too, sadly. Women love to hate other women — especially those who are successful. The internalized misogyny is wild in these streets."

"So, I just have to take it," I said flatly, not even really as a question. "I just have to hold my head high and ignore all the people sharing this article in victory like this *proves* that anyone who listens to my music has bad taste. I have to be okay with the fact that, no matter what I achieve, all they're going to talk about is who I'm dating or who broke my heart or what stupid fucking swimsuit I wore and how my body looked in it."

Isabella didn't answer, just leaned over enough to squeeze my knee and give me a moment.

And truly, that was all I needed. She was right. I'd been in this for seven years — and that was only after being discovered. Music had been my life since I was three. I knew how this all worked.

In the end, I'd get over this stupid article.

I'd laugh it off — not because I had to, but because when the frustration wore off, I really would find it funny that this waste of oxygen was so

obsessed with me. Then, I'd move on and be happy despite what that little prick wrote about me and what all the little trolls said online, because I *loved* what I did.

I loved my music.

I *especially* loved this album, which felt more mature than any I'd released before. It was like stepping into a new chapter of my life, one I knew my fans would jump into with me because they could relate to everything I was singing about.

Maybe that was what hurt the most.

I could take it when I was younger, when I read through those harsh reviews and saw a little truth in them. I could agree that some of my songwriting *was* trite, that I played into what sold and did what I had to do to gain popularity — mostly at the insistence of the adults driving the decisions of my career at the time.

But this?

This album felt personal, like a love letter to my fans. It was me sitting at my piano and bleeding out for months as I sat alone with my biggest feelings. It was my label trusting me to create whatever I wanted to, knowing my name alone would sell it. It was me belting out at the top of my lungs about the truth of love and heartbreak and friendships and growing up and losing innocence. It was me plucking at my guitar with my heart not just on my sleeve, but in the palm of all of their hands.

It was me breaking free from the industry know-it-alls around me trying to pull my strings and realizing that *I* was in the driver's seat, that I could take the wheel and choose the destination and the route to get there.

So, to have it diminished so quickly, before the first single even dropped...

It killed me.

"Ready to play my favorite game?" Isabella asked.

"Hit me," I said with a sigh.

Her favorite game was to pitch me two possibilities and then fantasize down each path. When she wasn't slaying dragons as my publicist, she was writing telenovela-style fan fiction — which meant the woman loved to dream up a story.

"Okay, so, we can ignore Garrett completely, not comment on the article at all, and continue with our normal press schedule, hoping it doesn't come up. I'll do my best to steer interviews away from it and make it clear that if

they ask a baiting question that stems from his bullshit, we will have you walk right off set. We'll release the songs as planned, with 'Heartbreak Habit' being the first single, and let your fans catapulting you to number one on every streaming platform speak for us."

I nodded, my throat tight as I listened to the first scenario. It was one we'd played out before. I was good at fielding questions from probing journalists. I was great at ignoring the rumors — like how Garrett insinuated that I'm not over Austin, that I'm so hung up on him, in fact, that I made this whole album about him.

Which was complete horse shit.

Sure, there were a couple songs on the album with slights toward my ex. In particular, the one about how he managed to manipulate me in a way that made me lose myself trying to be what he wanted me to be, what he made me feel like was *right*. The title of that track was "Puppeteer" and was one of my favorites.

But it had been over a year since our breakup. I'd had other experiences with fuck boys since him, and I was also writing about experiences my friends and colleagues had gone through — like when Isabella was falling hard in love with a married woman with all the promises of forever rolling off her lover's lips.

Only for her to eventually call things off, make Isabella feel crazy, and stay with her husband, announcing months later that they were expecting a child.

I'd held my friend's hand through that, cried with her as her heart broke into a thousand pieces. She let me in, and I went through all of it with her — the pain and disappointment. She knew music was my therapy, so when I'd written the song and played it for her, she'd cried and hugged me and told me thank you.

And then immediately told me it was going on the album.

Or like how I'd written "That Kind of Magic" just imagining what my mother must have felt falling in love with my dad in the late eighties and early nineties. Their love was the kind that not even the best movie could illustrate. It was the comfortable, playful love that comes so effortlessly you can't help but smile and long for it when you're around them.

The truth was I had plenty of writing inspiration in my life. There were my own lived experiences, the ones being lived around me, and the fictional ones I dreamed up in my head.

If only Austin would speak up for me, if he would use his voice to shut this all down...

That was a far-fetched dream.

If I defended myself, it would just fuel the fire. But if *he* made it clear that we hadn't spoken since our breakup, that it had been a mutual split and we were both moving on... people would listen.

That was the infuriating truth.

No matter how the times progressed, it seemed a man's word would always outweigh a woman's.

Of course, Austin *loved* the attention he got when something like this came out. He was well known and popular on his own, an actor with a long list of blockbusters under his belt. But articles like this one gave him the chance to be coy in interviews and spin his little web of lies in the perfect way to paint the ultimate picture of him being the golden boy who could never do any harm.

And me as the crazy ex-girlfriend.

"Okay," I finally said. "And the other option?"

"We flip the script."

I arched a brow at Isabella, leaning back in my seat. "And how do we do that?"

"Simple," she said. "We spin a different story. What if instead of a scorned woman still hung up on her ex, we show that you're a healed woman who has moved on. We illustrate that not only are you not still in love with Austin, but you're too busy having the time of your life with the most incredible man you've ever met to even *think* about that nepo baby anymore. We could switch up the single releases, go out strong with 'On the Way to You' and take control of a narrative that should be ours to tell, anyway."

I chuckled. "Sounds delightful, but that would require having a boyfriend."

"What if we took it a step further than that?" Isabella thumbed through her phone before biting her lip and offering it to me, like she was fairly certain I would throw it as soon as the thing was in my hand. "What if he was your *fiancé*?"

I snorted out a laugh, but it died in my throat when I saw the image on her screen.

Staring back at me was the cocky, cold smirk of the National Hockey League's bad boy, his lip freshly bloodied, shirt tangled in a night club

bouncer's fist as he was being thrown out.

The next shot showed him winking at the camera, and chills swept over my thighs at the sight.

Aleksander Suter.

Winger for the Tampa Bay Ospreys.

Notorious troublemaker.

And owner of my heart since we were teenagers.

CHAPTER 3

Just Crazy Enough

Mia

It took a full two minutes for me to stop laughing.

I was so certain this was a joke, a way for Isabella to lighten the mood before she smacked me on the ass and said, “*There she is. Now, come on — we have an album to release.*”

But when I finally wiped the tears from my eyes, my stomach tight from all the contractions — she was just staring at me, waiting.

The pink-haired, Mexican vixen was dead-ass serious.

“Bells,” I said, shaking my head. “That is... insane.”

“Is it?”

She took her phone from me, reading the headline about how Aleks had found himself in trouble yet again after getting into a fight at Boomer’s in Tampa. Then, she looked at me like I should have somehow gathered the missing pieces of the puzzle from her words alone.

When I just blinked at her, she huffed, letting her hands fall against her thighs with a slap.

“Aleks is a bad boy, Mia. Austin is the golden child of Hollywood. Don’t you see? This would be a complete one-eighty. It would give you an edge.”

Something about that sparked curiosity in me, and I leaned forward. “I’m listening.”

Isabella squealed, clapping her hands together before holding them toward me in excitement. “Okay. Let me paint the picture. You and Aleks are longtime friends. You’ve already been seen together over the years — you at his games, him at your concerts, the two of you home with your family from time to time. It’s never been a thing... but what if we started *making* it a thing?”

“There have been breadcrumbs — especially this year. I could feed them to the right rumor-starter and get the Internet buzzing. As your fans love to

do, they'd start overanalyzing *everything*. When we went to his game in New York and he scored a hat trick and didn't get into a single scuffle on the ice... was it because he was showing off for you, because he wants to be better *for* you?

"And when he came to that charity benefit concert we did last month, was it just because it happened to be in the same city as the NHL Awards, or was it because he was desperate to see you after winning the Stanley Cup, that he couldn't wait to celebrate with his girlfriend?"

She widened her eyes, mouth open in a giant smile as she nodded along with her story and waited for me to come down the path with her.

"Okay... I can see the story," I said. "There are enough instances over enough of a span of time that we could convince the public that we've been dating on the low for longer than anyone realized."

"Exactly."

"Dating a professional athlete — especially one with such a rough reputation — gives me an edge."

"Bingo."

"And to show he's changing for me, that he wants to be better... it takes the narrative away from me being a crazy ex-girlfriend to being a woman worth changing for."

"Ding, ding, ding!" Isabella waved her finger in the air.

But I just laughed, shaking my head. "He's never going to go for this. I mean, even convincing him to play along with us dating would be a feat. But to say we're *engaged*? It's too much."

"I disagree. Look," she said, pointing to the article on her phone again. "He's in boiling water with the Ospreys right now. I happen to have an inside source that says he's walking into a very serious meeting today about his future with the team — and how it could be cut short if he doesn't get his shit together."

That made my stomach turn. I knew Aleks in a way perhaps no one else did, which meant I knew his little spurts of acting out came from boredom and numbing himself more than anything else. Everyone else saw him as a brute, stern-browed and severe.

I still saw him as the self-conscious boy my family took in when I was in high school.

There had always been a big part of him that believed he didn't deserve anything good in life. When he tried hard, he pretended like he didn't, like

everything was easy to him. When he accomplished something, he acted like he didn't care, like he didn't need anyone's approval and it all just happened by accident.

But I knew better.

Hockey was everything to him. It would kill him to lose it.

The issue was that, if he was in one of his low spells, he might not have the energy to even try to save it.

"Besides, just dating him would only add fuel to the 'she's on to another boy toy' fire. But if you were *engaged*? That's serious."

"And when we don't get married?"

Isabella deflated a bit, like she hadn't thought that part out. I was ready to say *see* and call the whole thing off when she tilted her head and popped that pointer finger up again.

"Easy," she said. "We hold the control. We'll... make a big scene, something with him relapsing into his bad boy behavior. We'll show that you aren't afraid to stand up for yourself, even when you're hopelessly in love. That at the end of the day, you have self-respect. You don't take any shit. You're strong enough to walk away from a toxic situation." The more she spoke, the more excited she became. "Honestly, this could lead into even bigger sales for the *next* album. Think of how many girls have called off an engagement or gone through a divorce? You could write their future anthems!"

"Wouldn't that play out poorly for Aleks?"

"Of course not," she said, waving me off. "We'll make the big breakup something small in the eyes of the NHL. Nothing against team rules, nothing that will call for any game time suspension or anything. Maybe he'll be seen with a gaggle of puck bunnies, make out with one of them or something."

She waved me off again, but my stomach soured at the thought. Not that I hadn't seen Aleks tangled up with plenty of women in the tabloids throughout the years, but that didn't mean I was ever pleased about it.

He had a very specific type.

The women who garnered his attention were smokey-eyed and dolled up. They wore tight dresses and floss for swimsuits. They confidently claimed him in public, straddling his lap at restaurants or making out with him unabashedly in pool cabanas with their whole ass hanging out.

And those observations were not made with my lip curling or any kind of judgment. They were made with awe, with longing, with respect.

Because those women were hot. They were sexy. They were *bad*.

They knew what they wanted and how to get it. They lived *loudly*. And they didn't give two shits what anyone had to say about them.

That was what Aleks found attractive about them.

I knew because he'd urged me so many times in high school to stop caring about what people thought of me, to stop trying to fit into some sort of box that could be easily sold.

Sometimes I wondered if I had listened to him, if maybe he wouldn't have rejected me.

If maybe the night I asked him to kiss me, he would have.

Instead, he looked at me with pity like I was a sweet little girl not aware of what she was asking for, like I didn't understand the world and he was somehow sheltering me from it — from him.

The memory made a soft smile touch my lips, even as the pain of it stung my heart like a rusty butter knife carving into it. "I don't think he'll go for this," I whispered, and this time my doubt wasn't born from how crazy this all sounded, but more from the fact that I truly was *not* his type.

"He will. We will make it mutually beneficial, give him something to solidify his place with the team despite what his past record has shown. Trust me — Richard Bancroft wants to sell tickets. He wants to sell *suites*. He wants to make money off brand partnerships. And *this*, his team's bruiser engaged to the hottest pop star on the planet?" She thumped my knee. "*This* is a money-making dream come true."

Isabella stood, walking over to where Cora, my angel of a house maid, had left us a large pitcher of iced tea. I wasn't particularly fond of people working for me in my home. I preferred to clean my own house and cook my own meals. But over the last couple of years, the truth was that my time to do those things had dwindled to almost nothing. And so, I had a small team of people I trusted — a chef, my house maid, a house manager, and my security. I adored them all like family and paid them more than my financial advisor advised, but they were worth it to me.

Isabella poured each of us a glass before holding hers up toward mine.

"Besides, you know Aleks will want to keep his little bad boy rep. It gets him more super models than his bankroll and fancy cars ever could." She arched a brow. "If he thinks he's hit the pussy lottery now, just wait until he's the ex of Mia fucking *Love*. The kittens will be clawing each other's eyes out for the chance to be the woman who helps him get over you."

I tried to ignore the way jealousy sparked in my chest at that, at how it always had any time I saw another woman with my best friend. Because that's what Aleks was, what he had been since we were sixteen. He knew me in a way no one else did. He understood what I was never able to say out loud. Even when time stretched between us, when our lives got busy and we didn't talk for months... he could still take one look at me and just *know* how I was feeling, what I was thinking, and if I was okay or not.

Everything about this scheme sounded absolutely bat shit crazy to me.

And yet, somehow, *just* crazy enough to work.

Maybe it was the fresh sting of Garrett Orange's words simmering in my bloodstream. Maybe it was knowing Aleks was in trouble and I might have the key to getting him out of it. Maybe it was the thrill of doing something insane, something so ludicrous that the whole world would be talking about it.

Whatever it was, *something* made me pick up my phone.

And I decided if I was going to be fake engaged, there was no one I'd rather pretend with than Aleks.

I pulled up his contact, glancing at a wide-eyed and hopeful Isabella when his name sliced across the screen.

Then, I sent the text that would spiral me into a new life.

CHAPTER 4

How High?

Aleks

I'd called Mia as soon as I left the meeting with Kilman and Bancroft, my head still pounding from the alcohol from the night before along with their whining about my behavior.

Annoyingly, Mia had been coy about what was so goddamn important until I got my agent to join us on a video call.

Now that she'd explained her publicist's hare-brained idea, I understood why.

The four of us sat in silence, our images reflected on my laptop screen. The bottom box was Mia and Isabella in sunny California, the two of them huddled close in her back yard that I spent time in last summer during the offseason. In the top left box was my agent, Giana Johnson, her curly hair piled into a high bun on her head and her oversized glasses slipping down her nose a bit as she scribbled something frantically in her notebook.

And then there was me in the top right, blinking slowly, lips flat and unamused.

That resting face of indifference was my armor — always had been. I had the knack for looking bored or pissed off, or a combination of the two, regardless of what was happening around me.

But inside?

I was a fucking mess.

Because my best friend, the woman I'd been sick over since I was sixteen, the one woman I knew I could never truly have...

She'd just proposed that we pretend to date each other.

No, that we pretend to be *engaged*.

And just the thought of her being mine, even if only for a publicity stunt, had my insides twisted into an unholy knot of anticipation.

"This sounds like a one-sided deal," I said carefully, coolly, hoping I was

masking how badly I was ready to say yes without hearing another damn detail.

“Not at all,” Isabella assured me, glancing at Mia who was giving her an *I told you so* glare before she turned her attention back to me. “Like we explained, this works out very well for both of you. Just think how happy Dick will be when you tell him you’re engaged, getting on the straight and narrow. And with a pop star who will *undoubtedly* sell tickets to your games, at that.”

I smirked. I liked Isabella — had ever since I met her seven years ago. Out of all the people pulling the strings of Mia’s career, she was the only one who had my trust. She cared about our girl. She gave a shit what happened to Mia the Human, not just Mia the Musician.

Still pretending like I wasn’t sold, I nodded toward the screen at my agent. “G?”

Giana Johnson was the kind of woman who could throw you for a loop in the first hour you spent with her. On the outside, she was anything but intimidating. She was *maybe* five foot one and one-hundred-and-twenty pounds soaking wet, with big, curly hair and glasses. Combine that with her wardrobe that was some sort of mix between schoolgirl and librarian, complete with an array of plaid skirts, tights in every color, and cardigans she wore over crisp white blouses, and she was as confusing as she was intriguing.

But as soon as she opened her mouth, anyone around her was quick to realize she was a shark.

She took absolutely zero bullshit from anyone — me most of all. When companies offered me sponsorship or reached out about doing a commercial, she was quick to combat their initial offers and get me what I deserved. When I had to do interviews for the team, she was there with talking points and a reminder of everything I didn’t have to answer, no matter how the media pried.

She knew her shit, and she earned every bit of the fifteen-percent commission I paid her.

“Okay, I will take off my professional hat for only a moment to say that the bookworm inside me is absolutely *screaming* at this,” she said, and I could tell from how her little knee was bouncing in the video frame that she was trying really hard to keep her shit together. “I mean, a fake engagement between a hot hockey player and a goddess of a pop star? The fact that you

two have known each other since you were teenagers? This is trope *gold*.”

Mia and Isabella shared knowing smiles, giggling a bit as I slow-blinked and waited for my agent to come back to reality.

“Now, putting my professional hat back *on*,” she continued, her mouth tugging to one side. “I can definitely see some major benefits to this arrangement. I mean, Aleks...” She shook her head, going over the notes she’d taken. “Even with the Ospreys winning the Cup, our sponsorships have run dry. Everyone wants Tanev and Brittain and the other pretty faces.”

I arched a brow.

“Not that you don’t have a pretty face,” she said. “They just... *smile* more.”

I rolled my eyes.

“But this...” She tapped her notebook. “This would have people beating down our doors. Commercials, interviews, branding... I mean, the possibilities are endless. But,” she added. “I am a bit worried about the details.”

“Which ones? We are open to discussion on any of the points we brought up,” Isabella quickly fired back.

“Well, for starters — the breakup at the end of it all. We need to find a way to ensure that the scenario can work well for both of us. I understand wanting Mia to be the picture of a strong woman walking away from a toxic relationship, but we also need to preserve my client’s reputation and ensure this shines a favorable light on him.”

“He’ll be back to the pussy god the internet fandoms praise him for being now,” Isabella said flatly. “What more could he want?”

The two of them continued on, sizing the other up as they went through the details of this arrangement.

But I tuned them out, my focus sliding to Mia.

Fuck, it made my chest ache to look at her, to take in those blue eyes and pouty lips of hers. Isabella said something that made her smirk, that dimple in her left cheek popping and reminding me of all the times I’d wished I was brave enough to reach out and touch her there. Her long brown hair was straight today and a little greasy, like she hadn’t washed it in a few days. It was pulled half up in a clip on her head, the other half falling over her shoulders.

She used to wear it like that when we studied together, when she’d chew her pencil and frown at her textbook and I’d pretend I wasn’t just there to

study her.

She was too good for me back then. She was still too good for me now.

Never stopped me from wanting her, though.

“You’re fine with this?”

The words shot out of me, silencing Giana and Isabella in the middle of them working out details. Mia blinked before looking at me through the screen.

“With people thinking we’re engaged?”

I swallowed with the question, my throat tight as I tried to feign indifference.

Mia looked soft for only a moment before her lips flattened, one dark eyebrow arching. “Are you asking *me*, or stating your own concern?”

“We’re not exactly each other’s type,” I pointed out, thinking about her clean-cut ex. He had golden skin, golden hair, and a golden boy reputation. He wasn’t missing any teeth. His face didn’t have a single scar on it.

And then, there was me.

“Don’t worry — I’m sure the parade of women that follows you around will be waiting when this is all over,” Mia snarked. “And if you don’t want to do this, just say it and stop wasting our time.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to do it.”

“Well, you’re not exactly jumping up and down with excitement, either.”

I smirked. “Is that what you want, Mia? Want me to jump for you?” I leaned toward the camera. “How high, sweetheart?”

Isabella placed a calming hand on Mia’s arm as she narrowed her gaze, and Giana muttered a soft, “Aleks,” in warning.

I just leaned back in my chair and crossed an ankle over my knee, arms folding over my chest. It was defensive body language, but I’d perfected it enough that it came off as arrogance.

I kept my eyes on Mia as a moment of silence passed between us, and then Giana cleared her throat. “As long as Aleks is okay with it, so am I. My only condition is that we all stay in constant contact about what the plan is, and that there are no surprises.”

“No surprises,” Isabella promised. “Once you give the word, I’ll have my people make calls to some high-profile gossip sites and influencers to get the ball rolling. I have *inside sources* armed with photographs and details about how Mia and Aleks have been dating for months now.”

All eyes snapped to me, and I didn’t miss how Mia went from the wall of

fortitude she always was to the girl I used to know. Her eyes softened just marginally, just barely enough for me to even notice. But I saw it in the way she subtly chewed the inside of her bottom lip, in how she was wringing her hands together in her lap.

She wanted this.

I leaned forward, elbows balanced on my knees and my attention solely on her. “What do you want out of this more than anything, Mia?”

“This is for your benefit, too, Aleks,” Giana started, but I held up a hand to ask her for a moment of quiet.

Mia frowned, looking at her hands before she shook her head and lifted her gaze to mine again. For a moment, I thought she was going to lie to me. But she sighed, like she knew better, and she hit me with the truth.

“I just want to be free of Austin, of Garrett, of all this stupid criticism over a breakup that happened more than a year ago. I want people to listen to my music and hear it for what it is — not what those two men *think* it is.” She swallowed. “I love this album. And I want it to have a fighting chance.”

My jaw was tight as I listened to her. Fuck both of those men for making her feel small, for taking away something she worked her ass off for. Austin got to bask in the glow of their breakup while she tried to escape the rubble of it unscathed. That douchebag reporter friend of his didn’t help.

I wanted to squash them both like the bugs they were.

“And my role?”

Mia held her chin a bit higher. “Prove them all wrong. Show them I’m different than what they think. I’m not just the crazy ex-girlfriend still hung up on Austin. I’m...” She flushed. “Desirable. Sexy. Talented. I’m alluring enough to capture the NHL’s bad boy. I’m good enough for him to want to stay.”

Her words sucker-punched me square in the ribs, my next breath halting in my chest before slowly leaking out. The fact that she didn’t already feel that way about herself, that she didn’t see it...

I nodded, leaning back in my chair again.

I wouldn’t just deliver on what she’d asked.

I’d also make that punk ass bitch of an ex-boyfriend of hers wish he’d never fucked with my girl.

I’d make him wish he’d never been born.

“I’m in,” I said.

Mia blinked. “Really?”

A slight tilt of my lips was all I gave her in answer, and I thought I saw that beautiful skin of hers flush as Isabella and Giana continued talking over details. They were already discussing NDAs and plotting our next public appearances, going back and forth about how we'd lay the groundwork, and discussing when the proposal should be.

They landed on August — just a month away.

I kept my eyes on Mia.

And thought of all the excuses I'd have to touch her now.

CHAPTER 5

Crooked Halo

Mia

Later that night, I ran a hot bath and sank into the water along with my complete disbelief of what had transpired.

Aleks Suter was officially my fake boyfriend.

And soon — my fake fiancé.

It was surreal, enough so that I was having one of those out-of-body experiences where the day didn't feel real. It was almost as if I were floating above my body and watching in a heated daze as the bubbles rose higher in the bath around me, like I was watching a TV show of someone else's life.

I turned the water off with my toes once it was high enough, sighing a bit as I plunged farther in. My phone sat on a small wooden table next to the bath along with a hand towel and a glass of white wine — something buttery and delicious that Cora had poured for me before retiring for the evening.

I'd turned my phone face down to keep myself from staring at the screen the entire time I was supposed to be relaxing in the tub, but it taunted me.

Because within an hour of our phone call, rumors had started to fly — and now Aleks and I were all over the Internet.

It started with a fan account of mine with millions of followers posting a video with a montage of press videos and photos showing all the times Aleks and I had been spotted together over the years. That one had been courtesy of Isabella. We knew that fan well enough to know she'd run with any information that was leaked to her.

I had to admit, the photos and videos Isabella had scrounged up were pretty convincing. Aleks wrapping me up in his big arms after his win in New York, us laughing at a restaurant with my parents last summer, his hand on the small of my back before the benefit concert last month...

From the outside, it looked like he was protective of me, that he wanted me, maybe even *loved* me.

Of course, I knew the truth.

I knew he saw me more like an annoying little sister than anything else.

After that video was posted, gossip sites ran wild with the quotes from Isabella's *inside source* saying that I was unbothered by Garrett Orange's article because the points he'd made were laughable, considering I was happily in a relationship with Aleks.

Then came the fans with theories and timelines — one in particular that was gaining speed and quickly going viral. We hadn't even planned this one, but she'd put together a very convincing argument that Aleks and I had been secretly dating since February, and that Aleks had been the first person I'd run to after the breakup with Austin last summer.

She even asked at the end of her video if her followers thought that maybe there was something there *before* the breakup?

It wasn't just a little match strike and a slow burning candle flame of a rumor.

No, already it was a forest fire, roaring and spreading faster than we could handle.

Isabella assured me all was fine. She was glued to her phone as she kissed both my cheeks and left earlier, and I trusted her when she told me she had it handled.

But now, in the quiet of my home that was far too large for just me, I couldn't help but prickle with anxiety.

I didn't want to lose my grip on the situation — not when I already had so little control of what people said about me. This was a narrative we were creating, one I had the power to curate.

And I knew exactly what I needed to feel better.

Drying my hands on the plush white towel, I grabbed my phone.

Me: We need ground rules.

It only took a few seconds for the little dots to start bouncing, and then a reply came through.

Aleks: And this is a text that couldn't wait until morning? It's 2AM, Strings.

I cursed. I hadn't thought about the time difference before shooting off that message.

I also couldn't fight the way my stomach somersaulted at the familiar nickname. It didn't matter how many times he'd called me that since we were

sixteen. Every time he did, I felt my cheeks heat just like they had that first time.

Me: Well, for how quickly you answered, I assume you weren't sleeping. Did I interrupt the porn video playing on your phone?

Aleks: More like the live action porn in my living room.

I scoffed, but something sour sank into my gut at the sight of those words. I was fairly certain he was kidding.

But I was also fairly certain that he *could* have a porno playing out in his condo any time he wanted it.

Aleks: Why do we need rules?

Me: Because this thing is already tailspinning, and I want to make sure we're on the same page with everything.

Aleks: That's my Mia. Trying to control the uncontrollable.

My Mia.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen those words or heard them from his mouth, but they still sliced me open just the same.

I was never his. I never really would be.

And I was pretty sure he was doing all of this out of pure pity and boredom.

Me: First of all, you have to clean up. You're a nightmare to deal with when you're drunk.

The little dots appeared again, indicating that he was typing a response, but then they disappeared. They popped up once more, but then were gone again.

Then, the phone rang, Aleks's face filling the screen.

And not just for a regular phone call.

For a *video* call.

"Shit," I cursed, looking around the bathroom like there was something in there that could save me. In my panic, I answered the call, but with the option that only connected me to audio. The screen filled with a dark image of Aleks, one tattooed arm propped behind his head and a sleepy grin on his face.

"Hi," I said.

"Turn on your video."

"No."

"If you're going to call me an alcoholic, at least have the balls to say it to

my face.”

“I don’t have balls, and I didn’t say you were an alcoholic.”

“You insinuated it.”

“No, I insinuated that you can be a messy drunk — which you proved to be true countless times in high school and every year since — and that I don’t want to deal with it as your fiancée.”

He paused, that sleepy smirk firmly in place. He stared at the screen as if he could see me through it even with the camera turned off. “Fiancée,” he mused. “Has a nice ring to it, eh? Should I practice introducing you as the future Mrs. Suter?”

His Swiss-German accent was so slight now that it was barely anything at all, but sometimes, like when he said his last name, I heard it. It brought me back to when we were kids. His English had been phenomenal even then, but now? If you didn’t *know* he lived in Switzerland for sixteen years, you might never have guessed.

Especially since he didn’t talk about it much.

When we were kids, he’d been tight-lipped about his past until one night when my parents were at a charity auction and we were home alone. We’d snuck a bottle of Dad’s vodka and hung out in the hot tub, and for the first time, he’d opened up to me about his parents.

How his mom and dad were addicts, how his mom had died when he was just a toddler, how his father had taken off shortly after and left him in foster care, only to die a couple years later, himself. How Annaliese, his foster mom, had saved him.

That was a past he was trying to run from, not one he wanted to broadcast.

“Please, like I’d take any man’s last name.”

He chuckled. “Turn on your damn video, Strings.”

“I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I’m in the bath.”

He fell silent for a beat, and even though his screen was dark, I swore I saw his jaw tighten a bit with that admission. It reminded me of the time when we were teens and he’d walked in on me getting out of the shower in our shared bathroom. I’d had a towel wrapped around me, but that didn’t stop me from feeling naked under his heated gaze when he dragged it from my damp hair all the way down to my toes.

Before I could analyze his pause too much, he sucked his teeth, leaning up against his headboard and flicking on a lamp so I could see him better.

“Come on. We’re getting married. Can’t your future husband get a look at the goods before purchase?”

“You’re a pig.” I huffed. “Hold on.”

I used my free hand to wash all the bubbles up around my neck, making sure there wasn’t so much as a glimpse of my *goods*, as Aleks had called them, before I allowed access to my video.

“There,” I said when my image flickered on. “Happy?”

“Very,” he mused, rolling his lips together in that stupid, infuriatingly sexy way he always had. “Although I’d be even happier if a strong wind would whip through and blow those bubbles away.”

“I’m about to blow *you*, if you don’t stop,” I warned.

And then I paled, because *what the fuck did I just say?*

Aleks’s eyebrows shot up, the corner of his mouth tilting. “This is turning out rather nicely for me.”

“I— I meant—”

I shook my head, too flustered to even try to figure out what I meant because seriously... *what the fuck?!*

I growled, glaring at the screen when Aleks chuckled at my misfortune.

“Okay, funny guy, can we be serious for one minute.”

“I’ve probably got thirty seconds max.”

“Aleks.”

“Fine, fine,” he said, wiping his hand over his face. As he did, he wiped away his smile and frowned. “Serious face on. Don’t be a drunk prick. Got it. What else?”

“Thank you.” I sighed. “Okay. No hooking up with other women while we’re... whatevering. The last thing I need is a story running that you’re cheating on me. That would just make me a bigger fool.”

“But isn’t that your genius publicist’s idea for how this all will end? Me being seen with a woman crawling all over me, painting you as the poor girl who can’t save me from my *bad boy ways*?”

“That’s different,” I defended. “That’ll be on *my* terms, and with a full PR plan behind it. We don’t need any surprises.”

“No surprises. Got it, Mom.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Speaking of which... how, exactly, are we breaking this to your

parents?”

“It’s already done.”

That surprised him, judging by the tic of his brow. “Oh? And how did they take it?”

“You know them,” I said, waving my hand before I grabbed my glass of wine and took a long sip. “Mom thinks it’s ridiculous, but after hearing Isabella out, she’s fine with it. Just wants us to be careful. And wanted to know if this means she’ll see you for the holidays because she misses you more than me, as per usual.”

He smirked at that.

“And Dad...” I swirled my wine before draining the last of the glass. “Well, he’s... Dad.”

My eyes flicked to Aleks before I turned my attention to where I was setting my empty glass down.

“I can’t imagine he’s thrilled about it,” Aleks said.

“He’s on board.”

“On board, but not happy.”

I waved another mountain of bubbles up toward my collarbone. “He doesn’t like lying in any capacity, even if it’s with good intentions.”

Aleks fell silent, his nostrils flaring a bit like he knew that fact about my father all too well.

They had such a strange relationship, my father and Aleks. If it weren’t for Dad’s love of hockey, Aleks might never have made it to the States to play. I could still remember how excited he’d been the day he and Mom went to pick Aleks up from the airport, how he was already beaming with pride even before he met the kid.

My dad loved having him living with us. He treated him like his own son. He supported him mentally, emotionally, and financially. Sure, the team paid for his food and housing with us, but Dad went above and beyond to give Aleks the best — just like he would have if Aleks were his blood.

But he was also hard on him — way harder than he ever was on me.

It was like Aleks was the son he never had, and Daddy was never shy about his expectations. I’d witnessed Aleks get a reaming more times than I could count, especially when he first moved in with us. He was reckless then, quick to break a rule as soon as my father laid it out.

Over time, I watched their relationship morph. Aleks began to respect my father, and soon, to almost idolize him.

Still, there was something there that I didn't quite understand, some kind of riff between them. Maybe it was because my father always knew Aleks could do better, *be* better.

Or maybe it was because Aleks just wanted my father to leave him alone. He wanted *everyone* to leave him alone.

"Rich, you know," Aleks said, content to drop the parent subject. "That you're lecturing me about my drinking while you suck down a bottle of wine."

"It's one glass."

"Sure. You forget I know you. I've seen you play slap the bag and drink a line of defensemen under the table."

I chuckled at that particular memory, one from a high school party where I'd let loose maybe more than I should have.

And then my smile slipped because that was the same night I'd asked Aleks to kiss me.

The same night he'd told me he never would.

I cleared my throat. "Anyway, what about you? What rules do you want to put in place?"

"Hmm..." He tapped his chin. "Well, this *is* a pretty long dry spell you're asking me to have... does that offer of you *blowing me* still stand?"

My jaw hinged open at the salacious grin on his face.

"Aleks Suter," I scolded. "If you were here, I'd splash you."

"And I'd do a victory dance because then those bubbles would be gone."

"You're impossible."

He chuckled. "Relax, I'm just fucking with you. Whatever rules you want to put in place, I'm fine with. Truth be told, after talking to G... I really do think you're saving my ass. Dick will be thrilled with the brand deals and ticket sales. He'll be happy to see some media attention on me that *isn't* negative." He shrugged. "And, not that I really care that much, but I guess it'll be nice to not lose my job."

"You'd die without hockey."

The way his shoulder inched up again, his eyes avoiding the screen...

It made my stomach drop.

Because that look told me there was truth behind that statement I'd said as a joke.

And if he'd die without hockey, and he didn't care if he lost his job, then that meant...

“Aleks...”

“I’ll be good. Promise.”

I swallowed, not wanting to drop this without talking about it, but knowing him well enough to know it would be useless to try.

“He says, with devil horns holding up a crooked halo.”

Aleks gave me another sleepy grin that had me flashing back to high school again, to when we’d stay up long past our bedtimes talking about everything and nothing at all. I could almost smell him, ice and sweat and mint. I could almost feel his arm brushing mine and my cheeks heating as I tried not to let him see that I had a crush.

A foolish girl, that’s what I had been.

“I’ll make a list,” I said. “But you should get some sleep.”

“Oh, *now* she’s concerned about my beauty rest.”

“I’m getting pruny and need to get out of this bath.”

“Now *that’s* a sight worth losing sleep over. Just prop the phone up and —”

“Goodnight, Aleks.”

He was still laughing as I ended the call.

CHAPTER 6

How to Act

Aleks

I think I should be scared.

It seems like the right emotion to feel as a sixteen-year-old leaving their family and country behind to stay with a bunch of strangers, but I don't feel it.

Then again, I don't feel much at all most of the time.

My foster mom knows this about me. She asked me only once if I had everything I needed when it was time to go to the airport, and then she sat with me in contented silence until the moment I had to board my plane. Because I was a minor, she was allowed through security to sit with me — and I think she knew that alone was enough.

With a kiss on the cheek and a smile, she let me go with a promise to call every Sunday and to be good for the family that was being so kind to house me.

Mom never fusses with me. She knows how I am.

I love that about her, that she doesn't try to change me. She doesn't try to make me like my foster siblings, the ones I've seen come and go while I've stayed put. Some of them are smart. Some of them are funny. All of them are good enough to be adopted.

But not me.

If I'm not scared, maybe I should be excited.

I'm in America for the first time. I'm here to play hockey. My housing, food, and education are being taken care of. I'm so close to my dream of playing in the NHL, I can practically reach out and touch it.

But I don't feel excited, either.

A couple picks me up at the airport. The man is tall and broad-shouldered with a bit of a belly. He has thick black hair, tan skin, and is wearing a nice, tailored suit and a Rolex. His wife is much shorter than he is,

with silky brown hair, fair skin, and a kind smile. She wears a pencil skirt and a crisp white blouse, along with heels that make her a couple inches taller.

They introduce themselves as Charlie and Holly, but I call them Mr. and Mrs. Conaway, like Mom told me to.

Mr. Conaway takes my luggage and Mrs. Conaway asks me questions as we make our way to the parking garage, mostly about how the flight was and if I'm excited to be here. The questions continue from Holly on the drive from the airport out to the suburbs of Chicago where I'll be staying with them. Winnetka, my mom called it.

We pull up to a brick house bigger than any I've ever seen. It reminds me of the one from Home Alone, with large trees, white columns, and huge windows. It's so big it could be a hotel. The lawn is green and sprawling, and we drive up a stone path hidden behind a gate before parking in a garage with two other cars.

Charlie gets one of my bags while I get the other. Holly makes a comment about how I pack lighter than she does for a weekend trip. I can only guess how big her closet is and don't doubt her statement.

Holly tells me all about the house as we go inside. She says it has six bedrooms and eight bathrooms. She tells me how happy she is that it's summer now and that she can sit out on the back porch and get some sun. She tells me she hopes I like my room.

The room I'll be staying in is up a grand staircase and down the hall on the second floor. My room, like all the others in this mansion, has a view of Lake Michigan. It feels like an ocean to me, so vast and endless and blue. I stare out at the water and their private dock with a large boat, wondering how to act.

I feel out of place in my old boots and coat. I should have washed my hair before the flight.

I find myself wondering if my birth parents ever saw anything like this, if the woman who birthed me ever walked along a sandy shore before she died. I wonder if my father ever took me swimming before he left me, before he decided I was too much to handle without my mother on this Earth to help, before he died alone in a tent with a needle in his arm.

Charlie makes a joke to his wife about saving some of her questions for dinner that pulls me back to the present. He kisses her cheek when she flushes at the comment, and then tells me to get settled and they'll see me downstairs.

The closet is the size of my old bedroom in Berne, the one I shared with my foster brother. The bed is three times the size of the cot I used to sleep on. I still don't feel excited.

I unpack, take a shower, and change into the nicest clothes I have — a pair of jeans Mom bought me for this trip, and my favorite long-sleeve shirt from the hockey club I played on in Berne. Even though it's late in Berne, I call my mom using the cell phone and SIM card she bought me with money I know she didn't have to spare. I'll have a different cell phone soon, and a laptop, too.

I've never had a laptop before.

"It's okay to smile," she tells me before we hang up, as if she can see my face. "It's okay to enjoy yourself. This is a wonderful opportunity, Aleks."

"I know."

"Ich liebe di so wie du bisch."

I love you, just as you are.

"I love you, too."

When I go downstairs, I wonder if Charlie and Holly have left. The house is quiet, and I wander through the living area, taking in another impressive view of the lake until I stumble upon the kitchen.

There's a girl there.

She's sitting at the kitchen island, the chandelier above her casting her in a warm glow. Her hair is brown and damp, sticking to the skin of her arms and back. It's so long it nearly touches the hem of the sweatpants she's wearing, which have been rolled twice at her hips.

I can't see what she's doing, but she's bent over the counter, focused on something. One foot is tucked under her while the other is propped up on the barstool to her left. She keeps tugging at her hair with her right hand while her left works.

I realize as I get closer that she's writing.

At first, I think it's a poem. But then, I see the strange symbols and notice how she's tapping her foot, how she's humming a rhythm so quietly only she can hear.

I realize it's a song.

The next step I take is close enough for her to hear, and she gasps, whipping around to look at me. She clutches her song to her chest like I might steal it or, worse, see what she's written. I've scared her, which I'm used to, so I don't apologize.

In fact, I don't say anything.

I just... stare.

She's beautiful.

Her eyes are an electric blue, a shade so bright and brilliant it puts the lake to shame, even with the large-framed glasses covering them. She has thick, dark lashes and brows the same color as her hair. Her lips are a dusty pink, pouty and soft-looking. She has a beauty mark on her left cheek, just below the crease of her eye.

She blinks at me, lashes fanning over her tan cheeks.

"There you are," someone says from behind me. It's Holly. She sweeps into the kitchen with a wide smile. She's wearing a dress, a bit more casual than what she was wearing before, but still nice. She moves to stand behind the girl, kissing her cheek and placing her hands on the girl's shoulders with a gentle squeeze. "And I see you've met our daughter, Mia."

Mia looks at her mom, and then back at me, her cheeks red now.

"Hi, Mia," I say.

"Hi," she says back.

When she smiles, a dimple appears on her left cheek, just an inch below her beauty mark.

The emotion finally hits me.

Now, I am excited.

CHAPTER 7

Elephant in the Room

Aleks

“Oh, God. This is pure gold,” Carter Fabri said, holding his phone up to record as I lined up to take another shot at the golf ball resting on the lush green grass.

I’d missed it the first swing.

“Aleks Suter, *Suuuu Man* — top scorer in the league, and Most Likely to Whiff on the golf course.”

My eyes narrowed into slits as I glared at him. I turned back to where I was lining up my shot, pretending like I was going in for my second try, but instead, I reached out with my golf club and swiped it under his knees, making him fall backward as the rest of the guys laughed at his expense.

Stupid, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed fucker didn’t even get mad.

He sat up laughing just as hard as the rest of them.

Carter had been a pain in my ass ever since I first met him. I didn’t care that he was a nice guy. He was my particular pet peeve of a teammate — the kind who had the potential to be great, but had the backbone of a salamander.

I’d watched him kill it in practice so many times, playing like he was the center of our dreams, only to witness him throw it all away in a game because he lost his focus. His confidence had to be the equivalent of a five-year-old learning to ride a bike.

It was why he’d been sent down to the AHL time and time again.

He was back in Tampa this summer, promised a spot at camp next month, but he’d have to prove himself to stay any longer than that.

“Aw, leave Su Man alone,” Jaxson Brittain said. “Not his fault he’s an ugly sonofabitch who’s only good at one thing.”

“You mean sniping on your ass every scrimmage? Yeah, seems to be my specialty.”

Jaxson started in on his defense as the other guys laughed. I ignored them,

lining up for my shot. I hit the ball this time, but it was a poor showing compared to the rest of them.

I didn't know why I let them talk me into golfing in the first place.

I didn't play hockey to make friends — I never had.

The only reason I entertained the idea of today was because Will Perry had been the one to invite me. He was our goalie, a beast of a man who was one of the few I'd ever played with who made me want to be better. He'd also helped me out last season when I was flying too close to the sun, as Mia's father would say.

Coming into Tampa after being discarded from the Seattle team like a broken hockey stick, I'd felt like I needed to prove myself even more than usual. Of course, for me, that usually turned into my temper getting the best of me. In my attempt to be the best, I was quick to lash out at my teammates, alienate myself, and, more times than I liked to admit, get into fights on the ice that led to me sitting in the penalty box.

Will pissed me off at first because he was trying to tame me from the get go. He wanted me to fall in line and follow his rules.

But when I realized he actually gave a fuck about me, that he actually saw what I brought to the team... something shifted. I was used to being punished and threatened, but it was rare that I felt like anyone saw my worth.

It was rare that I felt like I truly *had* worth.

So when he pulled me aside and used his words to tell me saw my potential and believed in me, it meant something — especially because, like me, Will wasn't one to talk about anything, least of all being impressed by another player.

It probably also helped that he was quick to remind me that the team had been doing fine before I got there, and that if I were to leave, they'd find someone else to take my place. It was the truth — no matter how bitter the pill was to swallow.

No one could give you an ego check quite like Daddy P could.

So yeah, when that man asked something of me, even if just to join some of the teammates for a golf outing, I wasn't going to say no. Add in the fact that my face was plastered all over the Internet at the moment — and *not* from a bar fight — I guessed I needed an escape.

That's why I was piling into a large golf cart with Will, Carter, Jaxson, and Vince as we rode toward the middle of the fairway instead of holing up in my condo like I usually would.

Where Will struck me almost as a father figure — though I'd never tell him that — and Carter was like an annoying little brother, Jaxson and Vince were my reliable teammates. I didn't care to join in on their constant locker room banter, and I sure as fuck didn't need to be their friend, but I knew when we were on the ice together, I could count on them.

I was silent as we parked the golf cart and the guys took their second shots, all of them easily making it to the green. Vince nearly got his ball into the hole before it was my turn again.

Fortunately, this time, I was able to hit it on the first swing, and I made it to the edge of the green.

"So, are you going to give us details on the wedding?" Carter asked Will as we made our way toward the flag. It was one of those sweltering July days in Tampa, the kind that had sweat sliding down the back of my neck even at nine in the morning.

"Nope," Will answered easily.

That made me smirk. This was the kind of man I liked to be around. I'd only ever seen him lose his cool one time — last season, when he was falling hard for his nanny and didn't know how to handle it.

Fortunately, he had me to knock some sense into him.

"Come on," Vince said. "You bastards made me tell you everything about mine."

"Maven was telling the whole *world* everything about yours on social media," Jaxson corrected. "And don't act like you didn't love every second of it."

Vince smirked and shrugged. "I can't help it if we're the hottest couple to ever exist."

"Nah," Jaxson argued, tugging on the bill of Vince's hat as he jumped out of the golf cart. "That title belongs to me and your sister."

Vince glared at him before chasing him toward the hole, and Will shook his head as he, Carter, and I fell into step next to one another.

"I just want to know if this is going to be a small affair, or if I should start planning a date, ya know?" Carter remarked.

"You'll find out when everyone else does, Fabio," Will said. "Nothing to tell yet."

"And Doc isn't going to go as your date, no matter *when* the wedding is," I chimed in. I couldn't help it. Any chance I had to rag on the kid was too tempting for me to pass up.

Carter's face flushed a bit, but he shrugged me off on a smile. "So you say. I think Livvy secretly has the hots for me."

That made Jaxson and Vince spew out a simultaneous laugh as we approached where Vince was about to putt. Livia was our team dentist and best friend to Maven, Vince's wife. She was smoking hot, smart as hell, and had a known reputation for being a bit of a freak in the sheets.

In other words — she was so far out of Carter's league he might as well have been playing another sport.

"In your dreams, Fabio. Livvy would eat you alive," Vince said, and then he gently tapped the ball and sent it right into the hole.

Fucker got a birdie, and I was just as mad about it as I was when he outscored me in a game.

"Fuck you," Carter said, shoving Vince enough to make him stumble. But now Jaxson and Will were laughing, too, and I wore an easy smirk. "Fuck *all* of you. One day, I'll make you eat your words."

"If you ever bag Liv, I promise you, I will literally get on my hands and knees and kiss your feet," Vince said.

Carter shook his head, lining up for his first putt. I thought he would shoot some smart-ass remark back, but he quieted, missing the hole by just a few inches when he finally took his shot. He still hit par with the next one, but he seemed to be in his head now.

Poor kid. We were just giving him a hard time.

Then again, I'd rather him show even half the interest he had in Livia to getting better on the ice. We could use him, especially with the center on my line likely on his way out after this season. He was an older veteran in his early forties. Played like a monster, that guy, but our bodies could only do this shit for so long. Carter would play in the fourth line most likely, but he had the potential to move up quickly — if he focused.

"So, are we going to talk about the giant elephant in the room, or ignore it the way you ignore every call Coach makes?" Jaxson asked me as we loaded up to head toward the next hole.

"Yeah, Su Man, why didn't you tell us you were hooking up with the biggest pop star in the nation?" Vince chimed in.

Ah. So that was the elephant.

I hoped my smirk came off as cocky and sly as I winked at them, not saying a word as Will took his first shot. But as soon as he did, even he wanted the dirt.

“You know, we all saw something when she came to that game in New York,” he said. “You had a hat trick that night.”

“*And* you didn’t get thrown in the box even once,” Carter added.

Jaxson shook his head. “I just can’t believe it. No offense, bro, but... you don’t exactly seem her type.”

My nostrils flared with that comment because I was well aware of that fact.

But I didn’t need this motherfucker to point it out.

“You don’t think so?” I asked, tapping my chin with one finger. “Huh. Maybe you should tell her that next time I have her screaming out my name from her fifth orgasm of the night.”

That made them all laugh. Carter tried to high five me, but I just stared at his hand before he sheepishly put it down again.

Fuck. I hated that I’d said that. It didn’t matter that Mia wasn’t here to hear it, it was a prick thing to say.

Why was that always my defense mechanism?

Everyone already thinks I’m a prat, so I just continue to play into it. That’s easier than trying to change their minds. And why would I want to?

I always felt one bad day away from ruining it all, always felt like there was a part of me born to ruin everything I touched.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said, still pissed at myself for talking about her like she was just one of the many women who were desperate to get in my bed.

But this was who I was to these guys — to everyone.

Aleks Suter: the playboy, the asshole, the fighter.

“You two grew up together, yeah?” Carter asked, taking his shot before he turned back to me for an answer.

I spit in lieu of one.

Maybe I should have opened up, should have told my teammates about how I went from a poor foster kid in Switzerland to billeting with a rich family in Chicago. Maybe a better man would have shared his feelings and detailed how his fucked-up childhood shaped him.

But that wasn’t me.

I preferred to keep the past exactly there — behind me.

The only person who knew more than surface level shit about me was Mia, and even we didn’t talk about it much anymore. When we were teenagers sneaking onto rooftops or sitting by the lake that felt more like an

ocean, those conversations came easy.

Well — with *her* they did.

But she never pushed me, never asked for more than what I was willing to give. Sometimes I'd talk about my biological parents — what little I knew about them, anyway, which was mostly that they battled drug addiction until they both died. Sometimes I'd tell her stories about my foster mom, Annaliese, who was an angel on Earth.

Most times, I'd just talk about hockey.

Hockey was the only thing that felt constant in my life, the only thing I could rely on other than myself.

"Man, I'm sure Dick is thrilled with this news," Vince said, pulling me back to the present. "I looked last night, and your jersey is the top selling one on the team right now. In the offseason," he added with a slight shake of his head. "If you two make it to the season and sell out the arena, he'll be so tickled pink he'll probably offer you his jet."

"We'll make it."

The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I didn't miss the looks the guys exchanged.

"Alrighty then," Carter said with a grin. "Man, can you imagine how fucking wild it'll be when Mia Love comes to a home game? It was lit when she was in New York. I hope she brings her friends. Those twin models she hangs out with..." He clapped Jaxson on the shoulder and bit the knuckles of his opposite hand, but I ignored whatever he said next as I lined up and took my shot.

For the first time, it sailed farther than any of the other guys's had, and Will let out a low whistle as we walked toward the golf cart.

"You two are serious, huh?" he asked.

I didn't reply, but with him, I didn't need to.

We spoke the same language.

Mostly grunts and scowls.

"She seems great, man. Talented as hell. And I'm not just saying that because my daughter is obsessed with her."

I nodded.

She was great.

Better than me by all accounts — which was probably why these fuckers could barely believe we were together.

"I know talking isn't your thing, but if you ever need to..."

“Fuck off, Daddy P.”

He smirked, heaving his bag of clubs onto his shoulder before loading them on the cart.

CHAPTER 8

Chaotic Masterpiece

Mia

My stomach was in knots a week later — and not from the turbulence we hit on our way out of Los Angeles to New York City. Not because I had an appearance on a late-night show, either. In fact, *that* was about the only thing keeping me calm right now.

I loved talking to an audience. I loved performing on a stage. Music — *my* music? It was my safe place.

It was the fact that Aleks would be in that crowd that had me guzzling water and struggling to take each breath.

For the last week, the Internet had run wild with rumors about us. At this point, we were just about all anyone was talking about — at least, it *felt* that way. From social media to mainstream news, everyone was buzzing and wanting to know one thing.

Was it true?

Was Mia Love really dating bad boy Aleks Suter?

And tonight, they'd get their confirmation.

We were going to be seen together publicly for the first time since Isabella planted all the right seeds to have the rumors flying, and I was totally cool about it.

Totally, *totally* cool.

“Okay, unless you’re having some sort of artistic genius moment where shredding your napkin into confetti helps you visualize a tour set or something, I’m going to need you to stop.”

I blinked out of my daze, turning to where Isabella was watching me with a raised brow.

“Huh?”

She nodded toward my hands on the tray table, and I paled at the sight.

I’d literally torn all three of my napkins into tiny pieces, forming a snow-

white mountain that was precariously close to overflowing onto the floor at any moment.

I cursed, trying and failing to ball the little pieces up in my fist and make the pile smaller. Isabella chuckled, waving her hand for our flight attendant, who made quick work of my trash while I hid my face and looked out the window.

“It’s fine, Mia. Everyone gets nervous with the launch of a new album and tour.”

“I’m not nervous.”

She flattened her lips as I glanced back at her, and I sat back in my chair with a huff.

“Okay, I’m not nervous about *that*.” I waved her off. “People are already starting to move on from Garrett Orange and his stupid article, thanks to you. And besides, this is Daisy Kent. She’s my favorite late-night show host.”

“Because she doesn’t ask you about the size of your tits or which boy what song is about?”

“Exactly. It’ll be a great interview. And performing this single for the first time... this is what I’ve been waiting for. What we have been preparing for. Trust me. I’ve got this.”

“Okay, I trust you,” she said immediately. “But then would you care to explain why your fingers have turned into little terrorists wreaking havoc on anything they touch?”

I frowned, then looked down at where I’d now tied the strings of my joggers into five knots, one on top of another.

With another curse, I hastily unknotted them before shoving my hands into the pocket of my hoodie to cage them.

“I’m fine, I just...” I blew out a frustrated breath.

“Aleks.”

My next breath was a slow one as I nodded. “Aleks.”

“He’s not going to fuck this up, Mia,” Isabella assured me, like that was the issue. “Giana and I are on the same page. He’s in this, too. He will behave himself.”

I nodded but felt my skin heating at the thought of what *behaving himself* would entail.

It wasn’t unusual for me to have butterflies any time I knew I was going to be in the same place as my best friend. I knew he’d pick me up in a big hug, knew we’d rag on each other and give one another shit. I knew it would

feel easy, just like it always did — even if, under the surface of that calm water, there was a stormy past threatening to take me down with the current.

But this time was different.

This time, I didn't have a boyfriend, nor was I freshly out of a relationship and so heartbroken that I couldn't be interested in another man even if I tried.

And this time, Aleks would be putting on a show for every camera aimed our way.

He wouldn't just hug me like a little sister, he'd hold me like a girlfriend. He'd lace his fingers with mine.

God... would he kiss me?

My stomach did another violent roll at the thought, enough that I squirmed in my seat and groaned a bit.

"Dude, what the actual fuck is going on," Isabella asked on a laugh, sliding me her glass of water when she realized mine was empty. "You're being so weird. You're acting like..."

Her voice faded as I chugged the water, and then her mouth popped open as she blinked a few times.

"Oh shit... are you in love with him?"

"Stop," I said, sucking my teeth and swatting her arm. I looked around the small jet to make sure no one else on our team had overheard her. "Don't be ridiculous."

"You have a crush on him?"

"Absolutely not," I said with more insistence. "He's like a brother to me."

Lie.

Big, fat lie.

Did I sell that big fat lie?

Judging by my publicist's face, the answer was no.

"Stop bullshitting me. Was there something between you two when you were younger?"

"No," I answered immediately. "Yes. No, not really... but kind of?"

Isabella's eyes nearly bulged out of her head, and she looked around, too, before tugging on my sleeve so I was leaning down toward her and could hear her whispering.

"Okay, bitch. You need to tell me *everything* — right now."

I sighed, pulling my hood up over my head and tugging on the strings that tightened them until I was looking at Isabella through a tiny hole of thick

fabric.

"I may or may not have had a little tiny crush on him," I admitted.

"Mia! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's not a big deal," I said. "It's fine. Really. We... I don't know, I thought we had something. I thought maybe he liked me more than a friend. So, one night, when I was drunk and young and stupid, I tried to kiss him."

"*Tried?*"

"He turned me down."

"He *what?*!"

"Calm down," I said on a laugh. "He was right to do it. First of all, I was hammered. Secondly, it would have messed everything up — our friendship, our family. He's pretty much like a son to my parents."

"Okay, that's kinda ew, considering we're now about to convince the world you're engaged."

"Mom and Dad know it's fake," I assured her. "Because trust me, otherwise? Dad would have a lot to say about it."

"He doesn't like Aleks?"

"He loves Aleks," I refuted. "But... he's also very protective of me."

"Ah, and he doesn't think Mr. Bad Boy is the right choice, huh?"

I fell quiet instead of answering because truthfully... I didn't know. All I *did* know was that there was some sort of silent understanding between my father and Aleks, something they shared that only the two of them knew about when it came to me.

"I still don't really understand how he came to live with you," Isabella remarked.

"We were his billet family."

"Which means..."

"It's pretty common in hockey. Basically, when a teenager exhibits major talent, they might get the opportunity to play in a major junior league like the USHL or OHL. But there are only a select number of teams in the junior leagues, and they're in certain cities. Aleks was in Switzerland, and he definitely could have stayed there and gone on to be very successful. But... I think he wanted out. I think his *foster mom* wanted him out. They both knew he needed a fresh start, and besides — Aleks didn't want to just play hockey professionally. He wanted the NHL. And his best shot at that was in the States or Canada."

Isabella nodded, following along. “So, how did he end up with you?”

I shrugged. “My father loves hockey, always has. And since he never went past playing in college, he wanted to find a way to be involved. After years of being a sponsor for our local USHL team, the coach asked him if he’d be interested in billeting. Coach said he had his eyes on this kid overseas whom he just knew would be a monster scorer for the team.”

“Aleks.”

“Aleks.”

“So he just lived with you for two years?”

I nodded. “Yep. From the time we were sixteen until we graduated.”

“I mean, it would make sense that your father put some boundaries in place. It had to be a hard decision as a father to have a teenage boy living under the same roof as his daughter.”

“Aleks never crossed any lines,” I said, almost smiling at the memory of that boy he used to be. “He was too focused on hockey.”

“But you tried to kiss him.”

I cringed, picking at my nails before Isabella swatted my hand for me to stop. “I tried to kiss him,” I confirmed. “He was right to stop it. Like I said — I was not in the right mind to consent to anything. And we weren’t right for each other. He was going into the league as a top draft pick, I was focused on my music...” I shrugged. “I was just a silly drunk girl with a crush on a hot boy who happened to live with me. I mean, come on — it would happen to anyone. Seeing Aleks Suter walk around in nothing but basketball shorts after a shower? That’s like every teenage girl’s wet dream.”

Isabella smirked, but let out a long, heavy sigh. “If I’d have known all this, I wouldn’t have proposed—”

“It’s *fine*,” I promised again. “There’s no one I’d trust to do this with other than him.”

“But?”

“No buts.”

She flattened her lips again.

“I’m just a little nervous about the whole pretending thing, okay?” I said on what I hoped was a light laugh, tossing my hood back and taking a calmer sip of the water that had been refilled by our flight attendant. “I’m not immune to getting butterflies from him. That’s all it is. It’ll be fine. It’ll be *fun*. And knowing him, he’ll make some smart-ass remark to make me growl at him and remember why I’m glad nothing ever happened between us. He’s

infuriating,” I reminded her. “And I’m sure he’ll take any chance he can to annoy me. It’s his specialty.”

Isabella didn’t look convinced as she sat back in her seat. “Okay,” she said on another sigh. “But... if at any point this gets to be too much...”

“It won’t.”

“But if it does...”

“It *won’t*,” I said again, grabbing her arm in a gentle squeeze. “Now, can you hush? Your client needs a beauty nap.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re always beautiful, but yes, I’ll let you sleep. Wake you when we’re starting descent?”

I nodded, and with a kiss on my cheek, Isabella left me in the row alone as she went to join where my manager, Rina, and my booking agent, Glo, were no doubt going over every step of the evening.

I waited until she was deep in conversation, and then I pulled up my phone, reading the last texts from Aleks.

Aleks: Made it to NYC. Your security team is insane. They act like you’re a world-famous pop star or something.

Me: Wonder what gave them that idea.

Aleks: Surely not your dance skills.

Me: Better than your golf skills, judging by that video your teammate posted.

Aleks: Scrolling through my social media looking for ex-girlfriends already?

Me: I’d come up empty-handed if that was my goal, wouldn’t I? Unless one night of drunken sex counts as a relationship to you.

Aleks: Drunken sex is fun. You should try it.

Aleks: I volunteer as teacher if you find yourself curious.

Me: Tempting, but I’d hate for you to pull a muscle trying to keep up.

Aleks: Coach wouldn’t be happy with me then, would he?

I’d smiled, setting my phone down then, but he followed up with another text.

Aleks: In all seriousness... are you ready for this?

It had taken me a long time to write back to that, wondering if he could sense my anxiety from across the country.

Me: I think so. Are you?

Aleks: Been dreaming about making that punk reporter cry. I’d much rather kick him right in the teeth, but I’ll play by your rules, I suppose.

I’d chuckled at that, tucking my phone away.

But a few minutes later, it’d vibrated again.

Aleks: I've got your back, Strings. Always.

My heart squeezed as I stared at that text again now. I stared at it a long moment before thumbing up to look at older conversations. I made it all the way to when he'd texted me the night news broke about mine and Austin's breakup last summer before I clicked the screen off and sighed.

Then, I sank farther into my seat, pulled my hood back up, and dreamed about the boy I used to know.

• • •

When we touched down in New York, I felt like a haggard beast.

I had thankfully scrubbed away the drool on my chin, but I knew my face was puffy and my hair was a mess from hiding it under my hood all that time. I found myself counting the blessings of my incredible hair and makeup artists who would no doubt have me looking like a million bucks by showtime as my team and I filed off the jet.

And then I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of Aleks waiting at the bottom step on the tarmac.

Everyone said hello to him as they passed, Isabella muttering something under her breath that made him chuckle before she was patting his chest and making her way toward the row of black cars waiting for us.

But I just stood frozen, my feet unwilling to move, heart paused in my chest as I took him in.

Aleks Suter was a chaotic masterpiece.

Whether he was drenched in sweat and bleeding, wearing his hockey uniform, or scowling and clean cut in his after-game suit — that man had the power to turn every head. He wasn't pretty. He wasn't handsome. He was just plain *hot* — rugged, lined with hard edges and scars that had the power to make every pussy tingle.

Right now, he looked calm, cool, and collected in a pair of light gray joggers and a navy-blue Tampa Bay Ospreys performance tee. It was long sleeved, covering the tattoos that I knew lined those muscular forearms of his. I knew the first one he'd ever gotten was in script on his rib cage right below his heart. It said *as you are*. He'd gotten it the week after his foster mom passed away. And I knew the chain she'd bought for him was under that shirt, resting against his chest, even though I couldn't see it.

He wore a hat, too — flat-billed — and he turned it around to face

backward as I finally managed to take one step down toward him. It was just enough of a movement for me to see he still had his hair cut short, almost like a military buzz cut.

I'd always loved to run my fingers through that spiky hair, to feel how it was somehow soft even if a bit prickly. It would tickle my palms as I mindlessly played with it when we watched movies as teens.

But of all his features — the abs, arms, thighs, and back muscles built by years of hockey — it was still his face that stole the show.

The scar over his eyebrow was always what I noticed first. I was there when he got it, when he was a dumb kid shooting pucks at an empty net late one night to blow off steam. He wasn't wearing any gear, and the puck popped back off the bar and hit him so hard I'd shrieked and sprinted for the ice.

He'd grinned at me through the blood running down his face.

"I'm okay, Strings," he'd said, running his thumb over where a tear had slid down my cheek. "Don't cry for me. I never want to make you cry."

I swallowed at the flash of a memory, taking another step as I cataloged the rest of his features. His full lips, square jaw, the hollowness of his cheeks, the stubble on his chin...

And then his mouth curled into a smile, the one I swore was meant only for me.

"Strings," he said in greeting, offering me his hand as I hit the last step.

"Aleks," I replied. The moment I slid my hand into his, heat ripped through me with enough zap to have my next breath lodged in my throat.

He pulled me into him the moment my feet hit the tarmac, wrapping me in a hug that was tight and fierce and warm. He still smelled the same, like fresh ice and mint. But his arms were bigger now, more muscular, his chest hard as stone as he pulled me against it.

A sigh left him the longer he held me, and I melted into him with a smile.

"You look like shit," he murmured against my ear, pulling me under his arm. He pressed a soft kiss to my hair, holding his lips there like it was the most natural thing in the world while I tried to fight off an earthquake threatening to destroy my entire body.

"Gee, thanks," I said, elbowing him, but he wouldn't let me pull away.

Instead, he slid his arm down to curve protectively around the small of my back, his massive fingers hooking over my hip bone. His other hand swept my messy hair out of my face, and he thumbed my jaw, his endless

brown eyes searching mine.

When his gaze fell to my lips, my knees buckled.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Just looking at you.”

I swallowed. “I don’t think there are any cameras around.”

He smirked at that, running his palm along my cheek before he was cupping my neck. I couldn’t help but lean into the touch, and my skin flamed when I did, when Aleks *realized* that I did.

“No time like the present to practice, right?”

With that, he leaned in just long enough to press a searing kiss to my forehead.

Then, he took my hand in his and walked us toward the cars, all while I willed my heart not to beat right out of my chest.

CHAPTER 9

A Good Show

Aleks

New York City was my favorite place in the United States.

Sure, I'd made a home in Tampa. I loved the beaches and the heat, the team that had believed in me when the rest of the league turned its back on me, and the condo I'd purchased in one of the high-rises downtown. I loved how much the city had grown, how it was busier now than ever before and there was always something to do.

But there was just nothing like New York.

Every time I traveled there, whether to play in a game or see one of Mia's shows, I fell more for the bustling metropolis. I loved it in the fall, the winter, the spring, the summer. I loved the way it smelled, the way the air felt, the constant noise of cars and people. I loved how passionate New Yorkers were about their sports, their food, and their city.

It was a one-of-a-kind place.

Though I felt an affinity for the city, it wasn't home. Then again, I wasn't sure what was.

Berne should have been, I supposed. I lived there with Annaliese for most of my childhood.

Or perhaps it should have been Chicago, where I lived my formative teenage years with Mia and her parents.

Seattle could have been a home. It was the first place I lived on my own, where I grew from a young adult into a man. It was the start of my career. It should have been the city I felt loyalty to.

Instead, I felt nothing more than resentment. That city, that team, that organization as a whole... they'd treated me well only long enough to get what they needed out of me before I was being tossed aside.

I wasn't arguing that I'd made it easy on them. I knew I got into too much trouble sometimes, that my attitude cost me. But seeing how fast they turned

their backs on me, regardless of what I did to make that team a winning one, really pissed me off.

If you didn't fit the mold they created for their players, then there wasn't a place for you.

Now, there was Tampa.

I liked Tampa. And Tampa liked me.

The fans loved my crazy antics. They cheered me on in fights and slammed their hands against the glass when I was locked up in the penalty box. And though I might have pissed off Coach more times than not, he still seemed to care about me being there, about us doing well as a team. Richard Bancroft certainly wanted me to do well — if only for his own benefit.

Maybe Tampa would feel like home one day.

Or maybe the whole concept of home was a bullshit lie.

I wondered who in this world felt like New York was home as the black car zoomed us across the city toward Rockefeller Plaza. Isabella and Rina chatted away the entire ride while Glo and James, one of Mia's security guards, stayed quiet. Mia was mostly silent next to me, too, answering only when Isabella or Rina had a direct question for her.

To anyone else, she probably seemed nervous. But I knew better. I knew doing this interview tonight, performing her music live, being in front of an audience... that was her catnip. I'd known that since the first time I'd seen her perform live when we were kids. She'd had a small set list at a festival down by the lake late that summer I'd moved in, and I'd watched her bloom from this shy, adorable, goofy girl into a mesmerizing, confident, powerful entertainer.

I felt like I understood her then, that I fully comprehended what music and dancing and performing was for her.

It was like hockey for me.

Nothing made her happier. Nothing brought out that sparkle in her quite like this did.

"How many are you up to?"

Mia blinked at my question, drawing her gaze from the window to me. "Huh?"

"You used to count trees on the way to a performance," I reminded her. It was something I'd picked up on when we'd been on our way to a Christmas gig she had at the park when she was seventeen, and she'd confessed it helped soothe her and take her mind off her nerves. "I know there aren't

many trees in the city, but... how many are you up to?’

The corner of her mouth tilted up just a notch. “Twenty-nine. But I haven’t been counting very diligently, if I’m being honest.” She assessed me for a long pause. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“Come on now, Strings,” I said, tugging on the strings of her hoodie with the nickname. “I remember everything.”

I thought I saw her cheeks flush, but she quickly narrowed her eyes and swatted my hand away. “That so? Because your test scores back then beg to differ.”

“I remember what’s important.”

“So math, science, English... none of that is important, huh?”

“It’s not *unimportant* — but then again, I did have you to cheat off of, so there was less pressure.”

She rolled her eyes, but I could see it in the little curl of her lips, in the way her shoulders weren’t quite as stiff as before — I’d distracted her.

Mission accomplished.

There was already a crowd of paparazzi and fans surrounding the building entrance when we pulled up, and Isabella shared a look with Rina before they were sliding their sunglasses on and preparing to run inside as quickly as possible. Two security guards flanked the back door, waiting for James to knock on the window and give them the go ahead.

I was used to media attention and fans, but this was different. Before a game, I might have some kids, a group of drunk dudes, or a gaggle of women hanging over the gate at the arena begging me for an autograph. After a game, I might have to do a couple interviews or keep my head down as I made my way through the underbelly of the arena and the parking lot until I could get to the safety of my car.

But this was complete and total madness.

There were fans who were innocent enough in that crowd, sure — young girls with their parents, teenagers recording on their phone and praying for a selfie, women Mia’s age who had followed her since before she was really discovered.

But there were also crazy fans who would shriek and cry and throw themselves at the line of security guarding the entrance to the building. There were those who would scream nasty things at Mia, and those who would throw gifts they’d made in an attempt to get just one second of her attention. Add in that those fans were behind a wall of people with giant cameras and a

paycheck to claim, and it was anything but safe.

I ground my teeth together as we got ready to face them, hand finding Mia's and wrapping it up tight on the seat between us.

She blinked, staring down at that place of contact before her eyes slid up to mine.

Fuck, she was breathtaking.

It didn't matter that her long, dark hair was a ratted mess, or that she had bags under her cerulean-blue eyes. It didn't matter that she was in an oversized jogger set, complete with a hoodie that swallowed her slight frame. It didn't matter that she didn't have on a fleck of makeup, that she wore high-top sneakers instead of heels, or that her lips were a little chapped and raw, like she'd been chewing on them.

She was stunning — like always.

It was moments like this that made me think of her when we were younger, of how she made it impossible not to want her even when she wasn't trying. Something about her had always called to me, like a hot, homemade soup, or a warm nook in a snowstorm.

She was comfortable, and cozy, and safe.

She was also incredibly sexy without an ounce of effort.

And, of course, she was completely unattainable.

"Ready?" Rina asked Mia.

Mia nodded, sliding on her own sunglasses, and Isabella looked at me, arching an eyebrow.

"I got her," I promised.

With a nod from Glo, James knocked on the window, and when the door flew open, Rina climbed out first before she, Glo, and Isabella flanked each side of the car door — three tiny things trying to serve as extra protection.

The New York City summer heat was stifling.

The screams were deafening.

The lights were blinding.

And I tugged Mia under my arm as soon as we were out of the car, doing my best to guard her from all of it.

"Mia! Over here!"

"Oh my God, that's him! That's Aleks!"

More unhinged screams.

A flurry of camera flashes.

I held Mia against my chest, but instead of hiding against me, she stood

tall, smiling at everyone as we passed. I wanted to shield her, to cradle her in my arms and make sure no one got a single fucking look.

But she didn't want to hide.

"Love the jumpsuit, Mia!"

"Yeah, Mia, who are you wearing?"

"Aleks! Aleks, can we get a kiss?!"

"Mia, what do you have to say about Garrett Orange's review of your album?"

"Has Austin heard the album yet?"

"Does Austin know about you and Aleks?"

"When did it all start, Aleks?"

"How does it feel to be dating the biggest pop star in the world, Aleks?"

"Mia, what made you go for a bad boy this time?"

I couldn't help but smirk at that one, eyeing the reporter who'd said it, and that made them smile and snap a picture before I could school my features.

Mia slowed our gait even as security struggled to keep the fans and paparazzi at bay, but her hand fisting my shirt at my hip told me she was more on edge than she let on. Her smile was wide and confident as she waved at the fans behind the line of cameras, and she even stopped to sign a few autographs and lean in for a selfie. She ignored every question being screamed at her, but she made sure to take her time with the fans.

"Mia, is it true you and Aleks have been dating for months?"

"Mia! I love you!"

"Whore!"

"Aleks! Can I join you two for a threesome?!"

"Mia, what do you have to say about the article from Garrett Orange?"

"Fuck you! Your music is trash!"

"Oh, my God, look at him! He's so hot!"

"Mia, I hope you're getting railed every night by this man!"

A round of laughs.

More lights flashing.

We were almost to the door, and I didn't realize how tightly I was holding her and how protective I was being until Mia struggled against my grip a little to lean down and take a picture with two young girls wearing bright pink sequin skirts and shirts from her last tour.

As soon as she stood again, I pulled her into me. I wanted to throw her

over my shoulder and barrel inside the building. I wanted to show anyone who tested me just what it felt like to get checked by a professional hockey player. But I knew Mia was okay, I knew she was used to this. Hell, she'd faced worse when I was nowhere near to help protect her. So, I stood by her side and kept my grip tight while also allowing her the space to move freely.

Finally, we made it to the doors, and with one last wave at the crowd, she let me surround her with my arms for the last ten steps into the building.

"I could fuck you better, Aleks!"

"Mia, your music changed my life!"

"I love you! Please take a picture with me!"

"Your music sucks and so do you, slut!"

I ground my teeth at that last one when I felt Mia stiffen in my arms a bit, and I was ready to turn and knock out whoever the fuck had said it. But Mia gripped me tighter to her as if she knew my intent, as if she wanted to remind me that she was fine, that this was normal, that she just wanted me to be with her.

I would never admit to myself how much I liked that thought — that she wanted me there not as a publicity stunt, but for real.

When we were finally inside, the doors shut behind us with the effort of four grown-ass men at least twice my size. The crowd continued screaming, the cameras continued flashing, but all of us let out a breath of relief.

"Alright," Rina said, clapping her hands and snapping right into action. "Let's get you to your dressing room, shall we?"

"Hello, Miss Love," a young woman said, extending her hand for Mia's. I still had a protective hold on her, but Mia smiled up at me and slid out of my embrace to greet the woman. "It's so lovely to have you back at Rockefeller. If you'll come this way, we have a room all ready for you."

I didn't realize my hand was still clamped hard around hers until Mia tried to walk and was halted by my grip.

She startled, turning back to me with a sleepy smile. Her hair was a fucking mess, her face showing clear signs of exhaustion. And yet, she smiled with ease, with confidence, with a silent promise to me that she was ready, that she was excited for this.

"You look a bit pale there, Suter," she teased. "See one of your many exes in that crowd?"

"More like a line of men begging to be my new punching bags."

"Don't mind them. I never do."

My brows dipped farther.

How long had she put up with that shit?

How did any man think it was okay to behave that way toward a woman?

“Is it always like that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Not always. There’s usually a better barrier, and a lot of times people gather around to take pictures or ask their questions, but they keep a safe distance. But...” She tilted her head side to side. “All it takes is one person pushing in, getting closer, to give everyone else permission to do the same.”

My jaw tensed.

The brazen fucking audacity of people to think they had the right to do that to her, to *anyone*.

I was two seconds away from telling her I was resigning from hockey and joining her security team when she chuckled a bit. “I’m good,” she promised, squeezing my hand — which made me realize I still held hers in a vise grip. “See you after the show?”

Reluctantly, I nodded, my throat tight as I released her.

She held my gaze for a long moment over her shoulder as Rina, Glo, and the young show runner walked her toward an elevator. Her security team still surrounded her, which made me feel marginally better. Only once I saw Mia laugh at something Glo said did I feel the lock on my chest release.

“Now *that* was a good show,” Isabella whispered as she passed by me, squeezing my arm. Her eyes were on her phone as she tapped away on the screen. “The Internet is already losing their minds.”

She winked as she walked backward toward the elevator where they were holding it for her.

“Hang down here with Marci and she’ll get you settled. See you later, you heartthrob, you.” I didn’t know who Marci was, but I assumed she was someone’s assistant with how she smiled gently and waved at me, an iPad clutched in her arms.

With one last flourish of her hand, Isabella and that half of the team were gone, but her words still played in my head.

A good show.

Yeah.

Because that was all it was.

• • •

I watched Mia's interview and performance from the back row of a packed audience.

The show was one that was pre-recorded, but that didn't take anything away from the palpable energy from a crowd that was beyond excited to be the first to hear her new single performed live. They had to do a few takes just to ensure they could actually hear Mia over the screams and the fans singing along to the song — a song that had just released less than a week ago, in between the time the news of our "relationship" had broke and this performance.

The fans knew all the lyrics, already.

I took it all in with my sunglasses on, arms folded, and back leaning against the wall. I was thankful that most of the attention was on her and no one seemed to really notice me. Although, I didn't miss the fans who thought they were slick recording me on their phone from the back couple of rows.

I liked the new song. It was poppy enough to sound like her old albums, but with a deeper edge somehow, a maturity that felt new and fresh for her. It reminded me of the songs she'd write in her bedroom when we were younger, the ones she'd sing only when she thought no one else was home. Except this was more of a bop, of course — and I knew that was on purpose.

The label would want to be sure that first single was a hit.

When the show was over, I waited with some of Mia's team for her to join us on the bottom floor again, and then it was time to face the crowd. This time, though, it wasn't as intense. There must have been something else going on that called to the paparazzi because there was only a handful of cameras now and a small gathering of fans.

When the elevator doors opened, Mia, Rina, Glo, and Isabella filed out mid-laugh before saying goodbye to the show runner. Mia's eyes found mine, and she smiled.

She was all dolled up now — lashes dark and long, lips stained red, hair styled in silky waves. She still wore the black, bedazzled dress from her performance. The neckline plunged so low it nearly hit her belly button, the slight swells of her cleavage just a tease where that fabric split. And as distracting as that was, it was nothing compared to her long, lean legs — legs carved by years of dancing.

I smirked as she made her way toward me, sliding my hands in my pockets.

"Hello again," she said. "Enjoy the show?"

“Of course. You know what a big fan I am.”

She cocked a brow.

“Palma McLaughlin?” I shot a thumb over my shoulder as if I was pointing to the stage. Palma had been another guest star on the show tonight. “I’ve had a crush on her for *years*. When she starred as that bad ass undercover cop in *Shoot Out...*”

I let out a low whistle that was cut short by Mia playfully punching me in the gut. She did so with a roll of her eyes, but when she tried to pull away, I grabbed her wrist and tugged her into me, instead.

“You were phenomenal,” I said, making sure her blue eyes were locked on mine before the words left my mouth. “I had no doubts you would be.”

She smiled, but pressed her hand into my chest at the same time. “Whatever.”

“I’m serious. I like the new song. Can I hear the rest of the album?”

“On August third with the rest of the world,” Isabella answered for her, and then she was shoving us toward the door. “Come on. Let’s get you two to the hotel.”

Putting one arm around Mia’s shoulder, I leaned in to whisper where only she could hear. “You’ll give me a sneak peek, right?”

“We’ll see.”

“Oh, is it dependent on good behavior?”

“If it was, you’d *definitely* stand no chance.”

“I can be a good boy.”

“Sure, and I can be a gourmet chef.”

“So funny,” I teased, digging my fingers into her ribs just as security opened the doors.

Mia laughed just as the flurry of camera flashes assaulted us, and I told myself I was acting when I pulled her into my side and pressed a kiss against her hair.

“You sounded like the real you.”

Mia stalled a bit, looking up at me as the fans screamed around us and cameras flashed like mad. Her red lips parted, like she wanted to say something but wasn’t sure what.

I was just about to usher her toward the car when a man broke through the line of security, jumping over them and nearly crashing into Mia.

But he didn’t get the chance because my hand caught him hard in the chest.

“Keep your filthy music away from the ears of our children, you whore!”

He barely got the words out before I was slamming him back, holding Mia behind me and serving as a human barrier.

“Aleks,” she warned. “Don’t.”

I didn’t realize I had the guy’s shirt fisted in my hand and was snarling at him like a rabid dog until I felt Mia’s hand calmly wrap around my shoulder.

Security was already tugging at the man to take him away, but I made sure to hold my grip and pin him with my glare long enough that all the snark he’d had melted away.

“Try that shit again, and you’ll be six feet under,” I seethed.

Cameras flashed so quickly it was like one long blinding light as I made that promise, and when I finally released the fucker, security carried him away, and I tucked Mia under my arm and wrapped my other arm full around her face to block her from view. I all but carried her into the car Isabella had already climbed into, not allowing her the option to stop for autographs this time, and only once we were safely inside did I release her.

Even then, I stayed close, my thigh lined up with hers as I turned to face her. James climbed in when the mob was pushed back, and then the noise was snuffed out by the shutting of the door.

I ran my hands over Mia’s face, her neck, searching her for marks. “You alright?”

She swatted me away instantly. “That was stupid, Aleks!”

“What? What did I do?” I held up my hands.

“Trying to play knight in shining armor. You have to be careful with guys like that,” she said, swatting my chest. “They’re nuts.”

“And have a death wish, apparently.”

“I’m serious! You don’t know what those people are like!”

“And *they* clearly don’t know that I’ll snap a wrist without second thought should any of them dare to touch you without your permission.”

“I have a security team,” she pointed out, gesturing to a quiet, stern James. I had yet to see the big motherfucker smile. “I don’t need you to play bodyguard.”

“Maybe I like playing bodyguard. Maybe I’d like that to be my new official title.” I said it as a tease, waggling my eyebrows at her to try to loosen the tension of the moment, but Mia only let out a frustrated growl.

She crossed her arms as she fumed, looking out the window with her face turning redder by the minute.

And that's when I saw it.

She wasn't embarrassed by my actions. She wasn't snipping at me because I'd annoyed her — which had been my specialty since we were kids.

She was... scared.

"Aw, Strings," I said, running my knuckle over her jaw. "You were worried about me."

She batted my hand away, trying to keep her stern expression, but I saw how her brows bent together, how anxiety lined her features. After a moment, she turned to me with those big, soft blue eyes.

"What if he would have had a gun?"

"Then I would have jumped in front of the bullet to save you."

She sucked her teeth. "Be serious."

"I am."

"You would not jump in front of a bullet for me."

"Try me, Strings."

She shook her head, her cheeks reddening more. "Aleks, guys like that, they're just looking for their chance. He could sue you."

"Oh, I hope he does. I'll bury his ass in court, and then in the ground behind the courthouse."

For a second, Mia stared at me like I was crazy. But then she let out a puff of a laugh that rode on a long exhale, the worry melted from her face. A reluctant smile spread on her lips next. She tried to glare at me, but it fell flat as I wagged my brows and got that smile to crack again.

She shook her head before she let it fall back against the seat.

"You're a barbarian," she said on a laugh.

"Don't act like you don't love it."

I thought I'd said the words low enough that only she could hear, judging by the slight flush of her cheeks. But when Isabella chuckled from her side of the car, my head snapped in her direction.

"Well, if she doesn't, the world certainly does." I'd almost forgotten she was in the car with us. I wondered where Glo had gone. She must have had her own car with the other members of the team who had met us at Rockefeller.

Isabella wore the shit-eating grin of a woman who knew she had the winning hand at a poker table.

When she turned her phone toward us, I understood why.

There was already a video posted of my exchange with the punk who'd

screamed at Mia.

And by the time we made it to the hotel, it had gone viral.

CHAPTER 10

Night Cap

Mia

My ears were still ringing when Isabella, Glo, and Rina finally left my suite. We'd eaten dinner together, going over the show and the media attention and discussing all the next steps for album launch. I loved talking about it all, from all the appearances we had lined up to the music video shoots.

But I was still human, and I was tired.

The silence seemed louder than the screaming fans were earlier once I was alone. I could still hear the distant hum of the traffic and bustle of New York City, but the buzz in my ears was the loudest. I always had a bit of that after performing, after being in the throng of a big crowd.

It was nearly midnight, and we had an early wake-up call for a radio interview. I was ready to climb into bed when I got a text from Aleks.

Aleks: Think you could call your guard dog off long enough for a night cap?

I frowned, confused, before a picture came through. It was Aleks standing in the hallway of the hotel with an over-exaggerated pouty frown. He was posing next to Hunter, one of my security guards, who wore a stone-cold, unamused expression. In the hand not holding his phone, Aleks held a bottle of what looked like champagne.

And suddenly, all my fatigue was obliterated.

I cursed under my breath as I rushed to the nearest full-length mirror, wishing I hadn't already scrubbed off my makeup and washed my face. At least my hair still had a bit of volume to it. I ran my hands through the dark strands, fluffing the roots as I turned left and right and studied my frame in the bicycle shorts and extra-large t-shirt I wore.

As if that would be flattering on *anyone*.

I wasn't wearing a bra, and I debated throwing on the one I wore earlier, but couldn't bring myself to do it. Once my bra came off for the day, it *stayed*

off. It was late, and I didn't need to get ready to see Aleks. It was *Aleks*.

Besides, it wasn't like he hadn't seen me like this plenty of times before.

With a shrug and an internal laugh at myself, I padded over to my hotel door. James was sitting on a chair in the corner reading a book. He snapped it closed and stood as soon as I wandered over.

"It's okay," I assured him. "Just Aleks."

He nodded, sitting back down, but he didn't open the book.

"James, it's fine. You can read. Hunter is on the outside and we have the rest of the team downstairs."

"Never can be too careful, Miss Love."

I smiled, though he knew I hated when he called me that. I much preferred Mia. Still, I'd learned with James that the formalities were a boundary he liked to set between us, and a reminder that he worked for me and I wasn't his friend. He took me up on the offer to let him read or be on his phone when things weren't hectic, but he took his job seriously, and he always wanted to remind both of us where his priorities lie.

My father had been the one to find James and Hunter, along with the rest of my security team. That man was always looking after me, even though I wasn't his "little" girl anymore.

When I opened the door, Hunter turned, arching a brow at me as Aleks beamed from behind him. I chuckled at the sight.

"It's okay, Hunter. He's mostly harmless." I stood aside with the door open wider, motioning for Aleks to come in.

"I like him," Aleks said as he passed Hunter, a thumb hooked toward my beast of a bodyguard. "Him, too," he added with a point at James. "They don't fuck around."

"I quite literally trust them with my life," I said. "And you won't be surprised to hear that Daddy is the one who hired them."

"I like them even more."

I followed Aleks as he traipsed into the penthouse suite, quick to make himself at home.

He didn't whistle or make any comments about how grand or luxurious the place was. He was used to money like this, and a part of me was thankful for that. It was nice to be with someone who understood the money and fame without me having to explain myself.

Although, I could remember a time when something like this would have had him silent and wide-eyed, like he was the first few weeks after he moved

to live with us in Chicago. Now, he was a professional hockey player with a big contract. He had more money than he ever thought he'd have in his lifetime.

Money wasn't everything. My father had drilled that into me from the day I was born. He and Mom always made sure I understood how fortunate we were to be well off, and they made sure I knew I'd have to work hard for whatever I wanted in life. When I signed my first record deal, I remember Dad taking me aside and sitting me down with his signature serious face, the one reserved for the big talks.

"This is your money," he'd told me. "I will not police you, but I will advise you to be smart with it. Get a team together whom you trust, and know that it can all be gone just as easily as it came. And at the end of the day—"

"Money isn't what matters," I'd finished for him.

He'd smiled then, beaming with pride that I understood that. And I did. I loved our house. It was fun to hang out in our pool or take the boat out. I enjoyed the vacations we took.

But at the end of the day, it was time with Mom and Dad that made me happy. It was lazy summer days and long winter nights with Aleks. It was laughing with my friends at a sleepover. It was writing music, performing, spending time with my team.

That was why I searched until I found a financial advisor who understood my feelings. I was safe with my money, investing and saving and living well within my means. I paid my team well because that mattered to me. I also gave at least twenty-five percent of what I made to charity — because there wasn't a lifetime in which I would ever need to spend all that I was making.

I was fortunate, and I liked to pay that fortune forward.

"It's late," I pointed out to Aleks, though the way I followed him to the living area like an eager puppy betrayed my attempt at being annoyed by that fact. The truth was I was happy he was there. I was excited. I hadn't spent time with him in so long, especially not just the two of us.

And after today, I wondered what was going through his mind.

It was our first appearance in the public eye, and it'd taken only hours for every photo and video snapped of us together to be all the Internet could talk about. Isabella and Giana were thrilled, the first step in our plan carefully laid to perfection.

I hadn't had much time to process it all, not with us launching right into work as soon as we got to the hotel. But now that Aleks was here, that we

were alone...

All I could think about was how it felt to have his hands on me earlier.

The way he gripped me tight, how he sheltered me under his arm, how it felt to see him get so angry on my behalf. It had scared me as much as it thrilled me, to witness him threatening that asshole within an inch of his life for getting near me.

Aleks had always been a sort of protective older brother to me.

Except I did not see him as a brother — not even a little bit.

And everything about today reminded me how *hot* this man was.

It wasn't like I'd forgotten; it was just that I'd been busy. And distant. When I had another man with my focus, or music to write, or a tour to run, I didn't have time to think about Aleks Suter. And with him living in Florida, playing for a professional hockey team that he traveled with for most of the year... well, it wasn't exactly like we could just hang out.

We texted each other. We kept in touch. But being reunited with him today...

It reminded me how much I'd missed him.

He looked cozy right now, the way he used to after a game when we were kids. He'd come home, take a shower, and throw on the same pair of sweatpants and matching sweater. They were from the team he played on, the fabric a deep maroon with the gold logo over his left pectoral.

Now, he wore something similar, but the sweats were black — and if I had to guess, a luxury brand far better than the set he wore back in school. His short hair looked a little damp, his jaw freshly shaven, and his eyes were bright with mischief instead of filled with exhaustion the way I knew mine were.

I watched him as he perused the space, clearly not hurried by my comment about the time. When he hit the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, he looked out at the view for only a moment before he spun in place, holding up the bottle he'd brought with him.

"Care for some bubbles?"

I smiled. "So much for those rules we put in place."

"Hey, you said I couldn't be a drunk idiot," he pointed out. "Not that I had to be completely sober. And besides," he added with a flourish, already popping the bottle open. "It's cider."

"Cider?"

"Good ol' fashioned sparkling apple cider," he said.

There were four champagne glasses on the coffee table in the living area, along with an ice bucket made for champagne. Our suite attendant had filled it just in case when he'd delivered our dinner. Aleks poured two glasses of the amber gold bubbly liquid before he put the bottle in the bucket and handed one of the glasses to me.

It was like he was looking at me for the first time.

He'd barreled in so quickly, severing the space and commenting on my security team. But now, his dark eyes dragged the length of me from my heated neck all the way down to my bare, pink-painted toes. His nostrils flared a bit as his gaze lazily trailed back up to meet mine, and he tilted his glass in my direction.

"Cheers," he said. "To a brilliant album debut performance."

I smiled, clinking my glass against his and taking a sip. The cider was crisp and sweet, and I found I was much happier to have it in my hand than a glass of champagne. The last thing I needed was to wake up in the morning with a headache.

"How in the world did you even know this existed?" I asked.

"That would be an Otis special."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Otis is my neighbor. Prickly old man and a season ticket holder for the Ospreys. Not sure how it happened, but he's sort of become like a pet. He just shows up at my place sometimes, eats, brings me treats, settles in for conversations that can last all night."

"I think that's called a *friend*, Aleks."

"You know I don't have friends."

I flattened my lips, pinning him with a look that told him I hated that little fact about him. We both knew Aleks *could* have friends, if he wanted. But it was *him* who was prickly.

"Anyway, he's the one who introduced me to this." He held up his glass. "Have to say, I thought it was shite the first time he made me drink the stuff, but it grew on me."

"Kind of like Otis did, it sounds."

"Oh, he grew on me, alright. Like a fungus."

"You like him," I said with a knowing smile.

"He's tolerable."

"Maybe I'll meet him one day."

"Oh, God. He'd be hitting on you within sixty seconds."

“Good. I could use someone hitting on me.”

Aleks smirked at me then. “What, my forehead kisses weren’t enough for you today?”

“That was fake,” I reminded him.

“I almost got in a fight for you. That wasn’t fake.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. You were an absolute caveman.”

“The Internet seems to love it,” he pointed out with a grin.

“I better warn your coach. Your head is going to be too big to fit in your helmet soon.”

Aleks let out a loud bark of a laugh, and then I was gesturing to the kitchen, telling him to help himself to any of the provided food. It was hard not to laugh as I watched him tear through the snacks like he was a kid on a field trip with a free mini bar in his room.

We fell into easy conversation when he returned with his haul, Aleks kicking back on the couch while I sat in one of the leather chairs opposite him. I asked him how he liked living in Florida and what his new team was like. He asked me about the new album and what songs I was most proud of.

Before long, we had almost finished the bottle of cider, the time creeping past midnight and into the early morning. New York City was still bright with life outside the windows, and even though I knew I needed to get some sleep, I didn’t want to. It felt like being a kid again, like Aleks had snuck down to my room after Mom and Dad went to sleep so I could tell him gossip and he could pretend not to care while we played Uno.

“That was pretty intense today,” Aleks said when he poured the last of the bottle into our glasses. “All the fans, the screaming, the flashes from the cameras.”

“Like you don’t get that, too.”

“I do,” he said, handing me my freshly topped-off glass. “But not like that.”

I shrugged. “It’s not too bad. I’m used to it, I guess.”

“Does it ever feel like too much?”

I frowned, considering. “Sometimes,” I mused. “But I asked for this, you know? I dreamed of it. *Prayed* for it. This is what I’ve always wanted, and only a tiny fraction of musicians ever get to experience this. It’s a privilege.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to love every aspect of it,” Aleks pointed out. “No way in hell do you find it *fun* to have horrific names screamed at you from crazy fans.”

“I don’t love that part,” I admitted. “But did you see the happy fans? Did you see the ones crying because I took a picture with them, the ones who couldn’t speak as I signed their albums? Did you see the little girls all dressed up to see me?” I shook my head, heart filling with wonder over those statements just like it had the first time they happened. “*That’s* what I focus on. That’s what I see more than the bad.”

I took a sip of my cider on another shrug.

“Honestly, what bothers me more than anything is the comparison trap in my own mind. The fans are wonderful. It’s *me* who beats myself up.”

Aleks frowned. “What do you mean?”

“It’s hard not to let things like that article from Garrett Orange get to me.”

“Fuck that guy.”

I smirked. “Yeah, but also... people listen to him. They respect his opinion. And that makes me wonder sometimes if all the shit he says about me is true, and I’m just surrounded by people who love me and are paid to build me up, so I don’t see it.”

“Your team would build you up even if you didn’t pay them. You don’t pay me or your parents, and we love your music.”

“They’re my parents,” I said, deadpan. “And you don’t listen to my music.”

“Yes, I do.”

I laughed, but when I looked at Aleks, his jaw was set, eyes serious as they held mine.

The laugh died in my throat.

“Mia, I’ve listened to every album you’ve ever released, front to back, at least a hundred times.”

I opened my mouth, but my throat was too dry to respond.

He listened to my music?

“I don’t know why that surprises you,” he said, reading my expression with a grin. “Like I wasn’t your test dummy for every song you wrote in high school.”

“Yeah, but that was different. You lived with me. I forced you to be my test dummy.”

Aleks threw back the last of his cider. “Well, now you know you didn’t have to do much forcing.”

Something about that made my stomach flip, and I smiled to myself, taking another sip of my cider. It felt so nice to be with him again, to just sit

together and talk. It'd been so long since we'd done this.

And the last time I'd tried...

I lifted my eyes from my glass to Aleks, thinking about the Fourth of July two years ago when we were at my parents' house. I'd been with Austin then, and Aleks had been...

Not himself.

Or maybe too *much* of himself.

He had been destructive, sad, lonely. I'd watched him drink himself into a stupor, and when I'd gone to talk to him, he'd been shut off, cold.

It'd scared me a little, the way he acted that night.

It was the first time I believed what he'd always told me, that some of his mom and dad lived in him. It was the first time I thought addiction really could take him, if he let it.

"How are you?"

The words spilled off my tongue before I thought better of them, so I doubled down.

"How are you really?"

Aleks's eyes flicked between mine a moment before the corner of his mouth lifted. "I'm good, Strings."

"Really?"

"I'm not debating taking a bottle of pills like I was the last time we were alone, if that's what you're wondering."

I cringed a bit, dropping my gaze.

"It's okay," he said on a laugh. "I... I'm sorry you had to see me that way. I was..."

Aleks quieted, not finishing the thought. And I knew without pushing that he didn't want to talk about it more. It wasn't often Aleks fell into his really bad nights, but when he did, I knew it hit him hard. I knew he hated it. I knew it made him feel like he was one breath away from the life his parents lived, and he hated it.

"Do you ever think about going back to Switzerland?" I asked, changing the subject.

Aleks took my now empty glass, carrying it with his over to the sink in the kitchen. "Sometimes. I thought it might be fun to play on the national team there someday."

"That would be amazing," I told him, smile genuine. "And maybe you could meet up with some of your foster siblings."

Aleks snorted at that.

“What? I bet they’d love to see you.”

“And I bet they wouldn’t even remember I existed,” he shot back. He didn’t say it with an edge, though. He said it as a joke, his smirk climbing. “It’s okay, Strings. Not everyone needs friends.”

I hated that so much, I couldn’t help but show it on my face. Because I knew what he meant by that statement wasn’t that he didn’t need friends, it was that he didn’t believe he deserved them.

He had always been afraid of who he was deep inside, of his genetics, of what he perceived as his destiny. And part of me had always felt like I had no right to speak on it. I couldn’t imagine going through what he had, and I didn’t want to pretend like I could ever fully understand.

But I knew him better than he thought, better than anyone else.

And I knew his heart was good.

I popped up with mock offense, sticking out an exaggerated pouty lip. “Wow. So what does that mean for me? I’m not your friend?”

“Nope,” he said instantly, skipping over to where I stood. He shoved his hands in his pockets and did a little shimmy side to side with his shoulders like a little kid. “You’re my *girlfriend*.”

I rolled my eyes, trying and failing not to smile.

And then Aleks mirrored my grin, sweeping in swiftly to kiss my cheek. “Get some sleep, Strings. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

I flushed when he pulled away, thankful his back was to me as he made his way toward the door.

“Thank you,” I said when he was next to James. “For the nightcap.”

He winked. “Anytime.”

Aleks tipped an imaginary hat at James before letting himself out.

And I stood there in a daze, my hand on my cheek where he’d kissed it, wondering how that boy still had so much of my heart in his hands after all this time.

CHAPTER 11

A Love Song to Myself

Aleks

My first summer in Chicago passes like a fever dream.

Instead of a vacation filled with hiking and bonfires and game nights with my foster siblings, I'm thrown into orientation with my new team, as well as getting to know my new home and surroundings. Training camp doesn't begin until September, but that doesn't mean I'm not practicing every day on my own. Mr. Conaway gets me set up at a local rink with private practice times along with a few of my other teammates, and together we spend at least three days a week there.

Before I moved, the school counselor warned me about culture shock. She encouraged me to talk to my mom when I felt homesick, to be aware of signs of depression or anxiety.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that all the signs of depression had been present in my life since I could remember.

I suppose I do feel a little bit of culture shock. Chicago is different from Berne in nearly every way. But between getting settled at the Conaway house and familiarizing myself with the USHL and how my team will work, I don't give myself much time to dwell on any of it.

Any extra time I do have, I try to spend with Mia.

"How about, 'You light me on fire, you awaken my heart. I feel you running through me... like a really good fart.'"

"Aleks!"

Mia splashes me from where she's clinging to the side of her parents' pool, her slim body supported by a foam noodle under the water. It's sunny and hot and we have nowhere to be today. She has a notebook spread out on the travertine tile, a pen in her hand, and a pair of sunglasses sliding down her nose.

"What? I think that's the most romantic line ever created."

“And I think you’re disgusting.”

“You got something better?”

She tilts her head up, mouth pulling to the side as she taps her chin with her pen. I’m wading through the water with it cresting just above my shoulders, unable to take my eyes off her.

It’s been this way since the first time I saw her sitting at the kitchen island.

She was shy the first couple of weeks I was here, her cheeks always flushing when I’d talk to her. She would answer my questions with one-word answers — which was fine, because I’m not much of a talker, either.

But the more time we spent together, the more her sass came out.

And the more I liked being around her.

She’s kind in a way I’m not used to — not performative or self-seeking, but natural. She’s helped me with my English when I say something not quite right. She’s pulled out her yearbook to explain the school to me before I attend in the fall, pointing out people she gets along with as well as those to stay away from. She’s helped me fit in when her parents host dinner parties, showing me how to dress and which fork to eat with first.

Sometimes, I like to joke with her, to rag on her a bit just to see her get all worked up.

Most times, I like to stare at her, to watch her as she watches the world.

She’s cute. I’ve known that since the first time I saw her. But the more time I spend with her, the more I find myself thinking of other adjectives to describe her.

Funny.

Talented.

Creative.

Kind.

Sexy.

I know I shouldn’t be thinking that last one, but I can’t help it — especially in times like this, when she’s wearing nothing but a light blue triangle swim top and string bikini bottoms to match. It brings out the blue in her eyes, the color blazing against her tan skin.

“You light me on fire, you awaken my heart. But your grip on my hand made me nervous from the start. You know you can’t tame me, and yet you still try.” She closes her eyes, searching for the next words as she hums along to the beat she’s created to match the lyrics. She repeats them a few

times, seeking, waiting.

Then, her eyes shoot open and lock on mine.

“This body may belong to you, but this soul is still mine.”

I smirk, swallowing when I hear her sing those words about her body being mine. I know she’s not singing to me, but that doesn’t keep me from wondering what it would be like if she was. “You sure this is a love song?”

“A love song to myself.”

“I like it.”

She grins. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Write that down.”

Mia does so feverishly, and then she drops the pen to the page and turns to face me. Sliding off the pool noodle, she sinks into the water, emerging moments later with a smile as she swipes water from her face. It’s a hot day, but the breeze off the lake sends a chill over the pool as Mia cracks one eye open and then the next.

“Thanks for listening to me figure all this out,” she says, waving a hand toward the notebook. “I’m sure it’s silly to you.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because,” she says, waving her hand again. “I don’t know, it’s all lovey dovey and cheesy and stuff.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Downplay your creativity. Make fun of your art.”

Her eyes widen a bit, her smile fading.

“You’ve got something, Mia,” I say, wading toward her. I make gentle waves with each step I take, waves that crash on her skin. “Something special. Something real and vulnerable.”

I stop when I’m just a foot away from her, when her body is close enough for me to feel the heat of it even under the water.

“I’m just a girl with a guitar,” she breathes quietly.

Her eyes fall to my lips, and my heart hammers hard in my chest.

“And I’m just a boy with a stick,” I say, daring to move an inch closer. “But I bet we can rule the world one day, Strings. I bet everyone will know our names.”

“You’re so cocky.” The words slide out of her in a whisper.

“I’ll be confident enough for the both of us until you catch on.”

“What if I never do?”

The muscle in my jaw clicks as I tentatively reach toward her, and before I know what I'm doing, my hand floats forward, finding her under the water.

It's the first time I've touched her.

I can't ignore the electricity that zips up my fingertips, my hand, my arm, all the way to my unsteady heartbeat in my chest. I hope I'm playing it cool as I run my knuckles down Mia's arm, hope I look cocky like she said and not like the scared kid I really am.

Mia inhales a shallow sip of air when I brush against her skin, and I follow the line of chills that erupt from that spot all the way up to her collarbone.

"I'll find a way to make you see," I promise, and this time, when I take another step, our bodies are flush together.

I can barely speak now.

"You... Mia, you..."

I wonder if she can feel my erection.

I wonder if she'll push me away and gasp in horror and call me a creep.

But she doesn't.

She breathes harder, her chest rising and falling, her eyes locked on my mouth now.

"What?" she asks on a breath, gaze snapping up to mine before she's watching my lips once more.

You're beautiful.

You're sexy.

You drive me wild.

You make me feel something I've never felt before.

But I don't get to finish my sentence, because the sliding glass door opens, and Mia and I break apart like we've been caught red handed at a crime scene.

Mia jets over to her notebook, pretending like she just had a lyric idea and scribbling it onto the page. I blow out a long breath and sink to the bottom of the pool, trying to calm myself.

When I re-emerge, I'm staring up through a watery haze at where Mr. Conaway is blocking the sun.

"Aleks," he says, his voice deep and commanding. "Why don't you towel off and come to my study? I'd like to have a chat."

"Yes, sir," I say, already swimming toward the stairs.

He turns and leaves, stopping by long enough to bend to the edge of the

pool and plant a kiss on Mia's forehead. I think he says something about the song she's writing, but I can't be sure over the ringing in my ears.

I towel off quickly, wrapping the thick fabric around my waist to hide my current situation.

My eyes find Mia's briefly before I'm ducking inside.

The air conditioning is too cold after being in the pool and the sunshine. I shiver as I pad through the house to Mr. Conaway's study, and when I enter it, he nods toward the door, wordlessly telling me to shut it behind me.

"Have a seat," he says, waving his hand over the chair on the other side of his desk.

"I'm still a bit wet."

"Sit, son."

I don't protest this time. I plop down in the leather chair, my back ramrod straight, hands in my lap. I almost laugh at how I was just called cocky by Mia less than five minutes ago, and now, I'm shaking like a leaf in her father's office.

I already have more respect for this man than any other I've ever met.

I never knew my father. In a way, I'm glad for that. I don't think I would have liked him.

My coaches tended to be the kind of men who demanded my respect without doing anything to earn it, as if their title alone was all that was required. I hated that kind of attitude. It made me buck like a wild horse against their reins.

But Charlie Conaway had taken me into his home. He had help from the team, sure, but he went above and beyond that. He listened to me when I spoke. He watched me when I practiced. He offered help when I asked and stayed silent when I didn't. He fed me, and clothed me, and showed me what it was to be a man just by living his day-to-day life.

I love how he cares for his business, for his wife, for his daughter, for this home. I love that he cares for me even though I've only been here a couple of months.

But as he steeples his fingers and sits back in his chair with his eyes assessing me, I realize the real measure of my respect for him doesn't rest in love.

It exists in fear.

I am as scared of this man as I am inspired by him, and that is a true testament to his power.

"I want to tell you that I'm proud of you," he starts.

I don't know why, but those words make my nose sting, and I sniff against the sensation. I feel my chest tightening. I realize no one has said that to me other than my foster mom.

"You've really settled in," he continues. "You're taking your rink practice time seriously, you help out here around the house, you've been respectful of my family and of the staff at the rink. I know you've only met your coach a few times and that the team will take some getting used to, but the fact that you've acclimated so well in a new country... it's truly remarkable. You are a good kid, Aleks. You will be a great man."

I blink, unsure why my heart is racing even as he piles on the compliments. "Thank you, sir."

He nods, leaning farther back in his chair with his eyes on me. "You and Mia seem to get along well."

And suddenly, I know exactly why my heart is racing.

"Yes, sir," I confirm, not sure what else to say. This feels like a trap.

"She's a wonderful girl, my Mia," he says, a distant smile on his lips. "Always has been. From the moment she was born, she's brought light into our family, into any room she walks into. When she first started singing and asked for a guitar, her mother and I suffered through her living room talent shows with worried grimaces. She was terrible," he says with a laugh. "But by God, she just got better and better. Her music instructors were blown away by her progress, and now... well, I think we all know she's special."

He grows quiet, so I clear my throat and say again, "Yes, sir."

Mr. Conaway is quiet for a while, and then he leans forward, placing his elbows on his desk and staring intently at me. "Son, I'm glad you and Mia are friends. I think you're good for her, and I think she's good for you, too. But I need to make one thing very clear."

I swallow what feels like a sandpaper-covered wine cork in my throat.

"That is my little girl, Aleks," he says, his voice lower now. "She is my world. And I am only going to say this to you one time. Under absolutely no circumstances are you to do anything inappropriate with her. I want you two to be friends, but that's where the line is drawn. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Suddenly, all my 'yes sirs' have dried up.

I just stare at him, silent.

I don't want to understand what he's saying, even though I do.

I don't want to agree to what I know he's going to ask me to.

"I remember what it was like to be your age. I know the things you're feeling, the urges..."

I want to crawl inside myself and escape this conversation.

"I know Mia is a beautiful young lady, and there may be temptations. But... she has things she wants to accomplish, Aleks. Just like you do. I am trusting you to live under the same roof with her and that you will work just as hard as I do to keep her safe."

He sighs when I still don't say anything, scrubbing a hand over his jaw and looking out the window at the big blue lake. When he draws his attention back to me, his gaze is harder.

"She is off limits to you, Aleks. I do not want you to be anything more than her friend. And if I find out that you cross that line, in any capacity, I will not stand for it. I will revoke my role in your billeting situation. I will ask you to leave my home."

I know without asking that this is not a threat.

It is a promise.

"I don't want to do that, Aleks. I like you. I believe in you. I want to be there for you, to support you all the way to the NHL and long after. I... I know you've had a rough start at life, but I can tell you right now, after seeing you play for just a month — you have a bright future ahead of you." He pauses. "But so does she. And I won't have that ruined by her getting her heart broken, or, God forbid, getting pregnant."

My neck is on fire now. I can't look him in the eyes, so I drop my gaze to my lap.

I want to ask him so many things.

I want to argue.

What if I really like her, and she really likes me? What if we won't hurt each other?

What if we could be good together?

But I know without testing those waters that they are treacherous.

This man, this father — he is not opening a floor for discussion. He is laying down the law.

And I respect him enough to honor it, even if it fucking stings.

"I understand, sir," I finally croak.

Mr. Conaway lets out a long breath. "Good."

He stands then, rounding the desk and clapping a hand hard on my

shoulder. He squeezes, waiting until I look up at him.

“She’s like your sister now, Aleks. Protect her — and I will protect you.”

I nod, looking back at my fingers curled in my lap. They’re pruny from the pool and still buzzing from how it felt to touch Mia.

I realize right then that I will never get to touch her again.

“Now, enough of this serious talk,” Mr. Conaway says. He grins, clapping me on the back and prompting me to stand with him. “What do you say you and I grill some steaks tonight?”

Just like that, the conversation is closed, the expectations clear, the lines drawn.

When I’m excused from his office, I don’t go back to the pool.

I go to my room.

I try, and fail, to forget what it felt like to touch Mia, to have her close enough to kiss.

And I know this will be the first test of my strength as a man.

CHAPTER 12

This Isn't the Plan

Mia

A week before the album drop, Garrett Orange made a video review that got even more attention than his article.

In this new video review, he not only repeated his earlier sentiment that my album was a feminine-rage, man-hating disgrace, but he also hammered home that the songwriting was tired, the album sounded just like the two that came before it, and that I was clearly “*desperate for attention now that Austin Westbrook has stopped giving me any of his.*”

He then went on to cite how Austin politely declined to answer any questions regarding our breakup or my new album in the last month, as if my ex were some kind of saint.

I tried to ignore it, trusting Isabella when she told me that my fans were defending me in the comments, and the only ones agreeing with him were angry old men — but I still felt the impact of the hit.

I still felt like no matter what we did, this man's word would overshadow any evidence against his case that I was some lovesick crazy girl pining over her ex.

For the last two weeks since New York, the only chatter concerning me was excitement for the new album and, of course, my new relationship. Photos and videos from my appearance with Aleks when I went on The Daisy Kent Show had been posted everywhere within an hour of us leaving the building. Fans made memes and video collages with music from my last album and shared even more theories about when we started dating.

The most viral moment of all was of Aleks nearly ending the man's life who had dared to scream at me. And when I saw the video from the fan's point of view — Aleks seething, his jaw tight, eyes narrowed and vein pulsing in his neck... well, I understood.

It was hot as hell.

But now, Garrett Fucking Orange had the spotlight again. And to make matters worse, he had insinuated that if Aleks and I really were together, that I was likely *cheating* on Austin with him before we broke up.

Which was complete bullshit — I had been faithful to Austin.

But I *did* have a song on the album about the times I thought about cheating in my mind.

It wasn't real, it was me exploring the feeling of being in a relationship that seems so perfect from the outside but, in reality, is in shambles.

Now, it would be used as ammo against me.

Where I was of the impression there wasn't much I could do about any of it, Isabella had launched into action, booking me a flight to Florida and reserving a gorgeous house on the beach.

Not for vacation.

But for a photo opportunity.

"The best way to shut that man up is to steal back the attention," she'd said. "And what better way to do that than with the first leaked photos of you and Aleks sucking face?"

She'd proposed the idea with a wink and a little twirl as she packed a bag for me, and before I knew it, I was touching down in Tampa and being driven out to the beach house.

Aleks was already there waiting for me.

It was a hot, sunny day with clouds rolling in — the kind that would bring a thunderstorm come four PM. It was like that every day during the summer in Florida, a fact I'd learned from Aleks when he moved here before the start of last season.

Looking at him now, it was hard to believe he hadn't been born and raised a Floridian.

He waltzed out of the grand door of the beach mansion with one hand in the pocket of his linen shorts and the other holding a beer. He was barefoot, a reflective pair of aviator sunglasses perched on his nose. His bright, floral collared shirt was unbuttoned and flowing in the gentle breeze, showing off the bronze glow of his toned abdomen.

He had put on a little weight and muscle since I'd seen him in New York. I knew from growing up with my father and Aleks in the house that hockey players tended to lose a lot of weight in the playoff season, and it usually took all summer to get them back in shape.

Aleks didn't seem to be having any issue.

I knew those lines and ridges of his abdomen well, knew the faded tattoo that spread over his right lat and the deep-cut V that disappeared under his shorts. When we were younger, I'd flush every time I saw him without a shirt, whether it was him walking around the house on a lazy Sunday afternoon or rushing to get ready for school after a morning shower.

He was different now.

He was tan instead of pale, taller and bigger in every possible way. His smirk may have been that same cocky one he'd always had, but it was backed by experience now. It wasn't just a shield he hid behind.

With how much Florida suited him, it was hard to remember the teenager I first met, the one who always wore a puffy jacket and a beanie over his head. Living in Chicago, that was how most of us dressed for three quarters of the year.

Now it just looked like he was *made* to be a beach bum.

"Welcome to paradise," he said, spreading his arms wide as my team unloaded the car.

Isabella couldn't be here this time, but we had Marci, her assistant, as well as James, Hunter, and a few members of their team. They each shook hands with Aleks before tending to securing the area and getting my luggage inside. Marci was already on the hunt for where our staged kiss would take place, and I didn't need more than one guess to know it was Isabella on the phone with her as she trotted out toward our stretch of private beach.

"Paradise," I muttered as she scampered away. "More like my personal hell."

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad. I showered," Aleks said in defense, making his way down the steps toward me. "Even brushed my teeth," he added with a wink.

"You are enjoying this a bit too much, I think," I said with a roll of my eyes, but I couldn't help the curl of my lips as Aleks wrapped me in a hug. He smelled like sunscreen and citrus beer.

"How could I not? Getting to kiss the world's biggest pop star and stay at a swanky beach mansion all weekend for free?" He ran his fingers across his lips. "Hmm... maybe I should put on some lip balm."

"Shut up," I said, shoving him away. He took the small bag I had on my shoulder from me and led the way inside. And while he rambled on about the different areas of the house he'd already explored — including the infinity pool overlooking the Gulf — I clung to that one word that had slipped so

easily from his lips.

Kiss.

For the first time since Garrett's video had dropped, I felt my stomach tighten for a completely different reason. No longer was I concerned over what some idiots on the Internet were saying about my album.

Now, I could only focus on the fact that I was going to kiss Aleks Suter.

Aleks Suter. My best friend. My teenage dream. The one I'd wanted for so long.

His lips were going to touch mine.

And he was making jokes about it.

Getting to kiss the world's biggest pop star...

As if I hadn't already *tried* to kiss him once before.

As if he hadn't rejected me when I did.

Of course, I wasn't a pop star then. I was just the awkward teenage girl who slept down the hall from him. Was it different now that I had some sort of status?

I knew it wasn't, knew Aleks wasn't like that even as the thought crossed my mind.

But for some reason, I wished he was.

I wished he actually wanted to kiss me, even if it was just to use me for whatever he wanted.

I must have been wearing all the stress and anxiety of the day on my face because when we made it to the bedroom I'd be staying in, Aleks frowned as he dropped my bag on one of the chairs.

It was the master suite, a stunning, too-large-for-one-person room with marble floors, a plush, king-size bed, a stylish sitting area, and doors that opened up to a balcony overlooking the beach.

"Hey," he said, brows folding over his dark brown eyes. "You okay?"

"Oh, just peachy," I answered flatly, slumping down onto the bed with my eyes on the blue water outside the windows.

Aleks was quiet for a long moment before he carefully sat next to me, leaving room between us.

"We don't have to do this, you know."

I chuffed a laugh. "Backing out on me already, Suter?"

"You know I never go back on my word. Haven't I proved that with my angelic behavior lately?" He held up his nearly empty beer. "Haven't had more than two a day since you threatened me from the safety of your

bathtub.”

“You’ve managed not to get in a bar fight or have cuffs around your wrists for a whole two weeks,” I said. “Please don’t expect me to throw you a parade.”

“You could at least give me an ‘*atta boy*’.”

“Your head is already too big. I’m surprised you can carry it even with shoulders as muscular as yours.”

“You like my muscles, Strings?”

I rolled my eyes extra hard that time, enough that my eyelids fluttered as I let out an annoyed scoff that just made Aleks laugh.

“I’m not backing out of anything,” he said, nudging me. “Just wondering why you look like someone stole your guitar and started playing out of tune.”

“Well, I do have to kiss you,” I reminded him. “That’s enough to make any sane girl turn green.”

“Ouch. Guess I’m less appealing to you when you’re sober, eh?”

I smirked a little at the reference to our past, which somehow lightened the mood. He was right to laugh about it. As much as my stupid heart liked to overreact and latch onto that moment of rejection when I was seventeen, it didn’t have to be a big deal.

We were young. I was drunk and stupid. It wasn’t anything to hang onto.

But at the same time, it had been a very deep line drawn in the sand for me.

It had been the staunch realization that Aleks didn’t see me as more than a friend — and that he never would.

No, I wasn’t the girl who got a guy like Aleks. I was the girl who appealed to the slimy, controlling narcissists like Austin, apparently. I was the one whom golden boys wanted to tame and tote around on their arm like a trophy.

“I’m just a little tired,” I said. “We’ve been doing so much getting ready for the album release, and we still have so much to do for the tour... you know how that is. I’m sure you’ll be just as busy and tired when the season starts up again.” I rubbed my palms over my thighs. “It’ll be fine, though. *I’ll* be fine.”

Aleks narrowed his eyes a bit like he didn’t believe me, but before he could say anything more, Marci swung into the room.

“Ah! There you two are. Okay, I have our location picked out. Isabella dropped the hint to some local shutterbugs who are no doubt already on their

way. I told James and Hunter to not let them too close, but to also make sure they had a good shot.” She paused, shaking her head. “This is so weird. Usually, we’re doing everything we can to keep these punks *away* from you.”

“Well, if it’ll get the attention off Garrett the Ferret, it’ll be worth it,” I said, standing. “Tell us what to do, Coach.”

• • •

Thirty minutes later, Aleks was on the beach waiting for me.

I stared at him from my balcony, watching how he dove into the water and swam out a bit before coming back in. He was dripping wet as he slugged up the sandy beach, and then he fell back into the luxurious day bed and crossed his legs, folding his hands behind his head.

He was in position.

“They’re already snapping pics of him,” Marci confirmed as she peeked into my room from the hallway. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I muttered.

I was in my favorite bikini, a bright yellow, strappy little number that I mostly wore by my private pool in California because it was tiny and I loved the tan lines it would leave behind after a day in the sun. But as I followed Marci down the marble staircase, I found myself wrapping my white cover-up tightly around me.

I loved my body. I was proud of my sexuality and found myself embracing it more and more with every year I grew older — much to my father’s dismay, I was sure.

I also didn’t care about the paparazzi. Hell, I’d rather them have a flattering picture of me in a bikini I felt stellar in than see the pictures they loved to post of me with a mouth full of food or face screwed up mid-sneeze.

But this was Aleks.

And the thought of having *his* eyes on my body was enough to make me tremble before it even happened.

“I’m right here if you need me,” Marci said, stopping in the living room and fussing with my hair a bit — as if the wind on the beach wasn’t about to destroy it, anyway. “Remember, just act natural. And you don’t have to stay out there too long. I think we’ll sell it even more if you both pretend like you spot the paps and he kind of ushers you inside to get away from them.”

I nodded, giving her an awkward thumbs up. “Got it.”

“Have fun,” she said with a salacious smile.

I didn't even entertain that with a response. Instead, I turned and marched out to the beach, slowing my gait the closer I got to where Aleks was sprawled out on the day bed.

He was tapping his foot to some reggae music playing from a Bluetooth speaker, humming along like he didn't have a care in the world. Water sluiced down his body as he dried beneath the sun, sand sticking to his feet and the bottom of his calves.

I tried not to notice how his navy-blue board shorts stuck to his thick thighs — along with another thick part of him — but the closer I got, the more it drew my attention. It was impossible *not* to look with the water dripping down the middle of his abs and sliding along the hem of those shorts.

It was like a hundred neon arrows pointing down to the promised land.

Sweat beaded on the back of my neck and slid along my spine, and not from the July heat.

Get it together, Mia.

Sipping in a deep inhale, I let it out slowly, plastering a fake smile on my face as I sidled up next to him and stood so I was blocking the sun.

Show time.

“Need me to rub some sunscreen on your back, sweetie?” I teased, knowing the paparazzi couldn't hear us. But even though they were far away and out of sight, I swore I could hear their shutters clicking.

Aleks must have had his eyes closed under those dark sunglasses because he lifted his head and turned toward me with that sexy smirk he wore so effortlessly.

The moment he saw me, that smile slipped.

I shrugged off my cover-up and tossed it onto the day bed next to him, just like we'd talked about when we went through the plan with Marci. And even though it was scorching hot, a wave of goosebumps paraded over my skin the moment I didn't have that cover-up shielding me any longer.

Next, I was supposed to say something, we were both supposed to laugh, and then I would bend down and plant one on him.

But when Aleks slid his sunglasses down his nose, his eyes dilating at the sight of me — all those plans flew out of my head, and I was rooted in place.

I forgot what I was supposed to say. I forgot how to laugh. I forgot how to *breathe*.

Those dark eyes were nearly all black as they scanned me from where my

lips were parted all the way down to where my toes were hidden under the warm sand. They snagged like a fisherman's hook on seaweed along the way, too — on my collarbone, my breasts, my navel, my hips, my thighs, my calves.

I felt like an offering to a king or a god, like I was his to devour and there was nothing I could do about it.

Like I wouldn't do a thing even if I could.

"*Läck du mir,*" he muttered, the words rolling together as one in a deep baritone that had my toes curling in the sand. I had no idea what it meant, but I didn't need Google Translate to get a general understanding.

It was in his eyes, in his slack jaw, in the way he ambled up to stand with his gaze never leaving me.

"*Fuck, Mia...*" He shook his head, reaching out to drag his knuckles down the length of my arm as if it was the most natural instinct, as if he couldn't help but touch me.

Chills swept over me like a cool summer rain.

I knew it was for show. I knew he was much better than I was at making this look natural. This was probably how he touched all the women he fooled around with — as if they belonged to him, as if they were the object of his every obsession.

But it still knocked me breathless, even if it was fake.

His nostrils flared as he took me in again with a closer view, his fingertips sliding just beneath the yellow strap at my collar bone. "*dFarb staht dir mega.*"

I somehow managed a small laugh that didn't sound like my breath was prisoner in my chest. "Are you aware you're speaking to me in another language?"

"I said this color suits you," he mused, his voice quieter, rougher. I didn't miss how he struggled to swallow, how his jaw drew tight as his hand slid up my arm and around to the back of my neck.

His fingers curled in my hair there, his eyes pinning mine.

"You're exquisite."

"This isn't the plan," I breathed, eyes struggling to stay open as desire flooded through me. It was too much, having him this close, feeling him tower over me as his rough hands framed my face and tilted my chin up toward his. "You're supposed to sit there. I'm supposed to—"

"The plan was eviscerated the moment you showed up in this," he said,

plucking at the lemon-colored string at my hip. “Gives a new meaning to your nickname, Strings.”

“Oh,” I whispered. God, I hoped I whispered it. I hoped I said it in my head, actually, or at least muttered it so quietly that he couldn’t hear.

Aleks swallowed as his hand trailed back up. He cradled my face, pulling me to him. I was incapable of doing anything other than just barely keeping my balance as I leaned into his touch.

“Ready?”

“Huh?”

He smirked as I struggled against my lightheadedness at the feel of his hands on me.

“Can I kiss you now?”

I licked my lips, eyes already fluttering shut as I nodded.

“Strings...”

My eyes reluctantly opened, and Aleks thumbed my jaw as every muscle in him seemed wound tight with restraint.

“I’m going to need verbal consent here,” he said roughly.

“Kiss me.”

The words were nothing more than a breathless adjuration, and then his lips were on mine.

It was like being thrown into an icy lake, the way a little gasp erupted from me the moment our mouths melded together. Aleks held me steadier at the sound, his hands stable where they framed my face, his arms serving as safety rails as I wrapped my fingers around his forearms and held on for dear life.

Was it the heat from the sun or from him that rushed through every vein, that made my chest rise and fall so rapidly I worried I’d faint? Was it fire or ice? Was I burning alive or about to catch hypothermia?

This is fake, I reminded myself. He’s putting on a show for the cameras.

But, *God*, what a show it was.

His lips massaged mine, tender and warm and somehow too soft to belong to a man so hard and lined with sharp edges. He nipped at my bottom lip, kissing along my jaw and chin before he claimed my mouth again. This time, I was mid-pant, and he swept his tongue inside to dance with mine.

An embarrassing moan slipped out of me when he did, and it was like that sound unhinged him.

Aleks groaned, wrapping his arms fully around me and pulling my body

flush against his.

Heat.

Definitely heat.

That heat was enough to dismantle me now, to burn me from the inside out and reduce me to a pile of soot. His body was wet and slick against mine, steam rising in what little space existed between us, our breaths growing more and more frantic with each kiss.

“You’re putting on quite the show,” Aleks mused against my mouth before biting down on my lower lip.

“No way I’m letting you outdo me.”

He chuckled, but that laugh turned into a low groan when I hiked my leg up over his hip. He grabbed ahold of my thigh, and I wrapped my arms around him, rolling into the next kiss like a desperate teenager.

And maybe I was.

Maybe this was years and years of pent-up energy finally bursting loose.

Maybe this was seventeen-year-old me finally getting her chance.

“Mia,” Aleks warned, and when I felt his erection pressing against my stomach, a rush of power flooded me, replacing the heat.

I smirked, sliding my hand down his chest and tickling the skin just above his shorts with one long fingernail.

“Woman,” he cursed, and then with his teeth gritted and as if it pained him, he wrapped his hands around my arms and firmly put space between us.

He didn’t shove me away, didn’t do anything so drastic that the cameras would notice. But he held me at a safe distance, tonguing the inside of his cheek as he shook his head and let his heated gaze rake over me.

“What’s wrong, Suter?” I teased, hoping the way I was quite literally panting would come off as part of the play. “Afraid the world will see your... situation?”

A challenge sparkled in his eyes. “Oh, you think you’re slick, huh? Think this will embarrass me?”

I shrugged with a coy smile, still trying to catch my breath and come down from a fake kiss that felt anything but.

“Naïve little thing,” he said, running his thumb along my lower lip. “I thought you knew by now that nothing embarrasses me.”

Then, suddenly, he released me, stepped back, untied his board shorts, and ripped them down to his ankles.

I didn’t dare give him the satisfaction of looking down, not even when he

smirked and waggled his brows before jogging off toward the water.

But once he did, I let out a fizzle of laughter, covering my face as I shook my head.

That was it.

That was the money shot.

And within an hour, all the headlines had shifted from Garrett Orange and his opinions on my music to my new boyfriend's gigantic cock.

CHAPTER 13

Drafting Process

Aleks

I realized two things very quickly as I washed the sand and sunscreen from my body later that evening.

There wasn't a cold enough shower to rid my dirty mind of Mia in that yellow bikini.

And there wasn't a day I would exist and not think of what it felt like to kiss her — even if it was fake.

A thunderstorm rolled through the bay not too long after our little stunt, and Mia and I retreated inside, both of us running through the downpour as I attempted to keep her dry with a flimsy beach towel held over her head. We hadn't had a moment to breathe once we made it inside before Marci was grabbing Mia by the shoulders and shaking her with a high-pitched squeal of victory.

“Oh, my *God* — that was incredible. Isabella is calling in ten. She's overjoyed. Everyone is losing their minds!”

I'd slipped away while Marci dragged Mia over to her laptop to show her the media attention, smirking to myself a little as I disappeared up the stairs to the room I was staying in for the weekend.

Now, I was standing under the frigid water, trying to scrub the image from my mind of Mia's perfect body and the memory of her mouth opening for me.

But it was useless.

I'd told myself it wasn't her I was thinking of as I stroked myself when the water was still running warm, when I'd planted a palm on the cool shower tile and grunted out a release that somehow left me wound even tighter than before.

The truth was buzzing under the surface of my skin, though — a constant reminder that I was completely fucked.

When the cold water did nothing but turn to steam after hitting my hot skin, I gave up, slamming my hand on the faucet to shut it off. I towed myself down quickly before pulling on basketball shorts and a t-shirt, and then I made my way back downstairs.

It was quieter in the house now, nothing but the soft dripping of rain outside and the distant roll of thunder filling the open space of the giant house. When I rounded into the living area, I spotted Mia at the kitchen island, her phone in her hands, back rounded, one bare leg crossed under her and the other hooked onto the barstool next to hers.

I slowed even more at the sight of her, at the flash of a distant past that hit me seeing her in this way. She must have taken a shower, too, because her hair was wet and clinging to her tan shoulders. She wore a pair of sweat shorts, the thick band rolled once at her hips, and a strappy crop top tank showed the smooth skin at her lower back.

If I closed my eyes, I could almost remember her just like that when we were kids, sitting in her sweats at the kitchen island and eating Honeycomb cereal while she tried to figure out lyrics to a song playing nonstop in her head.

“Well, is my *situation* all over the Internet?”

Mia jumped a little at my voice, covering her chest with a flat palm as she spun in her chair to face me. She was wearing large, tortoise-shell, framed glasses — another visual that made me think of the past. She smiled as I made my way toward her, shaking her head and thumbing the screen on her phone before she laid it flat on the counter and shoved it my way.

That’s when I realized she wasn’t wearing a bra, and I once again felt my brain going haywire. She hadn’t been wearing one last week in the hotel, either, and it’d taken everything in me to keep my hands to myself. I knew I wasn’t good enough for her, that I was trouble in her mind and just playing my part in her carefully laid plans to get her album release on track. But that didn’t stop my thoughts from wondering what it would be like to walk my fingers up under her shirt and palm her, from wondering if she’d let me, if she’d be shocked and angry, or if she’d closer her eyes and sigh and lean into the touch.

She’d leaned in on the beach, part of my brain argued. She’d moaned and gripped and pulled.

She was doing it for the cameras, the smarter part of me argued. It was an act, just like the hundreds of other times she’s performed.

“Sure is,” she said. “And don’t worry — only half the comments are talking about how small and disappointing the view is.”

I pinched her side, right where I knew she was the most ticklish, before picking up her phone and taking in the view for myself.

The article on the screen was from *Pop Star Entertainment*, and though my junk had been blurred out in their photos, it was only *just* enough blur to not be able to see the details. There was still plenty to view, and I found particular joy in the close up of Mia’s wide eyes and her hand covering her mouth as she watched my white ass jog away from her.

“Hmm... your expression here doesn’t say *small* to me,” I pointed out, zooming in on her face.

Mia smacked my arm and ripped her phone from my hand, but not before I got a couple more scrolls in and saw the pictures of us making out.

The one with her leg hiked up over my hip and her chest arching into me was enough to give me another hard-on, so I rounded the kitchen island to stand on the other side of it just in case.

“Mission accomplished, I’d say.” I leaned over the countertop on my elbows, nodding to where she was now typing away. “Isabella happy?”

“Thrilled. I’m sure Giana is, too. You should check your phone — it’s been blowing up.”

I followed her gaze to where I’d left my phone in the kitchen earlier.

“You sound a little jealous,” I noted. “Want to go through my phone, Strings? I promise, you’re the only girl I’m texting.”

“Shut up,” she said without looking up at me, but I didn’t miss the way her cheeks turned red.

I chuckled, unlocking my phone and thumbing through the texts quickly. There was, indeed, a few from Giana telling me that sponsorship offers were rolling in and she wanted to meet tomorrow to discuss. She also asked if it would be possible to *not* flash my goods for the whole world to see next time.

There was a text from Richard Bancroft, too. He was giddy to report that we’d already sold out every suite in the arena for the first seven home games. He was expecting some high-profile guests to be in attendance.

Carter had added me to a group chat with the guys, and there were about a dozen texts from them ranging from dick jokes to not-so-subtle pleas for details of what the fuck was going on.

But all those texts faded to the background when I saw a missed one from Mia’s father.

Charlie Conaway: Hello, son. Been a while since we chatted. Got some time this weekend?

My asshole clenched at the sight of the text, which to anyone else would have seemed pleasant enough. But I knew Charlie. I knew that behind his love and respect for me as a hockey player and as a man, there was a fierce layer of protection over his daughter.

And I had a feeling that — whether he knew it was fake or not — he was *not* happy about the photos circulating online at the moment.

“*Gopferdami*,” I muttered under my breath before texting him back that I could talk tomorrow.

“What?” Mia asked.

I let out a sigh, tossing my phone face down on the counter once I’d shot off the text and ignored the rest. “Nothing. Just pretty sure your father is preparing to skin me alive.”

“Dad texted you?” Mia waved me off. “Oh, he’s fine. He and Mom are both aware of the situation. I’m sure he’s just pulling your leg.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You two are so weird sometimes. He acts like the sun rises and sets with you when you’re not around, you know,” she pointed out. “Pretty sure he brags about you to his friends and co-workers more than his own Grammy-award-winning daughter.”

I didn’t respond, mostly because I wasn’t sure what to say. Charlie Conaway had saved my life in more ways than one. He’d given me a home, a ticket to a career that was otherwise out of reach, and a chance to make something of myself.

He didn’t just demand my respect — he’d earned it. There was no one in this world I wanted to make proud more than him.

But I also held a deep, confusing resentment for the man who had given me so much.

Because as much as he believed in me, as much as he maybe even *loved* me, he also saw me as a threat to his daughter.

He always had.

I cleared my throat, deciding tonight was not the night to dwell on any of it. I’d get my lashing from Charlie in the morning.

For now, I was alone with Mia, and I planned to make the most of it.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Marci has some family who live in St. Pete, apparently. She’s going to

dinner with them and then staying at their place tonight. James is asleep, I think, and Hunter is on guard. The rest of their team is on the perimeter.”

Suddenly, Mia’s stomach growled so loudly it overshadowed the thunder outside.

I arched an eyebrow as her cheeks turned pink.

“And what are your dinner plans?”

“A chef was supposed to come to the house, but I canceled her.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Not hungry.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, her stomach growled even louder.

“Clearly,” I said on a laugh.

She sighed, finally locking her phone and sliding it away. “Okay, I just didn’t want to have another stranger in the house. If it was my chef back home, it would have been different. I know her. I don’t have to perform for her. But I’m...”

“Tired,” I finished for her, my voice soft.

Her shoulders slumped a little, and she nodded.

I couldn’t imagine it. Sure, there was some fame that came with being a professional hockey player, but it was *nothing* compared to the life Mia led. I still held onto a bit of normalcy. I could live alone, could go out without getting mauled, could shop for my own groceries without having more than maybe a few people asking me for autographs.

But Mia? She had an entire team of people who were around her constantly.

Security guards. Agents. Publicists. Stylists. Label reps... the list went on and on.

Even if she stayed in the privacy of her own home or a vacation rental like this, she still had people around her all the time.

I didn’t blame her for wanting a night of peace and quiet.

But I felt my chest tightening like a protective bear at the thought of her not eating.

“I was going to order something in,” she said. “But I might just go to bed and eat in the morning.”

“It’s six o’clock,” I said.

Her stomach rumbled again, and I chuckled, knocking my knuckles on the countertop.

“I’ll cook for you.”

“What?” Mia instantly shook her head, her brown eyes wide as if the idea horrified her. “You don’t need to do that. I’m sure you have plans.”

“I’m here for the weekend, remember?” I asked her, gesturing my arms wide. “Besides, you know you love my cooking.”

“I couldn’t possibly ask you to do that. It’s rush hour, and you’d have to go to the store.”

“Oh, what a crisis.”

“You’ve already done so much for me today.”

“Yeah, because kissing you was a real hardship.”

“It’s storming, and—”

“Woman,” I growled, flattening my palms on the granite countertop and lowering my gaze to meet hers. “Shut up and let me feed you.”

I arched a brow when it looked like she was going to finish her argument, warning her without words not to even try. And only when she let out a sigh of resignation did I push back off the counter.

“I’ll be back before you know it. You just relax,” I said, shoving my feet into my sneakers and swiping my keys out of the bowl by the door.

“Relax,” she echoed. “What’s that?”

I smirked, pointing at her from the doorway. “It’s an order. Give the phone a rest. Don’t think about the album or the tour for the whole half hour it’s going to take me to get what I need.”

The corner of her mouth tilted, and she hopped off her barstool before meeting me at the door. Surprisingly, she wrapped her arms around my neck, crushing me in a fierce hug.

Jasmine and honey.

I held her tight, my arms wrapped full around her, nose buried in the scent of her wet hair. Her body was small and soft and pliable against mine, everything about her in that moment making me want to hide her away from the world. I wanted to hold her on the couch while we watched a movie. I wanted to rub her shoulders and run her a bath. I wanted to cook for her, and the fact that me offering that seemed so wild to her, that she didn’t believe anyone would want to take care of her without being paid to do so... it only made me want to do it more.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I swallowed, the hug over too soon.

“You know I’ve always got you.”

• • •

An hour and a half later, Mia was moaning for the third time, her chin dripping with cheese in the most unattractive way possible as she took another too-large bite of the dish I'd prepared.

And yet, it was hard not to be turned on.

"*Guh, ish sho fucking good*," she said, shoveling in another forkful.

"You keep moaning like that, and Hunter is going to have a hard time believing anything innocent is happening in this kitchen."

"This is anything but innocent," she said, pointing her fork to the cheesy pasta and potatoes topped with caramelized onions and bacon that was left on her plate. There was a side of apple puree to her left, too. "This is a downright sin. What's it called again? I can never remember."

"*Älplermagronen*," I said, taking a bite of my own. "And it's not nearly as impressive as you're making it seem right now. It's quite literally macaroni and cheese."

"Was this one of Annaliese's specialties?"

I stiffened a bit at the mention of my foster mom, of the closest person I'd ever had to a parent in this world. I wanted to smile, but something in my heart blackened the day she died, and I couldn't seem to release the grief even ten years later.

She'd done everything for me.

She'd sacrificed her time, her money, her energy to make my life a good one.

And as soon as she could, she got me a ticket to the States, to a better life.

She never once told me she was sick.

And I was too young and selfish to notice.

I nodded, my throat tight, and Mia's chewing slowed a bit as she took in my expression.

"When you go back to Switzerland," she said. "Do you think you'll go see her?"

Go see her. As if I could just show up on my old doorstep in Berne, push through that old door that had rusty hinges, and see her sitting there in her rocker with her latest crochet project in her lap. As if I could just hug her and laugh as she told me I was too skinny and that she needed to feed me immediately.

I would give anything for that. Anything. I'd give up hockey, even, for

just one more day with her.

But what Mia meant was *would I go see her grave?*

I had always planned to. Mia and her parents offered to go with me. But I was scared, and sad, and frankly didn't want to face the fact that she was actually gone.

So, no. I hadn't been back yet.

I hoped one day I'd be strong enough to change that.

"Maybe," I answered.

I knew Mia wanted to ask more, but she didn't push. She reminded me of Annaliese in that way — neither one of them ever asked me to be anyone I wasn't. Instead, Mia just swallowed, stacked up another bite, and waved it at me before popping it in her mouth.

"Well, all I know is this is orgasmic."

My brow ticced up at that. "I don't remember you calling it that when we were teenagers."

"That's because I was a perfect little angel then," she said with a shimmy of her shoulders. "And because I didn't have my first orgasm until I was twenty-three."

I nearly choked on my next bite, and Mia smirked at me as I chased it down with a sip of the white wine I'd poured for both of us. "You're joking."

"Not all of us lived with our hands in our pants the way you did, Aleks."

"Maybe you should have." I shook my head. "Let me guess, perfect boyfriend Austin Westbrook made you come as he made sweet, sweet love to you in a bed full of rose petals?"

Mia narrowed her gaze, picking a piece of bacon off her plate and flicking it at me. "Why do you always have to ruin it? Just when I think you're not a prick, you go and prove me wrong."

"I have a reputation to uphold."

She sucked her teeth, stacking a few penne noodles on her fork. "If you must know, it wasn't him."

I couldn't hide my genuine shock at that confession. "Um... but didn't you two start dating when you were twenty-two?"

She nodded, swallowing her bite and reaching for her wine.

"Don't tell me you really *did* cheat," I said, but couldn't help but smile at the thought. Not that I was a fan of cheating, but I was a *big* fan of that golden boy asshole getting what he deserved.

"Of course I didn't *cheat*," Mia spat back. She couldn't look at me as she

toyed with the food on her plate. “But he wasn’t responsible for my first orgasm. I was.”

“Oh, I like where this is going,” I said, leaning in for more.

“Well, too bad for you, that’s all of the story you’re going to get.”

“Come on! You can’t leave me hanging like that. What’d you use? Your hands?”

“Aleks!”

“A vibe?”

“Stop,” she dragged out the word on a grin, her face turning bright red as she covered it with her hands.

“It was a vibe, wasn’t it. Dirty girl.” I smirked. “What kind was it? Was it big, or just one of those little clit ticklers?”

Mia laughed, throwing another piece of bacon at me. “You’re such a perv.”

I drank my wine with a grin, watching her over the rim of my glass. My smile faded as my curiosity got the best of me. “What’s the real story of what happened between you two?”

“What, you don’t read the tabloids?” She waved her hand toward her phone. “Obviously, I’m a crazy, neurotic, jealous drama queen, and he couldn’t fix me.”

I just waited, watching as she ran her finger through a glob of cheese and slipped it into her mouth.

“I don’t want to bore you with my relationship woes.”

“I asked,” I reminded her. “And we used to talk about relationship woes all the time.”

Her eyes flicked to mine then, and she didn’t have to say a word for me to know what she was thinking.

That was before.

Before I was helping her stumble into her room after getting too drunk at a party. Before she confessed she wanted me. Before she tried to kiss me.

Before I’d told her I couldn’t.

The memory of that night had haunted me since, the little devil on my shoulder always whispering and wondering what would have happened if I’d have given in. But she wasn’t sober enough to give any kind of consent that night, and when she *was* sober again — she’d laughed it off, making light of it, pointing out the fact that she was drunk and being silly.

And by the time we were out of her parents’ house and I was settled in

Seattle, it was too late for me to make a move of my own.

She was moving to Los Angeles.

And then, she was dating some pretty boy rock star five years older than us.

That was just the first of her relationships with men who were nothing like me. After him, there was the DJ, the activist, and finally, Austin.

And I got the picture loud and clear of what her type was.

Good. Every single one of them was good. You'd never see them on the news for fighting, getting thrown out of a bar, getting a DUI, or flipping off a ref during a charity game for kids.

They were the poster boys, the ones you take home to mom and dad. And she deserved that.

But I'd be lying if I said a part of me didn't rejoice every time they fucked up and lost her.

Mia was quiet for a moment as I succumbed to my memories, and I let my eyes wash over her clean face. Even tired, she was so gorgeous it was hard not to stare. Her skin was sun kissed from the afternoon, the beauty mark beneath her left eye almost blending with her complexion now. Her lips were as plump and inviting as always, eyes the most intoxicating hue of blue behind her glasses. They sparkled in the low light of the kitchen as she topped off both our wine glasses before she finally answered.

"He wanted me to be someone I'm not."

I took a swig of the wine to hide how my jaw tightened at that, and to keep my mouth shut so she'd continue.

"The further we got into our relationship, the more he... changed. He used to compliment my success — ask about my music, help me write when I was stuck, tell me how talented I was. He would praise my success around his friends, make me feel like a million bucks." She shook her head, finger tracing the rim of her wine glass. "But the longer we were together, the more he'd make these little comments that felt like backhanded compliments. He'd not-so-subtly hint to how his career was more important than mine, that he was so thankful that *when* we got married, he knew he could count on me to support him and take care of our family."

I wrinkled my nose, and Mia laughed a little.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It's cringe. But... *ugh*, I feel silly even admitting this but... I was excited about the idea of marriage, of being a mom one day. Not *now*, obviously. But... one day." She shrugged. "I just didn't think it

would be a traditional kind of marriage. I mean, you know my parents. Mom had her career just as much as Dad had his. They had their own friends and their friends together. They still travel, still laugh and play and kiss each other to this day like they're each other's everything. *That's* what I wanted. What I still want."

She grew quiet for a while, sipping her wine as the rain slowed outside. The more I saw the utter despair in her every feature, the more I ground my teeth.

I took back what I said about the fucker earlier.

He was anything but good.

I'd only met the prick a couple of times. Once was on the Fourth of July two years ago when I'd spent the weekend with Mia's family and she'd brought him home. *That* had been a nightmare weekend for me. I was on thin ice with my coach in Seattle, frustrated by the boundaries they were putting on me, and then I had to go and have a front-row seat to Mia being in love with Austin fucking Westbrook. It was my own personal brand of torture, and I'd drank myself into a stupor because of it.

I'd almost done much worse, but her father had been there to stop me.

I was sure that was part of the reason he wanted to talk to me. He was probably thinking to himself that I was some drug-crazed punk who could steer his little girl off course at any moment.

Or maybe he just wants to check in on you, a soft voice in my brain whispered.

I never listened to that part.

The other time I was in the same place with Austin was after one of Mia's shows. I'd only stayed long enough to give her a hug and tell her she was amazing before I'd made an excuse about needing to fly back to Seattle for something team related. She hadn't questioned it, and I'd gotten the hell out of there before I had to witness that punk kissing her.

I couldn't handle it after seeing it in person on the Fourth. It was bad enough to see it in the tabloids.

"It didn't happen overnight," Mia said, her voice softer now. "But slowly, discreetly, our relationship went from passionate and exciting to feeling like I was just living in this numb, performative dance. We smiled and laughed and answered interview questions like we were the perfect couple, but when we were alone, we didn't talk, we didn't touch, we didn't play."

She shook her head, and I wanted so badly to reach for her that I had to

fold my arms over my chest not to do it.

“He acted surprised when I said I wanted to take some space. And then, when he realized I was done... he just wanted control of the narrative. He wanted control of everything.” She sighed, swirling her wine before taking a long drink of it. “And, thanks to his connections, he got it.”

“He doesn’t control you.”

“He controls the public perception of me and our breakup.”

“Bullshit.” I leaned forward, hooking my foot on her barstool. “He may have his little groupies who hang on his every word, and maybe he gets the media to eat out of the palm of his hand sometimes. But I’ve been to your concerts. I’ve seen your fans in action. Trust me, Mia,” I said, covering her wrist with my hand. I waited until she lifted her eyes to mine. “If anyone is writing your story, it’s you.”

She smiled, but it was a sad smile, a pathetic tilt of her lips. “I’m doing a pretty shit job of it.”

“Nah, you’re just in the drafting process,” I assured her. “Like when you used to work on lyrics when we were kids. The best is yet to come in edits. I mean, I think making out with a hockey player on the beach is a pretty great addition.”

I smirked, and she smiled sweetly at me. She kept that sweet smile as she covered my hand that rested on her wrist, twisted out of my grip, and moved so quick it was a tornado of hair.

Then, she had my arm in *her* grip.

It was a move I’d taught her in high school when I’d felt like she needed to know how to protect herself, and I barked out a laugh when she was standing behind my barstool with my arm angled behind my back and my chest forced down onto the countertop.

“Say uncle,” she teased against the shell of my ear, and although I could have easily escaped her grasp and had her pinned on this countertop, I relented.

“Uncle.”

She wore a victorious smile when she released me, and I spun on my barstool to face her, folding my arms over my chest.

“See?” I said. “You’re not some poor little thing who needs the approval of your ex or his little posse of parasites. You don’t need the media to tell you you’re doing great. You’re Mia Fucking Love.”

I stood, and when I did, my chest brushed against hers, her eyes staying

locked on mine until I was towering over her. I tapped her nose with a grin.

“Don’t let them steal your pen when you’re just getting to the good part.”

CHAPTER 14

Too Bad

Mia

I don't even bother locking up my bike when I find him.

The January air is bitter cold against my cheeks and nose as I ditch my bike just off the trail, eyes on where Aleks is slumped on the beach. He's alone, the only one brave enough to sit by Lake Michigan as the wind whips in icy and brutal.

I wrap my coat tighter around me as I approach him, and though my teeth are already chattering, I don't ask him what the hell he's doing, or tell him he's crazy, or pull at his arm until he stands and leaves with me.

I just plop down next to him in the cold sand.

On a winter day like this one, the lake feels apocalyptic — its water deep and dark, white caps crashing, each wave letting out a roar of warning.

Aleks is burrowed into his puffy jacket, the hood pulled up over his beanie, arms wrapped around his knees. He rocks slightly as he stares off into the distant waters, and I can just barely see the tip of his red nose.

I don't know what to say.

I don't have any experience with death, with grief of this magnitude.

I don't know how any words could alleviate a pain so sharp.

Aleks has lived with us for seven months now. He was quiet at first — so much so that the kids at school made fun of him when the year first started up. They assumed he didn't know how to speak English. He proved them wrong when he perfectly cursed out Ben Harmon before punching him so hard in the nose, it cracked and spurted blood everywhere.

Since then, I've watched every girl in our school crush on him, and every boy try to be his friend. He's dated a few of those girls. I've watched him kiss them in front of our house from the safety of my bedroom window. And he's hung out with some of the guys on his hockey team, but he always seems to keep them at a distance.

For some reason, Aleks is only himself around me and my family.

But now, I worry we may lose him, too.

Aleks doesn't talk much about home. He doesn't write to any friends or girlfriends back in Switzerland, doesn't regale us with tales of growing up playing hockey or share family memories. When we ask, he clips out the straight, often-times terribly sad truths.

His parents were drug addicts.

His birth mother died, and his dad gave him up before he died, too.

He doesn't remember them.

He doesn't try to.

But if there's one person Aleks loves to talk about, it's his foster mom — Annaliese.

It's the only time I ever see his real smile, the only time I see him light up about anything he talks about other than hockey. When he tells us about Annaliese, he beams with pride and love. He brags on her cooking, laughs as he recounts her silly dancing and how she'd make a game out of moving pots and buckets under each spot in their leaky roof when it rained. He has a picture of the two of them on his dresser in the guest room where he's staying, and he never misses their weekly Sunday calls.

My father offered to fly her to Chicago for Christmas, but she declined. We assumed it was because she's got three other kids still under her care. We understand now that it was because she was too sick to travel that far.

I'll never get the chance to meet the woman Aleks loves so much.

And sitting next to him, I know she took a piece of him with her when she left this Earth.

I'm sorry.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but my mouth is too dry to say them. They sound so weak and tired and not enough.

Instead, I just sit next to him. I try to keep steady where he can't stop moving. I try to stay calm because I know there's a storm raging in his heart.

"You should go home," he says after a while. His voice is strained, like there's a hand around his throat.

"I will when you do."

"It's too cold out here."

"I have my coat."

"I don't know how long I'll be here."

"I don't need a time."

“I want to be alone.”

“Too bad.”

He finally looks at me with that remark, and I cock a brow at him, daring him to try to argue.

This is how we’ve been since the summer. I learned quickly that Aleks Suter didn’t respond to meek.

He scares everyone else around him — his teammates, our peers at school, sometimes even my parents.

But he never scares me.

Because I see it, that thing he tries so desperately to hide with his scowls and his scars and his bad attitude.

He thinks no one in his life is meant to stay. He thinks he lives a life so terrible, no one could possibly understand or relate. He thinks he’s alone and that’s just how it’s meant to be.

I don’t know why I’m determined to prove him wrong, but I am.

When I don’t budge, his stare softens a bit, his nose and eyes red from the cold wind. He’s only seventeen, but he somehow looks so much older, as if he’s lived a thousand lives he can’t tell a single soul about. His skin is pale, his face long, eyes dull and tired.

He’s still handsome, though.

He’s always that.

With a sigh, Aleks relents, realizing I’m not going anywhere. He still has his hands in the pockets of his coat, but he sticks an elbow out, a silent invitation for me to slide closer and slip my arm through his.

When I do, I have to fight not to sigh myself at the instant warmth. I snuggle in closer to him, laying my head on his shoulder.

I talk to Aleks about more than I talk to anyone else about. Even Jessie, my best friend at school, doesn’t know the things I confide to Aleks. I don’t know how it happened, but Aleks earned my trust.

Sure, I want to smack him upside the head more times than not for being a stupid jerk, for teasing me or just being dumb with his own well-being, but still...

He’s always there for me, and for some reason, it’s just easy to tell him things I never tell anyone else.

I don’t know if he feels the same, but I do know that I like when he talks back to me. I like when he listens, but it’s better when he talks, too. I like when he tells me about Switzerland, when he shows me pictures of the

mountains he used to climb in the summers and the lakes he'd skate in the winter when Annaliese found a way to afford them traveling. I like when he confides in me about hockey, when he tells me something is challenging him.

But for the most part, Aleks isn't the talking kind. He likes to be quiet, and I don't mind that, either.

So, I settle in, content to stay quiet and just be there next to him.

He surprises me when he speaks.

"I didn't even get to see her," he whispers. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

My heart breaks at his admission.

I squeeze his arm, letting him know I hear him. Once again, the words I'm sorry feel too weak to speak out loud.

"I shouldn't have left," Aleks says. "I should have stayed with her. I should have been there."

"No," I argue, shaking my head and sitting up straight. I wait for Aleks to look at me. "Annaliese wanted you to come here, Aleks. She wanted it more than anything in the world. She wanted you to have your dream."

"She was always putting everyone else before her."

I smile softly. "For some people, that's how they show their love."

He swallows, and then, the impossible happens.

His eyes flood with tears faster than he can hide them.

And in fact, he doesn't hide them.

He keeps those endless brown eyes on mine long after the first tears streak down his cheeks, freezing on his skin before he has the chance to swipe them away.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this without her," he croaks.

"I don't know either," I confess. "But I can promise you one thing. You won't have to do it alone."

His eyes search mine like he doesn't quite believe me. But slowly, his brows soften, his bottom lip trembling.

And then, on the wind-whipped shore of Lake Michigan, Aleks Suter breaks.

When the first sob racks his body, I throw my arms around him, pulling him into me as best I can as a girl half his size. He curls up like a little boy, his head on my chest, his arms clinging to me as he cries and cries.

I don't rush him. I don't try to comfort him, either. I just hold him and let him feel every heartbreaking second of a moment I know will shape his life forever.

After a while, he settles, the tears drying up as he sniffles and holds tight to me.

“Mia?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re my best friend.”

My heart aches in a way I’ve never experienced when he says it, in a way that tells me maybe this is a moment that will shape my life, too.

“You’re my best friend, too, Aleks.”

We stay on that cold beach until dusk, until Aleks insists we have to go home so my dad doesn’t worry.

But when we get home, I sneak into his room after Mom and Dad are asleep.

I hold him until the sun rises.

CHAPTER 15

One Way Ticket

Mia

Aleks's words still rang in my head weeks later.

"Don't let them steal your pen when you're just getting to the good part."

They were a source of inspiration, firing me forward into the next week of chaos. Every show I appeared on, the recording of the music video for our first single, tour practices... all of it was done with confidence buzzing deep within me.

He was right.

I was just getting to the good part.

This album, while it was my fifth, felt like the first of a new era. It felt like stepping into a new persona, a new space, a new life. Even after just the first single, my fans were giddy with the possibilities of what the rest of the album could sound like. They were ready to hear this new version of me, the one who was older, wiser, and had more to say.

My label had high expectations. Our single had been number one on all the streaming platforms and on the Billboard Top 100 since the week it dropped. Pre-orders for the full album far surpassed my last one. The music video for the first single had been viewed more than fifty million times. We hadn't announced the tour yet, but they had a feeling that when we did, we were going to set records. We were doing multiple nights at some of the biggest stadiums and arenas in the world, and they were forecasting us selling out every single night.

Everything about this just felt... *larger*.

And I was riding that high like it was a glitter-dusted cloud — right up until the album release party.

"Okay, Aleks should be here any moment now," Isabella said, flying into the bathroom where I was currently pretending to reapply lipstick that didn't need fixing. "I *may* or may not have tipped off a few of our favorites to have

their phones ready.”

She added that last part with a wink, and I knew by *favorites*, she meant the fans who ran accounts that were mostly favorable when it came to me. It had been a bold choice to invite them to my private release party, but it had been on purpose.

Because no matter how the momentum climbed for this album, Garrett Orange was still running his mouth every chance he got. And we knew without confirmation from anyone that he’d influenced some of the other big names in the music critic game.

The album had been panned by nearly every music industry magazine and blog, and they were all hanging on the same tired reasons that Garrett was.

Based on those reviews alone, I was sure we were already out of the running for any awards. I was fairly certain that the label had a similar thought. And where all of the reviews had me second guessing everything, wondering if I was a sham who thought this album was great when it was really a massive flop waiting to happen, Isabella was convinced we could turn it around — and that tonight would be pivotal.

Because tonight, the whole world would hear the album for themselves.

They would be the real judges.

And clearly, Isabella wanted my new relationship with Aleks front and center in their minds as they made those decisions.

“He’s showing up with a whole posse, by the way,” Isabella informed me, typing away on her phone. Her hot pink hair was in a slicked back ponytail tonight, her neck tattoo on prominent display in the tiny, leather strapless top she wore with skin-tight jeans. “G and I both agreed it would be good to see your worlds blending a little.”

I nodded absentmindedly, blotting my lips and staring at my reflection.

My makeup was done to perfection, from the striking red lip to the bold smoky eye. Blush and lashes, bronzer and brows. My dress was custom-made by my favorite designer, hugging all the right places and mirroring the album’s colors — a shimmering yellow and coral and red, like a sunset.

On the outside, I looked like the pop star that I was.

On the inside, I felt more unsteady than I had in years.

I usually lit up for these things. I mean, it was my *album release party*, for fuck’s sake. This was what I’d worked so hard for, what I’d counted down to, what I’d dreamed of for more than a year now.

Thanks to all the bad press, for the first time in my career, I wanted to

vomit at the thought of the world hearing my songs in just a few hours.

“Hey,” Isabella said, lifting her eyes and getting a good look at me for the first time. “You good?”

I smiled brilliantly — first at my reflection and then at her. This wasn’t a pathetic attempt at a fake smile. This was the kind of fake smile that saved me from breakdowns, that assured even those closest to me that I really was fine.

“Are you kidding? I’m fucking *perfect*,” I lied, kissing both her cheeks. “I could use a glass of champagne, though.”

“Ugh, so cliché. I was kind of picturing us doing Jäger bombs,” she said with a teasing smile, looping her arm through mine. She continued chatting about all the people attending tonight, the order of events, and other business-related things that I should have been giving my rapt attention to.

As it was, I just followed her and pretended to listen, all while fighting against the way my heart threatened to surge out of my chest.

I was glad we’d decided to host the release party at my house in LA. Not just because this property was far too vast to only house me ninety percent of the time, but because I knew all the places I could escape to for a quiet moment here.

I followed Isabella around the house as she showed me the incredible transformation of the space, thanks to my house manager, Renee, and the event crew she’d hired to help. Fine linens and carefully curated lighting set the tone for the event, along with a popular new DJ on our label spinning soft but pleasant music.

Most of the guests were hanging out around the pool and enjoying the gorgeous August evening. We hadn’t made the guest list a huge one, but rather stuck to those in the industry I was closest with, along with a handful of lucky fans selected to join us.

I was in the middle of taking a selfie with one such fan when Mom and Dad showed up.

I felt like a little girl as I squealed and flew into my mother’s arms. No matter what was going on in their lives in Chicago, they never missed my big events. Album release parties, the first night on tour, award ceremonies — whenever I needed them, they were there.

“Oh, you look stunning,” Mom said when I wrapped her in a hug, holding on tightly for longer than usual. She didn’t break the hug, though. She held me just as fiercely before pulling back and framing my arms in her hands, her

eyes searching. “Absolutely breathtaking.”

“What she said,” Dad mirrored, and he tugged me in for a side hug and a kiss against my temple once Mom and I let go. “How are you feeling, my little star?”

“Amazing,” I lied. *God*, I hated that it was a lie. It grated on my nerves more and more as the night went on that I didn’t feel the way I usually did at these events. “I can’t believe tonight’s the night.”

“You’ve worked so hard,” Mom said. She threaded her fingers together with mine and squeezed. “We are so proud of you.”

“Extremely proud,” Dad added. He picked up a glass of champagne from a passing tray, taking a sip of it with his eyes scanning the crowd. “Quite an impressive turnout tonight.”

“I’ll never get used to being in the same room with Huxton Crow,” Mom added, her cheeks tinging pink. “He is just so...”

Her voice faded as her eyes flicked up to my father, who had cocked a brow and was waiting with an amused smile for her to finish that sentence.

“Talented,” she said.

“Uh-huh. I’m sure that’s all you admire about him, honey. His *talent*.”

Mom released my hand so she could slide into my father’s side, and he wrapped one arm around her and kissed her hair.

“He’s got nothing on you, my love,” she promised.

The way they looked at each other made my chest seize. *That* was the kind of love I yearned for, the kind that I wrote songs about. Thirty years together and they were still just as madly in love as day one.

Dad smirked before he was serious again, his brows folding a bit. “So, will your *boyfriend* be joining us this evening?”

He took a sip of his champagne after the question, as if that would mask his clear distaste. I couldn’t help but smirk a little because my father had always been a little protective when it came to me.

“Charlie,” Mom warned.

“In fact, he will,” I answered. “Any moment now.”

“Really?” Mom lit up then. “Oh, I can’t wait to see him. It’s been far too long.”

I sipped my own champagne before eyeing dad. “Don’t act like *you* aren’t excited to see him, too.”

“I’d be more excited if the last time I saw him wasn’t on the header of a blog mauling my daughter.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was just a little kiss. And I hate to break it to you, but there will be more of that. It’s kind of the whole point of this charade.” I made sure to say that last part quietly just in case anyone was trying to listen in on our conversation.

“I still don’t understand why it’s necessary,” Dad grumbled, taking my cue to speak softly.

“Well, it’s a good thing I have a highly paid team who *does* understand then, isn’t it?”

Mom chuckled at my dad’s displeasure, patting his chest. “Oh, he’ll be fine. He’s always going to see you as his little girl. We’re just happy you told us about it instead of making us believe it was real. Aren’t we, sweetheart?”

Dad grumbled in response, and Mom and I chuckled while sharing a knowing look.

It was the strangest thing, because I knew when Aleks *did* show, my father would wrap him into a bear hug and probably steal him away for most of the night to talk about hockey. That was what happened nearly every holiday Aleks joined us in Chicago since graduation. Those two loved each other.

And yet, Dad was acting like us pretending to date was the end of the world.

Then again, he’d eyed *any* man I’d brought home to meet the family in that same way. Hell, even Austin didn’t win him over in the three years we dated. Maybe Mom was right — Dad would just always see me as his little girl, and no one would ever be good enough.

Mom launched into a story about one of our neighbors and good friends of hers who’d recently hosted a party on their new yacht, and I listened intently until the moment Isabella slid up to interrupt. She smiled apologetically at my parents before pulling me away, her tone low as she whispered in my ear.

“He’s here,” she sang. “Show time.”

My next breath was stunted, the hair along the back of my neck standing on end as I scanned the party.

I hadn’t spent much time with Aleks since our rendezvous at the beach house in Florida. Sure, we’d been seen together at various events thanks to the careful orchestration of Giana and Isabella, but I really had been so busy that, aside from a quick photo op, there hadn’t been much time to spare. We’d texted, yes, but again — sparsely.

My heart was accelerating with every second that passed knowing he was close now.

When I finally spotted him, that silly heart stopped altogether.

He parted that crowd like a scene in a movie, as if every guest here was an extra who knew their role was to step aside when he walked in. A triangle of people followed him, hockey players I distantly recognized with their significant others clinging to their arms.

But all my focus was on him.

He was dressed to kill in a designer suit tailored to perfection. It was a dark mustard yellow, almost brown but with just a hint of warmth to match the vibes of my album. Beneath that suit was an all-black shirt that hugged his thick neck instead of a traditional button up and tie, and I knew without seeing it that beneath *that* was the chain necklace Annaliese gave him when he was younger. He never took it off, no matter the occasion.

From his fresh buzz cut and the perfectly shaped scruff on his jaw, all the way down to the dress shoes carrying him across the party toward me, he was delectable.

I didn't miss the flash of his watch as he smoothed his hand over his stomach, the other hand sliding confidently into the pocket of his slacks. He wore a cocky smirk and walked with a confident gait that only a champion could.

And his searing dark eyes were locked on me.

"Damn," I heard Isabella whisper under her breath. I thought I felt her squeeze my arm before she was scurrying off, she and everyone around me backing away a few feet as if they were taking the cue from the audience parting the seas for Aleks.

Once again, we had a plan for tonight. He was going to show up fashionably late to get the rumor mills buzzing. *Will he or won't he be here?* And when he *did* show, he was going to kiss me in front of the entire party.

It was our first real public event together. This wasn't a spotting of us at a restaurant or on the beach together. This wasn't him being seen with me at the recording of a late-night show.

This was our friends and family together in one place. This was an intimate party with an exclusive guest list.

This was our public declaration that we were serious.

And *fuck*, did that man look serious as he prowled closer, his shoulders square, eyes heated and drinking me in from my straightened hair all the way

to my red bottom heels. He was just so... *good* at this, at pretending like he wanted me, like I drove him mad, like I was the object of his every desire.

He played the part so well it was hard to remind myself it wasn't real with him looking at me the way he did.

My breath was locked in my chest, and I willed it to break free and give me at least one puff of oxygen before he reached me. When he was close enough, he cocked an eyebrow, a silent question to ask if I was ready.

The corner of my mouth tilted up in response, a coy and inviting smile.

I swore his gaze grew even hungrier at that.

The music faded. The distant chatter grew to a haunting hum of anticipation.

And without a word of greeting, he kissed me.

Aleks didn't stop until his body was flush against mine, until we were all but crashing into each other in the middle of that party. One hand slid up and back into my hair, his thumb on my jaw strong and steady. His other hand was at my neck, splaying from where my pulse thrummed through the skin over my collarbone. It was as if he wanted to hold me to him and push me away in equal measure, like having one hand curling and the other flat would somehow help him keep control.

It was so fucking hot I wondered if I'd combust right then and there into a fiery blaze.

He groaned when his lips met mine, and I finally found my breath, inhaling him in as he held the kiss. I told myself it was something I'd practiced and planned for when I pressed up onto my toes and silently asked for more, when my arms wrapped around his neck and I raked my nails over his freshly cut hair.

The familiar feel of that hair against my palm had me reeling, memories of the past battling with the overwhelming sensation of *now*.

Aleks nipped at my bottom lip just enough to make me gasp and open, and he swept his tongue inside my mouth, striking a bolt of electricity between my legs. His hands were framing my face now, holding me to him, and then they slowly released, pulling me into him for a hug as he broke the kiss.

Again, I told myself it was an act when I chased that kiss as soon as he pulled away, not ready to let it end.

He chuckled a bit as he tucked me into him, his arms massive and protective and warm. He smelled like cinnamon and leather, and I inhaled the

scent with a shaky, shallow breath.

“Hi,” he breathed, kissing my hair.

“Hi.”

“You look...” I felt him swallow, his voice low and gravelly.

“Beautiful? Ravishing? Like a million bucks?” I teased, tilting my head up until my chin was on his chest.

“Like a one-way ticket to jail for me if anyone tries to touch you tonight.”

My skin heated under his gaze, under that compliment, but I managed to roll my eyes. “Look at you, playing the part of possessive boyfriend so well.” I smiled. “You look alright, too. You know. For a hockey brute.”

He smirked at me with the jest. “Just alright, huh? Because I’m pretty sure I caught you drooling on my walk over here.”

“Only because I remembered Chef Jenn made her famous cannolis. Still counting down the seconds until I get one of those.”

Aleks bit his bottom lip on a nod before digging his fingers into my rib, just enough for me to squirm in his grip before he was holding me even tighter.

“Such a brat.”

“Don’t lie. It turns you on.”

“Oh, nothing gets me going quite like that mouth of yours.”

I hid my smile against his chest before peering up at him again, all jokes gone.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said.

And I meant it.

Pretending to be something we weren’t in front of a crowd full of people was oddly the calmest I’d felt all night.

His eyes flicked between mine, an unreadable expression washing over his face.

But before I could analyze it, someone clapped Aleks on the shoulder, cueing us to come back to reality.

CHAPTER 16

Tornado

Aleks

Fuck, I was so gone for her.

The realization hit me as if it hadn't always been a present fact in my life, as if my ignoring it for years could do anything to erase it. My brain seemed to chant a mocking *duh* as I reluctantly released my hold on Mia, separating enough for us to turn toward the person who'd interrupted us.

We pulled apart, but I still held her to me, one arm snaking around her waist and hooking at her hip. I smoothed my thumb over the bone there, wondering if the shiver that touch elicited from her was just for show.

"I think you've rendered our man here mannerless with that kiss," Jaxson said, his smile bright as ever as he turned it from me to a breathless Mia. "Not that he had much in the way of manners before this. I'm Jaxson Brittain, one of the unfortunate souls who has to put up with your boyfriend's attitude on the ice."

He shook her hand politely before gesturing to Grace, who seemed a little starstruck where she was nestled into his arm.

"This is my girlfriend, Grace Tanev."

"I'm so sorry," Grace said on a croaky voice before clearing it. "I swear I'm going to get my shit together and be cool in like, five minutes, but right now can I just freak the fuck out that *you are Mia fucking Love?!?*"

Mia's resulting smile was dazzling, her laugh so light and sweet it was like honey. "Wait, I am?" She turned to me wide-eyed. "Shit. Why didn't you tell me?"

"And you're funny, too?" Grace groaned a little. "It's official. I'm surrounded by the baddest bitches to ever live. All of you are so hot and smart and funny and *ugh!*" She clapped her hands together and turned to grab Maven, pulling her over to us next. "Here. You have to meet everyone."

Grace launched into full-blown introductions then, and I stood idly by

with one arm still around Mia's waist and listened. It took everything I had in me to decline the drinks as they were offered to us on passing trays, but I promised Mia I'd be good.

And I was just nervous enough that I knew if I had one drink, I'd have ten.

I almost laughed at myself at the realization. I didn't get nervous even one night of playing in the Stanley Cup Finals, but put me in a house full of music industry people and fans with their phone cameras pointed at me, and I had the stomach of a teenager before a driver's license test.

This *felt* like a test of some kind — one I knew I needed to pass with flying colors.

"It's so nice to meet all of you," Mia said when the introductions were through.

She'd met Jaxson and Grace, Vince and Maven, Will and Chloe, and Carter. Livia had apparently taken Will's daughter, Ava, to the bathroom as soon as they got here and would be joining us soon.

"I have to admit, I didn't realize you had so many friends," Mia teased with a brow arched in my direction.

"Oh, he's made it crystal clear more than once that we're not his friends," Will chimed in. "Unfortunately for him, we're the kind of team that doesn't take no for an answer when it comes to building a family."

"Yeah, he's kind of been suckered into it," Carter added. "We put up with his outbursts of rage on the ice and, in return, he makes all of us look like Scottie Scheffler on the golf course compared to him."

I wiped a hand over my smile before slugging Carter in the stomach — not enough to actually hurt him, though he doubled over and played it off like I had.

Vince went on with the jokes, telling Mia about my first week of practice on the team and how I'd butted heads with everyone. She watched me curiously, her eyes understanding and smile light because she knew me better than anyone.

She knew I kept people at a distance because I knew I had nothing to offer them in terms of friendship, nothing to give in the way of kindness or generosity or care.

I stuck to myself because I knew I was the only one I could count on, and that if I didn't get tangled up with anyone else, my actions would only impact me.

That was how I wanted it.

Livia sauntered over to us with Ava's hand in hers, and the normally feisty little girl was wide-eyed and slack-jawed, hiding a bit behind Liv when they joined the circle. Livia introduced herself, and then she and Mia proceeded to gush on each other for so long I wondered if I should get them a room.

"And who's this?" Mia asked, bending down to Ava's level.

"This," Livia said, running a hand through Ava's hair. "Is your biggest fan — Ava Perry."

Ava flushed harder, hiding more behind Livia's legs. I realized then that she was shaking.

"Hi, Ava, it's so lovely to meet you. I am *dying* over that skirt," she added, nodding to the sparkly lavender thing Ava wore.

"It's like the one you wore in the 'Do My Own Thing' music video," Ava said, her voice soft.

"It *is*, isn't it? Well, I think it looks even better on you." She waited patiently, in no hurry to get back to the party as she calmed Ava with an attentive smile.

"She loves to wear it when we make up dances to your songs," Chloe said.

"We?" Mia asked with a chuckle.

"Oh, yes. And I'm their very unwilling audience," Will growled. "Not that I don't appreciate your music, Mia, it just isn't exactly my usual go to."

"Don't let him lie to you," Chloe said. "I overheard him blasting your last album during his jump-rope workout the other morning."

Will turned as red as his daughter, and when he didn't deny it, we all burst into laughter.

Well, everyone else did, anyway.

I was too enamored with Mia to laugh.

It didn't matter what she wore, didn't matter if she had on a full face of makeup or had just washed it clean. Mia was the kind of breathtaking that actually lived up to the namesake. She could steal your breath away — literally — and all with just a flash of her smile and that little dimple on her left cheek.

Tonight, she was a vision of warm colors that matched the cover of her album. The golden tones were set ablaze when combined with the natural tan shade of her skin, her eyes an even more striking blue than usual.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but for some reason, she seemed... off. Unlike when I'd ridden next to her on the way to the Daisy Kent show, when I'd known she didn't have an ounce of nerves about the performance, I couldn't say the same tonight.

She *looked* the same, sure — poised, confident.

But she was coiled tight, her breath a little shallow, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

I wondered if anyone else could see it but me.

"Ava, I have a question," Mia said. "Would you maybe want to see my little recording booth that I use here at the house?"

Ava's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding?"

Mia outstretched one hand until Ava took it, and I thought she was going to pass out when she did. "I would never joke about something so sacred. Come on, I'll even show you where I hide my favorite snacks for when late-night inspiration hits."

Ava turned to look at Will and Chloe with saucer-sized eyes, bouncing a little on her toes.

"You, too, Mom and Dad," Mia said, ushering them to join. And though Chloe wasn't *technically* Ava's mom, I didn't miss the way she lit up with pride and happily followed to that title, Will's hand finding hers as they went.

"Gotta say it, man — that woman is even spicier in person. Those legs..." Carter whistled with that, one hand on my shoulder as he shook his head in appreciation, watching Mia go.

He turned to look at me like I was going to join in, but I was stone-faced, jaw twitching.

That made Carter go white.

"Right. I'll just, uh... fuck off over here somewhere," he said, pointing across the pool deck to where a bar was set up.

Livia rolled her eyes and shook her head before following him and telling me to have fun.

The crew dispersed, and while I wanted to stay glued to Mia, I was happy for some reason that she was spending some time with Will and Chloe. When Giana had told me to bring a group with me, I had laughed. Who the fuck was I supposed to invite? I'd mentioned it to the guys on the golf course as a joke, and then been promptly surprised that every single one of them were down.

They showed up for me at the drop of a hat, no questions asked, no favors

to return.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that, other than it was a new sensation.

Giana bounced over to me as soon as I was free. She gave me a big hug before I was shaking the hand of her husband — Clay Johnson, star safety for Denver and one hell of a philanthropist. We chatted for a bit before Giana was being pulled away, and then Isabella was there, giving me a quick hug and telling me that my kiss with Mia was already going viral.

She no sooner got the words out before she was rushing off, something about having to talk to the chef, and I was alone.

For two seconds.

“So, is this how it's going to be? You get a little rich and famous and suddenly there's no more Christmas in Chicago?”

I turned with a smile at the familiar voice, finding a petite woman who looked so much like Mia beaming up at me. Holly Conaway was as bright and beautiful as ever, and I swept her in for a bear hug, savoring her laugh when I did.

“Hey now, I was *just* there for the Fourth of July.”

“That was two years ago!”

“You know we have games around Christmas,” I pointed out.

“Yes, well, I also know you can fly anywhere you want at any time. And you can make as many excuses as you want to, but until you're in that house for Christmas morning, I'm not listening.”

I smirked. “Yes, ma'am.”

She smiled in victory, and I tried to ignore the way my stomach tightened a bit at the real reason I hadn't been to visit them in years.

Because the last time I was there, so was Mia.

And she was there with Austin.

Suffering through just two days of him having his hands all over her and seeing how happy she was with him had made me want to pitch myself off the roof. I'd flown back to Seattle hellbent on finding any and every excuse I had to never return to Chicago again. Even after Mia and Austin broke up, I wanted to stay away.

I hated to see her heartbroken even more than I hated seeing her happy with another man.

“She's right, you know,” came a loud voice, shaking me from my thoughts. “Holidays aren't the same without you there.”

“What, no one to let you beat them in pool?”

Charlie Conaway let out his signature boom of a laugh at that, clapping me on the shoulder before he wrapped me in a fierce hug.

“Keep telling yourself that you *let me win*,” he said. “You and I know the truth.”

“That you taught me how to play so you had someone to beat up on when you had hard days at the office?”

He smiled wide at that. “Hey, you paid me back when you got me on the ice.”

“Oh, that’s a day that lives rent free in my head. The way your arms windmilled like a cartoon before you went down...”

“Alright, now,” Holly said, patting both our chests, but Charlie was still beaming at me like I was his son. In many ways, he’d treated me as such.

But when he stared a moment longer, that beam took on a more warning tone.

He loved me. I knew that like I knew the Earth was round. But he was also wary of me, especially when it came to my intentions with Mia.

He’d asked me to call him after the beach stunt, and then, he’d proceeded to grill me for twenty minutes straight. It didn’t matter that I assured him this was her publicist’s idea, that I was just playing along in whatever they asked me to, that I was still true to my word that I would never do anything to hurt Mia.

It was clear he didn’t believe me — not entirely.

I couldn’t exactly blame him, since the last time I’d been to his house in Chicago, he’d caught me in my old bedroom just moments away from tossing back an entire bottle of Xanax.

I shivered at the memory, remembering how dark everything was then, how a pill prescribed to me for what the Seattle team doctor saw as *anxiety* had made everything worse. It was so easy to take those pills and make everything feel better. It was so easy to take more than I was prescribed, too.

And on that night, I’d had a thought.

What would happen if I took the whole bottle?

I’d been two seconds from finding out when Charlie found me.

I wished I could tell him that I was good now and know it was true. I wish I could tell him I wouldn’t have actually gone through with it, that I was better now, that I’d never give in to those impulses again.

But I could never be sure, could I? Not with my bloodline.

If only Charlie knew the lengths I’d gone to to keep my promises to him

over the years, how I'd resisted his daughter in the most tempting moment of my young adult life.

Then again, I'd be a lying sonofabitch if I said I wasn't taking this fake relationship thing and running with it while I could. Hell if I wasn't going to make the most of the short period of time where I could touch her, hold her, kiss her, and pretend she was mine.

Maybe that was why her father still eyed me a bit warily as we drifted into easy conversation with Holly. He cocked a brow when I turned down the passing trays of booze, too, like I was playing some game and he was on to me.

"She's already been hurt so badly..." he'd said to me on our phone call after the beach stunt, his voice thick with emotion. "I can't pick her up off the bathroom floor again. I can't stand by and let another man wreck her like that."

"You know I would never hurt her."

"Not intentionally. But she cares about you, Aleks."

"I care about her, too."

"Just... don't take this thing too far, okay? She trusts you. I trust you."

But did he really?

The way he was staring at me now, my gut told me otherwise.

I'd grown up. Both of us had. But to Charlie Conaway, I was still trouble. I may not have been a hormonal teenage boy from another country with a troubled past living under the same roof as his teenage daughter, but I was a menace in a new way. I was a professional athlete, a fighter on and off the ice, a playboy, a drunken mess, an addict, a tornado wreaking havoc and leaving behind a trail of debris.

And the saddest thing was that I couldn't even argue with that — not when it was the truth.

I didn't come from a great family. I didn't have a family at *all* anymore, not since Annaliese died. I'd never had a serious girlfriend, or even a relationship that lasted more than one night. I didn't give to charity or spend my free time volunteering with a bunch of kids.

I wasn't the warm and fuzzy kind of guy that Mia usually fell for, the kind who could give her everything she'd dreamed of since she was prancing around in tutus.

The truth was that...most days? I was barely hanging on.

I was numbing myself with whatever was in reach — hockey, alcohol,

women.

Charlie may have respected my game, but that was where it ended. That was where everyone's respect for me hit a dead end. Past that, what did I have to offer?

Nothing.

And that was just the truth of it all.

I'd never be good enough for his little girl.

CHAPTER 17

Second Act

Mia

The water crashing on the shore was the only music I wanted to hear.

I stood on the balcony connected to my bedroom, hands on the rail and a cool sea breeze flowing through my hair. I knew Renee had this part of the house blocked off and guarded, knew that James was serving as a barrier just a few doors down the hall. I reveled in the peace and quiet I found up here, in the solace I took in knowing I could be left alone if even for just a few blissful moments.

It didn't make sense, sneaking away from my own album release party. But the moment the DJ started playing the album and everyone gathered around to hang onto every lyric, I felt like crawling out of my skin.

This one was just more... personal. More real.

And I couldn't stand to be there to watch everyone's faces as they judged it.

It wasn't like my team wouldn't be allowed up here where I'd snuck away, should they choose to find me. James was more on the lookout for fans or guests of the party not getting too close to me. Still, I hoped everyone would be too occupied with the first listen of the album to bother — at least, for a while.

Over the sound of the waves, I could hear the distant beat of the song they were listening to now. It was track fourteen — “After You.”

Perhaps the most intimate song on the album, I closed my eyes and let myself sing along to it in my mind, knowing that right now, at this very moment, millions of people around the world might be listening to the very same thing.

And casting their judgments on a piece of art that felt like a piece of *me*.

I heard the sliding glass door open, but I didn't turn to face whoever it was who was joining me. I let out a heavy sigh, knowing my peace and quiet

was coming to an end, but I didn't dare move. Maybe they'd turn around and leave again if I just pretended to blend in with the night.

As if I could, with this damn sunset of a glittery dress.

I closed my eyes, savoring the salty cool air across my cheeks. I waited, but no one said my name or asked what I was doing out here.

Instead, I only felt the heat of someone coming to stand next to me, of a smooth, muscular arm resting against mine on the railing.

I creaked one eye open and then another, heart pausing briefly before it galloped back to life at the sight of Aleks next to me. He watched the waves crashing on the beach below, one hand moving to unfasten the button of his suit jacket over his navel before he relaxed more into his pose over the railing.

And for a moment, I was seventeen again, staring at my crush while he stared at Lake Michigan.

"You know, that whole party going on in there? All those people gathered around the DJ listening to every song that plays?" He turned to me then, one brow rising into his hairline. "That's for you."

"You come to drag me back down there?"

"I didn't realize any dragging would be necessary."

I swallowed, turning toward the beach. "You're right. I know they're all here for me. I should be there." I sighed. "I'm a selfish girl."

"I never said that."

I shrugged, not able to argue when I knew it was the truth. So many people had shown up for me tonight, and yet I'd run to get away from them all.

"You can go back inside," I said. "I'll be right there. I just... needed a second."

"I think I'd rather stay right here."

"Why? Don't believe me that I'll go back?"

His eyes locked on mine. "I'd just rather be with you."

A long pause stretched between us as those words washed over me like warm spring water. Even if they weren't true, even if he was just saying them to make me feel better... I loved to hear them.

"Besides," he continued. "I'm curious why you felt the need to escape."

I searched his gaze, finding nothing but softness and understanding there before I even said a word. I let out a long sigh and ran my hands through my hair, shaking my head before my elbows were balanced on the railing again.

“I wish I knew.”

Aleks didn't push me for information. He didn't pepper me with questions or guess what I was feeling. He just stood there, right beside me, our eyes on the water for the longest time.

“Every other album release party I've had, I've been so... excited,” I finally said, voice so soft I wasn't sure he could even hear me over the waves. “It really freaks me out that I don't feel that way tonight. In fact, I feel the opposite. I feel... scared.” I swallowed. “Maybe it's because I know the album is shit. Maybe it's because, deep down, I wonder if Garrett Orange is right about me — if they all are. Maybe it's because this could be the night I crash and burn and everyone realizes I'm a fraud.”

Aleks nodded, tilting his head side to side a bit as if weighing the options I'd presented. “Maybe,” he conceded, which did nothing to ease the ache of my chest. “What if that was what was happening? What if every big fear you just listed came true?”

“I'd throw myself off this balcony.”

His gaze turned to me, stern and severe. “Don't even joke like that.”

“I'm being dramatic,” I said, waving him off as my shoulders slumped more. “But I mean... I'd be dead in all the ways that matter. Creatively. Career-wise.”

“Would you?”

I blinked at him. “Didn't you hear the worst-case scenarios? If Garrett is right, if the album tanks, if everyone realizes that I...” I shook my head. “That I'm a shit songwriter and an even more terrible singer? That I've been hyped up for years for nothing? That I'm irrelevant? That would be it. I'd be done for. I may only be twenty-six, but in this industry, that's... not young.” I swallowed. “My time would be up.”

“But you wouldn't be dead,” Aleks pointed out. “Regardless of how dramatic you want to be about dying of embarrassment. Your heart would still be beating. Your lungs would still be pumping oxygen into your organs.”

“I'd be lost without music.”

“Who said you'd have to give it up?”

He turned to me then, leaning weight on his elbow that rested on the railing. God, he looked so sexy it wasn't fair. His suit, his freshly trimmed facial hair, his dark eyes...

“Would you really stop creating music if this album got panned? I mean, honestly. Would you just never pick up a guitar again, never sit down at the

keys, never sing?”

My heart squeezed at the thought. I couldn't even voice it, but I didn't have to.

Aleks already knew.

“You wouldn't stop,” he said when I didn't answer. “If anything, you'd be... free. Free to create whatever you want, to start over, to take all this damned pressure off yourself to be the best. And then what would you bring to life? What would you feel?”

Every word he spoke made my heart race faster.

“You already have everything you could possibly want from this career, Mia — money, fame, awards. You wouldn't be broke and on the street. You wouldn't all of a sudden stop being booked for shows. Even if your tour didn't sell out, it would still sell. You would still be desired by millions of fans worldwide. But you know that already. And you know what else? I think you also know you're not scared of people not liking the album or agreeing with that *chotzbrocke*, Garrett Orange. Not really, anyway.”

Aleks inched closer, sliding his arm along the railing until our chests nearly brushed. He ran his fingertips up my arm, over my shoulder, along the slope of my neck until he was sweeping my hair back and behind one ear, his eyes locked on mine the entire time.

“You're scared because this album is real, Mia. It's you.”

My eyes instantly watered, a strangled breath escaping my parted lips.

“I heard it in just the first few tracks. I heard you at seventeen, and at twenty-one, and at twenty-six. I heard you breaking, heard you healing, heard you finding a new way. You're not excited tonight because this wasn't an album written for fans or for a label. This was an album written for you. And there's nothing more terrifying than showing someone your true self like that, let alone showing the entire world.”

Silent tears built in my eyes and slipped hot and heavy down each cheek. Aleks caught one with his thumb, and I leaned into his palm, hanging onto his every word. It was like being back in my childhood home in Chicago, the two of us up way past our bedtime confessing our biggest fears to one another.

He knew mine so intimately now that I didn't even have to voice them — even with years between us, he still knew.

“You should be scared. But you should also be proud, Mia. So fucking proud. Because you fucking *did that*. You put your everything into this. It

isn't just another cog in the wheel full of pop hits. It's art — *your* art.

"And I can tell you right fucking now that yeah, some people are going to hate it. Some people are going to call it shit. But *more* people are going to love it, and connect with it, and play it on repeat, and see a little of themselves in every song. Because you didn't hold back. You let yourself be raw and honest and true. And there's nothing better than music that hits like that."

"How can you be so sure?" I croaked.

At that, the corner of his mouth tilted up. His eyes flicked between mine for a long moment, the Adam's apple in his throat bobbing hard.

"Because I felt it," he admitted softly.

My heart was in a vise grip in my chest, struggling to beat as I read into those words. I wondered if he really did feel it. I wondered if he knew that so much of the music on this album was inspired by things *he* had made me feel.

Did he know that track two was about how I longed for him when I was with my first real boyfriend, how I wondered how Aleks would do it all differently if it were him as my man?

Did he know that tracks six and seven explored how angry I was with him for rejecting me, how I somewhat blamed him for my string of terrible boyfriends before I realized that it was me self-sabotaging all along?

Did he know the final track, titled "Windows," was about how I couldn't leave my doors open for him forever, but that I'd never be able to shut my window because I would always be hanging onto hope that maybe, one night, he'd crawl through it?

I wanted to ask him. I wanted to know if I was as transparent as I felt under his gaze right now.

But before I could speak even one word, Aleks wet his bottom lip, his eyes falling to my mouth.

God, the way he looked at me. The way he always had.

It made it impossible not to think he felt something even when I knew he didn't.

He stepped closer, eliminating the little distance between us. My skin was hot to the touch at his proximity, at how his hand still cradled my face, how it seemed to shake a bit as his other hand hooked me at my waist.

"Aleks..."

"Mia."

He tugged me into him, eliciting a muted gasp that got stuck in my throat

as our bodies lined up flush against one another. I could feel my heart about to beat out of my ribcage, my chest rapidly rising and falling as I fought to steady my breathing.

I blinked, and saw us years ago — me on top of him, him pinning my hips to stop me, my mouth on track for his before he turned his chin and denied me.

But when I blinked again, I was in the present, where he wasn't turning away.

The present, where he was angling his mouth for mine.

The present, where his fingers were curling in the fabric of my dress.

"There aren't any cameras out here, you know," I breathed. "You don't have to pretend."

That made him pause, the muscle in his jaw flexing hard as his gaze shot from my mouth to my eyes. He searched them, looking for... something.

And then the sliding glass door flew open.

"Oh! Look at you two, committing to the cause," Isabella said, stepping onto the balcony barefoot with a bottle of champagne in one hand and two flutes clutched in the other. "You can ease up. I made sure no one can see us up here."

Giana stepped through after her, holding two glass flutes of her own.

"Which is a good thing, since I'm pretty sure your publicist is about to shake this bottle of champagne and pour it over your tits like you're in a rap star video," G said on a laugh.

Aleks let out a strained breath that rumbled softly in his throat as he released me, stepping back so far I felt chills sweep over my body as if we were in the icy tundra instead of California.

Giana handed a glass to him as Isabella handed one to me, and she popped the bottle, pouring bubbles to the top for each of us.

"You fucking did it, bitch," she said, shaking her head on a drunken smile. "The streams are insane. Social media is spiraling. It's only been an hour and a half since the album dropped and I can already confidently tell you that this is the one."

"People are *crying* downstairs," Giana said, pausing a moment and blinking a few times to let that settle in. "Crying, Mia."

As if my heart wasn't unsteady enough, it now felt like a wobbly wagon on one precarious wheel, like it was about to fall out of my body and splat onto the floor at any moment.

People loved the album.

Was Aleks about to kiss me?

They were crying. The Internet was exploding.

Was Aleks about to kiss me... when he didn't have to, when it wasn't for show?

"See?" Aleks said, knuckles tapping my chin. I blinked up at him, feeling like I was living an out-of-body experience. "Told you so."

His eyes held mine in the softest caress, like he didn't just have me ready to mount him had we been left alone for even a second longer.

Was that what he wanted, too?

Did he want... me?

Or was it all still pretend?

"I think it's time for our second act," Isabella said, chugging half her glass of champagne before she tilted it toward me. "The rising action, if you will."

Giana bounced a little on her toes, wearing her excitement in her wide gray eyes as Aleks and I shared questioning glances.

Isabella chuckled a bit at our discomfort, waggling her brows as she slid up next to Aleks and patted him on the chest.

"Hope you're ready to go ring shopping, bad boy."

Her gaze turned to me next, playful and yet as serious as a heart attack when she added three words that finally did my shaky heart in.

"It's proposal time."

CHAPTER 18

So Weird

Aleks

A week later, eight of the top-ten songs on Billboard's Top 100 were from Mia's new album.

And of course, she held the number one spot.

The album streams were outrageous, the kind of numbers that had every radio and television show host talking about Mia Love and her particular kind of magic. She was days away from announcing her tour, and as if the fans weren't already going wild wondering what cities she'd be in and how they would get tickets, we were about to give them all fangirl heart attacks.

A jeweler was showing up at my condo in twenty minutes.

We were picking out a ring.

And tomorrow, I'd propose.

The thought had my heart racing. I knew now that Mia wanted a family, from what she'd told me when we talked about her breakup with Austin. She wanted to get married. She wanted to have kids. And it didn't matter that our little engagement was going to be fake.

I wanted to make it memorable for her.

There had to be a part of her that didn't love this, even if it was saving her album release and helping with the tour. She wanted the real thing, not something pretend.

So, I'd do my best to give her what she deserved.

As for me, this would likely be the only time I had this experience — fake or otherwise.

I would never admit it out loud, not to myself or to anyone else, but I longed for a family, too. I wondered what it would feel like to have a woman to come home to after each game, to have a child or two running around a big house. What would I teach them? How would I show them a home life better than I had? What part of me would live in them?

That was always where the fantasy ended.

Because when I thought about *that*, about how they'd be stuck with my genes, it stopped me from dreaming. The dream became a nightmare.

I didn't want to subject any woman to a lifetime of putting up with me, and I couldn't stomach the thought of failing as a father to an innocent child.

Mia looked a bit green in my kitchen as Isabella ran over the plan for today. I wondered what was going through her mind, if her thoughts were as chaotic as mine right now. Her bronze arms were folded over her middle, hair tied into a low bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a Dodgers baseball cap, an oversized t-shirt, and black biker shorts — the hem of which disappeared under her shirt and made me wonder if she was even wearing pants when she first showed up.

Isabella and the team had managed to sneak her in without anyone being the wiser, but now, paparazzi had been tipped off that I was having a jeweler come to my condo, and they were camped out downstairs waiting to get proof of it.

It was Mia's first time in my place here in Tampa. She'd visited a few times when I lived in Seattle, but never here.

It was crazy how she could make a condo feel like a home just by walking through the door.

Maybe it was because we grew up together. Maybe it was because in that big house in Chicago, she was the warmth and comfort that made it not feel intimidating. Whatever the reason, having her here in my space again brought a familiar, nostalgic ache to my chest.

I watched her as she took it all in, as her gaze snagged on each piece of furniture and décor.

I was a simple man. I didn't need much, nor did I want it. If I was being honest, my main goal was to keep my place clean for when I brought a woman home with me. Most of the items that filled my space were picked out by my interior designer and had very little to do with my preferences.

But Mia seemed to know what was mine and what wasn't. Her gaze skimmed over the brown leather sectional in my living area, but they locked on the plush cream bean bag. She didn't give a second glance to the art on the wall, but she smiled a little at the coffee table — one made from an old World War II war ship door. And her eyes particularly dazzled at the Steinway in the corner of my main living area, the seat of which faced the Hillsborough River.

Could I ever tell her I bought that piano for her, just in case she ever came to see me, just in case she ever needed to play?

“Alright, he’s parking,” Isabella said, shooting off a text to whoever it was who’d let her know that about the jeweler. “Aleks, you ready?”

I saluted her, heading toward my door, but I paused next to Mia.

“Are you ready?”

She blinked, turning her tired eyes toward me. I couldn’t even imagine the whirlwind week she’d had. My summer break was coming to an end, the guys and I using time we’d rented at a local rink to get ready for training camp next month. But Mia had been flying back and forth across the country for interviews, events, and live performances — all while continuing to plan and train for her tour that would start in October.

I wondered if she ever stopped to consider just how damn impressive she was. If I had to guess, the answer was no. She’d always been oblivious to her natural talent and drive that so many people wished for.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head as if coming out of a dream. “I was just asking myself what woman would come up here and actually sleep with you after seeing that a grown-ass man has a *bean bag* in his living room.”

“Hey, that thing is fucking comfy. Sit on it and you’ll see.”

“Ew.” She wrinkled her nose. “I absolutely will not. I don’t want to know what you do on that *comfy* thing.”

I smirked. “Don’t worry — I haven’t fucked anyone on it. Yet.”

She let out a huff of a sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. “And this is the man I have to pretend to be engaged to.”

I kept my smirk fixed with her comment, despite how my stomach sank a bit with it.

It was all fun and games until I remembered that there was a bit of truth behind her jokes like that one, that there was always going to be an underlying truth beneath all this pretending.

She was in a different league than I was, one where pretty boys with well-adjusted families and positive PR reigned supreme.

And I was just the riffraff friend she had thanks to a decision her parents made when she was a kid.

“Alright, he’s downstairs. Cameras are clamoring at the door. Try to greet him close enough that they can get a shot through the glass.”

I was still staring at Mia as Isabella barked the order, but I saluted her again, and then I was out the door and in the elevator.

I did my best to shake out of my thoughts as I greeted the jeweler waiting for me in the lobby. He was a Black man, tall and stout with one of those smiles that you couldn't help but return when he flashed it at you. He introduced himself as Mr. Lionel Bachman with a firm handshake and a booming voice that bragged about the impressive collection of rings he'd brought me. He tapped the briefcase in his other hand, and I nodded, thanking him for his time.

I made sure to drag out the exchange in the lobby, and I saw the shutterbugs behind the glass clicking away even though I pretended not to. Some fans had stopped as they were passing by, too, holding their cell phones up. I was sure they didn't even know what they were capturing — not yet. But they'd wait to see what the headlines were and then post their videos to social media and brag that they were there.

Ever since Mia and I had started "dating," I'd had more attention than ever around Tampa Bay. Tourists would take selfies in front of my condo building. Locals recognized me more now and weren't shy when it came to asking for a picture or a signature. And suddenly, my fans weren't mostly men or little kids. There was a healthy amount of young women now, ones who asked me how Mia was, when I'd see her again, if I loved her, if we were going to get married.

When I was sure they all had plenty of shots to get the rumors going like Isabella wanted, I led Mr. Bachman to the elevator and up to my floor.

Mia was seated on the edge of my sectional when we returned, and Isabella was in a tizzy, thanking Mr. Bachman profusely for his discretion and offering him a drink. I took a seat next to Mia, watching her watch the buzzing city of Tampa outside my floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Ms. Love," Mr. Bachman said when he sat in the chair across from us. He shook her hand with pure admiration in his eyes. "What an absolute pleasure to meet you. I'll have you know I've brought my most prized selection for you to view today. I hope the gems sparkle even half as bright as you do."

Mia smiled with the cheesy compliment, waving her hand over the coffee table. "Let's get started then, shall we?"

For the next half hour, Mia and I listened intently as Lionel went over his impressive collection. He had everything from twenty-carat diamond rings to the most colorful sapphires I'd ever seen. Each ring was meticulously crafted and had some special story attached to it, and while I was listening intently to

Mr. Bachman as he explained each one, I was mostly tuned into Mia.

I noticed she lit up most when there was a colorful diamond or a gorgeously cut sapphire. The larger diamonds did nothing for her, her eyes scanning them quickly and catching on the others.

After a full explanation, she picked a few to try on, holding out her hand and examining how each ring dazzled on her manicured finger.

“Does it feel weird?” I asked her when she slid on the first one.

“So weird,” she said on a laugh, but I didn’t miss how she tilted her head and assessed the way her hand looked, how she wiggled her finger and watched the diamond sparkle.

Mr. Bachman praised her for each choice she made to try on, but I could tell from the soft crook of her lips that she hadn’t quite found the one she wanted yet.

I also wondered if there was a part of her that didn’t want to.

Mia had always been a romantic, ever since I’d known her. I knew part of her had to be dying right now.

She didn’t want to pick out her own ring.

She wanted a man who loved her to pick it out *for* her, to know her so well that he would select the perfect one. She wanted to be surprised by a proposal that would take her breath away.

She wanted to say yes to the man of her dreams.

I swallowed the thick knot in my throat, knowing I couldn’t give her that.

But maybe I could at least give her part of it.

“Let me pick it out.”

Mia blinked up at me from where she’d been focused on a green sapphire princess-cut ring on her finger. “What?”

I slipped the ring off her finger and put it carefully back on the velvet before grabbing her by the arms and hauling her up off the couch. I walked her backward a few steps toward my balcony, nodding for Isabella to follow.

“You two, stay out here,” I said, sliding the glass door open and plopping Mia down in one of my cushioned chairs. “Check your phones or take a nap or whatever you want. I’ll pick out the ring.”

“But—”

“Hey, it doesn’t really matter, right?” I asked Mia. “If it’s not real?”

She blinked several times, opening her mouth and shutting it again. “I... I guess not.”

“Then let me do it. It’ll be a fun surprise. Besides, you make decisions all

day, every day. Let me take this one off your plate.”

I held back the fact that I really did want to surprise her, to shop those rings as if I had an actual shot in hell of her ever saying yes to marrying me.

I wondered if I could pick out the right one, if I could open that box tomorrow when I was on one knee and elicit a genuine gasp of a reaction from her. I remembered a lot about the jewelry she wore in high school, and even looking at her when she got all dolled up for show appearances or live performances, I could tell what she’d picked out, what was her choice versus the choice of her team.

I didn’t miss the bit of relief that came from Mia’s sigh as she conceded, and I knew then that I’d been right.

Even if it was fake, she didn’t want to pick out her own wedding ring. It took the magic out of it all, and if I knew one thing about Mia, it was that she loved to hold onto the magic life had to offer.

“Okay,” she said. Her little finger snapped up to point into my chest next. “But *don’t* be a funny guy about it, okay? I swear to the Beatles, if you get some unicorn-looking gargantuan thing—”

“So pink, purple, large...”

She smacked my arm. “Aleks.”

“Mm, I love when you say my name like that, like you’re not sure if you want to kill me or kiss me.”

Isabella snorted a laugh as Mia narrowed her eyes at me. Then, she was kicking my butt with her bare foot, ushering me inside. “Go before I change my mind.”

I was still smirking when I ducked back into my condo to rejoin Mr. Bachman.

And after just a few more minutes of browsing, I knew exactly which ring to pick.

• • •

Isabella excused herself shortly after Mr. Bachman rolled up what rings I *didn’t* purchase and went on his merry way. She was delighted, showing us the photos that were already circulating and the videos from fans losing their ever-loving minds with what it meant.

She particularly loved an edit that was made to one of Mia’s newer songs from the album about leaving her window open for the right man, knowing he’d come one day. The video was a montage of photos and videos of us over

the years, including one from when we were kids. I was pretty sure they only got that one because Mia had posted it on her Instagram before she was discovered. It had one of the old filters on it, the two of us leaning in for a selfie.

Mia smiled brilliantly while I barely crooked a grin, but I remembered that photo. I remembered how I felt in that moment, just days before our graduation, knowing we were about to go our separate ways.

When Isabella was gone, it was just me and Mia in my condo, the silence falling over us as soon as my front door snicked shut.

I slid my hands into my pockets, turning to find Mia typing away on her phone. When she looked up at me, she let out a long sigh and shrugged on a smile. “Well, mission accomplished, I guess.”

“I don’t think you can say that until after tomorrow.”

She tilted her head side to side, still smiling. But then, her lips evened, her brows folding over her sharp blue eyes. “You’re sure you’re okay with all this?”

“A little late to back out now, don’t you think?”

“It’s never too late, if you want out.”

I thought I heard a touch of vulnerability in her voice when she said that, and I knew why.

Her album had blown up. It was breaking records even *she* didn’t expect. And this one was real to her, it was close to her heart.

A big part of her still wondered if Garrett and the other critics could take that from her.

“Hey, I’m not stopping until I play my big bad wolf part and send you riding off into the sunset of the most successful music tour of all time.”

She smirked a little at that, fussing with her hat. I thought I saw her tuck the top of her ear under it — as if she could look anything less than fucking adorable in a baseball cap, whether she had giant ears or baby mouse ones.

“I bet that’s the part you’re counting down to,” she snarked. “Poor you, having to make out with a bunch of puck bunnies and get caught on camera.”

My smile felt tighter knowing that was still what she thought of me, even though I couldn’t blame her. What had I done to make her think otherwise?

“Anyway, I guess I should get going.” Mia started gathering her things off my kitchen island, making her way toward the door.

“Where are you off to this fine evening, the last of which you are a single lady?”

She rolled her eyes at the little wink I added at the end of that question. “Probably to hide away in my hotel room and go over this number that the choreo isn’t right on,” she said.

“What? It’s the weekend. You can’t work tonight.”

She laughed in my face at that. “As if you don’t *always* work on the weekend during the season.”

“Strings, come on. It’s Friday. You’re in Tampa. Let’s do something fun.”

“I have a tour coming up. You and I?” She pointed between us. “We don’t work normal jobs where we take the weekends to lounge around the house in our pajamas and stuff our faces with pizza.”

“We could.”

She flattened her lips. “Why are you acting like you really want to spend your Friday night stuck in this condo with me?”

“I’m not acting.”

The words slid out of me before I could think better to hold them back, the weight of them hanging between us. They seemed to shock the sass right out of Mia, who blinked, her lips parting a bit.

“I don’t have plans,” I said quickly with a clearing of my throat. “Not like I can go out on the town tonight, get wasted, and fuck the first blonde I see when I’m supposed to get on one knee tomorrow.”

Fuck.

My skin burned with the words even as I said them, as if they were acid coming out of my throat and I was succumbing to the virus that I was, unable to control a thing.

Mia pinched her lips tight together on a nod. “Right. And with *that* sincere offer...”

She went to walk past me toward the door, but I caught her by the crook of her elbow, swinging her to a stop.

Her eyes snatched on where I held her before they crawled up my arm to my face, and I hoped she could see it. I hoped she knew that I didn’t mean what I’d said, that it was a cover up, a defense mechanism, a shield.

She used to know that.

Did she know it still?

“Stay,” I croaked, my voice a bit unsteady. “We can order pizza and play The Game of Life like we used to in high school. Or if you want to go out, we’ll go out.”

“I can’t just *go out*,” she said. “Not without us making a big scene, and I’ve had enough of the madness lately.”

“Not true.”

She pulled away from my touch, folding her arms over her middle. “In what world could we go anywhere without someone recognizing us?”

“Do you want to go out or do you want to stay in, Mia?” I leveled my gaze with hers. “Answer the question, and I’ll make it happen.”

She shook her head on an incredulous laugh, but then tongued her cheek, looking out my window and then back at me. “Fine. I want to go out.”

I smirked, chest buzzing with the challenge.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

CHAPTER 19

Catfish

Mia

“I feel absolutely ridiculous.”

I didn’t have to be able to see his face to know Aleks was smirking under that stupid mask he wore.

“You look ridiculous, too,” he said, in no attempt to make me feel any better about the situation. “But has anyone noticed you?”

I looked around at the bar that was filling up more and more as the evening progressed, genuinely shocked that no one had recognized me and caused a riot yet.

Then again, I wasn’t sure how they *would* recognize me when I was dressed like a maniac.

“We look like a couple out of *The Purge*,” I said.

“Oh, we’ll definitely be the source of some nightmares tonight.”

“How and why do you even have these things?” I plucked at the oversized yellow eyeball on his green fish head mask, which he’d paired with a lightweight black hoodie and white shorts. All of his most notable tattoos were covered right along with his face, which just made him look like some big muscley dude in a mask.

As for me, I was still in my biker shorts and oversized t-shirt with *The Night Game* on it — one of my favorite bands.

Oh.

I was also wearing a cat head mask.

It was gray and white striped with a pink nose and outrageous whiskers. It was also rubber and hot as hell, but I’d pay the price of sweat if it meant not getting mauled in this bar that was quickly becoming packed.

The only person who had seen my face was the bouncer checking IDs at the door. I’d been shaking when I handed mine over, worried he’d recognize my name even if it was my legal one and not the pop star one. But he was an

older gentleman with absolutely zero care in the world for anything past my birthday and the fact that my face matched the picture, apparently.

He'd slapped the bright pink wristband on me that said I was over twenty-one without so much as a second glance.

Aleks had ordered us a cab from Tampa to downtown St. Pete, our masks already in place as we climbed inside to a driver who didn't so much as blink at our appearance — just asked where we wanted to go. Aleks assured me he'd likely seen crazier during Gasparilla, the pirate-themed parade that happened every January in Tampa.

I'd been so scared we were going to get run over by a crowd when the cab dropped us at the bar, especially since I'd insisted to my security team that they didn't need to be with us when Aleks and I took off. I told them not to worry, that we would be fine.

Even if I hadn't fully believed that.

Of course, James and Hunter didn't care if I thought we'd be okay, they weren't going to leave me completely alone. They gave us space, tailing us in an unmarked car, and now they were blending in with the crowd, but keeping an eye on me and Aleks.

But other than some people laughing and pointing at us or high-fiving us when we walked by them... nothing happened.

No one recognized us, and now, I was sitting at a high-top table for two with my childhood best friend as if we weren't famous.

"What can I say? I'm into kinky shit," Aleks answered.

I scoffed. "Seriously. Why the hell do you have these?"

"They're from my rookie party in Seattle. It was a little hazing ritual. They made us wear these masks when we went out and we were tested to see if we could still land a girl to come home with us by the end of the night."

I flattened my lips. "Charming."

"You asked," he said on a shrug. "The fish head was mine. The cat belonged to my roommate at the time, and when we moved out, he was going to throw his away. I told him I'd take it. I didn't want to part with the memory."

"How very sentimental of you."

"Why don't you go get a drink?"

I looked at the crowded bar with a bit of panic. "What if they recognize my voice?"

"They won't," he assured me.

I chewed my lip, debating.

“Come on,” he teased on a laugh, flicking my arm. “You wanted to go out. Well, here we are,” he said, sweeping his hand over the scene of the bar. It was an indoor/outdoor space, with a third of the bar giving off a club vibe complete with a dance floor and lights, a third of it feeling more like a dive bar with arcade games and pool tables, and another third of it acting like a park with outdoor tables and lawn games.

When I took too long to reply, Aleks smirked, moving to stand. “It’s okay. I’ll go.”

“No!” I hopped up immediately. “I want to do it.”

Aleks grinned and took his seat again. “Atta girl.”

“You want anything?” I asked.

“Surprise me.”

I popped off my barstool, shaking a bit as I made my way to the bar. I had to push my way through the crowd to get to where I could order, and I didn’t miss how people pointed and smirked at me.

“Nice whiskers,” a girl said to me on a laugh, holding up her shot she’d just ordered before she squeezed past me.

“You know Halloween isn’t for another two months, right?” a guy teased, but he did so with a drunken grin. “A for effort, though.”

Other than those teasing remarks, everyone left me alone. And to her credit, the bartender didn’t even seem fazed when she asked me what I wanted. It was like she’d seen crazier shit, and my cat mask didn’t so much as make her blink twice.

I ordered a vodka water with lemon and lime for me and a whiskey, neat, for Aleks. While I waited, I tapped my fingers on the wood of the bar, looking around and taking it all in.

All while not a single person gave a shit about me.

God, it felt nice, to be somewhat invisible. Even with a fucking cat mask on, I was no one to these people. I was just some weirdo at the bar getting drunk on a Friday night. I could just walk up to the bar and order a drink like a normal person.

I’d missed out on all of that.

My career took off when I was nineteen — something I prayed for and dreamed about. But sometimes, I wondered what experiences I’d unknowingly given up when I took this path, what rites of passage I’d never have access to. I’d written songs about going out, about being young and

reckless, but the truth was that most of the parties I attended were ballgown attire and consisted of champagne more than shots of any kind.

With that in mind, I added two shots of tequila to my order once the bartender was back.

And when she told me my total, I balked.

Because it was that exact moment I realized I didn't have any money on me.

I wasn't used to carrying a purse with an actual wallet in it. Any time I *did* have a purse, it was for a fashion statement and to maybe hold my lipstick and mascara for touchups. I had a team who took care of paying for things for me, and most of the events I attended, we paid for in advance. There was no *reason* to take money out with me.

Even if I did have my wallet on me right now, what was I going to do? Pay with a card that had my name on it? The bouncer may have been oblivious, but would this bartender be?

My neck felt red hot as I stammered, "Um..."

She cocked a brow at me, an annoyed expression taking over her face even as she nodded at the next person and got started on their order.

Panicking, I looked back at the table where Aleks sat.

And again, I knew the bastard was smirking under that damn fish mask as he held up two twenty-dollar bills.

I rolled my eyes, assuring the bartender that I'd be right back. I muttered *excuse me's* to get to Aleks through the crowd, swiped the cash out of his hand, pushed my way back to the bar, paid, grabbed our drinks, and carefully maneuvered my way back to our table.

By the time I made it, I had sticky hands from our drinks spilling a bit, and I was sweating under the mask, my breath labored.

"Cheese and rice, that was a production," I said, picking at my shirt to let some air in.

"Welcome to the world of getting things yourself."

"No one recognizes me."

"Told you."

I smiled even though he couldn't see it, finagling the straw of my cocktail into the mouth of my mask and taking a long pull.

I immediately grimaced, chills breaking out over my arms. "Ugh! This is disgusting!"

Aleks barked a laugh as he lifted the bottom of his mask to take a sip of

his whiskey. “If you were wondering what you missed out on at college parties — here’s your taste of it.”

I was still grimacing even as I took another long pull. With a shiver, I shook my head and then held up the two shots of tequila. “I got these for us.”

“Wow. We really are going for the college experience.”

“I’ve never done shots at a bar before.”

“*What?*” He laughed. “How the hell is that possible?”

I shrugged. “I was focused on music when everyone else was focused on partying. And then I was going to parties where shots weren’t exactly a thing. It was more like... champagne fountains and expensive bottles of wine.”

“What kind of tequila is it?”

“I don’t know. I just said tequila.”

“Jesus,” he said, shaking his head as he picked up one of the shot glasses. He held it up to me as he lifted his mask and prepared to drink it. “Here’s to not puking on the spot.”

He didn’t give me time to voice my concern over that toast before he clinked his glass against mine and threw the shot back, giving me no choice but to follow suit.

I coughed as soon as I did, nearly gagging as the alcohol burned its way down my esophagus.

“Oh my God,” I hissed, chasing it with my cocktail — which was only marginally better. “That was awful. Why does anyone do that?”

“To get drunk as quickly as possible.”

“It was *terrible*,” I said.

But once the burn settled, I felt a swimmy smile on my face, the urge to dance taking over.

So, I grabbed Aleks and hauled him to the bar to do another.

• • •

“*Catfish! Catfish! Catfish! Catfish!*”

The chants rang out all through the bar as Aleks rubbed my shoulders, both of us eyeing our opponents across the green turf.

“This is it, Strings. One chance. One shot to win the game.”

“Okay, Eminem. Relax.”

“Do you hear that? The crowd going wild? That’s for *you*. Sink this, and they’ll go ballistic. Sink this — and we *win*.”

A laugh barreled through me. But then I nodded, over and over, rubbing

my hands together and bouncing a little on my toes. I'd never been competitive in anything athletic — not a single day in my life.

But apparently, get me drunk, put me in a cat mask, and pair me up with a pro hockey player in a game of lawn pong, and I become a different person.

We had one trash can left to eliminate, and when I picked up the dodgeball, it felt weighted with expectation in my hands. Aleks had just barely missed it on his turn — the ball swirling around the rim before popping out, much to the dismay of our growing admirers and the relief of the two muscle heads we were playing against.

Those beefy guys taunted me now as I stepped up and braced myself to throw, but I tuned them out, focusing instead on the humming buzz flowing through me.

It was the same adrenaline I got before I ran out on stage to start a concert, that anticipation that something great was about to happen and I would be a part of it.

I let it fill me up, let myself sink into it like a warm, hidden oasis.

I took a breath. I let it out. I wound up with the ball in my hand... and I let it fly.

The chants went silent as soon as the ball was launched, and it seemed that ball flew in slow motion across the turf. Even the people playing games next to us had stopped to watch, to see if this was it, if we would take home the gold.

The red ball soared in a perfect arc, and when it hit the rim of the trash can, there was a collective *oh* that rang out from the crowd. I bounced up on my toes, clapping my hands together and screaming, "GET IN THERE!"

It bounced, teasing all of us.

And then it fell right into the trash can.

Everything happened at once: the crowd screaming, beer flying around us, someone running through the middle of the little yard pong court and tearing their shirt off.

And me jumping into Aleks's arms.

He spun me as soon as I landed, my legs wrapped around his strong center and him holding me effortlessly with one hand as he thrust the other into the air in victory.

Just when I realized that the one hand he had holding me steady was firmly on my ass, just when I started to react to the way a very sensitive part of me was flush against his heat — we were being surrounded.

Aleks dropped me to the ground but kept me close, his arm possessively hooked around me as we handed out high-fives and accepted people roughly palming our heads through our masks and giving us a good shake. There were dozens of people claiming they had downs and would play us next, but I tugged at Aleks's damp shirt, proof that he was as hot as I was from playing a sport in this dreadful Florida heat with a rubber mask on our head.

I loved that I didn't even have to say it. He knew by that one little motion that I needed a break.

"Alright, I think it's time we step down from the throne and let other people play," he announced to the disappointment of the crowd. But he just waved off their pleas, grabbing my hand in his and tugging me toward the bar.

We both chugged a water, and then I did a shot while Aleks left me only long enough to run to the restroom and back.

"Are you as sweaty under there as I am?" he asked, tugging on my mask.

"Oh, I'm absolutely disgusting. I've gone from a cat to a swamp monster."

I could hear him chuckle even through the rubber, and he fished out more cash for the bartender before he had my hand in his again.

"Come on," he said. "I know somewhere we can go."

CHAPTER 20

Tied Up in Knots

Aleks

“I promise, we’re good down here,” I said for the third time, squeezing Mia’s knee where it hooked over the edge of the pier. We were facing the now-black water of the bay, listening to the waves crashing at our feet as we licked at our ice cream cones.

Mia still had her mask perched on her head, as if she was ready to yank it down at any moment, should someone approach us. But no one was giving us a second look. There were skaters practicing moves and filming themselves in the brightly lit courtyard behind us, families playing in the park to our right, lovers sprinkled along the edge of the pier just like us, caught up in their own world. James and Hunter lurked nearby, too, just in case.

“Mia,” I said on a laugh when she flinched at a passing skateboard, her hand flying up to the mask on her head. “This is Downtown St. Pete — not L.A. We are *fine*.”

I peeled the rubber off her head, letting it fall to the opposite side of me where she couldn’t reach it with a *slap*. Her worried eyes doubled in size as she peeked up at me, but I just nodded to the melting cone in her hand.

“You better get to licking, or you’re going to have a mess on your hands.”

Mia blinked, glancing at her dripping cone before running her tongue long and flat around the edges of it. It didn’t matter that she was a sweaty, smelly mess — that woman’s sweat was like catnip to me.

She still looked fucking gorgeous.

She still had me tied up in knots with the urge to touch her.

And she was still running her tongue all along that ice cream cone in a way that made it impossible not to imagine her licking something else.

I fought not to groan at the sight, reaching down to adjust myself in my shorts.

I thought I was slick about it, but Mia arched a brow, eyes falling to my

lap before she met my gaze again. “You pervert — did you just cop a chub from watching me lick an ice cream cone?”

“Hey, have some consideration for the afflicted, okay? Going through a bit of a dry spell here,” I reminded her. “And it’s not my fault you’re licking and nibbling at that ice cream cone like a little nympho.” I licked my own cone on a shrug. “I’m just a man.”

“A nympho?” She giggled. “What are we, sixteen again? I’m eating ice cream, Suter. It’s *you* who’s making it dirty.”

“Uh-huh. Says the one who called my cooking *orgasmic* last month.”

She chuckled to herself, shaking her head. I could see she was still pretty drunk — her eyes a bit glazed and unfocused as she kicked her feet. I’d watched her throw back so many shots tonight, I was surprised she was still awake.

I thought she was going to drop the conversation, but then, the little minx smiled like the devil, turning to face me more fully as she licked up the side of her cone. She made sure it was overtly slow, her eyes locked on mine as she sucked the tip of it into her mouth and moaned. She closed her eyes then, licking her lips after she swallowed the bite.

“So *good*,” she said a bit breathlessly.

Fuck, I wanted to be immune to it. I wanted to be able to play it off casually. But my cock was hard as a rock now, pitching a damned tent in my shorts as my eyes stayed hooked on where her tongue was licking her lips clean.

When she opened her eyes and smiled at me, her cheeks pink and flushed, I decided two could play that game.

Without breaking, I held her gaze and lifted my cone to my mouth, licking up the side of it nice and slow with a low groan rumbling out of my chest. When I got to the top, I swirled my tongue in a tight circle before flicking it back and forth just like I’d do if the gods ever granted me access to the sweet fruit between Mia’s thighs.

“Mmm, you’re right,” I said, wiping the corner of my mouth with my thumb before I licked the chocolate ice cream off my skin. “Tasty.”

Mia’s next breath shuddered out of her parted lips, her tipsy eyes stuck to my mouth for the longest time before she shook it off, grunted, and shoved at my arm.

“You’re disgusting.”

“Keep telling yourself *that’s* what you were thinking just now.”

Before she could argue, I reached over and bopped her on the nose with my ice cream cone.

Her mouth popped open incredulously, “You did not just do that.”

“Did, too, and I’ll do it again.” I ran a finger through my ice cream and then tapped each of her cheeks.

“You brat!” She narrowed her gaze, bopping me with her own cone right on the chin. “Ha! How’s it feel?”

I got her a few more times, dodging her attempts to counterattack. When she tried to get some in my hair, I swooped out of the way and licked the creamy treat off her cheek.

“Ew!” But she laughed, and then she ducked in and licked my chin.

That lash of her tongue sent a jolt right between my thighs.

I couldn’t strike back, couldn’t laugh or get in another jab with my cone. My brain had gone haywire. It didn’t matter that it was a matter of seconds. That drag of her tongue against my flesh had occurred in slow motion in my mind, and now it was on repeat as I snagged her by the wrist and held her close to me.

I stared down my nose at her, Mia peering up at me with a mischievous smile. The longer I held her, the more that smile slipped, the energy between us warping into something electric to the touch.

I wanted to kiss her.

My nostrils flared with the restraint not to just do it. What would she do if I did? Would she let me? Would she kiss me back when there weren’t any cameras around to pretend for?

Before I could act on my impulsiveness, Mia pulled free from my grip and playfully shoved me again, her cheeks red enough I could see the blush even with us shrouded mostly in darkness.

She cleaned herself up with a napkin, handing me one to do the same, and then we both fell quiet as we ate the rest of our cones.

“Tonight was so fun,” she finally said, pausing before she glanced up at me. “I’ve never gone out like this before. Is this what you do all the time?”

I was still reeling from the feel of her tongue on me, but I tried to shake it off, zeroing my focus in on her question. “Not quite like this, not anymore at least. I’m more used to the VIP life now, I admit. But when I was a rookie in Seattle?” I nodded, eating the last of my cone. “All the time.”

“I bet you drank more when you went out back then. You barely drank *at all* tonight. Which is just rude. I’m way more drunk than you are right now.”

“Well, that’s because you’ve had approximately seven tequila shots and who knows how many cocktails.”

“And you nursed that whiskey for almost the entire night. It’s not nice, you know, to let a lady drink alone.”

She said that last part in a terrible British accent that made the corner of my mouth tilt.

“What can I say? I keep my promises.”

Mia cocked a brow.

“You said I’m not allowed to get drunk and make an ass of myself,” I reminded her.

“Right, because I was so sure you’d actually follow through.”

She scoffed a little, finishing off the last of her cone and wiping her hands together to dust off the crumbs. When she looked at me again, her smile slipped at the absence of mine.

“You don’t think I’m a man of my word?”

“I... I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

She swallowed. “I just mean I didn’t really expect you to stop your lifestyle for this little stunt. I just thought maybe if I laid out some rules, you’d be discreet about it.”

Now, I wished I had something to drink, something to do other than lean back on my palms and look out at the dark water wondering if I’d ever be able to change her mind about me.

Wondering if she’d ever see me as anything more than a fucking brute.

I tried to keep my face neutral, to hide the sting that her words brought to my chest. Just when I thought maybe she saw more in me, she’d say shit like that and remind me I was wrong.

Then again, could I blame her if even *I* didn’t think any more of myself?

I’d lived a life no one else had, one that made me tick differently. When it came to motivators, I had none — there was no family to provide for or make proud, no parents to show off for, no wife to impress, no kid to set an example for.

There was just me.

And most days, the only thing that got me by was hockey.

Some days, not even that excited me.

Maybe that was why Mia didn’t trust me to keep a promise when I made it. But the sick part of this joke was that she was the *only* person in my life

whom I felt the need to uphold my word with.

She was the only one I felt deserved better than what I had to offer.

“You know, even with a fish head mask, I’m pretty sure you could pull more pussy at that bar than any of the guys we were playing against.” Mia leaned back to mirror my stance, her statement shaking me out of my thoughts. “Did you see that bachelorette group tittering in the corner when we were playing yard pong? I was worried you were going to get mauled when you went to the bathroom.”

I wanted to sling a smart-ass remark back at her, but the best I could manage was a pathetic attempt at a grin as I continued to sulk over what she’d said before.

“Have you ever dated anyone since you moved out of Mom and Dad’s?” she asked, her voice softer now, more contemplative. “You know, like... seriously?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Humor me.”

I didn’t know why she needed to hear me say it. Even if it was sparse, I talked to Mia more than anyone else in my life. If anyone was going to know I was in a relationship, it would be her.

“No,” I answered.

“Did you ever want to?”

I swallowed, thinking about the time I booked a flight to L.A. with all the intentions in the world to tell Mia how I felt about her. We were both twenty at the time. I had just finished up my first season in the NHL. She was recording her debut album.

The night before I was supposed to fly, tabloids broke with photos of her and some rock star.

“Not really,” I lied.

“Hockey is the only love of your life, huh?”

I looked from the water to her. “If that’s what you think.”

“I don’t know what to think,” she shot back. “That’s why I’m asking. I... I just wonder if you ever want to settle down. If you want a wife one day... kids...” She shrugged. “Maybe it’s because we’re about to fake it to the whole world tomorrow, but it’s been on my mind.”

“Do you want that?” I asked, deflecting. “Marriage and kids, I mean. I know you mentioned you felt that way when you were with Austin. Do you still feel it now?”

“Yeah,” she said, a soft smile on her lips as her eyes scanned the dark waves. “Yeah, I really do. But it’s different now, you know? After Austin. I don’t want a husband just for the sake of one. I want...” She sighed. “I want the kind of love that consumes me. I want a partner and a friend, someone I can laugh and play and explore with. I want passion, raw and all-encompassing. I don’t want to just *get* married. I want to *be* married — committed mind, body, and soul to someone just as mad about me as I am about them.”

My nostrils flared at her admission, throat tight as I traced what little light was reaching the side of her face. My gaze stuck on her beauty mark, on the soft skin of her cheek just below that where I knew her dimple would appear if I made her smile big enough.

I wondered if her daughter would have that same dimple, if her son would have her bright blue eyes.

And then my stomach immediately bottomed out because I knew if she ever did have kids, they’d be with someone I’d never see as good enough for her.

I was pretty sure there wasn’t a man alive I’d classify in that category.

“That’s not fair, by the way,” she said, pointing her finger at me and doing a little wave with it. “You have to answer now.”

“Or what?”

She tapped her chin. “Or... I’ll throw you over this pier and into the shark-infested waters below.”

“Pretty sure there are no sharks down there. And also pretty sure you couldn’t throw me even an inch.”

“Fine. Then I’ll throw *myself* off.” She leaned forward dramatically to make her point, but actually lost her balance in the process, her eyes widening and a little yelp squeaking out of her as she nearly toppled into the water.

I caught her easily with one hand, hooking it around her elbow and hauling her into me. She was so slight that I didn’t realize just how easily she’d come with the motion, and now she was half in my lap, one hand on my chest and the other wrapped around my neck as I looked down my nose at her.

Once again, she was close enough to kiss.

If I just tugged her up another inch, if I lowered my chin and angled my mouth for hers, I could taste her. I could inhale that sweet gasp I hoped she’d

let out, could savor the way she'd melt into my arms.

Or was that only when it was for show?

As if she realized where my mind was, I felt her stiffen — like she was afraid I was going to kiss her instead of being anything close to excited about it. I blinked and remembered last week at her album release party, when I'd been *just* tempted enough to say *fuck it* and kiss her for real.

But she'd reminded me there were no cameras around.

She'd made it clear that was the only time she wanted my lips on hers.

I swallowed, reluctantly releasing my grip on her and helping her sit upright. But even when she was no longer in my lap, her hand still clung to my chest, her fingertips fisting in my hoodie just enough to hold me in place.

"It doesn't matter what I want," I finally said, my voice rough.

Mia blinked. "What... what do you mean?"

"If I did want a wife, kids... it doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because that's not the story meant to play out for everyone, Mia."

"Why couldn't it be the one for you?"

I smirked, a breath of a laugh leaving my nose as I swept her damp hair back and off her face. "What do I have to offer a woman as a lifetime partner? What do I have to offer a child as a father?" I shook my head. "I have a disease in me, Mia. One I was born with that will never leave me. Addict blood runs through me."

"Aleks..."

"It's true. You've seen me when I drink, when I give in to other ways of numbing myself. I know you still remember the Fourth of July."

I pinned her with my gaze then, daring her to tell me I was wrong.

She didn't.

"I have to actively fight not to let it ruin my life the way it did my parents'," I continued, voice hoarse. "And honestly, some days, I wonder if that fight is even worth it. I don't have a big, beautiful family to share with someone. I don't have a lifetime of wonderful childhood memories. I'm not some well-adjusted gentleman with friends and a financial plan. I'm just..." I shrugged. "I'm just a hockey player. And some days, I'm barely that."

Mia's eyes flicked between mine, and I wasn't sure if she realized she had twisted her hand up even more in my shirt, that she'd pulled me closer to her.

"You're more than what has happened to you," she whispered.

But did she really believe that?

The way she joked with me, the things she said about how I acted... I wasn't so sure.

And right now, she was three sheets to the wind, as her mother would say — drunk and in a state where she could say anything, if the tequila willed her to.

Last time she had been this drunk with me, she'd asked me to kiss her.

And then the next day, she'd told me it was a mistake.

I cleared my throat, folding my hand over hers just long enough to peel her fingers off me. I stood, gently helping her up, too.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get you to your place. We have a big day tomorrow."

I tried to smile with that, giving her a little wink that said I was fine and the conversation was a buried one. I didn't miss her frown even as it disappeared under her mask. I pulled mine down, too, grabbing her hand and calling a cab as we walked toward the parking lot. James and Hunter followed from a distance behind us, but I knew they were there making sure Mia was okay.

I was thankful for them, even if I felt Mia was safe with me. I liked that she had good guys on her team to protect her.

Mia was staying in a secluded mansion on Davis Island, one not too far from where Will Perry lived with Chloe and Ava.

When we pulled up the drive and the cab driver put the car in park, I wondered what it could be like to live this life with her. What if we were coming home from a night out and instead of me walking her to her door, I was walking inside *with* her? What would it feel like to help her undress, to sink into a hot bath together, to hold her and touch her and make her mine in every way?

I could see it, for that split second — the family she asked me about.

But as soon as it manifested, it was gone, erased in a cloud of reality.

One of her security guards was at the door when I walked her up to it. James. He nodded in greeting, but otherwise pretended like we didn't exist, his eyes on the perimeter of the house.

"Thank you," Mia said softly. "For tonight. I... I can't tell you how much fun I had, how much I needed that."

"Always here for a good time." I leaned in, brushing a quick kiss across her cheek. "See you tomorrow, almost fiancée."

Then, I backed away with a cocky wink I hoped was more convincing than the unsteady beat of my heart.

CHAPTER 21

We Have Tonight

Mia

“I’m drunk.”

I giggle the words for what I’m pretty sure is the twenty-seventh time since we left Owen Marshall’s house party, and Aleks fights back a grin, holding one finger to his lips to tell me to be quiet.

We’re home now — thanks to Aleks being sober. He has rink time in the morning and didn’t want to be hungover, so he didn’t drink at the party tonight. I’m glad he’s sober. I’m glad he drove us.

I’m glad he’s holding me upright so I don’t fall as we stumble through my side yard.

I try not to focus too much on where his hand is locked around my hip as we make our way toward the back deck, but it’s impossible. His hand is so big. His palm is so warm against my skin.

I lean even more into him to the point he’s practically carrying me, inhaling his scent. Why does he always smell so good? Like body wash and boy. Mint and ice and him. Sometimes, I go into his room to write lyrics on his bed while he plays video games just so I can soak up that scent.

“Alright, Strings. Use those legs of yours,” Aleks says on a chuckle when we reach the stairs. He helps me every step of the way up, reminding me again to be quiet before he’s carefully sneaking us in through the sliding glass door.

He checks to make sure the coast is clear before helping me farther inside. Mom and Dad know we went to a party. What they don’t know is that their baby girl is drunk with a capital D right now, and they would not be happy about it. So again, I’m glad Aleks is taking care of me.

He’s always taking care of me.

We stumble down the hallway together — me clinging to him and swaying while he does everything to keep us steady. We bypass his room on the way to

mine, and once we're inside, he releases me to carefully and quietly shut the door behind us.

I flop face down on the bed in a fit of giggles.

"I'm drunk," I say again, the noise muffled by my comforter.

I hear Aleks sigh behind me before his hands are on my ankles hanging off the bed. With one swift jerk, he rolls me over, and I laugh even more.

"You're going to get us both in trouble if you don't be quiet," he warns in a whisper, then he smacks the outside of my right thigh. "Hush."

I don't know why that word makes chills race up my legs.

I don't know why all the laughter dies in my throat.

I don't understand the strange and unfamiliar zing of electricity that strikes between my thighs and makes me squeeze them together.

My eyes are wide, lips parted as I lean up on my elbows to watch Aleks. He's oblivious to me, his focus on where he's untying my sneakers. He undoes the laces with care before sliding each shoe off my feet, setting the dirty things under my bed quietly.

His hands find my ankles again when he's standing, thumbs brushing the sensitive skin above my socks.

I think I feel him stiffen a little, too.

I think he feels the weight of the room closing in the same way I do, the way the air is heavier somehow now.

He swallows, his eyes flicking up to meet mine.

He's so hot.

God, he's so hot.

He's wearing a dark green hoodie with our school's logo on it. Paired with the light wash jeans he has on, the chain around his neck, and his backward hat — he looks like a bad boy. It doesn't help that his nose is still busted up from a high-sticking on the ice last week.

I feel hot and sweaty staring at him, like I should look away, but I can't.

He clears his throat, releasing my ankles and crossing the room to my dresser. He opens and shuts drawers until he finds my pajamas, tossing them onto the bed next to me.

"Get some sleep, you little menace," he says with a smirk.

Before he can take a step toward the door, I grab his wrist.

"Stay."

Aleks looks at where my hand is around his wrist, his gaze finding mine before he's staring at the point of contact again.

“Please?” I add when he’s still frozen after a moment. “Just... sit here. Talk to me.”

I pat the bed next to me, scooting over and up until my back is against the pillows.

Aleks looks at the invitation like it’s the gateway to hell.

“I’m too drunk to lie down yet,” I say. “I’ll get the spins.”

He swallows, but concedes, sitting next to me. He’s still stiff, not fully relaxing against the pillows.

“Oh, my God. Relax, Suter. I’m not going to puke on you,” I tease, and then I thread my arm through his and lay my head on his shoulder, tucking my sock-covered feet under his legs. “Mmm, you’re always so warm, like a furnace.”

I nuzzle in, and after a few breaths, I feel Aleks marginally relax.

“Dude. Did you see Jerry do that keg stand?” I giggle on a hiccup. “No wonder he passed out on the couch after.”

“I was more impressed with your slap the bag performance,” Aleks says, his fingers coming up to play with my hair. I sigh contently at the first brush of his nails against my scalp. “Who knew you were such a wine-o?”

“I get it from my mama.”

He chuckles at that, and then we’re reminiscing on the night and all the craziness that occurred. From the people we saw making out and jumping in the pool to the ones who were dancing on the kitchen island or taking bong hits that would knock a grown man on his ass.

Eventually, we quiet, Aleks still playing with my hair as I fiddle with the string of his hoodie.

“I’m going to miss high school, I think,” I admit on a sigh. “I mean, not all of it. Like, not the schoolwork and stuff but... I don’t know. We’ve had it kind of good, haven’t we? It’s been... fun.”

Aleks smirks, but when I glance at him, I see a sort of distance in his eyes. “I suppose so.”

I wonder if he’s thinking about his mom, and immediately feel like a jerk for assuming he’s had the same high school experience as me when I know his time has been full of ups and downs. He moved to a whole new country. The woman he considered his mother died while he was gone. He’s in this place where everything is different — the language, the culture, even aspects of the sport he loves.

The longer I stare at him, the harder my heart beats.

This boy came into my life just two years ago, and now, he's my best friend. I can't imagine not talking to him every morning and night. I can't imagine weekends without him teasing me as I attempt to write new songs, or nights during the season where I wouldn't be there cheering him on as he plays hockey. I can't imagine sleeping in this house and not knowing he's right down the hall.

Now, we're seniors, weeks away from graduating and going on to live our separate lives. I'm going to college in the fall, unless by some miracle my music takes off before then, which seems highly unlikely considering how many artists out there want the same big break I do. And Aleks? He's already been drafted to the NHL. Sure, he'll be here for the rest of this year and maybe play another season with the junior league next year, but then he'll be gone. And who knows what will happen next for me...

But we have tonight.

The words hit me out of nowhere, harsh at first, and then melty like butter as they slink into every corner of my body.

We have tonight.

I swallow, my heart picking up speed as I feel my hands moving before I can tell them what to do. I go from playing with the string on his hoodie to tracing the line of his jaw, shivering a bit at the slight stubble there that tickles my palm.

I think I feel his jaw harden under my touch, think I hear his heart start racing to match the pace of mine.

I don't let myself overthink it before I'm climbing into his lap.

I expect Aleks to stop me. I expect him to laugh and ask me what the hell I'm doing.

But he doesn't.

Instead, his hands find my hips, gripping me hard enough to bruise as I straddle him. That bolt of electricity between my legs is back with a vengeance when I'm fully seated, when the seam of his jeans is flush against the cotton panties under my skirt.

I shake at the contact, my confidence a little rockier now that I'm on top of him. I do my best not to show how nervous I am as I fist my hands in his hoodie, my eyes tracing his neck, his jaw, before I find his lips.

Aleks doesn't move.

He just sits there under me, his breaths coming hard and labored, his hands fixed to my waist.

“You’ve never told me about this,” I say breathlessly, fingering the silver chain necklace around his neck. I’m delaying what I really want to say, what I really want to do.

“What about it?”

“You’ve worn it since I met you. Does it mean something?”

“It was a gift from my mom.”

My brows pinch together as I look up to meet his gaze. We both know now that when he says mom, he means Annaliese — not his birth mom.

“She gave it to me when I made the team in secondary school,” he explains. “I’d made some offhand, stupid comment about how some of the guys on the team had necklaces and that I wanted one, but I never imagined I’d actually ever have one. We could barely afford food some weeks, let alone something like this.”

He touches the metal, rolling it between his fingertips before he lets it drop and his hand is on my hip again.

“She loved you,” I whisper.

He nods. “Not sure why.”

I frown deeper at that, and bravery finds me again as my hands come up to his face. I trace the lines of his jaw, the jagged bridge of his nose, the furrowed brows above his deep brown eyes.

“I know why,” I say softly.

Aleks tightens his grip on my hips when I rock against him, my eyelids fluttering a bit at the ecstasy that floods me with just that bit of friction. My whole body is on fire right now, my skin hot, blood boiling.

My fingers curl at the base of his neck, tilting his chin up toward me and forcing his eyes to mine.

I rock against him again.

Against his erection.

He’s hard for me.

That fact sends me reeling, and I whimper at the feel of that hardness against where I’m so hot and soft and damp.

“Mia,” Aleks warns, and this time he grips my hips hard enough to stop me from bucking again.

“Aleks,” I breathlessly reply, dipping my forehead to his. I bite my lower lip, watching where each breath rocks his chest.

I don’t know what I’m doing.

I don’t know what I want.

*I don't know what I expect to happen, where I expect us to go from here.
All I can hear are those three words on repeat.*

We have tonight.

With shaking hands, I pull him into me, fighting against his resistance as I lower my lips to his neck. He groans the lowest, most delicious sound when I press a kiss to his throat.

His breath intensifies as I drag my mouth along the slope of his Adam's apple, up to his jaw, nipping at the skin there with my heart about to burst out of my chest.

Then, I'm hovering, panting, my lips parted and just an inch from his.

"Mia, we—"

"Kiss me," I interrupt, clawing at the back of his neck. "Aleks, kiss me."

"Fuck."

He mutters the word, wetting his lips. His tongue nearly touches me when he does. I feel the heat of it, the heat of him beneath me, the heat of this moment in every cell of my being.

"Mia, you... you're drunk."

"So?"

I rock against him, and he grunts, pinning me still once more.

"Aleks, I want you."

He lets out another string of curses, this time in Swiss German, and I smirk a little.

This is it.

This is when we give in, when I finally feel what it's like to be kissed by Aleks Suter, to be touched by him, to be claimed by him.

I try to lower my mouth to his, pulling him up to meet me.

But at the very last second, he turns his head to the side.

My lips land against the corner of his mouth instead, and I frown, pulling back to look down at him.

His nostrils flare, his eyes focused somewhere across my bedroom. For a long moment, he's completely silent, me panting and waiting on his lap while he breathes like a fucking dragon and does everything but return my gaze.

"You're drunk, Mia," he repeats, and when he finally brings his eyes to meet mine, I swear a piece of me shatters. "You should get some sleep."

And there it is, written in every feature of his beautiful, stupid face.

Rejection.

He doesn't want me.

He's using the fact that I'm drunk to laugh this off, to save himself from having to say what he really means.

To save me from embarrassment.

It's too late for that last one, I realize, as I shamefully release him and climb out of his lap. As soon as I'm off him, he flies off the bed, and I tuck my legs up to my chest and hug them tightly.

Oh, God.

What have I done?

"I... I'll go get you some water," he says, scrubbing the back of his neck.

And then he's gone.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God." I repeat the words over and over when he's out of the room, slapping myself in the forehead. "Mia, what the fuck?!"

I burrow myself under my covers, pulling them up over my ears to hide my face. Maybe he'll think I passed out when he comes back. Maybe I can just die of embarrassment without him being any the wiser.

"Mia?" Aleks asks when he comes back. I hear him set down a glass of water on my bedside table, but I don't move. "There's water here. You should drink it before you go to bed. And I brought two ibuprofen, too. They'll help your head."

I don't reply.

I don't move.

I don't want to be living in this nightmare for another second.

I think I hear him sigh as his weight sinks the mattress behind me. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping I can play off that I'm asleep.

"Mia, I..."

But he doesn't finish that sentence.

Instead, I feel him brush my hair back from my forehead just enough to press a kiss there, and I feel that kiss like a slap in the face and a branding iron to my soul all at once.

The stupid part of me almost wonders if that kiss is laced with longing.

The smart part of me knows it's actually pity.

My heart is locked up tight in my chest when Aleks finally leaves. I throw the covers off once he's gone, flopping onto my back and staring up at the ceiling as tears flood my eyes.

But I don't let them fall.

And the next morning, I pretend nothing even happened.

CHAPTER 22

Let's Just Get This Over With Aleks

Mia felt a thousand miles away.

In reality, she was only standing a few feet from me on the deck of a luxury yacht gliding through the beautiful blue-green water of the bay. Her brown hair was blowing in the breeze, her body close enough to touch if I wanted.

But her eyes were shielded by large sunglasses, her mouth in a tight line as she sipped from her champagne glass and listened attentively to her publicist.

She was right here, and yet, on another planet completely.

I wondered if she was just hungover, if all that tequila from the night before had come back to bite her in the ass.

Or was she feeling the remnants of last night the same way I was, like a sticky residue from an unknown substance that you just can't quite scrub off?

I couldn't put a name to the unease in my chest as we prepared to pull off our fake engagement to the world. I laughed when it was appropriate, cracked jokes right on time, and carried my shoulders square and back.

But it was a feigned confidence — one I masked not just for this publicity stunt, but because I had no fucking idea what I was so knotted up about.

It had been a fun night together. I knew she'd needed it — to let loose, to pretend to be a normal human being instead of a pop star. I was still smiling just thinking about her celebrating our yard pong win in that floppy cat mask.

But I was also fighting nausea over something I couldn't quite place.

A sick longing for something I knew I'd never have, maybe.

"So, the paparazzi has already been snapping photos of the boat. They know you're on it. But we waited purposefully to drop the tip until all they could photograph was a blurry photo of the yacht."

Isabella ran through what I imagined was a timeline on her tablet like she

was coordinating a concert or gala appearance. She was in business mode, locked in and focused with her pink hair pulled back into a sleek bun and her eyes on the prize.

“We’re heading back in now, and once we’re close enough for them to get a good, clear shot, we’ll have you two go to the bow for your big moment. Aleks, you have the ring?”

I tapped the inside pocket of my sports coat. “Ring pop secured.”

Isabella narrowed her eyes at my joke before getting right back to business. “And Mia, you’re ready to give us the performance of a lifetime?”

Mia snapped out of her daze, turning to Isabella and staring blankly at her for a long moment. Then, she shoved her sunglasses up onto her head, beaming, eyes bright and wide. They glossed with tears as she covered her mouth with her hands, shaking her head.

“Oh, my God! Aleks! I can’t believe this!” She said each word with fake enthusiasm and surprise. “Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she dropped her hands and the whole act, her smile leveling out as she put her sunglasses back on and folded her arms over her chest.

Isabella blinked at her. “Okay, Moody Pants.”

“She’s hungover,” I offered by way of explanation — and I didn’t miss how Mia studiously ignored me, swallowing and holding her gaze somewhere over the horizon.

“Your fault, no doubt,” Isabella said. “Okay, next, we need to talk about when we get back to the marina. So the security team...”

Isabella continued on with the plan, and I listened more intently than usual mostly because I could tell that Mia was barely listening at all. Isabella was almost finished when Giana piped up from where she’d been silently tapping away on her phone beside us.

“Wait! I have an idea.” She stood, bouncing a little on her toes as she looked at me and then Isabella. “Okay, I know we just have pictures staged, but... what if we had a,” she held up her hands and did air quotes, “*stewardess* on board record a video on their phone and leak it after? Not just blurry pictures, but a live video of it happening with sound and everything.” She paused, rolling her lips together when none of us responded. “And by *stewardess*, I obviously mean me. I’d record the video.”

Isabella pointed her stylus pen at G. “Okay, that’s gold.” She looked at me next. “But we didn’t prep a speech.”

“Is that your way of asking if I can handle one on the fly?”

“He can,” Giana said before I could.

I echoed the sentiment. “I got this.”

That made Mia’s attention snap back to us. She shook her head, sliding her sunglasses up into her hair again. I loved when she did that. She looked a little like the girl I used to hang out with by the pool in Chicago, and a little like the mom she could be someday — the perfect mix. Her face was shiny with sunscreen, her lashes painted with mascara, but her face otherwise void of makeup. She looked like she belonged on this boat — blue linen shorts, loose button-up white top hanging off her shoulder and exposing the black strap of her swimsuit underneath it, bare legs and bare feet, a silver chain hugging the delicate bone of her left ankle.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” she said. “You... what are you going to say?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I winked at her.

She flattened her lips. “Okay, that just makes me worry more.”

“It’ll be a surprise — just like your ring,” I said, tapping my jacket pocket again. “Trust me.”

Mia arched a brow at me, and when I looked at Isabella, she wore a matching expression.

I laughed out a sigh. “Listen, I can do this. And if you hate my speech, then we just delete the video and don’t leak it. It’s as simple as that.”

That made Isabella’s shoulders relax. “Good point — we can take the video as if the stew is hiding behind the bar or something. And yeah, if you suck, we just don’t post it.”

“Most women like when I suck,” I shot back. “Especially in little rhythmic patterns, with two fingers placed *just so*.”

I curled my fingers and did a *come hither* motion with a cocky smirk.

Giana flushed and coughed and looked down at her phone. Mia rolled her eyes. Isabella sucked her teeth.

Not a single one of them laughed.

“Tough crowd,” I muttered, tucking my hands in my pockets. I nudged Mia next to me. “Not even a smile from you.”

“Some of us are taking this seriously,” she said, and when her eyes landed on me, hard and cold, I frowned. What had happened between last night and this morning that I’d missed?

I looked to where Isabella and Giana were chatting about the plans before

gently grabbing Mia by the elbow and tilting her away from them, shielding her from their view with my body.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” she bit out.

“Very convincing.”

At that, she sighed, pulling her sunglasses back over her eyes even as the sun sank behind thick clouds. “Let’s just get this over with.”

• • •

Mia

“You don’t have to do this,” I whispered low enough so only Aleks could hear as we walked toward the bow of the boat, the setting sun casting a perfect glow over the teak deck. It was hot as hell, as was par for the course in Florida, but on the water, it wasn’t so bad. There was a breeze, the salt sticking to my skin. I tasted it when I licked my lips.

“You still think I’m going to back out at the last minute, huh?”

“I just mean the whole speech thing,” I clarified, sliding my hands over the railing with my eyes set on the horizon. I knew there were already eyes on us, camera lenses zoomed in as far as they could go, shutters clicking, dollar signs rolling in the eyes of the paparazzi we’d tipped off. So, I forced a smile that I spoke through, pretending like I was having the time of my life.

“Why, don’t think I have it in me?”

“I just don’t think it’s necessary.”

“You’re so grumpy today.”

I huffed a laugh in my chest at that. Grumpy. That was one word for it. And really, the only word I could think of that was close to what I was feeling.

Was there a word for slightly hungover, wholly fulfilled by how much fun I had last night, confused about my feelings for my best friend I’m now about to pretend to get engaged to, and completely frustrated over his deflection of my questions last night and his seeming frustration that I’d asked at all?

There’s a challenge for you, Webster.

I couldn’t keep up with my thoughts last night, but they’d run rampant like little hellions, and kept me awake long after Aleks dropped me off. I thought about the night with Aleks, how much fun I’d had, how good it had

felt to let loose. But then I'd think about the pier, about how not once, but *twice*, I'd thought maybe, just maybe, he was going to kiss me.

He seemed close enough to do it.

He seemed like he *wanted* to do it.

But that just showed I was still a naïve girl who knew nothing at all, because he *hadn't*. And why would he? There was no one around to perform for.

If the last time I'd asked him to kiss me wasn't proof that he didn't want to, I didn't know what was.

But... he was so damn *confusing*. He was flirting with me on that pier, wasn't he? The ice cream, the way he held me when I almost fell...

Was it really just a joke to him?

Did he honestly feel nothing?

And then he shut me out when I asked about wanting a family. That was what infuriated me most. I knew he let me in more than he did anyone else, but he still kept me at a distance in times like that, as if he didn't trust me with the real answers.

I blamed that tornado of thoughts and my lack of sleep for how touchy I was now.

But inside, I knew it was also because Aleks was about to fake propose to me.

And I had no fucking idea how I felt about that.

Aleks slid up behind me once I was positioned at the bow, his arms wrapping me up tightly as he widened his stance and bent low enough to rest his chin on my shoulder.

I knew it was all for show, but it didn't stop my heart from thundering in my chest at the way it felt to be held by him, didn't stop my next swallow from being so damn difficult to take that I gave up completely.

"Do *you* still want to go through with this?" he asked softly in my ear.

My nostrils flared, two truths battling for dominance inside me. On the one hand, I absolutely did not want to do this. I didn't want to subject myself to more pretending with Aleks when I had so many not-so-fake feelings for him tearing me up. Just hearing him say last night that what he wanted didn't matter, that love and marriage and having a family wasn't in the cards for him... *God*, it made me want to prove him wrong.

It made me want to hold him, and kiss him, and tell him I...

What?

Love him?

My stomach soured with the thought of saying that out loud, though my heart kicked in my chest with the fact that it was true.

I did love him.

I always had.

But on the other hand, I understood what he didn't say. It wasn't just that he didn't think it was in the cards for him — it was that he didn't really want it. He didn't want to say it to me, didn't want to admit that he liked his lifestyle of the rich and famous, but he did.

He wanted to score goals, make money, and fuck whoever he wanted.

That was the truth he was hiding.

And in a way, I understood — because I wanted success, too.

I wanted this for me, for my career. I wanted the picture Isabella had painted. I loved the achievements of the album so far, the projection that my tour was going to sell out stadiums, the fact that every time Garrett Orange or one of his cronies ran their mouths about me, we were quick to bury his ass with a more enticing story of our own.

We'd taken control of a narrative I thought I had no say in.

Garrett had been robbed of attention the same way he'd tried to rob me of my success, and I thrived on that power.

In the end, that part of me won out. Because I didn't know another way to handle Garrett the Ferret, but I knew I could snuff out my feelings for Aleks. I'd done it for years. I was practically a professional in the art of denying myself when it came to him.

Ever since the night he made it clear what I was to him — and what I would never be.

"Yes," I answered, tilting my chin just enough so Aleks could see I wasn't bluffing. "I want this. I just don't want you to embarrass yourself trying to get this video. It's not something we need. The photos will be enough."

He chuckled, the sound a low rumble against my neck. "Ye of little faith," he tsked. "You don't think I can deliver a swoony proposal speech."

"I just—"

"Woman," he said, cutting me off with a squeeze of his hands at my hips. Then, the bastard nipped at my earlobe, making my eyelids flutter when he lowered his voice even more and growled in my ear. "Shut up and let me inspire your next song."

I wanted to roll my eyes.

I wanted to scoff and shove him off me and tell him he was *dreaming* if he thought I'd ever put any of this in a song.

But I was too busy trying not to spin out of orbit, my fingers curled around the metal bar at the bow so tightly my knuckles were white. My entire body responded to his hands on me, to his voice in my ear, to the words still echoing long after he said them.

Damn him for being so good at pretending, for making it look so easy.

Damn him for making it impossible for me.

"Alright, lovebirds," Isabella called from where she was hiding out of sight in the main salon. The door was open so she could talk to us — and so Giana could sneakily get the video from a stew's point of view. "I just got confirmation that we're in good sight. Fire away, Romeo."

Aleks took a long, deep breath, letting it out slowly as he thumbed my skin where he held my hips. He did it again, this time, waiting for me to do it with him.

"Breathe, Strings," he said in my ear. "I'm right here with you."

On our next exhale, Aleks released me, keeping one hand on the small of my back as he slid up beside me. He leaned an elbow on the metal bar, then his hand trailed up to sweep my hair back from my face, and he cradled my neck, waiting for me to face him.

My heart cracked when I did.

He was so brutally handsome, it was like a fist straight to the gut when I looked at him. It was the wildest phenomenon, to see him both as the rugged man he was standing before me and also as the quiet, reserved boy who'd first stolen my heart all those years ago. I knew no matter what happened next between us, no matter who he dated or who I married or where our careers took us — I would always be able to close my eyes and see him.

I would always feel him like he was a part of me.

Aleks stared at me for a long moment, his throat constricting as he thumbed my jaw line, his brown eyes almost golden in the setting sun where they traced every inch of my face. He wet his lips, shaking his head a bit.

"You're so beautiful," he said softly.

I knew Giana was filming, so I leaned into his palm, telling myself it was all for show even as my stomach tightened and my knees grew weak.

"And I don't just mean your eyes, or your hair, or your lips," he said louder, loud enough for Giana to pick up with her phone. He tapped my

bottom lip with that comment, smirking. “Although I do love these lips. These are the kind of lips that could launch a thousand ships, as they say.”

I couldn’t fight the way my lips curled.

This poor kid.

He was going to crash and burn trying to give this speech.

“I could go on and on about everything that makes you gorgeous — your dimple, your beauty mark, your legs, your smile. But all of that is... to be frank, Mia, it’s so fucking boring compared to what really makes you beautiful.”

I arched a brow at that, and he smiled, shaking his head before he was pulling me to face him more squarely, his eyes searching mine.

I wished I’d worn my sunglasses out here now.

I wished I had something to hide behind, with how he was staring right through me.

“It’s your heart, and your soul,” he said, swallowing. “It’s how music lives within you even when you don’t intend for it to. It’s how you light up every room you walk into, how you love your family and your friends so fiercely. It’s the way you laugh, the way you cry, the way you open yourself to feeling every emotion life has to offer, never running from them even when I know they hurt.

“It’s the way you share that pain with the world, the way you embrace being vulnerable and ask us all to be brave enough to do the same. It’s the way you fight for what’s right, for your voice to be heard, for *all* voices to be heard.”

His brows bent together, and he wet his lips, pausing for a moment like he wanted everything he said to be perfect.

Meanwhile, my heart was thundering now, building up the storm already raging inside me.

I couldn’t believe the things he was saying.

I couldn’t tell if he meant them, or if this was just some Oscar-worthy performance.

That confusion I felt last night quadrupled, and suddenly, I felt so lightheaded I had to grip the bar at the bow even tighter for fear I’d fall over.

“Mia, I have had the pleasure of watching you grow up,” he finally continued. “I have watched you transform from the girl who cared so much about what others thought of her to the woman who doesn’t give a damn, who inspires other girls all around the world to be exactly who they are and

to love every piece of themselves.”

My eyes flooded with tears — and not because I willed them to.

He might have been faking it.

But this felt all too real to me.

“When we were younger, I told myself I was too much for you. When we were apart over the years, I told myself I wasn’t enough. But now, for reasons I will never pretend to know or understand, the universe has put us together again. It’s given me a chance I know I don’t deserve. But I can promise you this — I won’t waste it.”

I swore his hands were shaking a bit as he took mine in his, swore it wasn’t just in my head how his jaw tightened as he lowered himself down to one knee.

Fake, Mia.

Pretend.

All for show.

But those thoughts wouldn’t stick. The first tear slid down my cheek as soon as his knee hit the teak, my heart collapsing at the sight of him bent there before me the way I’d pictured in my dreams more times than I could count.

“I am an honest man,” he said, his voice deep but a bit shaky. “Even with myself. And I know I am not what you deserve. I know I fall short in so many ways. I know that I can be irrational, and loud, and broody and cold. I know I can shut the world out and do some really stupid shit. But I could never shut you out, Mia.” He swallowed. “And I could never stop loving you — no matter how hard I tried over the years.”

I blinked, two more hot tears searing my cheeks.

And my heart thundered at his words, at how believable he made them sound.

Fuck him for doing this to me.

Fuck him for saying that with his eyes locked on mine as if he actually meant it.

“I can’t promise I’ll be perfect. In fact, I know I’ll be everything but.” His hands squeezed mine before he peeled them away so he could reach into his jacket pocket. “But if you let me, I will love you with every fucked-up piece of who I am, with every shredded fiber of good I have left in me. I will protect you, and care for you. I will make you laugh. I will hold you when you cry. I will stand behind you and support you and celebrate you always.”

He paused, taking a breath as he pulled the midnight blue velvet box from the pocket of his sports coat.

“I know this is crazy,” he admitted, and then he smiled that beautiful, crooked smile that had first made my teenage heart burst into flames. “But so are we.”

He popped the box open, and I didn’t have to fake the gasp that ripped from my throat.

I covered my mouth with both hands, more tears spilling over as I stared at the most beautiful ring I’d ever seen. I couldn’t even remember it from the showing with the jeweler at Aleks’s condo. Then again, that had all been an out-of-body blur. I didn’t want to pick out my own wedding ring — even if it was fake. It felt so strange, like a bad omen of some kind.

And Aleks had known it.

He’d shooed me away. He’d picked out a ring to surprise me.

He’d picked out a ring better than any I could have ever imagined for myself.

I wasn’t even sure what the stone was nestled in the delicate and intricate gold setting, but it was a mixture of green and black and gray, a swirling whirlpool of beauty in a perfectly sized gem. The brilliant band sported tiny leaves of diamonds to frame the stone — one branch spiraling up to hug the top of it while the other hugged the bottom.

It was like an entire fairytale told without a single word.

It was enchanting, and magical, and stunning.

It was perfect.

“Marry me, Mia,” Aleks whispered, like the words were strangling him. He cleared his throat and spoke louder, his dark eyes fixed on mine. “Marry me.”

Whatever I’d practiced, whatever fake show I’d planned to put on at this exact moment? It was impossible now. I was so overcome with emotion I could barely nod, could barely breathe through the tumultuous disorientation forcing more tears down my cheeks as I held out a shaking left hand.

Aleks pulled the ring from the box and slid it onto my ring finger.

It fit perfectly.

Then, he stood, his own eyes red and rimmed with tears as he stared down at me. He wiped the tears from my right cheek with his palm, and then mirrored that action on the left until he was framing my face.

He bent, and I pressed up onto my toes, and our lips met in a kiss far too

tender, a kiss that reverberated through me like an earthquake that I felt all the way down to my toes.

I threaded my arms around his neck, holding him to me even when he tried to pull away. Even if this was just for show, I didn't care.

I wanted to pretend not for them, but for me.

I wanted to soak in every second of this fantasy where Aleks said those things to me and meant them, where he asked me to marry him and I said yes, where he loved me.

Where he was mine.

My grip seemed to be the only cue he needed. Aleks inhaled me, wrapping his arms around my frame and holding me so tight it was like he was afraid I'd float away.

I opened my mouth, and his tongue slid inside, lighting a fire deep in my stomach when it danced with mine.

That spark sent lust vibrating through me.

That flame seared my body, my heart, my soul.

That fire burned me.

And then sent me flying back to Earth in a fiery ball of reality.

I broke away from the kiss, fighting off more tears as I pressed against his chest to put some much-needed distance between us.

"I..." My next breath came more panicked than the one before it, and then again, and again, until my chest was rapidly rising and falling in a pattern I couldn't control. "Excuse me."

I barely got the words out before I was darting inside.

I tried to pretend like I was running over to celebrate with someone inside the boat, but I wasn't sure if I pulled it off as I brushed past a celebrating Giana and a giddy Isabella. My publicist and friend tried to hook me by the elbow and hug me, but I yanked out of her grasp, sprinting for the nearest head.

I barely had my hands on the toilet seat before I gagged.

And I stared at that ring on my finger the entire time I retched.

CHAPTER 23

Got the Shot

Aleks

Mia could barely look at me.

She canceled the “surprise” engagement party we were supposed to have when we got back to shore, claiming she had an upset stomach. We all heard her throwing up on the boat, so it shouldn’t have felt like a lie.

But it did.

I held fast to her hand when we got to the marina, and she pulled off her dazzling smile enough to finish the show for the paparazzi waiting for us. She waved at some of the fans gathered, holding up her ring finger as they all screamed with delight. As soon as we ducked into the black SUV, though, she instantly paled.

She scooted away from me, all the way to the other side of the car.

She looked out the window.

She folded in on herself.

Isabella and Giana filed into the car with us, James taking the front seat next to the driver. Giana was bouncing in her seat showing Isabella the video she’d captured of the proposal as we started to drive. They were creating a burner account to post it from, and then Isabella was going to tip off some of Mia’s super fans so they’d share it and make it blow up.

They both seemed oblivious to the fact that the star of this whole show was breaking down right in front of us.

I sniffed, scooting over slowly and carefully until I was right next to Mia. I didn’t touch her, but I leaned forward to block her from where G and Isabella were sitting, hoping I could serve as some sort of shield and get the truth out of her.

“Mia.”

“Please, just leave me alone,” she whispered.

The way she pleaded those words felt like a thousand paper cuts to my

chest.

When I didn't move, she sniffed, looking past me to her publicist. "I want to go home."

The car quieted. "Tonight?" Isabella asked.

"Right now. I want to pack my shit and go to the airport and go home."

Isabella was quiet for only a split second before she nodded. "Of course. I'll arrange the plane."

I knew the friend part of her wanted to ask Mia what was wrong, but the business side of her reminded her that, in that moment? Mia was her boss. She immediately got to work texting and calling whoever she needed to make it all happen, and I swallowed, creating that barrier with my body even more so and trying to get Mia to look at me.

"You're going home?"

"Yep."

"Right now?"

"I have a tour starting soon, in case you forgot."

I frowned, dodging her acid-soaked arrows all while wondering why the hell they were pointed at me.

"It's already late," I tried. "Just... stay tonight, and then—"

"I'm going," she interrupted, her eyes hard when they snapped to mine. "And I would really appreciate if you could just give me some fucking space right now."

Damn it, it pissed me off that she was doing this, that she was pushing me away when I had no fucking idea what I'd done wrong. But I didn't want to upset her any more than I apparently had, so I backed up, sliding over to the opposite window and watching as the lights of the bridge passed by on our way back to Tampa.

"You two did *amazing*," Isabella said when she'd made her calls. "The Internet is melting down."

"Oh, my God. Look!" Giana showed Isabella first before holding her phone up toward me and Mia. "The video already has half-a-million views. I literally *just* put it up, like... *what!?*"

Mia and I shared a look.

Neither one of us smiled.

And for the rest of the ride, everyone was silent.

• • •

When we made it back to the house Mia had been staying in, she threw her car door open and stormed up the driveway.

Giana and Isabella both jumped when she slammed the door shut behind her, and then they looked at me. I muttered a curse word before hopping out of the SUV and chasing after my grouchy bride-to-be.

“Mia.”

“Leave me alone, Aleks.”

“Would you just fucking stop for a second?”

I caught her by the elbow, not gripping her tight but holding just enough to spin her to look at me.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. I just want to go home and sleep in my own fucking bed. I want to get away from the noise. I want to focus on my tour and take a break from this... this... charade.”

“You’re mad at me.”

She scoffed. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“That’s the exact question I’ve been asking myself since I showed up here this afternoon. Care to enlighten me?”

Mia tongued her cheek, folding her arms over her chest and shaking her head. Then, she let out a long breath, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’m fine. Really. I am not mad at you.”

Lie.

I knew it and she did, too.

“I’m just... tired, okay?”

Her blue eyes found mine with that statement, holding my gaze and silently begging me to let it go.

But when she turned toward the house, I was already moving with her.

I couldn’t let it go.

I couldn’t let *her* go — not like this.

“Talk to me,” I begged, pulling her to a stop again.

She let her hands fly up and hit her thighs with a slap. “Jesus Christ, Aleks.”

“What happened? Last night, you were happy and carefree and having a fucking blast. Then today, you act like I personally offended you somehow. Just... tell me. Tell me what I did.”

Her nose flared, eyes watering as she looked anywhere but at me.

It fucking broke me.

“Mia,” I croaked, stepping into her. When she didn’t move, I couldn’t help myself — I reached for her, cradling her face in my hands and forcing her to look up at me. “Please. Tell me what’s going on.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment, and when she opened them again, two tears slid down to hit my thumbs where I held her.

“We already got the shot, Aleks,” she whispered. “Please... just let me go.”

My heart thrashed in my chest. My body screamed *no* in every fucking language I knew.

But I did what she asked me to — even when it killed me to do it.

As soon as I released her, she turned, rushing toward the house without so much as a backward glance.

And I watched her tear that ring off her finger just before she disappeared inside the front door.

CHAPTER 24

All Business

Aleks

October

“Look alive, Brittzy!” I baited, keeping the puck steady with my stick tapping on either side of it. I skated right up to him, blades slashing into the ice, and I read him like a book in just a split second. He was moving to my left to steal the puck.

So I went right.

He nearly fell as I whizzed past him, and I laughed all the way to the net as I broke away. Daddy P was in a low squat in front of the net, glove hand positioned, poised and ready to block my shot. That beastly body of his looked nearly impossible to bypass.

But I was on fire today, and not even he could stop me.

I slapped it in, the puck flying *just* between his left knee pad and the glove on his hand and rewarding me with the satisfied sound of hitting the back of the net.

“Fuck!” he cursed as I threw my hands up, and I barreled out a loud buzzer noise with my mouth.

A few of my teammates gave me high fives or nods of approval when Coach McCabe blew the whistle, while the rest shook their head and skated over to the bench. They were drenched in sweat when they peeled their helmets off, and they glared at me both with appreciation and annoyance.

I couldn’t blame them.

I was being a bit of a showoff.

But I also wasn’t sorry for it. Preseason was over, the real season officially underway, and I had served my punishment time. In two days, I would play my first game of the season.

And I was fucking *ready*.

“Looking sharp, Suter,” Coach said when I slid up to the boards. He arched a brow. “Maybe consider passing to your teammates from time to time?”

“Need one of these bastards to catch up to me in order for that to happen,” I quipped.

Coach flattened his lips, and Will clapped me hard on the shoulder before squeezing. “Easy,” he muttered in my ear.

I shrugged him off.

Why was it always *me* who had to calm down, slow down, simmer down? Why was it never asking other players to match my energy? To step up? To fucking play like a pro?

“Sorry, Coach,” I muttered, even though I wasn’t really sorry at all. I think Coach knew it, too, but to his credit, he didn’t make me skate laps or grill my ass for the lack of respect I’d just shown him.

“Fabio,” he said, turning his attention to Carter. “You looked better today, but you’re still—”

“Passing like a fucking toddler handling a ball for the first time, I know,” Carter interrupted, sitting back on the bench with his jaw clenched.

Good.

He should be pissed at himself.

He made it through camp, through preseason, and now he was on the fourth line — just like I’d predicted he’d be. And with the teammate at center in my line on his way out at the end of the season, I needed Carter sharp. I needed him to care more than he’d ever cared before, and to *play* like every game was a fucking playoff game. We were Stanley Cup champions, and we had the chance to either defend that title, to bring the Cup back to Tampa at the end of this season...

Or, to be a one hit wonder and let it all go to some other team.

“Just clean it up,” Coach said. “You’re slow, you need to bag skate every day after practice. I want to see that speed you brought in the preseason — that will be what sets us apart when we play Boston.”

Carter’s jaw was still tight as he nodded, and Coach moved on, offering up feedback to a few more players before he was addressing us like a team.

Coach McCabe was one of the youngest in the league, a man who had earned respect not just as a player when he was younger, but as one of the most influential coaches, too. He’d come in as a fresh face to Tampa and completely reshaped the team, taking us from a consistent losing record to the

Stanley Cup champs.

It was an honor to play for him — even when he annoyed the crap out of me.

He was so wholly focused on our team, always at the stadium even when I came in early to skate or stayed late to hit the bikes in the gym upstairs. I wondered if he ever slept. I wondered if he ever did *anything* other than work his ass off to make this team the best it could be.

I liked that about him, though. I could relate to that feeling, to not having a wife or kids or a life outside of this sport we loved — or sometimes loved to hate. He was just as consumed as I was, maybe even more so, because where I sometimes fell into a numb state of routine with hockey, he was always alert.

Calculating. Planning. Engaging.

If we had nothing else in common, at least I knew we both wanted to give this season everything we had — just like last season and the one before it, and just like every season we'd ever play in the future.

After a quick run-through of what Coach wanted from us over the next forty-eight hours leading up to the next game, he told us to hit the showers, and my smelly, sweaty teammates filed into the locker room.

All of them except for Carter.

Coach frowned at him, his eyes catching mine before he nodded subtly toward my dejected center. I rolled my eyes at what he was insinuating — because I did not want to be anyone's fucking babysitter — but I obeyed his unspoken command. I stayed back, waiting until Coach rounded into the tunnel that led to the locker room before I flopped down on the bench next to Carter.

"You good?" I asked him, spitting near my skates with my eyes on the ice.

"What do you think?" He shook his head. "I looked like cat shit out there today."

"It wasn't that bad," I lied. "And it was just a practice."

He leveled me with a glare then, sweat dripping down his nose and onto his pants. "Says the man who cursed me out in multiple languages for most of the hour."

I sighed. "Look, I won't lie and say I don't want better from you. But I want better from *everyone* — myself, included. I know bad days happen. Sometimes at practice, sometimes at a game. But every bad day costs us. So,

yeah, I'm going to push you. I'm going to curse you out sometimes and call you names and try to get under your skin."

"Let me guess — *'but it's because you care?'*"

"It's because I don't do shit like this," I corrected, gesturing between us. "If you want a pep talk, go to Daddy P. You want someone to go out with and drown your sorrows, you know where to find Tanny Boy and Brittzy." I leaned over toward him, leveling him with a stare. "You want the truth about what you need to work on? You want someone not afraid to call you on your bullshit?" I thumped my chest. "That's my role."

Carter looked ready to scoff, but instead, he held my gaze, blowing out a long breath after a moment and hanging his head between his shoulders. He stayed that way for a beat before speaking again.

"I want to be better," he said, his voice low. "I feel like all I've ever done since getting drafted is try to be better, to be... good enough." He swallowed, turning to face me, and I saw a vulnerability there that made me as uncomfortable as it made me feel sorry for the guy.

It also made me a bit sick in the stomach.

Because I understood that feeling more than he knew.

"I finally have a chance again, Su Man. I made it through camp. I made it through preseason. I... I'm *here*, as an Osprey." He shook his head. "I can't get sent down again. I can't go back to New York. This is my team. This is where I want to be."

I nodded, throat tight. I didn't know what that was like. I'd been drafted and remained in the NHL since then. I'd never been sent down to the AHL, never had that kind of pressure riding on my shoulders to prove something — at least when it came to hockey.

For once, I felt like I saw Carter for more than just the annoying punk who frustrated me with his lack of talent.

I saw his potential.

I saw his drive.

"Then listen to me, listen well, and let me help you."

His eyes widened. "You? Help me?"

"I won't fucking repeat myself."

"No, no, of course not, I — yes, please. Help me."

He turned to face me more fully then, eager puppy dog that he was, and I took a breath on a smirk before launching into all the shit I saw in this practice alone that he needed to work on. I gave him homework — video to

watch, players to research, drills to run, and then I told him to meet me here early tomorrow to go through some things together.

By the time I was done, I swore I could see him jotting notes in his mind, his head bobbing like one of those fucking toys that you might see sitting on the dashboard of an old car. But the kid was smiling again, and he had a little bit of hope back in his eyes.

I preferred that to the moping he was doing before.

“Hey,” he said when we finally stood and started making our way back to the locker room. “I heard your fiancée will be at this game.”

I nearly stumbled at the mention of Mia, but somehow kept my cool, shrugging one shoulder. The locker room was empty already, save for a couple guys in the ice baths or getting work done by our trainers.

“Of course, she will be,” I said with what I hoped was a convincing smile. “She’s gotta show support for her sexy ass husband-to-be.”

“And then you’re going to her first concert in New York?”

I swallowed. “Yep. Just enough time to go before we play Toronto the following night.”

“That’s going to be so wild, man. She sold out not one, not two, but *three* nights at the Garden.” He whistled. “Impressive shit, that is.”

“She’s an impressive woman,” I agreed, ignoring the way my ribs squeezed my lungs in a vise grip.

I couldn’t wait to see her.

And yet, I knew it wouldn’t really be *her* I’d be seeing.

It would be the new Mia — the ice queen with all her highest, most solid walls up. She’d been like that ever since the proposal, and no amount of me begging could get her to tell me why.

We met up for photo ops. We had a “secret” engagement party with close friends and family that ended up all over the Internet. We held hands walking side by side in Los Angeles, pretending to talk and laugh only to be completely silent on the drive back to the airport.

But that was it.

We no longer hung out outside of the stunts. She didn’t ask me to stay, and she declined me when I tried to get her to.

It was all business now.

And it fucking killed me.

Especially as we sped closer to our expiration date on this whole charade.

Giana was thrilled with the sponsorships that had rolled in for me this

season. We'd filmed so many commercials in August and September that I already knew I was going to be sick of my own face now that they were all airing.

A fast-food restaurant, a shoe brand, an energy electrolyte drink...

Add in that my jerseys continued to sell like hotcakes and we'd sold out the first ten games of the season, and Richard Bancroft was more than tickled pink with this whole arrangement.

On my end, the deal was done.

And we weren't far behind when it came to Mia.

Soon, I knew Isabella would be ready to pull the plug. Garrett Orange had already been silenced for the most part. The album was a success. The tour was already shaping up to break records. I'd served my purpose.

How much longer would they need me?

How much longer would I have an excuse to hold her, to touch her, to kiss her before I'd be asked to fake breaking her heart?

If I was being honest, it didn't feel like something I needed to fake at the moment. It felt like something I'd already done.

I just didn't know *how*.

"I still can't believe you're getting married," Carter said, shaking his head as he untied his skates. "To Mia Fucking Love. I mean, look, I know we're not all best buddies or anything, but... you didn't tell a single soul."

"Why would I?"

He shrugged. "To let us share in the excitement with you? To practice your speech? To... I don't know, have a fucking friend to celebrate with?"

"I don't—"

"Have friends, yeah, yeah, I know," Carter cut me off, standing with a sigh as he ripped his practice jersey overhead. He paused for a long moment before turning to face me. "Doesn't that ever get old to you? Doesn't it ever get... lonely?"

I couldn't explain why his gaze felt like a knife through my chest, why my face grew hot the longer I went without being able to pop back a sarcastic or unaffected response. I swallowed what felt like a glob of sandy peanut butter before slapping on my signature smirk.

"I've been lonely my whole life, kid."

Carter's brows tugged inward, and I couldn't take the fucking pathetic way he was looking at me. I stood, holding up my fist for him to bump.

"See you in the morning. Get some good rest, because I fully intend to

kick your ass on that ice.”

I turned and stripped out of my clothes quickly before heading toward the shower, not leaving any room for further discussion.

In the shower, I overheard one of the televisions from the training room talking about a hurricane moving toward Cuba, its path after that still unknown.

I couldn't help but feel another storm brewing deep inside me.

CHAPTER 25

Stupid Girl

Mia

It was eerily calm when our plane touched down in Tampa in mid-October.

The way we came in, you never would have known there was a hurricane wreaking havoc in Cuba. Weather experts were anticipating that it would gain strength over the warm waters of the Gulf before swinging up toward Louisiana.

But in Tampa, it was sunny, just some fluffy white clouds coasting over the blue sky in a pattern that swirled if you watched it close enough. It was as if that storm was sucking up all the energy within its vicinity, leaving nothing but sunshine for the outskirts.

And everyone was business as usual.

Isabella swore to me there was nothing to worry about when we made the arrangements for me to come to Aleks's game before heading up the coast to New York for my first set of shows. She used to live in Florida, and she assured me that everyone would stock up on water and some non-perishable food *just in case* but that the most that would happen would be a little wind and rain.

Nothing to worry about, nothing that could interfere with my flight out of here tomorrow.

I texted that pink-haired brat as I descended the stairs off the plane, letting her know I'd landed fine and that I'd call when I made it to the house. We'd been able to secure the same one on Davis Island for the past couple of months of this charade with Aleks, and it basically felt like a second home at this point.

I planned to stay tucked away within its walls until the game started, until I could sneak through the back and be escorted to my suite. I'd put on a bit of a show there, wear Aleks's stupid fucking jersey, and then let the cameras catch us leaving together.

He'd drop me off at home, I'd get a good night's sleep, and this time tomorrow, I'd be in New York City with the rest of my band, dancers, and crew.

It was where I should be right *now*. I wanted to be there with them. I wanted to be rehearsing, even though I knew we'd rehearsed so much I couldn't miss a step of choreo even if there was someone throwing buckets of water at me or buttering the bottom of my high heels.

I'd buried myself in this album release, in this tour, more than ever over the last two months.

Anything to not think about Aleks.

The proposal had messed me up more than I wanted to admit to myself, let alone anyone else. I thought I'd be fine after I got away from him for a while, after I got home to California and dove into work.

But everything just got worse with that distance between us.

I was so confused, trying and failing to dig through my thoughts and feelings so I could pull them out, one by one, and face them. I thought if I could name them, I could put them behind me just the same.

Joke was on me.

Any time I did see Aleks for a planned publicity stunt, I felt that irrational anger inside me bubble up again. It was infuriating that I couldn't dust off the whole ordeal. So what, he'd said some lovey-dovey stuff on a boat at sunset. So what, I had more feelings for him than I admitted to Isabella or anyone else.

It was a show, a game, a part of a bigger plan.

And I was a professional.

I needed to get my shit together and stop being such a little crybaby about it all.

The truth was that I wasn't mad at Aleks. I was mad at myself. I knew what I was getting myself into, and yet I had the gall to be upset when my feelings got tangled up in all the pretending. It didn't matter that he made it feel real sometimes... that was his role to play.

And how was he supposed to know that, deep down, I wanted to believe what he said.

It was me who had broken my own damn heart.

I tried to move on. I tried to shake it all off. But just when I'd think I was on the up and up, when I'd be focused on the album and the tour, Aleks would show up or I'd fly out to see him.

And I'd realize that no matter how I iced him out, he was always going to find his way inside my heart.

I repeated the steps of my plan the whole flight here, finding comfort in the fact that I was in control, that this was just one more thing to get through before I could kick off this tour that I'd thrown my all into. I couldn't wait to see my fans, to dance and sing with them, to finally feel this album come to life.

I just had to survive the next twenty-four hours first.

"Surprise!"

I startled at the chorus of voices that shouted that word at me, nearly fumbling my phone as I hit the tarmac. When I realized who the voices belonged to, I blinked, unsure of how to react. Fortunately, I'd faked enough shit in my life up to this point that a smile slid into place easily, and I peeled off my sunglasses with a delight that almost felt real.

"What in the world are you gorgeous ladies doing here?"

Standing in front of a pearl white SUV with very tinted windows was Maven Tanev, Livia Young, Grace Tanev, and Chloe Knott.

AKA — the wives and girlfriends of Aleks's friends.

Er, maybe *friends* was a strong word. Teammates was probably the more accurate one. And technically, Livia was their team dentist and no one's girlfriend. In fact, I was pretty sure Isabella tried to make her *her* girlfriend a couple times, only to be broken hearted that Livia didn't seriously date *anyone*.

But she was Maven's best friend and they seemed attached at the hip. Also, I was pretty sure Carter Fabri had a massive crush on her — whether she saw it or not.

They looked like the final curtain call of a high-end fashion show, all of them dolled up in dresses or curve-hugging suits with heels strapped to their feet. While Maven and Livia sported theirs with confidence, Grace and Chloe looked a little more out of their element, like they'd been wrangled into dressing up by the other two. Still, they were all absolutely stunning.

I had no idea why the hell they were here.

I'd first met them at my album release party. Since then, we'd hung out only a couple times — once at the fake engagement party that Aleks and I had thrown, and once during a planned photo opportunity with the team before preseason kicked off.

These girls were impossible not to like, from Maven and Livia's quick

wit and sass to Grace's free spirit and Chloe's genuine sweetness.

But I still didn't know why they were greeting me on this tarmac when I had planned to spend the day very much alone.

I squeezed my phone in my hand, suspecting Isabella had a hand in it.

She hated how much I'd been in my head lately. I would not have put it past her to set something like this up.

"Okay, hopefully you won't be mad, and hopefully you didn't have any big plans," Grace started, being the first to make her way to where I was frozen at the bottom of the stairs. She grasped my hand in hers and squeezed, bouncing a little like an excited child would. "But... well, we just really wanted to get to know you better."

"And we asked Aleks to help us surprise you," Chloe chimed in from behind. "Aleks and Isabella," she added, confirming my suspicions.

Aleks wanted to surprise me.

Something about that made my stomach flip, that he thought to do something nice for me when I'd been so chilly toward him for months.

"We thought it would be *super* fun to do a girls' brunch before the game later. We booked a private place, no paparazzi — we were assured. And the *best* cocktails," Grace promised.

"We can also completely fuck off," Livia said, subtly squeezing Grace's shoulders and backing her out of my space a bit. "Because this was obviously not what you expected, and we don't want to intrude."

"But," Maven said, offering me a genuine smile. "We really do want to hang. If you do. And I promise — with this crew, there will be no shortage of entertainment."

They all fell silent then, their hopeful eyes on me, and though everything inside me was *screaming* to say, "Thanks, but no thanks," I just couldn't bring myself to do it. And, truth be told, I needed a girls' day. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had one of those.

So, I smiled, tucking my phone inside my purse. "Brunch and cocktails? How could I say no when you're speaking my love language?"

Grace squealed and bounced up and down while Chloe clapped excitedly. Livia and Maven shared a smirk with me before Maven jutted her chin toward the SUV. "Let's roll, trolls."

It was said with love and met with a chorus of laughter.

Then, after a quick conversation with my assistant and security team about the slight change in plans, we were off.

• • •

“I really appreciate you not judging me for fangirling the first few times we hung out,” Chloe said, sucking down the last of her mimosa before Maven was instantly refilling it. The adorable redhead was a giggling mess as she leaned closer to me. “You have to understand, I teach kindergarten. You’re kind of like the queen of everything to them.”

I chuckled, sipping from my own drink as I grabbed my hair in a handful and pulled it off to one shoulder. I never quite knew how to react to statements like that. It was amazing to be loved by children, to see them dancing and singing my songs.

But it was also a big part of why my career hadn’t been taken seriously for so long. It was Garrett Orange’s favorite punchline. It was every powerful man and snide woman’s first hit when it came to trying to knock me down or add a *but* to any accomplishment I had.

“I can’t even imagine that job,” I said, dragging the attention back to her. “Do you ever just want to... I don’t know, pull your hair out?”

Grace laughed. “I know I would, but Chloe here is a little angel on Earth,” she said, squeezing Chloe in a hug around the shoulders. “Patience of a saint and kindness of a woodland fairy.”

“With the fire of a witch,” Maven added. “Because she’s the only woman in the world who could tame Daddy P.”

Livia lifted her glass in a silent cheers to that before slinging back the last of her champagne and refilling. “Alright, I’m tired of dancing around the question we all want to ask.” She leaned her elbow on the table then, narrowing her dark cat eyes at me with a delicate arch of her brow. “How the hell did you end up engaged to Aleks fucking Suter?”

“Liv,” Maven hissed.

“Don’t act like you don’t want to know.” Livia waved her off, her eyes never leaving me.

I smiled, fingering the stem of my champagne glass. “He asked, I said yes. What more do you need to know?”

“I need to know if that man has you dickmatized, because as much as I appreciate the brute and what he does for our team — I don’t exactly see him as your type.”

“Liv,” Maven chastised again.

But I loved that Livia was unapologetic in her questioning — even if the

sentiment in her tone stung a bit.

Was she saying that it was weird that I was with NHL's bad boy, or that I didn't seem like the type *he* usually went for?

It was phrased like the first, but felt like the latter the longer she stared at me. It wasn't necessarily that she was sizing me up, but rather like she was a detective looking for cracks in my story.

And there were many, many cracks — so I knew I needed to tread carefully.

Swallowing down the fact that I was well aware I wasn't Aleks's type — no matter how well he pretended otherwise — I forced what I hoped was a dopey, lovesick smile, my eyes falling to my champagne.

"It doesn't make sense, that I will admit," I said wistfully. "But... I don't know. It just sort of happened. We were best friends when he lived with my family in high school. He opened up to me about things he didn't tell anyone else, and I guess that made me feel safe to do the same."

My throat tightened with the truth of that statement, with how much I cared for that stupid boy.

The words he'd said in that fake proposal echoed in my ears.

"I could never stop loving you — no matter how hard I tried over the years."

How many nights had those words kept me awake over these last two months? How many days did I spend plucking through every fiber of them in search of something I knew didn't exist?

I wanted that statement to be real. I wanted *all* of it to be real.

What a stupid girl I was.

"We kept in touch over the years, but there was always someone or something between us. I dated other people, he had his career to focus on, we lived in different states." It was insane how easily I could tell this lie now, how effortlessly I played into the exact scenario that was killing me from the inside. "But after we reconnected earlier this year, we just... decided we didn't want to play the excuses game anymore. We wanted to try. We wanted to make it work."

My heart twisted violently, stomach roiling.

How desperately I wanted that to be true.

"And now, here we are," I said, smiling at the girls as I lifted my glass to take a sip. I didn't realize I had tears in my eyes until one sneaky bastard leaked and ran down my left cheek. I batted it away, and then laughed a little

when I realized I'd made Chloe cry a bit, too.

"That's so romantic, I want to die a little," she said, sniffing.

Livia tapped her nails on the table before pointing at me. "Well, all I have to say is that I think you're a good look for him. I think you bring out the better in him."

"I co-sign that," Maven added immediately. "And I am also in the camp that it's less about him having you dickmatized — although, I think we *all* had fun when those beach pics of him streaking came out — and more about the fact that he is as soft as a baby kitten when it comes to you."

"The things he said in that proposal?" Grace squeaked.

"The way he nearly ended a man's life when he was playing the role of hot security guard after you recorded at the Daisy Kent show?" Chloe chimed in.

They fanned themselves and talked over one another about which was hotter, all while my knee bounced under the table. I needed a change of subject before I crawled out of my fucking skin.

Because everything in me wanted to tell them it was all a sham.

And for reasons I couldn't quite speak out loud, I wanted to tell them how I really felt. I wanted to tell them how my heart was breaking every second of this charade. I wanted to tell them how I'd gotten myself into this mess, and now I couldn't wait to get out of it.

I wanted to ask them how the fuck I was supposed to pick up all the pieces when this was all said and done, when we faked the break up and I was expected to just go on like nothing had happened — our deal done, the piper paid.

How could I ever forget the way it felt for him to press his hand against the small of my back when we walked in and out of restaurants?

How was I supposed to erase the memory of his mouth on mine, of his hands in my hair, claiming me and driving me mad?

How would I ever fall in love with anyone else when I knew my heart would always belong to him?

"Oh, shit," Maven said, interrupting the fit of laughter the girls were currently entangled in as she frowned at her phone.

"What? Vince forget to water your Monstera again?" Livia teased.

But Maven didn't so much as crack a smile. "Um, apparently we have missed quite a big development in the span of our four-hour brunch." She was already typing away to whoever it was who had texted her. "The

hurricane swung.”

“Swung?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

But suddenly, the girls were silent.

They all pulled out their phones.

“Will has called like eight times,” Chloe murmured. “Oh, he’s probably so worried.” She was already scooting off her chair and rushing to the hallway where the bathrooms were, the phone to her ear.

“Jax, too,” Grace chimed in. “Holy shit. He said the game was canceled.” She looked at me and Livia with wide eyes before hopping up from the table and finding her own corner to call in.

“Okay, can someone fill me in on what is happening?” I asked, heart starting to race. “What does this mean? What’s going on?”

Livia cursed at her phone before setting it on the table and sliding it toward me, screen lit up with a bright red weather alert.

“It’s not heading for Louisiana anymore,” she said. “It’s coming straight for Tampa.”

I blinked at the screen, my ears ringing, brain trying to grasp what that meant as I scrambled for my own phone. There were a dozen missed calls from my parents, along with Rina, Glo, Marci, and Isabella. My pink-haired friend had also sent me a text in all caps that said DO NOT STRESS, I WILL HANDLE THIS. I blinked again when I saw the texts from James, whom I’d made promise me he would stay outside and let me have a peaceful brunch unless there was a dire emergency. His texts simply informed me of the situation, and then each one urged that he felt we should get somewhere safe sooner rather than later.

Bless that man for listening to my wishes, but curse him for being so literal about what defines a dire emergency.

Text after text, call after call, but all of it faded to the background when I saw the two missed texts from Aleks.

Tell me where you are, I’m coming to get you.

And don’t worry, Strings. I’ll keep you safe.

CHAPTER 26

Fireworks

Mia

I should be happy.

I just finished a successful tour. It's summer in Chicago, my favorite time of the year. It's the Fourth of July. Fireworks are already streaking over the dusty blue sky as the sun sets. I'm at Mom and Dad's. I'm at Mom and Dad's with Austin.

I'm with Austin.

My boyfriend.

I should be happy.

But as I stand around the kitchen island with my family, I can't help but feel like every smile I've worn today has been forced.

Austin is laughing at something my mom said as she refills their wine. She goes to refill mine before realizing I haven't touched the last glass she poured. She keeps her smile, but I don't miss the questioning glance in her eyes as she tilts her head marginally.

I tap my temple, pretending my head hurts while giving her the most reassuring smile I can muster.

My eyes flick to the staircase next.

My father is up those stairs, and he isn't alone. I have a feeling he isn't in his study like he said he'd be. He told us he just wanted to send one email real quick before he forgot, and then we'd go watch fireworks on the lake.

But he's been gone for a while now.

So has Aleks.

Being in this house with him again has been disorienting, like trying to find my way through a reoccurring dream. It's familiar, but warped. It's comforting, and yet scary, too.

Everything seemed fine when we were on the boat today. We all laughed and drank and ate and swam. But Aleks never sat next to me. We never got a

moment alone. And I couldn't help but feel like he held some sort of animosity toward Austin, which wasn't fair, considering this was his first time meeting him.

He was distant. He was in his head.

He was having one of those days.

The bad days.

And the more he drank, the more my stomach hurt.

I stay lost in my thoughts until Dad comes down the stairs. Glancing toward Mom and Austin and seeing they were still lost in conversation, I sneak over to meet Dad on the bottom step.

He lets out a heavy sigh when I look up at him, eyes filled with questions I don't have the guts to ask. He places a hand on my shoulder, kisses my hair, and tells me not to worry.

But he's hiding something behind his back.

Something that rattles a bit as he walks away from me and into his bedroom. He emerges a moment later with both hands free, offering me a sad smile before he rejoins Mom and Austin in the kitchen.

My eyes flick up to the second story again.

It's time to go watch fireworks. Austin tells me as much with a warm, lazy kiss to my cheek.

I should be happy.

I tell him and my parents to go on without me. I fake that I have an upset stomach, that I just need to use the restroom and I'll be right out. Austin doesn't ask another question. I'm pretty sure he's still under the illusion that girls don't poop. Mom asks if I need anything with a worried bend of her brows, but I assure her I'm fine.

Dad holds my gaze before they go, some sort of warning in his eyes.

I ignore it.

As soon as they're gone, I tiptoe up the stairs, but I don't go right. Going right would take me to my bedroom.

I go left.

To his.

Two soft knocks on the door announce my presence. That door is cracked, and when I push it open a few inches, I see the room is pitch black. It's silent, too. But it smells like him, like mint and ice.

"Aleks?"

I slip inside, shutting the door behind me and letting my eyes adjust.

There's a flash of red from a firework bursting over the lake, and it illuminates a slumped form in the corner of the room.

Aleks is sitting on the floor, his back against the built-in bookshelf that still hosts a number of his trophies from high school. He has one leg extended in front of him, the other bent, his arm balanced on that knee with a can of beer hanging loosely from his fingertips. His eyes are fixed on that can, unmoving.

He looks like shit.

The more my eyes adjust, the more I see it — his pale skin, the purple under his eyes, the slouch in his shoulders. This isn't my cocky, annoying best friend.

This is his dark twin, the one that always lives inside him, the one he's always running from.

I used to assure him this part of him didn't exist, but eventually, I realized the truth. Now, I just try to remind him this isn't him — not really.

I'm not sure he believes me.

Wordlessly, I drop down to the floor next to him, my back against the shelves, shoulder brushing his triceps. I extend my legs, my feet only coming to the middle of his calf.

Aleks circles the can in his hand a bit, the liquid inside it making a swishing sound. "Your dad send you up here?"

"No. Why would he?"

He laughs at that, shaking his head before draining the rest of his beer. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because he just found me in here with a handful of pills."

He crushes the can and tosses it next to his foot.

He crushes my ribcage with those words, too.

"Aleks..."

"Save your breath, Strings," he says, dragging his hands back over his short hair. "Your dad already lectured me."

"It's not lecturing," I defend. "It's because he loves you. We all do."

Aleks lets his head fall back against the shelf, turning slowly until he's facing me. His eyes are glazed. "You love me, huh?"

My stomach does a dramatic dip, like I just went over the first big hump of a rollercoaster and now I'm plummeting toward the earth.

"Yes," I breathe.

His eyes float between mine, back and forth, like he's trying to read

deeper into that answer. He knows I mean it. I love him — like family.

But can he see the reason that word was so faint when it left my lips?

Can he feel that I may love him in a different way, too?

Aleks swallows, his Adam's apple jutting up and down in his throat.

"What about Austin?" he asks, his voice gruff. "You love him?"

"I think so."

His nostrils flare, but he says nothing. He turns toward the window as the fireworks begin to pop off one after the other. Each spark of color lights up our lawn, and my eyes stick on where I spot Austin with my parents near the dock.

I should be down there with him.

I should be happy.

"Come on," I say, standing. I hold my hand down toward Aleks. "Let's go watch the fireworks."

He stares at my hand. He doesn't move.

He feels so distant.

I want to cry.

"You're worried about me," Aleks says. And then, like that possibility breaks him, he shakes his head and sighs. "Don't worry about me."

"You're not your parents," I tell him. "This part of you... I know it feels powerful sometimes. I know, some days, it's dark. But this isn't you."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

Aleks stares at my feet for a long time before his eyes crawl up to meet mine. "I'll be okay," he promises. The smile he gives me is forced, just like mine has been all day. "You should go. I'm sure Austin wants to kiss you under the fireworks, or whatever perfect boyfriends do."

"Come with me," I try.

At that, he laughs a little, gaze floating to the window.

"Can't, Strings," he croaks. "I just... can't. Not tonight."

I want him to talk to me. I also know that he won't — not right now. If he wanted to talk, he would have started as soon as I walked through his door.

He's in one of those moods where he just wants to shut the world away.

I know better than to push him.

I know what he needs right now, even if I hate giving it to him.

I nod, biting my tongue and all the words I want to say. I lean down and kiss his cheek quickly before I dart out the door, swiping a tear from my jaw.

I take a moment in my bathroom to get myself together, then I make my way down to the lake.

Austin pulls me under his arm when I arrive, greeting me with a beaming smile and a kiss that should make me melt. I should be laughing with him and my parents. I should be feeling electricity tingle down my spine as he whispers what he wants to do to me when the night is done.

I should be happy.

But the boy upstairs isn't.

And I realize then that no amount of time or distance can ever untangle me from him.

CHAPTER 27

Old Sport

Aleks

She wanted to hit me.

I wanted to kiss her.

That was how it had always been with us.

“This is just... great. Just fucking perfect,” Mia said, throwing her hands up in disbelief before she sank down into my giant bean bag with a huff. As soon as she realized where she was sitting, she hopped up with a frustrated growl before stomping over to the couch, instead.

She hated that fucking thing, and I really wanted to laugh.

But nothing was funny in this moment.

The news about the hurricane shift had surprised all of us. It wasn’t unheard of, but the drastic shift toward Tampa had been highly unlikely.

No one like Mother Nature to remind us that *highly unlikely* never meant *impossible*.

We were just finishing up our morning skate, most of the team heading back to our homes for a nap and to load up on carbs when the news broke. Coach had quickly met with management, and before we knew it, the game had been canceled, our opponents told to shelter in place while our team was told to go home and prepare to evacuate if we were in an evacuation zone.

With so little time before the storm would hit, evacuation would be difficult.

Daddy P and Vince were definitely in those mandatory zones, one of them on Davis Island and the other right on the beach. Fortunately, they both had places to go that were more inland. Will, Chloe, and Ava would go to Will’s uncle’s house, and Maven and Vince would go to Mave’s parents’.

The rest of us would shelter in place, and I’d had the good sense to stock my condo with hurricane prep supplies just in case. I’d be good.

But I knew the second I picked Mia up and saw the mix of fear and anger

on her face that I was in for a rough night whether the storm was bad or not.

She buried her face in her hands, shaking her head.

“What am I going to do?”

Under normal circumstances, I’d toss a smart-ass remark at her and smirk as that perfect mouth of hers gaped open at me, as her cheeks turned red and that little vein in her forehead popped. I knew exactly how to push her buttons, how to make rage pour through that normally put-together woman.

But right now, I just wanted to comfort her. That side of me I always kept tied up in the basement of my cold, dead heart was thrashing, urging me to go to her, to pull her into me, to hold her and find a way to make it right.

We’d barely talked in months.

She’d iced me out.

And selfishly, I was a bit happy about the sudden change in plans if it meant I’d get a night alone with her.

Maybe I could get her to talk to me. Maybe I could get her to tell me what the fuck has been going on since the day she firmly shoved me away.

Her dark hair fell over her shoulders in a silky curtain as I took the seat next to her. I hovered one hand over her slender back before I carefully, slowly, rubbed it. “I’m sorry.”

Mia froze under my touch.

There it was again, that shock of electricity between us, that zap of heat I felt any time my body made contact with hers.

But just when I thought she might melt into that touch, Mia yanked away, uncovering her face so she could properly glare at me. Those sharp blue eyes of hers narrowed into slits. “Well, you should be. This is all your fault.”

And just like that, we were back to sparring.

“My fault?” I gaped at her, smirking even with my mouth open because I wanted her to feel as ridiculous as she was being. “Mia, it’s a fucking hurricane. What the hell am I supposed to do about it?”

“You’re the whole reason I’m here instead of in New York to begin with. I’m doing all this to save your ass! And now, I have to cancel a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden.”

The truth of that seemed to hit her full force, her face going white.

“Oh, God,” she whimpered, burying her face again. “I have to cancel a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden.”

Any desire I did have to comfort her was receding now, held at bay by her accusation. “Saving my ass,” I repeated, tonguing my cheek. “So, this is

all about me suddenly? I'm the big bad wolf and you're just doing this to be a little saint, huh? Nothing at all in it for you?"

"Oh, shut up," she spat, shoving me away. I barely budged.

"Because I'm pretty sure this was *your* publicist's idea," I reminded her.

"Well, *your* agent is the one who made me come here for your stupid game!"

"Made you?" I stood, jaw tight. "You are a woman with free will, Mia. In case you forgot. No one can make you do anything."

She looked up at me then, her eyes softer, something in the relaxing of her jaw telling me I'd struck a nerve without trying.

No, I silently begged. Don't do that. Don't clam up. Fight me. Get mad. Tell me what's going through your head.

"Whatever," she said after a moment. The word was resigned, not laced with any sort of edge, and that upset me more than if she'd screamed it.

I could handle her yelling at me.

I couldn't handle knowing I'd hurt her — even with all the practice I'd had over the years.

She sniffed, waving her hand in the air. "Do you at least have some tequila or something?"

"Need to get drunk to face the truth?"

"That I'm stuck in a high-rise condo with my fake fiancé with a hurricane barreling toward us?" She stood, a saccharine smile on her tight lips. "Um, yeah. Drunk is the bare minimum."

She stormed past me and into my kitchen then, and I took a deep breath, letting it out as slowly and calmly as I could as I folded my hands together and rested them on top of my head. I stared up at the ceiling, debating converting to the first religion I could think of just to see if there was a god who could save me.

Mia needed to drink to get through this, and I needed to sit on my fucking hands.

Because she wanted to hit me, and I wanted to kiss her.

And with the two of us forced to stay together for the night, I had no idea how the hell I was going to keep up the charade of anything I felt for this woman being fake.

• • •

Thirty minutes later, Mia was two tequila shots in — shots she sipped,

because the kind of tequila I had in my house was meant to be savored — and had resorted to lying like a starfish on her back in the middle of my living room staring up at the ceiling. She alternated between long, heavy sighs and quiet little whimpers of despair.

“We’re going to be okay,” I assured her as I sat on the couch above where she was sprawled. I had my sneakers in one hand, and I dropped them to the floor next to me, pulling the first one on my foot and lacing it up. “I’ve got plenty of food and supplies if we lose power. Flooding is our biggest concern being downtown, but right now they’re not predicting the surge to be where it would impact us. And this building is brand new, it’s up to code, it’s sturdy.”

Mia nodded, her head lolling to the side as she looked at me. “While all of that is comforting, I’m being a bit of a selfish bitch right now and thinking about how I’m about to have to cancel the biggest tour debut of my career.”

“You won’t have to do that.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Isabella is working on it, and that woman can do anything. You can’t get out tonight, but that wasn’t your plan, anyway. It was always to fly tomorrow. And my bet is that you’ll still be fine to do exactly that.”

“What if the storm completely wrecks the airport?”

“Highly unlikely, but if that does happen, we’ll come together as a community and get it fixed. And there are other airports within two to five hours in several directions from here.”

Mia’s mouth pulled to the side. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

“You worry too much,” I said, bopping her on the nose as I stood once my other shoe was on. I could tell she was a little tipsy, mostly because she seemed less likely to claw my eyes out.

I swiped my key fob off the kitchen island as I passed it, Mia scrambling up from the floor behind me.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’ll be right back.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I just have something I need to do real quick.”

“There’s a *hurricane* outside.”

“We have some time before the worst of it hits.”

“So, what? You’re going out for a little stroll in the rain? A drink at the local bar?”

“Worried about me now, darling fiancée?” I asked, swinging my key ring

around my finger with a grin.

She scoffed. "Don't flatter yourself."

I remembered another time she *was* worried about me. When I gave her *reason* to worry.

That version of myself felt far away now. It had been so long since I'd felt that desperate, that lonely, that... numb.

But I knew he was still inside me. He always would be.

"You could always come with me."

"To go *out* in a hurricane? No, thanks. I'm not crazy."

I chuckled. "Suit yourself."

I only made it to the door before she let out a little huff of a groan behind me. "Wait! Wait a second, let me put shoes on."

Five minutes later, we were out the door, Mia with her arms crossed and a massive hoodie on. She had the hood up and sunglasses to boot.

"You really think I'd put you in danger of the media or a fan frenzy right now?"

"Well? You won't tell me where we're going, so—"

Her words died when I stopped abruptly a few doors down from my own, knocking on the door of condo 2143. I slid my hands into my pockets, smirking as she blinked at the door first, and then at me, dumbfounded.

The door swung open before she had the chance to ask anything more.

"First a hurricane, the game canceled, and now a scoundrel showing up at my door?" The old man with his liver-spotted hands on the doorknob shook his head, scowling as if he were annoyed. But I knew him well enough to see right through it, especially when he opened the door wider for us to enter. "The good Lord must really be testing me today."

"Nice to see you in such good spirits, old sport."

He harrumphed at the nickname I gave him because he quoted *The Great Gatsby* the first time I met him, then he blinked, thin lips curling into an appreciative smile when Mia took her hood off.

"Well, now," he mused, a hand at his stomach as he half-bowed. "If you aren't the prettiest thing this old man has seen in decades."

"Easy there," I warned him when he reached out for Mia's hand. "I don't need you having a heart attack when the hospitals are all busy preparing for the storm."

He scowled at me for only a second before his smile was back in place and aimed right at my fake fiancée.

“Mia, this is Otis Schwartz. Otis, Mia Conaway.”

“A true pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mia. *Vous êtes charmante.*”

“He speaks French now,” I teased, folding my arms over my chest with an arched brow.

“And I speak just enough Swiss German to tell you to bug off, too, if needed.”

He quipped those words without so much as a glance my way, and I chuckled, shaking my head as I made my way farther into his condo. It was a very similar layout to mine, though a bit smaller, and filled with ornate furniture, curious art, and trinkets that evidenced the many travels he’d had in his lifetime. Old books and maps and globes decorated the space, most of the furniture antique wood of some kind, everything warm and a bit musty smelling even in a brand-new condominium building. He was old money rich, the kind where his parents and his parents’ parents never had to worry.

“I’m going to bring your furniture in,” I told him.

“Ah, so that’s why you barged in on this fine afternoon,” he said. The wind whipped angrily outside just as he said it. “How silly of me to think you might be joining me for a glass of brandy and a good conversation.”

“Safety first, booze second. Make mine a scotch, will you?”

Otis waved his weathered hand at me, but his smile was warm as he nodded, mouthing *thank you*. I nodded in return, a silent gesture to let him know there was no thanks necessary.

Otis was eighty-nine years old, a white man with most of his hair missing, other than little tufts of white lining the lower half of his skull. He had more hair coming out of his ears, if we were being honest. He slumped forward a bit even when standing, working hard to lift his head up to sass me, and he had a cane that he only used half the time he should be.

I met Otis at an Ospreys game last year when he was honored as our season ticket holder of the game. He’d been one ever since the organization was founded, and we hit it off quickly when he came to the locker room for pictures and to get autographs from the team.

When I was leaving the stadium that night, walking over to my condo, I noticed him as I approached the building. Stubborn old man had walked from the arena after the game, too, and it’d taken him so long to walk that I’d had time to have our game debrief, shower, and answer interviews and still caught up to him.

I’d walked him the rest of the way home, pleasantly surprised to find that

he was my neighbor just a few doors down. Since then, he'd sort of... stuck. It was like I'd fed a stray cat and now he'd just show up on my doorstep from time to time wondering what was for dinner.

I'd never admit it to him or anyone else, but I liked his company.

And I forced him to let me help him, whether he liked it or not.

I listened to him charming Mia with a smile on my face as I moved his outdoor chairs and couch inside, pushing the furniture as much out of the way as I could. He had a few plants on his balcony, too, and I made sure to collect them before I shut the sliding glass door. It wasn't raining too hard just yet, but the wind was already picking up, and the last thing anyone needed was this old man's furniture or plants becoming projectiles in this storm.

I shook off the bit of rain that had gathered on me, taking off my shoes and setting them aside as I made my way toward where Otis and Mia were in the kitchen. Otis was regaling Mia with a story of his sailing days.

But Mia's eyes were on me.

I thought she looked even less likely to stab me in my sleep now, her gaze soft and curious, head tilted just a bit to the side. I offered a small tilt of my lips, and as soon as I did, she blinked, her expression hardening as she turned back to Otis and dutifully ignored me as I approached them.

So much for progress.

"What are you doing now, you rascal?" Otis asked as I opened his pantry.

"Making sure you have enough food and water should we lose power for a few days and be trapped by flood waters."

"Oh, I've been in Florida for most my life," he said, batting the air with both hands. "We'll be just fine."

"Maybe. But just in case, always best to be prepared. Right, boy scout?" I patted him on the head as I passed, Mia chuckling a bit as the old man growled at me and swung too slow to actually hit me.

"Impossible, this one," he muttered to Mia. I noticed he'd poured them each a glass of brandy, and a tumbler of scotch waited for me beside them. "Doesn't know how to leave this old man alone."

"Like you don't show up at my place like a lost puppy nearly every other night during the offseason."

"I'm bored without hockey. You're a last resort to cure that boredom."

"It's okay to say you love me, Otis."

"Love you like a thorn in my backside."

But he smiled as he said it before he was back to charming Mia with more

tales of his worldly travels.

On inspection, I found Otis did have a pretty decent amount of nonperishable food to get by, as well as a case of water. He did not, however, have a lantern or any kind of flashlight. After a quick jog down the hall to my place, I supplied him with a couple of mine, filled his bathtub with water just in case, and only then did I accept the liquor with my name on it.

“Cheers, old sport,” I said, tapping his glass with mine. “M’lady,” I said to Mia as I tapped hers.

She was still watching me with equal parts suspicion and curiosity in her eyes.

“So, now that you’ve heard how I met this brute,” Otis said, nodding toward me. “How do you two know each other?”

His bony finger waved between us, and I took a sip of my glass, raising a brow at Mia to let her answer.

“We grew up together,” she said simply.

“Mmm, and he hasn’t annoyed you enough to drop him yet, eh?”

“You’re brutal tonight, Otis,” I teased. “Really hurting my feelings here.”

“You don’t have feelings any more than I have real teeth.”

I chuckled, but my smile slipped a bit when I looked at Mia, who was watching me in a way I couldn’t quite decipher.

“He’s not so bad,” she said, her voice soft. “If you really know him.”

I swallowed at her sincerity, eyes searching hers as if I could find the answer to why she’d been so cold to me since the day of the fake engagement. But she tore her gaze away too quickly, clearing her throat and smiling at Otis before asking him another question about his life.

We didn’t stay much longer after that, mostly because I noticed Otis was yawning quite a bit and his eyelids were already drooping. I didn’t know how this man made it to half our games when he was usually asleep by seven.

Still, I could tell he was enjoying Mia’s company and attention, so until it was almost nine, I let him prattle on about the time he swore he discovered Göbekli Tepe before Klaus Schmidt. When we said our goodbyes for the night, I made Otis promise to call me or come over if he needed anything, and he made Mia promise to not let me chase her away so that he could see her again.

Mia was silent on the walk back to my condo, sliding inside without a word once I ran my key fob over the sensor and opened the door for her. She kicked off her slides, walked to the middle of the room, and stood there —

just staring out at the wind-whipped rain visible through the windows in every direction.

It was dark, save for the lamp I'd left on down the hall in my room. Mia stood there like a ghost for so long I wondered if she really was one.

"Can I take a shower?" she finally asked.

"Of course."

With that, she nodded, slowly dragging her feet down the hall toward the guest room I'd shown her to earlier. I'd been half-tempted to board that motherfucker up and pretend we only had my room available, but I wanted her to feel comfortable, safe — not even more stressed than I knew she already was.

"Mia," I said when she was almost to the room.

She paused, leaving her back to me but angling her chin so I could see her profile, so I knew she was waiting.

"I'm glad you're here."

It was honest, and I also hoped it comforted her a bit in a situation that was completely out of her control.

But she barely acknowledged the statement at all, just a huff of a laugh through her nose before she disappeared into the guest room.

CHAPTER 28

So Prickly

Mia

Numb was my state of being as I padded down the hallway barefoot after my shower, hair dripping wet and Aleks's jersey hanging from my shoulders. It was so big it swallowed me, the hem of it brushing my kneecaps.

I debated just locking myself in the guest room for the night, but my stomach protested with a fierce growl the moment I smelled whatever it was Aleks was cooking. I decided I'd re-emerge long enough to eat and then I'd ride out the storm alone.

My thoughts and feelings matched the weather, the tumultuous whirlwind inside me mirroring the wind and rain outside the windows. On a whole, I was terrified for Tampa, for anyone in the path of the hurricane. Selfishly, I was worried sick I'd have to cancel my first show at Madison Square Garden. But the most turbulent emotions surrounded how I felt to be stuck overnight with Aleks in this condo.

I was still so angry at him, so hurt by the way he'd avoided my questions only to then knock me on my ass with the most romantic speech of all time. It killed me that he could just fake that, that those words could spill from his mouth, his eyes so sincere, and then he could be shocked by me being upset when he shrugged it off the moment the cameras weren't on us, looking at me with an expression of *how'd I do?*

In the next breath, I wondered if I was overreacting. I'd iced him out since then, hellbent on putting distance between us for the rest of this little charade because I was in danger of getting hurt. But was that fair?

He was right. It *had* been me who had asked him to do this in the first place.

I knew what I was getting into.

He was doing everything I'd asked.

Still... did he not feel *anything*? Was this all really just for show?

And if it was, why did that pierce me right through the heart when it was exactly what I'd wanted?

I thought back to the plane ride to New York when Isabella had asked if I wanted to call it all off, and I couldn't help but chuckle at how confidently I'd assured her everything was fine.

I could have saved myself all this pain and confusion.

But then I'd have had to miss the way it felt to be held by him, to be protected with his arms around me, to watch him threaten anyone who came too close. I would never have known what it felt like to have his lips on mine.

Even now, if I could go back... I'd do it all again.

As if I wasn't already confused enough as it was, seeing the way he was with Otis... it stirred up all the emotions I'd managed to wrangle in the past couple of months. Because *that* was the man I knew lived inside Aleks. He was kind, and compassionate, and *good*.

He'd never felt those things about himself, but I saw it. I always had.

Even now, when I wanted to hate him, he did shit like that and reminded me I never could.

Aleks was in the kitchen when I emerged, his back to me as he tended to something on the stovetop. The television showed the local news reporting on the hurricane but it was muted, a jazz playlist crooning softly through the condo, instead.

"I made some *rööshti*," he said, grabbing a couple pasta bowls from the cabinet to his left. "It's nothing special, just some bacon and potato magic, but it's one of my favorite comfort foods when I'm sick or it's storming, raining, snowing." He chuckled. "Not that we get any snow in Tampa."

He plated up the first bowl, but when he turned to set it on the kitchen island, he froze at the sight of me.

Dark brown eyes dragged over me slowly, hungrily, with a simmering intensity that lodged my next breath firmly in my chest. He swallowed thickly, the bowl gripped tightly in his hand, his pupils blown out by the time they made their way back to meet my gaze.

"Christ, Mia."

"What?" I asked, a bit breathlessly, I realized, before I tilted my chin up and folded my arms over my chest.

"You're wearing my jersey."

"Yeah, well, it was either this or the lingerie I packed when I thought I'd be sleeping alone," I shot back, sliding onto one of the barstools at the island.

Aleks stayed frozen for a beat, his dark eyes locked on mine with a heat that made my skin prickle. Was he angry? People slept in jerseys, didn't they? It was at least fine to wear casually around his condo... wasn't it? Or was it an insult of some kind that I wasn't aware of? Was I only supposed to wear it to a game?

I was still trying to figure it out when Aleks blinked, like the simple act of me sitting down snapped him back to this universe. In an instant, his usual cool demeanor slid back into place, the moment gone before I could untangle what that raw, unguarded possession in his gaze might have meant.

"Does that mean I'll have company in my bed tonight?" he asked on a cocky smirk, setting the steaming bowl of *rööschi* down on the granite in front of me. It smelled like bacon potato heaven, and my stomach growled again.

"Ha, ha."

"Oh, come on. You can serve up better banter than that."

"I don't have the energy or the desire right now," I said, making a face at him before I picked up the fork and took my first bite. I didn't even care that it was steaming hot and nearly burned my tongue off — it was delicious.

I noticed how Aleks paused then, his eyes locked on my hand. I was wondering if I was somehow offending him with the way I ate now when I realized he was looking at the ring.

The ring he'd given me.

The fake one that didn't mean shit.

I covered it self-consciously, twisting it on my knuckle. "Obviously had to wear it for all the pictures today," I murmured. "Forgot to take it off."

It was only half a lie. I did wear it any time I knew I'd be photographed, but I also had taken it off when I showered.

I'd also put it right back on when I was done.

I loved that ring. I loved the words he'd said when he'd given it to me.

"Don't," Aleks said when I started to slip it off my finger. He held my gaze when I paused, questioning him. "I... I just don't want you to forget it here."

Right.

My shoulders slumped, disappointment simmering in my gut. As I dove into my food again, I internally scoffed at myself. I had no reason to be upset.

Story of my life lately.

Aleks made his own plate before taking a seat next to me. We ate in

silence, jazz as our background music, interrupted intermittently by a particularly strong gust of wind. A few glances at the TV let me know that the hurricane was moving slowly through the Gulf, the worst of it expected to hit in the middle of the night.

“Looks like it’s going to hit farther north,” Aleks mused, stacking my bowl on top of his with his eyes on the television. He rounded the island to the sink, rinsing the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher.

“You think?”

“Seems to be trending that way.”

I sighed, hopping down from my barstool and making my way over to the couch. I plopped down, crossing my legs under me and burrowing into one of the blankets Aleks had. It was soft and heavy, a bit weighted if I had to guess, and absolutely massive — likely so it was big enough to cover the behemoth of a man who owned it.

“I’m a terrible person.”

“Because you didn’t thank me for feeding you?”

I glared at him. “Because I’m happy the storm is swinging north. Maybe that means I’ll get out of here.” I paused, picking at my nail polish. Sometimes I wished I could have long nails, stiletto or almond shaped, maybe. But I couldn’t play guitar with nails like that. “And thanks for feeding me,” I added softly.

Aleks chuckled, finishing up where he was cleaning in the kitchen. “You’re welcome. And you’re not terrible for not wanting something you’ve dreamed about forever to be canceled. But you also don’t have to worry about it. It’ll all be okay.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

I flattened my lips, folding my arms as I glared at him when he sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “You’re literally never positive. You always grump about how life is meaningless. So don’t try to play Mr. Sunshine now that I have something to be upset about.”

Aleks arched one brow high into his hairline before barking out a laugh. “You are so prickly tonight.”

“I’m not prickly!”

I huffed the words, which made him laugh harder, which in turn made *me* scream into the heavy, fluffy blanket before I threw it off me and stood.

“Whatever. I’m going to sulk alone in peace.”

Aleks was thoroughly enjoying himself, struggling to catch his breath between chuckles as I marched past him. Just as I was about to leave, he reached out, his large, calloused hand curling around my wrist.

“Wait,” he said, still fighting off laughter, and with a gentle tug, he drew me closer. “Come here.”

“What?” I stumbled a little, my heart skipping as he slid his hands to my hips.

He turned me toward the television, giving me another soft pull.

“Sit.”

“No, I’m going to bed.”

“Sit *down*, woman.”

I tilted my chin, crossing my arms in defiance. I was ready to tell him that he could get fucked trying to order me around like that, but then he stood behind me, his hands moving up to rub my shoulders.

Tension melted off me like butter on a skillet the moment he sank those thumbs deep into my muscle.

“Sit down, *please*,” he amended. “I want to make you feel better. Will you stop being so damn stubborn for one millisecond and let me try?”

Oh, how I wanted to say no. I willed myself to tell him I didn’t need him to help me with *anything* — but I was a prisoner under that delicious pressure of his hands. A groan leaked out of me unbidden, and reluctantly, I did as he said.

Aleks waited until I was cross-legged on the floor in front of the couch before he took a seat on it again, his legs braced on either side of my shoulders. He worked the muscles for a while, his magic hands slow and steady and sure. It took every ounce of willpower in me not to moan again, and I used it, because I’d be damned if this man got me to moan when I was mad at him.

Why was I mad at him again?

“Feel better?” he asked, his breath warm on my ear.

I shrugged, which earned me another amused laugh.

Okay, maybe he was right. Maybe I was being stubborn. But it was his fault for being so damn confusing — and for living in a state where there are freaking hurricanes.

After a moment, Aleks pulled on my shoulders until I reclined farther, my back settling against the leather couch. His hands glided up over my neck, fingers weaving through the strands at the base of my scalp, sending chills

down to my bare toes.

He didn't say a word, but I already knew what he was doing.

He was braiding my hair.

The motions were achingly familiar—his fingers gliding from roots to tips, massaging my scalp just a little before he separated the first section to begin the braid.

And this time, I couldn't fight it.

I let out a deep and heavy sigh, my shoulders relaxing with it, eyes fluttering shut at the feel of something so nostalgic.

When we were in high school, Aleks would braid my hair any time he saw that I was stressed out or having a bad day. It had started from him watching me huff in frustration one morning before school as I tried and failed to French braid my hair. I was so worried about my audition to sing the national anthem at a Bears game that season that I kept messing up the braid, and by the time he found me, I was on the verge of crying or ripping my hair out or both.

He hadn't said a word. He'd simply taken me by the hand and led me out of my bathroom and into my bedroom. He had me sit on the floor and he sat in my desk chair behind me while he braided my hair — calmly, efficiently, — all while I silently cried and wiped my tears away.

By the time he asked me for a hair tie to fasten the end of the braid, I was breathing steadier. I'd asked him how he knew how to do it, and he'd told me he used to braid Anneliese's hair because her arthritis had gotten so bad and she missed having her hair braided.

I'd had a hard time not crying again at that.

Afterward, it just became ritual. Whenever I felt those talons of anxiety clawing at my insides, I'd find him, wordlessly handing him a hair tie and situating myself on the floor at his feet.

Tears stung my eyes at the memory, at the way my body and mind and soul found relief with his hands in my hair now.

This was what he was for me, what he'd always been — my rock.

Strong and steady and supportive.

Even when I was being a brat.

Aleks had unmuted the television, but I only half-listened to the weather reporter detailing the storm update. I was more focused on every brush of his fingertips against my scalp, my eyes closed, breaths coming easier and easier with each stroke.

“You used to love when I did this,” he mused behind me, his voice deep and quiet. “Said it brought you peace.”

A tear slid hot and fast down my left cheek, falling onto my lap before I could swipe it away.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your questions when we were at the pier.”

My eyes opened at that, heart kicking up a notch from where it had steadied.

“I...” He cleared his throat. “Well, you know how I feel about myself, about what I have to offer.”

I heard him swallow behind me, his hands still weaving my hair as if it was like riding a bike, something he’d never forget how to do no matter how much time had passed.

“It’s hard to admit that I wish I could be better than I am.”

Crack.

I heard it as much as I felt it, that little hairline fracture in my heart. This man, my best friend... he would never see himself the way I saw him. He’d never understand how much good lived within him, how much he *did* have to offer.

“I don’t mean to sound trite, but... have you thought about talking to someone?”

The words sounded as awkward as they felt coming out of my mouth, but to his credit, Aleks didn’t laugh or scoff or brush me off like he had the right to.

“Therapy?”

I nodded.

He was quiet a long while, his fingers getting closer and closer to the end of the braid even with how slowly he was moving.

“Maybe I should,” he admitted softly.

When he finished off the braid, I pulled off the hair tie I always had on my wrist and handed it to him. He took his time wrapping it around the ends of my hair, his hands hovering even after it was fastened like he wasn’t sure what to do next.

The air around us grew heavier, thick with the electricity of the storm perhaps, or maybe it was something else.

Something that had always been there.

Something I would always wonder if he felt, too.

“I wish you’d talk to me.”

I closed my eyes at his words, letting them rumble over me just like the wind shaking the building we were in.

But I couldn't grant his request.

Not when I had no idea what to say.

"I'm going to bed," I whispered.

And I did so without another word or glance in his direction.

CHAPTER 29

Chasing Dreams

Aleks

I woke to the sound of music.

I wasn't sure I'd actually slept at all.

It'd taken me a while to leave the living room and retreat to my bedroom, a big part of me hoping that Mia would change her mind and come back to join me. When she didn't, I'd spent at least the better part of an hour just staring up at the ceiling in my room, my entire body tuned in to the fact that she was just a few doors down the hall.

It was like when we were teenagers, except now, I didn't feel welcome to join her. I didn't feel like I could just knock on her door and hop up into bed with her, tease her about whatever song she was writing or ask if she wanted to go walk down by the lake.

She was in my condo, and yet she was a thousand miles away.

I blinked in the darkness of my room, reaching for my phone to check the time as the soft sound of piano music spilled in from down the hall. It was just past three in the morning.

We must have lost power because my phone wasn't charging even though it was plugged in and my room felt darker than usual. I used the light from my phone screen to guide the way to my door, bare feet padding over the wood floors as I followed the sound of the keys.

I needed the light less and less as I got closer to the living room. Even with the storm raging outside, there was still enough glow from those who still had power in the city filtering in through the windows. When I could see without it, I tucked my phone away, slowing my steps.

I halted altogether when I saw her.

Mia sat at my piano, her dark hair still in the braid I'd weaved, my jersey hanging from her shoulders. It sparked a primal need in me, seeing my number on her back as her hands moved over the bone-white keys. I couldn't

see her thighs, but her feet were bare where they worked the pedals beneath the bench she sat on, her delicate ankle still sporting that dainty chain she'd had on the day of our fake engagement.

Her entire body moved slowly and fluidly with the music she played, the chords devastatingly sad and yet somehow laced with hope.

For a long moment, I stood tucked away at the edge of the hall, shoulder leaned against the wall as I watched and listened. She was singing softly — so softly that I couldn't hear what the words were at first. But as the song worked to a crescendo, her voice rose with it.

*"I'm holding on to echoes, to whispers in the dark,
Wondering if you feel it, too, or if I'm just another spark.
I'm reaching through the silence, hoping you'll take my hand,
But maybe I'm just chasing dreams in a shifting, sinking sand."*

If the lyrics weren't enough to sucker punch the air right out of me, the way she sang them would have been. Longing and hopeless desperation were tangled in every word, and I could almost see them physically manifesting as ropes binding her body as she swayed with the song, her hands moving effortlessly as she brought that sad music to life.

I didn't know who she was singing about.

I had absolutely no right to even *think* it was about me.

And maybe it was the wind and the rain pelting against the windows, the percussion of it drumming up my heartbeat. Maybe it was the tension from the night, from the last two *months* of wondering what was going on inside that head of hers.

Maybe it was just sheer selfish curiosity.

But I decided in that moment that I had to know.

My feet were moving me across the living room before I'd even made a conscious decision to do so. I took each step slowly and quietly, careful not to disturb her, as if she were a bunny in the woods and one quick movement would have her skittering away again.

She was so beautiful.

She was so *breathtakingly* beautiful.

I cataloged the long slope of her neck, the delicate outline of her shoulders, the narrow bend of her waist beneath my jersey the closer I got. My heart was racing in my throat by the time I reached her, and I knew she felt my presence only by how her body slightly tensed, by a minor skip in the

music — just enough to make me stop.

I stood a few inches behind her, chest tight with anticipation as she continued playing her song. She wasn't singing anymore, though. She was silent. And when she angled her chin just enough to offer me a subtle angle of her profile, I swore I saw the pulse in her neck mirroring mine.

Mia only afforded me that view for a moment before her attention was back on the keys, and with every ragged breath I took, my thoughts ran wild.

Say something.

What do I say?

Tell her how you feel.

How the fuck do I feel...

I have nothing to give her.

She's too good for me.

I'm not her type.

But maybe she wants me, too.

Maybe all this pretending hasn't been so fake.

She's been cold, distant... she hates me.

Or does she love me?

Are the two not so close they could be one and the same?

I want to kiss her, without any cameras around.

Would she let me?

Or would she stop me, like she did in LA, like she did on the pier?

I could have spent the entire night standing there behind her, listening to her play her sad song while I thought up every excuse to not move a muscle, to not say a word.

But, like many times in my life, I said *fuck it*.

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat, slowly reaching forward until my hands found her shoulders. Mia stiffened when I touched her, until I started kneading the tight muscles.

Slowly, she released, head falling back slightly even as her fingers kept their pace on the keys. The music surrounded us, the soundtrack to a moment that felt so weighted.

I let my hands explore, sliding them up to cup the back of her neck, to brush my knuckles along her jaw, to destroy her braid as I ran my fingers roughly through it to massage her scalp.

Her breath was as shallow as mine when I maneuvered to sit on the bench next to her, straddling it and admiring the way the soft light through my rain-

streaked windows hit the side of her face. I cupped that gorgeous face in one hand, thumb resting over her ear, fingers curling at the nape of her neck. When I ran my thumb along her bottom lip, I wet my own, and her mouth parted to reward me with a sweep of warm breath.

Her eyelids fluttered shut, head tilting to lean into my touch only a moment before she stopped playing. The silence of my apartment was jarring in the absence of the melody, a heavy quiet that wrapped around us before I noticed the faint sounds the music had hidden before.

Rain drumming.

Wind whistling.

The city outside thrummed with its own rhythm, as alive as the pulse between us.

She turned to me, eyes opening to lock onto mine.

And that's when I realized she'd been crying.

I could just barely make out the gleaming proof on her cheeks, her watery eyes watching me as her nose flared, her bottom lip wobbling.

"Mia..." I croaked.

"No," she whispered, her eyes falling to my chest. She wrapped her hand around my wrist, holding me steady where I still cupped her face. "I don't want to talk about it. Please, just..." She rolled her lips together, a fresh tear sneaking free as she lifted her gaze to mine. I wiped that tear with my thumb, feeling it burn my skin like a liquid fire. "Can you kiss me?"

I frowned, stroking her cheek with my thumb and willing her to talk to me, but she shook her head before I could even ask again.

"Aleks, *please*. Kiss me." She fisted her hand in my sleep shirt, twisting. "Please. *Please*."

A blink, and we were kids again, alone in her bedroom, those exact words rolling off her lips.

I'd been scared then — scared of her father, of the repercussions, of not being what she needed, what she deserved. I was so hellbent on being respectful, not just of her dad's wishes, but of her.

Tonight, I didn't care if I wasn't good enough.

I wanted her so badly, I'd risk being her mistake.

"Only if you agree."

"Agree to what?"

"To let me kiss you everywhere."

Surprise flitted across her expression for only a breath before her eyes

heated, her next breath bottoming out.

“To let me do *more* than just kiss you,” I clarified, sucking in a breath through my nose as my hand traveled down, fingertips tracing her jaw, her chin, until I splayed my hand over her neck and curled my fingers around it.

“To let me ruin you in every way I’ve ever imagined.”

A heated promise punctuated with a tightened grip.

A sweet surrender underlined with a longing sigh.

One word, riding on a breath of tentative release.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 30

Give In To Me

Mia

“Yes.”

How that word reverberated through me.

How it echoed off every beaten, battered wall I was tired of holding up.

How it filled me with buzzing, palpable anticipation.

And no sooner than it had escaped my lips, it was silenced by his.

He angled his mouth over mine, sure and swift, both of us inhaling at the contact. I gave into him with that breath, and he seemed to claim me with his.

This wasn't a kiss for the sake of a photograph. This wasn't a sweet, staged caress for the paparazzi.

This was carnal.

This was a hand, warm and strong where it gripped my neck and pulled me into him. It was a mouth so demanding and dominant I knew I'd never really been kissed by Aleks before — not like this. It was a guttural groan from his throat that elicited a desperate whimper from my own when our tongues touched.

It was heaven.

It was hell.

It was surrender and assassination in tandem.

He wanted to ruin me.

I was desperate to be ruined.

And I climbed into his lap with any last shred of apprehension blowing away in the hurricane wind.

“*Fuck, Mia,*” he growled into my mouth, his tongue sweeping over mine as I straddled his thighs. “Say it again. Tell me you want this.”

“I want this,” I promised, rolling against him, grinding myself along the thick bulge straining through his joggers as his hands clamped down on my hips. I wasn't sure if he wanted to stop me or pull me down harder, his own

hips bucking up to meet mine in an eager thrust.

“Tell me you want me to destroy you.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me I can do anything I want.”

“I’m yours.”

And I was. I always had been. And I didn’t care anymore if it was all a charade, if there was an ending in sight, if one day I’d be sobbing in my home studio writing songs about what could have been.

I only cared about tonight.

He kissed me hard, hands framing my face, fingers curling into what was left of my disheveled braid. He nipped at my bottom lip as he deftly unfastened the hair tie, tossing it aside and running his fingers through the freed strands. I moaned at the feel of it, of his large, adept hands, his arms encasing me, his thighs spreading wider so that I had no choice but to do the same.

“You in this fucking jersey,” he cursed, hands running down my ribs until he was fisting the fabric and tugging. “It drives me insane, Mia. It makes me reckless.” He tugged enough to expose my collarbone, his teeth biting the flesh as I gasped. “I’m going to strip you bare and bind you with it. I’m going to make you squirm until you’re begging me for relief, until all you can do is scream my name like a desperate little fangirl.”

Filthy. Degrading.

Addicting.

I wanted more.

“You’re so full of yourself,” I said breathlessly, the bite of my rebuttal weak.

“You’ll be full of me soon, too.”

The promise danced across my neck with his hot breath, his tongue drawing a line up to my jaw before his mouth claimed mine once more. He kissed me like a punishment as his hands slid under the jersey, the fabric pooling over his wrists as they traveled up, up, up. Chills swept over my skin as he revealed it, my body trembling with excitement. I wasn’t wearing a bra, and we both groaned when his thumbs brushed against my nipples.

“Do you realize how badly I’ve needed this? Needed *you*?” His voice was low and gravelly as he shoved the jersey up over my head. “Arms up.”

I did as he said, the view of him disappearing for only a second. I tried to reach for him, but he kept my arms in the sleeves, wrapping the rest of the

fabric around his fist and maneuvering it down carefully until my arms were trapped behind me.

I writhed in his lap as he tightened his grip, eyes raking over me as an appreciative groan rumbled through his chest. He took his sweet time, licking his lips and shaking his head as his gaze hungrily devoured every inch.

“Look at you.” His teeth clamped down on his bottom lip as his free hand found my hip, the other still binding me with the jersey. “Look at those pouty lips, these perfect little tits.”

He slapped my left breast with just enough bite to make me moan — did it hurt, or did it feel so fucking good I wanted another? I couldn’t decide before he covered the sting with his mouth, and I saw fireworks, the wet heat of his tongue blanketing my nipple. All my attention snapped to that point of contact, pussy throbbing with the desire to be next.

“Aleks,” I moaned, head falling back, eyes falling shut.

“Don’t give in that easy, Strings,” he teased, biting the soft flesh of my breast. “I want to work for it.”

In a flash, I was off his lap, lifted and kissed hard before I was planted right back on the piano bench. My arms were still restricted behind me in the jersey. The only thing I could do was brace myself, leaning against my palms with my fingers curling around the wood as Aleks dropped to his knees at my feet. He wrapped his arms under my thighs and yanked me to the edge.

“I think I’ll kiss you here next,” he said, throwing one of my legs over his shoulder and then the other. He buried his face between my thighs, running the tip of his nose over the damp lace. “What do you think? Can I kiss you here?”

I shook so violently my eyes rolled back, my awareness zeroed in on where his hot breath washed over the lace. When he licked the fabric, his tongue pressing with the perfect amount of friction to make my thighs spread of their own accord, I whimpered.

“Yes.”

“What was that?” he asked, the bastard smirking up at me before his tongue lashed me again.

I wanted to wipe that smirk right off his face, take my hands in his hair and force his mouth where I wanted it most. But my arms were restrained, my hands doing all they could just to hold me steady.

“Words, Strings,” he said, and one thick finger toyed with the lace of my thong. “I need your words.”

“Yes,” I repeated. “Kiss me, lick me.”

I rolled my lips together and bucked my hips up to meet his mouth.

“I love when you tell me what you want,” he praised, fingers curling around the lace over each of my hips. He released my legs back to the floor. “Talk me through it, baby. Tell me just how you like to be touched.” He tapped his fingers against my ass. “Lift.”

As soon as I planted weight into my heels and lifted my ass, he ripped the fabric down. My ass hit the bench again, and then my legs were forced together as he peeled the lace over my thighs, my knees, my calves, all the way to my ankles.

Where it stayed.

I expected him to discard the thong completely, to rip it off me and throw it somewhere across the room. Instead, he tied it into a knot around my ankles. The devilishly handsome prick stood long enough to bind me and kiss the tender flesh of each inner ankle, his lips curling as he watched me squirm.

“Now this is a gorgeous sight.”

He drank me in like an expensive whiskey, eyes lingering on my heaving breasts, on where my pussy was framed by my trapped thighs. He groaned, keeping my ankles bound in his hand as he dropped back to his knees. He swiped the pointer finger of his free hand between my legs, the thick digit gliding through my wetness before he lifted it to show me.

“Glistening,” he said on a smirk, and then he licked his finger clean.

“Oh, God.” The words leaked out of me, quiet and shocked and desperate and wanting. I couldn’t believe this was happening. With the hurricane raging outside and the power out, it was just crazy enough for me to wonder if it was all a dream.

No way was Aleks touching me right now.

No way was he on his knees, binding me, teasing me with his tongue over the lace of my soaked thong.

But he was. *God*, he really was.

I didn’t know why my breaths came harder then, panic zipping through me just as strongly as desire. I was panting, chest heaving, legs shaking where he held them. It was too much. I was freaking out.

I was definitely freaking out.

Any other man would have plowed right through, absolutely oblivious to my inner meltdown. He would have seen pussy and tits and wouldn’t have stopped until he hit the finish line.

But Aleks knew me. He knew me like no one else did.

And one look up at me had his smile slipping, his brows furrowing, his eyes connecting hard with mine.

“Breathe, baby,” he said, releasing his grip on my ankles. They were still tied together with the thong, but he widened my legs and slipped between them, giving me no choice but to wrap around him as he surrounded me. “You’re in control. You say the word, and we stop.”

“No,” I said instantly, shaking my head even as my heart threatened to beat out of my chest. “No, I want this. I just...”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

I just... *what?*

Think I might love you?

Think I maybe always have?

Think this might *actually* fucking ruin me forever?

I let out a frustrated sigh, and when Aleks dropped his forehead to mine, his breath syncing with mine until it steadied... I found the only words I knew I meant for sure.

“I want you to make me stop thinking,” I whispered. “Turn off my brain. Turn it all off.”

Aleks nodded, knuckles gliding over my cheek as he pressed his mouth to mine. He kissed me long and unhurried, waiting until I was breathing more normally, until I was squirming against his erection.

Then, he was kissing down.

He swept his lips across my collarbone, over each breast, savoring my nipples before he trailed his kiss lower. His mouth lingered on my hip bones, on the sensitive flesh of each of my inner thighs, and finally, he settled between them.

I gazed down at him through heavy lids, buzzing with need.

And he kept his eyes on mine as his tongue flattened, running it long and slow from my opening up to my clit.

“God, yes,” I sighed, my head falling back. I looked up at the ceiling for just a brief moment before I was peering at him again, just in time to watch him repeat the motion before he covered my clit with his mouth and sucked.

I bucked off the bench, chasing that pressure when he released it to lave at me slowly. He hummed like he had all the time in the world and was enjoying every second.

I was tempted to beg him already, to rip out of this jersey and force him

on me. But he whispered, “*Patience*,” against my thigh, kissing that spot before he was licking and sucking and exploring again.

And I settled in for the ride.

I wanted so badly to run my fingers through his short hair as he worked his magic on me, to feel those prickly strands against my palms the way I used to when we were young. But there was something so hot about being restrained, about relinquishing all control to him. I couldn’t do anything but hold myself up on that bench, core firing up just as much as the sensitive nerve endings between my thighs. And with my ankles bound, Aleks had forced my knees wide around him, like I was entrapping him and forcing him to stay until I finished.

I could have come just from that thought alone, that I had any power over this man who was unraveling me one lick at a time.

He kept his eyes trained on me as he licked and sucked, watching me closely as I gave him clues for what I loved most. He lapped at me with his whole tongue and I gasped. He circled my clit and I moaned. He sucked it into his mouth in steady, pulsing rhythms, and I shook and bucked and chased a release that was so close I could taste it.

And when he pressed just the tip of his finger inside me, testing the wetness before he plunged all the way in, I cried out his name.

“Yes, Aleks. Yes. Right there. Just like that.”

He groaned his approval, curling his finger inside me as he sucked my clit in tandem.

I’d come from a man going down on me exactly zero times.

I shouldn’t have been surprised that Aleks Suter would be the one to change that.

But I was. Shock and delighted excitement flittered through me as I felt that distinct buzz of my orgasm cresting. My breaths came shallower, legs shaking, toes tingling before they went numb altogether.

“Oh, God,” I cried, and I couldn’t help it. I was smiling. Because oh my fucking *God*, I was about to come on Aleks’s tongue. “Oh, *fuck!*”

Aleks clamped his hand on my hip and held me to him as he feasted, the other hand busy between my legs as he licked and sucked me to the promised land. I came in a rather embarrassing display of moans and whimpers with my legs trembling around him, head thrown back in ecstasy, and pussy throbbing with every wave of my orgasm.

When the blood rushing through me calmed, I realized how sore I was,

my arms nearly giving out, the full weight of my legs resting on his shoulders. Aleks kissed the inside of each thigh with his mouth wet from me, lips curling as he took in the disheveled mess he'd turned me into.

"That was sexy as hell, Mia," he murmured, kissing my thigh again. "Burned into my memory forever."

I smiled, beaming under his praise, under that word I'd always wanted used to describe me.

Not cute.

Sexy.

And I felt it, too. I felt desirable with my legs spread for him, my breasts heaving, the shadows from the rain and the city lights reflecting over every inch of my body splayed out before him.

Carefully, Aleks untied the thong around my ankles, helping me stand up before he removed the jersey from my arms. He held me steady as I stretched everything, his lips slowly perusing my neck and shoulder as his fingers trailed lazy lines along my arms.

For a while, we stood just like that, my breathing slowing, heart steadying, body relaxing so much I could have fallen asleep right there in his arms.

"Shower and sleep?" Aleks asked.

Those words snapped my eyes open, and I pressed my fingertips into his chest. "Not a chance. Not until you follow through on that promise you made of filling me up." I nodded toward his joggers. "Strip."

Aleks barked out a laugh, knuckles tilting my chin up until my mouth met his. "Yes, ma'am," he muttered against my lips.

He kept kissing me, his hands roving over my hips and navel and breasts as he backed me up. Before I realized what was happening, the back of my knees hit the oversized bean bag in his living area, and I toppled back into it.

I made a face, lips flattening as I blinked up at him. "You're kidding."

"Shut up and watch me take my clothes off."

"You're not fucking me on this thing."

"Oh, is that so?" Aleks asked, arching a brow. Then, he made quick work of his shirt overhead, revealing an abdomen cut with muscle.

How the hell could a ribcage be so hot?

But it was. *He* was. That body was sculpted by years and years of playing a professional sport, of grueling skate sessions and hours in the gym. The ink stretched over his skin only added to the aesthetic.

He was absolutely mouthwatering.

He'd effectively stunned me silent, and his smirk climbed when he slid his thumbs under the band of his joggers and briefs. He slid them down over his perfect ass, his thick thighs, kicking them away and standing wide-legged and proud as he fisted his cock.

His very large, very thick, very beautiful cock.

And suddenly, I didn't give a rat's ass where he fucked me — as long as he fucked me soon.

"You know, on second thought, this thing is pretty comfy," I said, voice more breathless than I would have liked as I spread out in the bean bag, wetting my lips and letting my eyes slowly trail him from head to toe.

Aleks chuckled, and that sound lit me up just as much as if he would have groaned. I loved how playful we were in this moment, how it didn't feel weird or awkward or too serious. We were being silly, toying with one another like we always did.

We were still... *us*.

Although, there was nothing playful about how Aleks's gaze heated the longer he looked at me, the more his gaze swept over my sated, naked body as he ran his fist over himself. I couldn't tear my gaze away from that visual — the slow pumping of himself, fist running from base to tip, thighs tense as he flexed into his hand.

Aleks walked slowly toward where I sat, power radiating off him as he came to tower over me. He maneuvered until he had one knee on the bean bag, his cock lining up right with my mouth.

"Open up, Strings."

I swallowed, eyes trailing up to meet his as I let my lips part.

"Wider."

I stretched my mouth open, and Aleks rewarded me with a groan and by pressing the crown of his gorgeous cock between my lips.

He hissed when I moaned around him, eagerly swirling my tongue around his tip and pushing up to my elbows to take more of him in.

"That's it, baby," he praised, hand raking through my hair. He fisted his fingers in the strands and held tight. "Make it sloppy. Get me nice and wet so I can slide inside you, so I can stretch that perfect pussy I just got to taste."

I moaned again, taking him deeper. He was far too large for me to take all the way in, but I licked and sucked him before working my hand with my spit and coating him in it.

He cursed as I began fucking him with my mouth and hand together, forming a seam between my lips and fingers. When I picked up the pace, ready to take him all the way, he groaned and pulled me off him, my mouth releasing with a pop.

Aleks yanked my hair with just enough pressure to make me look at him, to let me see how he was breathing raggedly, his stomach muscles flexing. He ran his thumb over my wet bottom lip, nostrils flaring when I chased that digit with my tongue. Then, he clamped my cheeks between his thumb and fingers and lowered to plant a bruising kiss on my mouth.

“Turn over,” he growled against my lips. “Ass up.”

I did as he said, giggling a little when he spanked my ass on the spin. When I was in position, Aleks hiked one of my legs up, splaying me out on the bean bag like an offering.

He ran his slick cock between the swells of my ass, sliding it up and down before he gave me a little slap with that thick beauty.

And then he was lining himself up at my entrance, his wet crown toying with me before he slid an inch inside.

I arched and whimpered, Aleks mirroring my sentiment with a guttural groan.

“Goddamn, Mia,” he croaked, withdrawing and sliding in another inch. I stretched around him as every nerve ending in my body fired to life. “Open up for me, baby. Let me in.”

I relaxed as much as I could when he withdrew and pushed in again, and then I was focusing on my breath, on how he filled me, on how I felt like I could come again just from the sounds he was making as I stretched to fit him.

Aleks hiked my leg up a little more when he was fully seated inside me, rocking his hips and pressing his weight into me.

And when he did, I gasped.

“That’s it,” he said with a smirk behind my ear, kissing the tender flesh there. “Feel it? Feel that friction you need, baby?”

He withdrew and rocked in again, groaning when I let out a surprised moan. Because every time he pushed inside me, my clit rubbed against the bean bag, making me whimper and writhe at the sensitive sensation.

“Aleks...”

“I know, I know.” He kissed my shoulder, one hand snaking under me to palm my breast before he notched in again. And I couldn’t help it. My hips

ground against the fabric, thighs trembling at how it felt to be full and stroked at once.

“I already came,” I said breathlessly.

“And?”

I was already panting, orgasm building even as I tried to say it wasn’t possible.

“Let me guess,” he mused, voice low and gravelly in my ear. “You’re used to men who make this part about them.”

He filled me, rocking into me, smiling against my neck as I moaned.

“I bet you just performed until it was over. I bet you faked it for them every time.”

I gasped when he picked up his pace, fucking me harder, my clit getting more and more action.

“You won’t fake it for me. You won’t have to. Now let loose and give me number two.”

“Yes,” I breathed, and with that word, I surrendered again.

I gave in to the way it felt to have Aleks thrusting into me, to feel every hard, thick inch of him inside me. I succumbed to the sensation of his hands all over me — on my hip, gripping my hair, wrapping around my neck and squeezing. I relented to the ever-present buzz thrumming through me, my climax building like a slow, drum-heavy beat.

“Give in to me,” Aleks murmured low against the shell of my ear, pushing inside me deep and hard. “Give in to me, Strings.”

I moaned, writhing against him and the bean bag and seeking every bit of contact he would give me in that moment. I reveled in the feel of him surrounding me, in his weight on me and his hands roaming all over. And when he picked up his pace, flexing into me in the perfect rhythm, I caught just the right friction over and over to make me combust.

The second orgasm was different from the first — a low burn in my belly that seemed to eat me alive. I came slowly, the waves lasting longer, my whimpering cries muffled by the bean bag as I gave in.

When the last of my climax shuddered through me, I fell limp, heaving as I gripped the bean bag and smiled against it.

“Still hate this thing?” Aleks asked with his lips curling against my skin. He was still moving inside me, flexing slowly and stretching me wide.

“I think I might need one of my own.”

He kissed my slick neck with a chuckle, helping me up from where I’d

been stretched out on the bag. I was stiff and sore as he assisted me, and then his hands were in my hair, his mouth on mine, his kisses deep and promising.

“Your turn,” I mused.

“You think you can handle more?”

I scoffed, pushing on his chest until he fell back to sit on the bean bag.

“Shut up and let me ride you.” I threw his words right back at him, basking in the smirk he rewarded me with.

And then Aleks threw his hands up, repeating his sentiment from earlier.

“Yes, ma’am.”

CHAPTER 31

Snappy Beats

Aleks

Fucking Mia was better than any high I'd ever experienced.

It was better than a fist fight on the ice, better than scoring a goal, better than winning the Stanley Cup.

It was everything.

I told myself not to think too hard about what this meant or about what came next as Mia sauntered over to me, doing a little spin to face the windows and offering me a picturesque view of her backside. I could still taste her sweet cunt on my tongue as she pulled her hair to one side and over her shoulder, hands running down the slope of her waist and hips as I watched.

Then, she peeked at me over her shoulder and smacked her left ass cheek.

I bit my lip on a smile, soaking up every second of her feeling confident and comfortable and sexy. Because she was. *God*, she was sexy as hell, and I couldn't believe I had the privilege of having her like this.

Slowly, she waved her hips from side to side, backing up a bit each time until she was between my legs. I stroked myself as I watched her, heart thrumming, cock begging for relief. It'd taken everything in me not to come the second I'd slid inside her.

Wordlessly, Mia maneuvered my legs closer together, enough so that she could climb on to straddle me.

To straddle me *backward*.

I hummed my approval as she smacked my hand away so she could grind against my cock, sliding her ass up and down over my shaft, her cheeks hugging and teasing me.

When I'd had enough of the foreplay, I leaned up, a squeal of surprise coming from her as I wrapped her up in my arms.

"Enough teasing," I said against her spine. "Sit on me, baby."

Mia reached between her legs, finding my cock and lining me up at her opening. She hissed a little when she lowered down an inch, and I groaned at the feel. She was somehow even tighter than before.

“That’s it,” I coached as she lifted and lowered again, taking more of me inside. “Nice and slow. Open up for me.”

Mia moaned when I cradled her breast in one hand, the other snaking up to grip her neck. I’d been paying attention all night, watching what she responded to, what turned her on. I knew she liked when I took control. I knew she liked that bit of pain bordering on pleasure, that gentle squeeze of my hand around her throat, the sting of a palm against her flesh.

When I rocked my hips up to meet her, plunging in deeper, she let her head fall back on a cry of ecstasy. We sat like that for a long moment, her adjusting to the feel of me and my hands exploring every inch of her. I squeezed each breast, massaging, toying with her nipples as I licked and nibbled across her back.

And then, she began to move.

She lifted, pressing weight into her heels to rise until just the tip of me was inside her before she slid back down. We groaned together at the sensation, and then my hands were at her hips, helping her ride me, picking up the pace.

Up and down, over and over, faster and faster.

Soon, she was riding me wildly, her moans growing louder and louder. When I snaked a hand between her legs to circle her clit, she mewled, shaking her head.

“Can’t,” she breathed, but even as she said it, her hips started bucking wildly against my hand — enough so that she lost her rhythm fucking me.

I kissed her shoulder blade. “Sure about that?”

“Oh, God.” She was losing it, falling back against me as I rubbed her clit and flexed inside her.

“I think you can,” I argued, and then I picked up her thigh with my free hand, rocking us both back until she was fully seated in my lap, her back against my chest. She lifted her other leg to mirror the one I’d hiked up, her hands propping her up as best she could on the bean bag.

And I took control.

With my hand hooked under her knee and the other working between her legs, I bucked my hips up, using my heels planted on the floor to drive myself into her. Over and over, again and again, I had that woman bouncing in my

lap, legs shaking, face twisted up in pleasure as she screamed and moaned.

She let out a string of curse words as she came, and as soon as I felt her walls tightening around me, I lost it.

I gripped her hard, keeping pace as my stomach muscles seized, all the blood rushing between my thighs. My orgasm clocked me like a fist to the face, stealing my breath and knocking out any thoughts trying to hold on. I fucked her mercilessly as we both rode out the waves, our skin slick, hearts hammering, hands gripping onto one another for dear life.

I filled her and I still didn't stop. If anything, the feel of my cum leaking out of her only drove me to want more. I was insatiable, fucking my cum inside her again until my body gave out. So long, I'd longed for this. So long, I'd dreamed of claiming her, of marking her, of having her in every way.

Even when my body was spent, I craved more.

We collapsed once the last of our orgasms left us, bodies turning to weighted heaps of bones.

I rolled over to the side just enough to let Mia fall into the oversized bean bag with me, my legs curling under hers, cock softening inside her. We lay like that for a moment before Mia carefully rolled, giving me no choice but to pull out of her. She splayed out in a mess of arms and wild hair next to me, panting, beautiful breasts heaving as she blew a strand of hair out of her face and turned to look at me.

The rain poured.

The wind howled.

And we were silent for a beat before we both laughed.

"Fucking hell, woman," I said, shaking my head and wiping the sweat from my forehead.

"That was fun."

She giggled and I smiled, though I couldn't place why my chest tightened a bit at her words. *That was fun.*

Fun.

As in a fun little one-time thing?

Before I could overanalyze too much, a more pressing thought struck me hard enough to make me bolt upright.

"Fuck, Mia. We didn't use a condom."

She arched a brow. "You're just now noticing this?"

"I'm sorry, I... I didn't even stop to think—"

"It's okay," she assured me, tugging on my bicep until I reclined back

with her again. “I am a young woman in the twenty-first century. I do have means of protecting myself against an unplanned pregnancy. And it’s not like either of us have slept with anyone in a while.” Her smile slipped a bit at that, worry etching between her brows. “Unless... have you...” She swallowed. “Have you—”

“Don’t ask questions you know the answer to,” I warned her, pulling her into me. I surrounded her with my body — one leg sliding between hers, hand hiking her leg up on my hip before I smacked her ass. “I made a promise to you, remember? I haven’t been with anyone. No one but you, Strings.”

I felt her lips curl against my chest, felt her let out a soft sigh of contentment and relief as she curled into me like a kitten. I rested my chin on the crown of her head, stroking her hair with one hand while the other rubbed her back.

We were quiet for a long while, just listening to the rain and wind outside. Even though we’d lost power, I had a feeling the worst of the storm had missed us. I didn’t need the ability to turn on a TV to confirm it. If we were getting the brunt of it, we’d know.

I knew we needed to clean up, but a sick part of me loved lying there with her knowing my cum was still inside her, that her mouth tasted like me and mine tasted like her. I wrapped her up a little tighter at the thought, kissing her hair on a sated sigh.

“That song you were playing,” I said after a while, and I wondered if she’d started falling asleep because Mia jumped a bit when I spoke. “It’s not on the album.”

“No,” Mia confirmed, running one finger over my chest. She traced the lines of the lion tattoo I had there, her chipped nail polish making me smile.

“Why? Is it new?”

Her shoulders lifted a bit. “It just didn’t make the cut.”

“Well, it should have.”

“It’s not poppy enough.”

“It doesn’t need to be.”

“It’s too honest, too vulnerable, too... sad.”

I leaned up on one elbow then, caging her between me and the bean bag as I swept her hair from her face. *Fuck*, she was beautiful — hair a mess from having my hands in it, cheeks flushed, lips swollen.

“That’s exactly why I loved it.”

The corner of her mouth tilted and fell again, her eyes soft under where her brows pinched together. “You liked it?”

“It was beautiful, Mia. It reminded me of when I’d catch you playing when we were younger, when you thought no one was listening. That was always when you were at your best. It was when I got to see the real musician inside you — the one not thinking about what sells or has a snappy beat.”

“Hey, I like snappy beats.”

“I do, too,” I clarified. “I like everything you write, everything you play.” I shrugged. “I just like the honest, vulnerable, sad songs most.”

“Masochist.”

“Guilty.” I tapped her nose. “You should release it — the one you played tonight.”

“The album’s already out.”

“So? You make the rules, Mia Love. Play it as an encore song at the Garden. Tell them you weren’t sure what they’d think of it, so you kept it off the album, but now you want to share it with them. Release it at midnight after the show. And then immediately call me when it hits number one on the streaming charts and tell me I was right.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “Okay first of all, I need to record it.”

“Like you can’t do that in New York. Don’t add more to it. Just you and your piano,” I said, nodding toward the one in my living room. “That’s all you need.”

She bit her lip, eyes searching mine. “You really think I should do this.”

Not a question.

“I really do.”

She smiled then, one big enough to reveal that dimple in her left cheek that I loved so much. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” I said. Then, I groaned as I stretched and maneuvered to stand, pretending like an old man as I cracked my back and Mia laughed. “Now, come on. Let me get my girl cleaned up.”

We took a long, hot shower together — one that was very difficult not to turn into another round as Mia let me lather her up and wash her. But I could see in her eyes that she was exhausted, so I behaved myself, even though there was a very big part of me wondering if this would be the only time, if the spell would be broken in the morning.

She didn’t seem angry with me anymore, but we hadn’t talked about it. I still had no idea where her head had been these last couple of months.

So I definitely had no idea what tomorrow would bring.

When I was finished in the shower, I kissed Mia's wet hair, leaving her to shower alone and take a moment to herself while I cleaned up in the living room. I unzipped the cover to the bean bag and threw it in the wash, smirking to myself at how Mia had made jokes about all the girls I'd fucked on it and then, in reality, she'd been the only one.

By the time she ambled out of the shower wrapped in one of my large bath sheets, I'd made us both a tray of snacks from my hurricane prep food stash, and we ate them with sleepy smiles before I grabbed one of my t-shirts for Mia to sleep in.

She curled up in my bed without me having to ask, and I took that as a win.

But when I slid into the expensive sheets with her, wrapping her up in my arms and pulling her flush against me, I didn't feel comforted. My mind raced, heart jackhammering in my chest the more I thought about asking her what this meant, and then chickened out every time. When I finally found the balls to say something, my voice was weak, quiet.

"Mia?"

No response.

"Mia," I said again, leaning up enough to peek at her face.

She was sound asleep.

I did my best to follow her lead, knowing all my questions would have to wait for the morning sun.

CHAPTER 32

King of Fragile Egos

Mia

Everything moved at hyper speed once the sun broke through the clouds the next morning.

My phone was ringing from down the hall at the same time Aleks's began to buzz on the table. We broke away reluctantly from where we were snuggled in his giant bed, but Aleks kept a hand on my thigh while he checked his phone.

"Storm missed us," he said, his morning voice gravelly. "The eye hit the panhandle, but it looks like it weakened to a tropical storm. They're assessing damage, but hopefully other than some power outages, flooding from the surge, and downed trees, everything should be okay."

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until he said that last part. "Really?"

He squeezed where he held me. "Storm surge was only a few feet. Really shouldn't be too bad."

"I want to help," I said immediately. "I'm going to tell my assistant to be at the ready to send money to the panhandle or wherever they need assistance. There has to be some way we can help — bottled water or rehoming people who need it."

I threw the covers off me as my phone rang again from down the hall, but Aleks held firm to my leg until I looked back at him. He had a sleepy smile on his face, his eyes warm.

"Not enough to be the biggest pop star on the planet, you have to save the world, too?"

I stuck my tongue out at him, surprising both of us when I planted a kiss on his lips before popping up out of the bed.

My cheeks flushed.

Was I allowed to kiss him without cameras around now that it was

daylight?

“You should help, too, money bags,” I said, trying not to overthink anything until we talked. “I know what your signing bonus was last season.”

“I already donate to FEMA and two local Tampa organizations for kids, you brat.” He leaned up and smacked my butt with that last part, which made me giggle as I skipped away from him.

Okay... so we were doing butt smacks and thigh grabs. That had to mean something...

Right?

“Well, you should send more.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a wink, and visions of him saying those words last night and all the things that followed made my head spin.

Who even *were* we?

My chest tightened with the need to talk to him about last night, about the things we said, the things we *didn't* say. But my phone was insistent, so I pushed pause on my anxious train of thoughts and jogged down the hall.

I had multiple missed calls from everyone on my team — my agent, my tour manager, my mom, and of course, Isabella. I called her first, eyes crossing as I held the phone away from my ear when she screamed into the phone upon answering.

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN ANSWERING ME?!”

“Good morning,” I said calmly. “Why, yes, I did survive the storm and am well, thank you for asking. We lost power, but are otherwise okay.”

“Oh, don't give me that shit. I already knew you were okay or I would have sent an ambulance. Now, get your ass dressed and pack your suitcase. A car will be picking you up in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?!” I glanced at myself in the mirror in Aleks's guest room, panicking at the sex-mussed monster looking back at me. “What would you have done if I didn't answer?”

“Sent it anyway and told Hunter to beat down the door.”

“Bella!”

“Get dressed, bitch! You've got a sold-out show in *Madison Square Garden* tomorrow!” She sang that last part, and even without seeing her on the other end, I knew she was shimmying and smiling and would likely have pinched my side if I was with her.

I giggled. “Oh, my God... I have a sold-out show in Madison Square

Garden.”

At that, I squealed and jumped up and down while Isabella hyped me up on the other end. Maybe the storm had wiped the fact from my brain, or maybe I was so sure I’d have to cancel that I couldn’t let myself celebrate.

Or perhaps I was just dazed from being fucked down by my best friend.

Regardless, it felt like that moment was the first it really hit me.

In just over twenty-four hours, I’d be on one of the most well-known stages in the world, singing my songs with a crowd full of fans.

I whipped around the room like a tornado as soon as we ended the call, getting dressed as fast as I could. I wrangled my hair into a slicked-back ponytail, put on some tinted moisturizer and mascara to disguise my exhaustion, and shoved everything in my suitcase without care for organizing it.

The only time I paused was when I peeled Aleks’s t-shirt off me, holding the fabric to my nose and inhaling deeply.

I threw it in my suitcase, too.

He wouldn’t miss it.

When I rolled my suitcase into the living area, I had less than three minutes before my security team would escort me to the car.

Aleks was waiting for me, his hip leaned against his kitchen island, arms folded over his bare chest. He wore only the joggers I’d watched him peel off last night, and my mouth watered at the sight of his muscular abdomen, the tattoos on his chest and arms, the chain around his neck.

“It’s really unfair that you look like this all the time,” I said, waving my hand over him.

He smirked, but it was a reserved smile, and I didn’t miss the way his eyes were clouded with questions. I propped my suitcase up and crossed over to him, sighing a bit when he rested his hands on my hips and I looped my arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry I have to go so quickly. I...” I paused.

What the hell was I supposed to say?

I didn’t know what last night meant or what happened next. All I knew was that in that moment when he found me at the piano, when he ran his hands through my hair and over my shoulders, I wanted him.

I wanted him and I didn’t care what the consequences were.

I didn’t care if I’d been confused, angry, hurt.

I just wanted to feel good for a while. I wanted him to turn all my

thoughts off.

And he had.

The way he was watching me now, I knew he was worried. He was probably looking for signs that I was okay, that I hadn't read too much into this, that I wasn't suddenly planning a *real* wedding and kids and a whole life together.

I knew my best friend. I knew how long he stayed with the women he shared a bed with.

He needed to know we were cool, that this wasn't going to ruin our friendship.

But he'd asked to ruin me, hadn't he?

Wasn't it what I'd asked for, too?

My phone vibrated in the process of me trying to untangle my thoughts, James letting me know he was waiting for me near the elevator down the hall.

I sighed, tucking my phone away before I looked back up at Aleks. He forced a smile and knuckled my chin. "Go. I'll see you at the show tomorrow."

I nodded, but didn't move.

"Go," he said on a laugh. "Break a leg, Strings."

That actually did make me smile, and then I peeled away from him, slowly, reluctantly, like I wasn't sure what the move was here. Did I hug him? Kiss him goodbye?

Were we back to just pretending for the cameras?

Aleks shoved his hands in his pockets, swallowing as he watched me back away. He didn't make a move to kiss me, so I took his cue.

And then I sealed my title as the most awkward woman on Earth when I gave him two thumbs up before grabbing my suitcase and jetting out of his condo with my cheeks burning from embarrassment.

What the actual hell, Mia?!

I slid into the elevator, groaning a bit as I covered my hot cheek with one hand. I squeezed my eyes shut, shaking my head. I wanted to crawl right out of my skin.

Suddenly, the elevator doors stopped from where they were closing.

I gasped a little, James moving in front of me to protect me from whoever belonged to the hand we could see. But when the doors slid open, James relaxed, stepping aside.

It was Aleks.

He stood there for a beat, eyes searching mine, chest heaving like he'd sprinted down the hall.

Then, he swept inside the elevator, framed my face with his hands, and kissed me.

His lips were firm against mine, insistent, like he needed me to know something but couldn't say what it was. I melted into the touch for just a moment before he pulled away, sliding out of the elevator before the doors could shut again.

"Tomorrow," he said.

And then the doors shut and the elevator began to descend.

It was useless trying to untie the knots in my stomach as I rode down with James, letting him cover me as we hustled to the waiting car outside Aleks's building. Fortunately, there was no paparazzi waiting — likely because Florida was in a state of emergency. I slid behind the tinted windows and pressed a hand to my chest, closing my eyes and trying to find my calm.

That attempt was obliterated when my phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down to find my ex-boyfriend's name staring back at me.

Okay, so it wasn't his name. It read *KING OF FRAGILE EGOS*, actually, but even the nickname I'd given him one sad, drunken night didn't make me feel better.

Because either way, my ex was calling me.

I debated not answering, but curiosity outweighed anxiety, and I tapped the green phone button to answer his call before I could overthink it.

"Hello?"

"She lives!" Austin answered with a chuckle, and even after all this time, I could see his smile. It made my stomach hurt. "I take it you rode out the storm okay?"

"Uh... yeah," I answered, unable to hide my confusion. James arched a brow where he sat across from me, and I mouthed *Austin* while pointing to the phone, which made his other brow tic up. "The storm swung more north than they expected."

"Well, that's good. I mean, not for the panhandle, I suppose, but I'm glad you're safe."

My lips flattened.

This motherfucker.

"Austin, why are you calling me?"

"I just wanted to check in on you, make sure you're okay. I bet you're

excited about the big show tomorrow night. I'm happy to hear you didn't have to cancel. There were rumors floating around after news about the hurricane broke."

Yeah, right. I knew this bastard. He was probably *praying* for me to cancel.

"Uh-huh," I said flatly. "Well, I'm fine, so... see ya."

"Wait, wait," he said on a laugh. "I... I miss you, love. It's good to hear your voice. Tell me how you are."

I knew I really had moved on because where him saying *I miss you* to me even nine months ago would have made me weak, it now just made me cringe.

"Cut the shit. What do you want?"

"So hostile."

"If that's what you want to call it, then let's be clear that you made it that way."

"By giving you space after our breakup like you asked me to?"

"Don't play innocent. We both know what your buddy Garrett the Ferret has been doing, and your convenient *no comment* approach isn't doing me any favors. But you already know that."

"I'm just keeping our private life private."

I barked out a laugh. "Okay. Bye, Austin."

"How's your fiancé?"

I paused where I was about to hang up on him, but didn't say a word.

"Aleks Suter," he said, clicking his tongue. "Can't say I saw that one coming. Although maybe I should have, if the little video timelines your fans have made about how you two were already together when we still were are to be believed."

My fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, and I knew better than to say a word. He was goading me.

"That part of the rumor mill had me curious, I admit," he said. "So, I started doing a little digging. I asked around about Aleks, about you two." He paused, waiting for me to bite, but I refused. "What's interesting is that, unknown to the public... there seems to be a *different* rumor going around. One that insinuates that you two lovebirds aren't actually engaged. Some even say you're not dating *at all*."

My insides felt like goop, sliding out of me and onto the floorboards of the car racing us across town.

“Come on, Mia,” Austin said, voice lowering. “What’s with this charade? I know Aleks Suter. He doesn’t propose. He sleeps with supermodels at pool parties in Vegas.”

My nose stung with that assessment, my anxious mind once again thinking of last night.

The way he’d commanded me...

The way he’d tied me up...

His mouth on me...

Was I just another conquest, a way to get what he needed after the dry spell I’d conned him into, the one he’d reminded me about so often?

He’d had so much to say last night...

“Do you realize how bad I’ve needed this? Needed you?”

“Tell me you want this.”

“Tell me you want me to destroy you.”

“Tell me I can do anything I want.”

He’d given me all the control, given me the chance to stop it. And I’d told him to turn off my brain.

I hadn’t asked him for more.

Could I really be mad, then, if he only gave me last night?

But that kiss...

“Is this how you and Bella thought you’d spin Garrett’s reviews?” Austin asked, pausing when I didn’t answer, a low chuckle rumbling through the receiver. “I never thought you’d stoop so low. Even the best artists can take a little criticism, love.”

I ground my teeth together, face burning. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He laughed. “Sure. Alright, well, have a great show tomorrow. Tell your *fiancé* I said hello.”

Austin hung up.

And I, promptly, freaked the fuck out.

CHAPTER 33

The Big Finale

Mia

Two weeks passed in a blur of sequins, dancing, and screaming fans.

Anxiety had gripped me by the throat the entire flight to New York after Austin's phone call, but once I stepped foot on the tarmac, my team surrounded me, each of them listing off our endless to-do's.

And my focus shifted.

Sound checks. Choreo runs. Morning show appearances. Radio interviews. Recording sessions.

The first show went off without a hitch, everything from the lighting to the last confetti cannon perfectly orchestrated. And as if the cheers from our fans weren't already enough of a reward, the headlines the next day were the cherry on top.

LOVE WINS: The Sunset Tour is Sensational

A Star Among Stars: Mia Shines Bright in a Sold-Out MSG Debut

From Opening Chord to Final Bow: The Sunset Tour Dazzles at the Garden

A MUST-SEE SHOW: Mia Love IS the Music Industry

MSG Has Seen Legends—Add Mia to the List After Last Night's Performance

The Sunset Tour Takes NYC by Storm: Fans Beg for an Encore

Isabella was over the moon, frantically reading every new headline to me each morning as we ate room service in my suite. And when I told her about the song I'd kept a secret, the one Aleks had told me to release... she'd lost it.

"We're recording this," she'd whispered when I'd played it for her, her eyes misty. "Now."

And we did. In between shows and interviews, we snuck into a recording booth tucked away in Brooklyn, just me and my piano. It only took a few

recordings to get what we wanted — mostly because this song was so engrained in me at the moment that I couldn't help but sing it with my whole heart. That was why Aleks had caught me singing it in his condo. I was consumed.

On the last night at the Garden, we played it as the encore song.

We released it as a bonus track at midnight.

And by morning, it was number one on every streaming platform.

I woke to a text from Aleks, three words that made my heart gallop, my lips curling into a smile.

Aleks: Told you so.

I held onto those words as the weeks flew by. They were all I had. The night he'd come to my opening show, we'd had only moments together — a quick, staged kiss and photo op before I went on and then him guiding me to my car after the show, his hand on the small of my back.

That touch had lingered in the car, but we didn't have a spare second to talk with Isabella and Rina there with us. They were freaking out over the show, screaming how amazing it was, showing me videos and photos posted online.

Aleks had kept his hand on my leg, but he was silent, and I'd wondered what he was thinking as he stared out the window.

Once he got me safely inside the hotel, he was all but run out by my team — who had gathered for what felt like an afterparty in my suite.

He'd squeezed my hand and told me he was proud of me.

He'd kissed my cheek and told me to get some rest.

He'd offered a weak smile and told me he'd see me soon.

And the next morning, he was on a flight back to Tampa, getting ready for his next game.

That was it.

For two weeks, that was the most time we had together.

Our texts were short, him busy with the season in full swing now and me too caught up in my head to know what to say when I did have time to get on my phone.

I didn't tell him about Austin.

I didn't tell *anyone* about Austin.

I may or may not have put some extra effort into the little photo ops Aleks and I did have, holding our kisses for longer and leaning into his touch

when he walked with me in public, just to prove my ex wrong.

But truth be told, I'd forgotten about the punk and his stupid phone call.

Until the day Isabella dumped a bucket of ice-cold reality over my pretty head.

"I think it's time."

Isabella and I were huddled together on the bright orange velvet couch of my suite in Nashville where I was about to play another sold-out show in just a few hours. Giana and Aleks were on Isabella's laptop screen, G in the top square and Aleks in the middle with us reflected at the bottom.

Just like it had been when we'd proposed this whole charade months ago.

"Time?" I asked.

"For the big finale. The final scene." She clapped and shimmied. "Time to break your heart and start that healing vindication tour of feminine power and enlightenment."

My stomach bottomed out at her words, heart stalling in my chest before it kicked back to life hard enough to crack a rib.

She was calling the breakup.

Dread curdled inside me, and I wasn't sure if I was buzzing or completely numb as time stretched and slogged to a complete halt.

I felt like a tightrope walker who'd just glanced down for the first time, like I'd completely forgotten just how far I had to fall and how badly the crash would sting until that very moment.

Simply put, I just hadn't expected this. Isabella called a meeting with us so casually that I thought it would just be to discuss our next publicity stunt. In fact, I'd been buzzing with anticipation. I'd hoped his schedule would allow Aleks to fly out to my next show. I'd hoped I'd have a gap in my tour to go see him in Tampa, to actually stay a night with him and talk about what happened during the hurricane.

I missed him.

God, I missed him so badly my chest ached just at the vision of him on that tiny laptop screen.

I wanted to reach through it, wanted him to pull me into that frame and into his arms. I wanted to remember what it felt like to have him wrap me up, to have his scent surrounding me, to feel his warmth and hear his content chuckle as he kissed my hair, blocking out everything else in the world. I'd slept in the shirt he gave me more nights than not, but it just wasn't the same. It wasn't enough.

I needed to see him.

But I didn't want to see him for *this*.

"Talk me through your thoughts," Giana said, her all-business tone snapping me back to the cruel reality I was trying to escape.

"Well, we're about to release tickets for the second half of the tour, and then a few weeks after that, we're announcing the European leg." Isabella scrolled on her phone, looking over her notes that were blurry to me no matter how I tried to focus. "It just makes sense. They're projecting we will sell out, but I want to guarantee it. I want these fans rabid. I want them dying for a front-row seat to the Mia Love Renaissance."

Giana nodded, saying something, but I couldn't hear her over the thrumming in my ears. My eyes snapped to Aleks, whom I swore was watching only me.

I waited for him to say something.

He seemed to be waiting for the same.

"You don't think it's too soon?" I asked, my voice cracking.

The silence that followed my question was deafening.

Isabella glanced at the screen, at Giana and Aleks, and then back at me. "I mean... do you want to keep it going longer while you're on tour and he's in season?"

Everyone looked at me then, their eyes burning holes through my already fragile shield.

I scratched my neck, one shoulder inching up noncommittally.

A glance at Aleks found him quiet and watching me like the rest of them.

I couldn't read his expression. Usually, I was so good at that, at seeing through his fake smiles or sarcastic remarks. But he was stoic.

If anything, he looked... worried.

Worried I wanted to keep this thing going? Worried he'd have to make more flights during his busy season when he needed to be focusing on getting wins?

Worried he'd have to keep pretending with me, keep up his dry spell, keep passing on opportunities with other women?

My brain beat me up with every possibility the longer the silence stretched.

"No, of course not," I finally said, hoping my smile and the shake of my head sold the words.

I didn't want to admit that Austin was in my head, and since everything

was about to be over anyway, I decided I didn't need to.

An unthinkable melancholy slid through me like a bucket of snakes.

It was about to be over.

This thing I'd thought was so ridiculous, this scheme that had been laughable from the start... why did it feel like such an integral part of my life now?

Why was I holding tension in every muscle of my body at the thought of no more fake appearances, fake hugs, fake kisses...

That kiss on the elevator wasn't fake...

But was it just to make me feel better? Was it just to smooth things over? Was it his way of saying, "*Hey, kid, last night was fun. We're still friends. All good.*"?

My stomach roiled.

"Alright, then," Isabella said, her brow inching up as she watched me. I had a feeling she was going to have questions for me after this, and I needed to think up answers fast.

She kept on with the plan, her and G launching into action, all while I stared at my shoes and went numb.

On the outside, I was calm.

Inside, my heart was breaking.

Aleks was silent, and that silence was confirmation of all my worst thoughts.

He didn't want anything past what we had that night in his condo.

It was just two people stuck together, horny and emotional and bored. I knew it was great for him, just like it had been for me.

But what a fool I'd been to think it meant more to him than that.

My blood pumped loud in my ears as I dragged my gaze back up to the laptop screen, to Aleks. My heart stopped at the sight of him, at how he looked almost as numb as I felt.

Was he upset he was about to have to play the part of the bad guy?

Was he annoyed he had to deal with this when he had games to focus on?

Was he just... *over it*?

I swallowed, watching him, searching for any clues I could find that would tell me what he was thinking.

His eyes lifted, and I wondered if he was watching me, too. I felt that gaze like he was right there in the room with me.

"Aleks, what do you think?"

The question came from Giana, and my heart fluttered on the wings of hope as all eyes turned to him.

Say something, I silently begged.

Tell them you don't want to do it.

Tell them we want more time.

Tell me it meant more to you, that I mean more to you.

Tell me this isn't all in my head.

Tell me... anything.

Aleks was quiet for so long, I wondered if he'd heard the question. His jaw was set, hard as stone, his expression absolutely unreadable.

"Whatever Mia wants," he finally said.

His voice was low, resigned.

And there it was. The answer I needed, but not the one I hoped to hear.

He was over it all. Bored. Unamused. Probably rolling his eyes internally that we even had to have a meeting about this when he had more important things to do.

Rage simmered under the sadness blanketing me, and I crossed my arms and my legs at the same time, leaning back on the couch. "Then I guess it's settled."

He blinked, the muscle in his jaw tightening. "I guess so."

I laughed under my breath, turning to Isabella with new resolve. "Alright, coach," I said, ignoring the loud crack of my heart. "What's the plan?"

CHAPTER 34

The Hardest Lie

Aleks

Anger.

Apathy.

Detachment.

Confusion.

Regret.

Repeat.

This was the cycle of my emotions for more than a week.

After the phone call with Mia, Giana, and Isabella, I checked firmly into survival mode — and I only did that for Mia. If she hadn't made me promise, I would have added reckless to my cycle. I would have been drowning myself in whiskey, checking out of my life completely.

Because what the fuck did it matter now?

Not even work could serve as a refuge. I worked my games on autopilot, playing just well enough not to raise any flags to our staff but just terribly enough that Daddy P noticed. He'd tried to pull me aside to talk before our game against Jacksonville, but I'd shoved him off me and told him to eat a dick.

Not my finest moment.

I couldn't help it. I was pissed. I was *seething*. And I took out that frustration on the ice, on any opponent who dared to go toe to toe with me, on any teammate who had the gall to question me, on the puck any time I got ahold of it.

It was easy to just be mad.

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

Even Otis knew I was off. I'd managed not to be a prick to the old man, but I'd been cold enough for him to get the picture that I didn't want to talk.

He'd stopped by my place unannounced as always, and when I'd declined to join him for a drink, he'd pushed his palm against my door in my attempt to close it.

"You have the power to change your circumstances," he'd said, his eyes hard on mine. "Don't you forget that, young man."

It'd taken everything in me not to laugh in his face.

If he only knew how powerless I was right now.

I knew, underneath that rage and numbness, there was something more pressing vying for my attention. Something I was hellbent on ignoring.

Because at the base of it all — I was hurt.

I was fucking *wrecked*.

I supposed there was a part of me that always knew the truth. Mia's father had told me from the start — I wasn't good enough for her. And I'd agreed. I'd seen her for everything she was and me for everything I wasn't and knew the two didn't fit.

I'd held it together that night when we were teenagers, the night she'd asked me to kiss her and I'd found the willpower to say no.

I'd kept my distance over the years, watching her love other men from afar, other men who were my polar opposite in every way.

And even through this publicity stunt, I'd done my best to draw the line between real and fake, to realize what this was and what it would never be. I'd taken advantage of the excuse to hold her, to touch her, to kiss her — *knowing* it would all end one day, that it didn't really mean anything.

But there'd always been part of me that wondered.

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

Even when I talked myself out of it, Hope was a loud little bastard in my ear. When I held her, I wondered if maybe she wanted me to. When I kissed her, I wondered if she liked it, wondered if the way her breath caught meant something.

And that night in my condo when she'd asked me to kiss her again, when she'd admitted she wanted me when there wasn't a camera around to perform for, I hadn't hesitated.

I'd jumped all the way in.

And like an idiot, I'd assumed it meant something.

It wasn't fair of me to put that on her. She'd owned her truth that night.

Turn off my brain. Make me stop thinking.

She'd been anxious, scared. She was powerless in that moment and couldn't sleep thinking about the possibility of her show being canceled.

And so she'd used me.

And *fuck*, I'd wanted to be used.

I'd let her do it again even now, even knowing this ice pick of pain in my chest was sure to follow, I'd still say yes. I'd still fall to my knees for her.

I'd told her she was in control that night, and I'd meant it.

But as soon as we woke the next morning and she was running around my condo like a hurricane herself, I realized relinquishing that control would be the death of me.

I wanted her to stay.

I wanted her to pause, take a breath, and talk to me.

I wanted to ask her who that song was about. I longed to know if her brain chemistry had been fucking destroyed and rewired the moment we gave in — the way mine had been. I craved her touch, her kiss, her assurance that something monumental had shifted.

But she'd just... left.

No conversation. No kiss goodbye — not until I literally ran after her and stole one in that elevator.

It was right back to business for her.

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

Even if I'd grown the balls to say *fuck leaving it in her court* and decided to ask her about that night, there hadn't been time. I'd flown in for her show, played my part in our little stunt for the cameras, and then been effectively shoved to the side by her team as they celebrated her success.

And rightfully so.

She played sold-out shows at the Garden. She released a brand-new surprise song that shot straight to number one. Reviews for the tour were sensational. *She* was fucking sensational.

Why the fuck would she press pause on the most exciting time in her career to pet my hair and tell me I was a good boy? Why would she feel the need to coddle a grown-ass man who should have been able to easily discern that one night of fucking didn't need to be followed up by a full conversation of what it meant?

Still, it killed me to hold my tongue.

I didn't want to push her. I didn't want to distract her.

And when Isabella called that team meeting, I got my answer without having to ask.

We were done.

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

Now, we were back in my condo for the first time since the hurricane. Isabella and Giana were talking logistics in my kitchen, a bottle of wine between them. Mia was acting like nothing about this bothered her, fingers running idly over the keys of my piano as she hummed something to herself.

She was perfectly fine.

Writing a little song in her head.

Dreaming about getting back on tour.

And I was suffocating in the silence between us, drowning in everything I couldn't say, dying a little more every time she smiled like none of it ever mattered.

"Okay, I think we have a solid plan," Isabella said, picking up her wine glass and swirling the red liquid inside it.

Mia stopped playing, spinning where she sat on the piano bench to face the room. Our eyes caught for the briefest moment, her cheeks reddening.

Was she thinking about when I had her tied up on that bench, her arms bound, legs around my shoulders as I made her my meal?

Or was she embarrassed by what we'd done, hoping to never speak of it again — just the way she'd handled the night she'd asked me to kiss her years ago?

Her eyes snapped away too quickly for me to tell.

"We'll tip off Stella that our lovebirds here are fighting later this evening, have our *inside source* tell her where Aleks ran off to, and let the games begin. Our favorite paparazzi here in Tampa will be ready to catch pictures of Mia crying as she runs to the waiting car and heads for the airport while the Internet starts exploding with videos of Mr. Bad Boy returning to his old ways."

Stella, I'd learned that day, was one of Mia's super fans with a huge YouTube channel and general social media presence. She was known for having the inside scoop when it came to Mia's personal life — a seed that Isabella had carefully planted and nurtured.

If I was capable, I would have laughed.

Some fucking influencer was going to be the death of what little hope I

had left.

“I’ve wrapped up all our pending sponsorships, commercials, and upcoming events, making sure the contracts are iron tight. This won’t be enough for any of them to terminate, and honestly, given the audience most of these brands have, they will likely be thrilled,” Giana said, paging through what I imagined was a list of said brands on her phone. She adjusted her glasses up her nose. “You’re a much hotter commodity when you’re single and showing attention to everyday women as opposed to locked down by the perfect Mia Love.”

I swallowed, gaze flitting to Mia.

Hers was on Isabella, distant and empty.

Bored.

My chest stung, those emotions I’d been burying clawing their way out of the dirt.

How could she not so much as look at me? How could she be here, in this place, and not remember everything about that night? It had been torture for me to live here since the phone call Isabella had for the team. Every time I opened my front door, I felt another piece of me shatter.

Mia was everywhere for me now — in my living room, at the piano, in the kitchen, in my shower, in my bed.

In my mind, in my heart, in my fucking soul.

“So, I guess this is it,” I said, still silently begging Mia to look at me. I needed to see her eyes. I needed to watch her every feature as she told me this was what she wanted. “One more performance and the show is over.”

She tucked her hands under her thighs, looking everywhere but at me. “Yep. One more stunt and then you’re free.”

I frowned at that.

Free.

Free from what... from pretending? From the crazy travel schedule?

From her?

I never wanted to be free from her, and I opened my mouth to say so but was cut short when Isabella clapped her hands together.

“You’ll *both* be free, and you’ll be able to say you successfully pulled off the craziest PR stunt of all time.” She paused. “Well, to me and G, anyway. You can’t tell another soul, or we’ll all be toast.”

Giana laughed and Mia smirked, and I felt fucking sick.

But with Mia avoiding my gaze and staying silent, she confirmed

everything I should have kept in the forefront of my mind all along.

This was just a charade.

I was just a dirty little secret.

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

“What do you think, big boy,” Isabella asked, gripping my shoulder with a playful wag of her eyebrows. “Are you ready to put on the performance of a lifetime?”

One last time, my eyes slid to Mia.

Do you really want this?

Is it really all in my head?

Is this how you want the story to end?

A fierce ache rocked through me when she finally looked up, her wide blue eyes catching mine.

But she didn’t say a word.

I swallowed, nodded, and let the last of my fantasy of us die — along with my will to fight for something that had never been mine.

“Ready,” I said.

It was the hardest lie I’d ever had to tell.

CHAPTER 35

Counting Trees

Mia

The last time I'd been in this condo, a hurricane had been raging outside.

Now, the storm was inside me.

I stared at where my fingers rested on the bone white keys of Aleks's piano, unmoving, frozen. I yearned for music, ached to play something that would relieve the pressure building in my chest.

But I knew nothing would work.

So I just sat there, staring, listening to everything happening around me like a ghost who couldn't fully participate. It was dark outside now, evening giving way to night, the waning crescent of moon visible over the Hillsborough River like just another eye fixed on us.

Giana left first, making sure Aleks was good to go before she excused herself back to her hotel. Aleks left next, right at the time of our planned fake fight. I stared at the keys extra hard as he prepared to go, knowing if I looked at him again, I'd break all the way down.

He hadn't stopped it.

As if the call hadn't been heartbreaking enough, I'd had to sit here and watch him apathetically agree to every step of Giana and Isabella's plan for tonight. He didn't try to pull me aside. He didn't tell everyone to fuck off.

He really was done.

I felt both resigned and desperate as I sat at that piano, each emotion warring for who would win. They tugged on the bones of my rib cage, and I heard each crack as they fought.

“¿Estás bien, mi amor?”

I blinked at the question from Isabella, dropping my hands into my lap as she took a seat next to me on the piano bench. *You good, my love?*

“Peachy.”

She frowned, sweeping my hair back behind one ear. “One last little bit

here, darling. Almost done.”

I nodded, a strained smile on my lips.

“Just think about the ticket sales and all the songs you can write,” she added with a playful nudge.

This time, my eyes welled with tears.

As if my heart wasn’t already broken enough from that boy. As if I couldn’t already fill a whole album with songs about how he’d wrecked me.

“Hey,” Isabella sang, brows pinching together more. “What’s this? Talk to me.”

I sniffed, swiping the tears off my face and forcing a smile. “Just getting ready. I’m about to have to sell a breakup, remember? Need to have a blotchy, tear-streaked face.”

Isabella didn’t look convinced. When she opened her mouth to question me more, I stood abruptly.

“Speaking of which, I should probably get to it. You’re going to stay here until the paparazzi clear out, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Great. I’ll see you in L.A., babe.”

Another forced smile. A kiss on her cheek. A straightening of my shoulders.

And then I grabbed my suitcase and bolted out the door.

James was on my heels as I tore through the hall and to the elevator, but he didn’t say a word. Not as we climbed inside and I chewed my lip against the emotion building in my chest. Not when we hit the bottom floor and the tears began to spill. Not when he sheltered me as we walked through the lobby and a sob ripped from my throat.

By the time we were walking the short distance from the front doors of the building to the waiting black SUV, I was a mess. A complete and total disaster.

And it wasn’t acting.

The finality of everything hit me like a thousand books to the head, each one a memory of Aleks that I’d never forget. I slid inside the car with camera lights flashing, reporters calling my name and asking what happened while I fell apart for their entertainment.

“Mia! Is it true you and Aleks have split?”

“Who ended it, Mia? Was it you or Aleks?”

“Mia, are the rumors about Aleks cheating true?”

“Mia, is this the end of the wedding plans? Are you calling it off?”

“How are you holding up? Can you give us a comment?”

James shut the door behind me, snuffing out the noise as another sob tore through me. I folded my arms over my stomach, aching and rocking and shaking my head.

This can't be happening.

This can't be real.

The driver already knew where to take us, every part of the plan set into place. He headed toward the airport while I tried to calm my breaths. I pressed a hand against my chest and closed my eyes, focusing on each inhale, trying to lengthen my exhales.

In, and out.

In, and out.

The tears were still sliding fast and furious down my cheeks. I let them. I watched them fall to my thighs, felt them dry on my chin. My skin was tight from their tracks, my nose running, eyes fatigued.

After a few minutes, I gained my composure a bit, sinking back in the seat and letting my head loll to the side. I sniffed, watching the city of Tampa pass in a teary blur.

I started counting trees.

1... 2... 3...

But the trees turned into memories, each one pelting me like the rain that had whipped against Aleks's windows last time I was here.

A magnolia tree, but I saw Aleks, brows bent in concern as he shielded me from the paparazzi in New York. I felt his hand on the small of my back, the way it held onto me even still in the car when all the cameras were gone.

A palm tree, but I saw Aleks's beaming smile at the beach mansion, his bare chest exposed by an open, tropical button-up. I felt his heat from that first fake kiss, heard his words whispered only for me. *Läck du mir.*

A jacaranda tree, but I saw Aleks in a stupid fish head mask, saw him peeling it off and beaming at me, felt his strong body when I jumped into his arms to celebrate our win.

An oak tree, Spanish moss hanging dreamily from its limbs, but I saw his heated eyes as he stripped the jersey with his name and number on it over my head, felt his hot breath on my skin as he whispered filthy words along the column of my neck.

All of it hit me in unrelenting flashes, wave after wave of feeling crashing

over me until I was drowning.

And that's when I realized.

None of it was fake.

Not one single thing that had happened since we first met up in New York had been pretend — not to me.

And I didn't care if he didn't feel the same. I didn't care if I was crazy for breaking all the rules I'd set for us. I didn't care if I'd feel like a fool in the morning.

I had to tell him.

I blinked, snapping out of my haze and into the moment with my heart thundering loud and fast in my chest. "Don't get on the highway."

James frowned at me, the driver's eyes snapping to mine in the rearview mirror. "But, Ms.—"

"*Don't* get on the highway," I repeated, leaning forward. "Boomer's. Take me to Boomer's."

"That's where Aleks is," James said.

"Exactly."

I thought I saw the corner of James's mouth inch up, but I was too busy snapping my fingers at the driver.

"Boomer's," I repeated, louder this time. "Please. And hurry."

I knew now what I wanted, what I was willing to risk.

I just hoped I made it in time.

CHAPTER 36

The Last Nail

Aleks

I couldn't go through with it.

I knew I'd have my ass handed to me by Isabella and Giana. I knew Mia would scream at me and tell me how I'd ruined everything. Even as I peeled Renee, the girl I was supposed to be making out with, off my lap, I tried to think of an alternative, a way to fix the mess I was about to create.

But I didn't care. Even if I couldn't figure something out, even if I had to answer to the feminine rage of all three of those women, that was just how it would have to be.

Because I couldn't go through with it.

I could barely stomach the blonde when she grabbed my hand and led me to the VIP area of Boomer's — just like she had been paid to do. She'd signed an NDA, too, one that would ensure all our asses were covered.

I was supposed to hold her in my lap, get wasted, kiss up her neck and let her stick her tongue down my throat. I was supposed to slide a hand under her dress just in eyeshot of the locals with their phones at the ready. I was supposed to throw it all away, smirk, and soak it up like the playboy they wanted to paint me as.

The playboy I used to be.

But I couldn't. I just... *couldn't*.

Renee wore her confusion on her face when I stood, leaving her on the couch where I'd been. I didn't answer her questions as I shrugged on my light jacket and made my way toward the door.

The whiskey I'd ordered was completely untouched.

Phone cameras followed me as I weaved through the crowded bar. I found it hard to believe how this place was my solace just five months ago, the one place I wanted to go to escape and feel something, or sometimes, just to go numb but not be alone.

Now, it was hell on Earth.

I didn't want to drink. I didn't want to dance. I didn't want to touch or be touched by anyone.

No one but Mia.

"Aleks, who was that girl you were with?" I heard someone ask my back as I shrugged past. "Does Mia know about her?"

I wondered if it was the girl they'd tipped off. What was her name... Stella? I was supposed to confirm her suspicions. I was supposed to give her content to put me on blast and hammer the last nail into my coffin.

Instead, I ignored her, along with every other fan who said my name, told me they loved me, asked for a picture or an autograph or a kiss. I kept my eyes down, hands in my pockets, pushing through the crowd.

I could walk home. It was only about two miles and I needed the fresh air. Maybe I'd walk down by the river.

Maybe I'd throw myself into it.

When I pushed through the door that led into a perfectly pleasant November night in Florida, I paused.

People were waiting in line to get in, the bouncers checking IDs at the door and letting in only as many people as they saw come out. There was a bustle of noise when I emerged, and then screams from the women, hollers from the men, all of them calling my name or a question or a love confession or a combination of the three.

I should go back inside.

Now that I was out here, guilt crept through me like thick sludge. I was ruining everything. I was putting Mia in an even worse position all because... what? Because I had feelings for her? Because I always had?

I knew that when I agreed to this.

I knew what it was and what it wasn't.

How fucking selfish could I be, to throw away the whole thing in the final act just because I suddenly decided I couldn't deal?

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a long exhale, cursing under that breath as my shoulders fell.

I looked up to the sky next, hoping for strength to come from a god I didn't believe in, and then I turned, ready to make my way back inside and do what I had to do.

But my eyes caught on a figure down the block.

It was just a glimpse, one I almost ignored as the bouncer nodded at me

and opened the door I'd just come out of. But then I did a double take.

And there she was.

Oversized sweatshirt and biker shorts. Messy hair piled on her head.
Glasses.

Mia.

My Mia.

A black SUV lurked just behind her. James stood only a few feet from her back, one hand clasping the opposite wrist in front of him. He was stoic and still, but I saw him subtly cataloging everything, ready to act if needed.

Mia.

She's here.

She didn't go.

I blinked, once, just to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

And then I ran to her.

CHAPTER 37

Mine

Mia

He ran to me.

The first step was slow, hesitant, unsure.

The second was solid, steady, determined.

And then his strides were long, each one making my breaths come harder, the tears in my eyes welling too fast to stop before they spilled over my cheeks.

I couldn't move. I stood rooted to the spot by the SUV, James at my back and a thousand phone camera flashes going off from the line of people outside the bar while Aleks ran to me.

His eyes never wavered.

His steps never slowed.

And I choked on a sob the second he wrapped me in his arms.

"Please don't make me do this."

He crushed me to him, his arms hard and hot around me as he kissed my hair and mumbled the words again in my ear.

"Please, Mia. Please don't make me do this."

"I thought this was what you wanted," I croaked, clinging to him, hands fisting in his dress shirt as fresh tears dampened the fabric on his chest.

"All I've ever wanted is you."

And then his lips were on mine.

It was a claiming kiss — his hands in my hair, fingers curling around my neck, thumbs caressing my jaw. His lips were warm and firm and insistent, seeking more more more until I opened for him and melted and relented and surrendered.

Mine, that kiss said.

Mine, mine, mine.

I heard it in the groan that came from his throat, saw it in the bend of his

eyebrows, felt it in the desperate way he held me to him — like I might disappear if he loosened his grip even slightly.

Yours, my body echoed.

Yours, yours, yours.

All the worry I felt in the ride over, all the hesitation and anxiety that had bubbled in my stomach evaporated instantly.

Because I knew now without even asking.

He felt the same way I did.

“You,” Aleks repeated, the word muttered in between kisses. “All I’ve ever wanted is you.”

And then he was pushing me back toward the SUV, not taking his lips off me until James opened the door and Aleks helped me inside. As soon as the door shut behind us, snuffing out the lights and the noise, he was on me again.

Hands. Arms. Lips. Eyes.

“I didn’t want to do this,” he said, the words apologetic and anguished. “I couldn’t. I tried but I couldn’t go through with it. She was there, in my lap, and I felt sick, Mia. I felt so fucking sick I wanted to die.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you say something when Isabella made the call?”

“I knew what I’d agreed to. I knew it would all end eventually. I just thought...”

“After the hurricane...”

“Yes.”

“Something changed.”

“Yes,” he breathed, kissing my neck, my jaw. James was in the front seat next to our driver, and I was thankful for the privacy as Aleks’s hands roamed and pawed and claimed.

“I thought it didn’t matter to you,” I whispered. His thumb wiped away the tear that came with that admission before it could fall.

“I thought you didn’t want me.”

“I thought you were avoiding me, that you were worried I’d read too much into what happened.”

“I thought I wasn’t good enough.”

My chest cracked with that one, with how strained the words were when they left his lips. I kissed him just as urgently as he did me, pausing to press our foreheads together.

“I thought I wasn’t your type.”

A breath of a laugh from his nose, but it wasn’t a humorous laugh. It was sad, devastated, the weight of all we never said crushing both of us.

“I hate our thoughts,” he murmured.

“Yeah, same,” I said, and then I was clinging to him even more, climbing into his lap, desperate to be closer. “Fuck our thoughts.”

“Fuck them so hard.”

I straddled his lap and Aleks kissed me and kissed me, his mouth roving over my lips, my neck, my collarbone and my jaw before they restarted the route. I whimpered under his confident touches, heat building in my core like a volcano sure to erupt.

And the second the car pulled up to Aleks’s building, my hand was in his as he dragged me inside, the world and all its questions left behind us.

CHAPTER 38

No One to Run From

Aleks

Mia's back hit my front door with a thud as soon as it was shut behind us, me pressing my weight into her as her arms and legs wrapped around me and squeezed.

"What about Isabella and Giana?" she breathed into my mouth as I kissed her.

"They'll be fine."

"We should let them know what happened."

"Tomorrow."

"They're going to see the pictures. They're going to—"

"Woman," I growled, nipping at her neck before I reluctantly stopped my kissing long enough to frame her face and make her look at me. "They're fine. Everyone will be fine. We can handle the PR shit show in the morning. Right now, no one gets access to us. Right now, you don't owe anyone a phone call or a text or an explanation. Right now?" I lined her bottom lip with my thumb. "You're mine."

She stared at me for a long moment, unsure, before I watched and felt her body melt with relief. She nodded, hands moving for me, fingers curling at the nape of my neck and pulling me into her.

"They can wait," she whispered, still undecided.

"They can wait," I echoed.

And then I did everything I could to erase all the worries that plagued her.

My hands found her hips, holding her securely in my arms as I walked us blindly through my dark condo back toward my bedroom. There were so many places I wanted to take her. I pictured fucking her against my windows, spreading her wide on my kitchen island, lathering her up in my shower.

But tonight, I wanted her in my bed.

My heart was a steady drum in my chest as I dropped her into my sheets,

bed still unmade from this morning. She giggled as I fell down on top of her, moving her up until her head hit the pillows, until I was settled between her legs, balancing my weight on my elbows with my forearms framing her beautiful face.

She sighed and I took it as my cue to slow down, to savor this moment the way I wanted to. There was no need to rush now. There was no one around to see us, no one to run from, no one to lie to. It was just me and her and hours to pretend like the world didn't exist.

"You stupid girl," I muttered against her lips as I lazily kissed her, each one long and slow and filled with intent. "You stupid, stupid girl. How did you not see it? How could you not know that I've been fucking obsessed with you since we were teenagers?"

"You rejected me," she panted, fingers sliding each button of my dress shirt through the slits. "I tried to kiss you. I tried to be more than friends, and you turned me down."

"Because you were drunk," I defended, tugging her to sit up by the neck of her sweatshirt. I ripped it over her head and flung it to the side before I was on her and kissing again. "And when you were sober the next day, you pretended like nothing happened. I tried to talk to you about it but—"

"I was embarrassed." She slid my shirt over my shoulders, and I sat on my knees long enough to shrug it the rest of the way off before we were connected once more. "I thought you felt sorry for me. Here I was, this pathetic little girl with a crush."

"I had a crush on you, too."

"You never told me."

"Your father would have kicked me out if I did."

Each confession came between clothes being shed — her shorts, my jeans, her bra, my briefs, her panties, my socks — until she was nude and I was bare but for the chain hanging around my neck. It kissed the swells of Mia's breasts as I settled in again.

"Daddy loves you," she argued, frowning.

"He does. But you're his little girl, and I was a horny teenage boy from another country living under his roof. He had every right to be protective. I would have been disappointed if he *hadn't* set boundaries." I swallowed, running my knuckles over her cheek. "But that didn't mean I didn't dream of breaking them. Every fucking day I thought about risking it all, Mia, just to have one night with you."

Mia shook her head, moaning when I flexed my hips, the shaft of my cock sliding between her legs and teasing her where she was wet and wanting.

“All this time,” she sighed, eyes fluttering shut, nails digging into my shoulders.

“I came for you when we were older,” I told her, burying my face in her neck and licking along her flesh. “I came to L.A. I was going to tell you how I felt. I was hoping like hell you felt the same. But then I got there and you were with that fucking rock star.”

“Oh, God. *Ian?*”

“Don’t say another man’s name when I’m between your legs, Strings.”

I bit down on her neck to hammer that message home, and Mia gasped, arching into me, her hips grinding and trying to line me up at her entrance as I teased and toyed with her.

“I took that as my sign,” I told her, kissing down the flat bone of her sternum before licking each modest swell of her breasts. I circled her nipples with my tongue and savored the whimpering sounds that touch elicited. “I knew I wasn’t your type. I knew you were too good for me.”

Never good enough.

Never good enough.

“So, I stayed away. I watched you shine from afar, wanting everything good for you but hating when your smile was because of someone else. I stopped coming to family holidays because I couldn’t stomach being around you and whatever man had your attention.”

“That Fourth of July...”

“Fucking killed me,” I croaked, remembering how I’d tried and failed to numb myself that night after seeing Austin with her all day. “That was when I knew I couldn’t do it anymore. I tortured myself with miles between us but couldn’t man up and see your joy up close. I wanted you happy, Mia. I still do.” I kissed down her stomach, hiking each thigh up over my shoulder before my eyes locked on hers. “But fuck if I’m not the most selfish prick because the truth is I only want you happy with me.”

I licked along her inner thigh as she squirmed and sighed, hands fisting in the sheets and twisting hard.

“When I called you about the publicity stunt,” she breathed, her words strained as she tried to focus through the way I was teasing her.

“I jumped at the chance. Because I didn’t care if it was fake, Mia. I didn’t

care if it would all end. I didn't care that I'd be a fucking wreck when it was over. I wasn't going to miss the chance to see you, to hold you, to touch you." I tightened my grip on her thighs, spreading her wide and licking her in one long lash of my tongue from her opening to her clit. I kissed her there as she shook beneath me. "To kiss you."

"You made it all feel so real."

"Because it was. It was always real for me."

"Aleks..."

"It was. I came to so many of your shows and never told you, Mia. I bought every special edition of every album, every magazine with you on the cover. I watched every late-night show and listened to every podcast interview. That Steinway in there?" I nipped at her skin with a nod toward the hall. "Why do you think I have it? I don't play piano. But you do. I bought it for you. Just in case you ever came to visit. Just in case you ever decided to stay."

"Aleks," she repeated, this time my name sounding like an awestruck revelation.

My mouth was on her then, all words gone between us, and I let my tongue and teeth and lips show her everything else I had never said. I kissed and licked and sucked as she writhed and moaned and bucked against my mouth. I longed for her to feel how much I wanted her, how much I'd *always* wanted her. My mission was to erase any shred of doubt she had left hanging on.

"Do you feel it now, Mia?" I asked, swirling her clit with my tongue before I sucked it in tiny pulses that made her gasp and arch and whimper. "Do you feel how my heart beats for you?"

"Aleks—"

"Don't say my name again. Not yet," I reminded her. "Make me earn it."

And then I settled in to do just that.

I took my time exploring her with my hands and tongue, biting and sucking and licking. Her hands moved from the sheets to my head, guiding me, and I let her fuck my face as I held fast to her hips and gave her the friction she needed. I could have stayed there for hours tasting her. I could have spent the whole fucking night making her come as many times as I could just like that.

Her first orgasm was quiet and strained, like all the tension I'd felt between us the last time she left my condo had finally released. It was like it

pained her as much as it brought her pleasure, and no sooner had she stopped trembling and sank into the sheets, she was grabbing for me, pulling me up so she could taste herself on my tongue.

“Need you,” she whispered against my mouth, reaching between us to position me. “When you’re inside me, everything makes sense. Everything feels right.”

“Fuck,” I groaned, nestling my forehead between her head and shoulder as I wedged myself inside her just an inch. “You told me last time to make you stop thinking. I thought that meant you just wanted to use me. And I didn’t even care. I wanted to be used.”

“You do turn off my thoughts. You turn off everything — the stress, the noise, the expectation. With you, I can just be... me.”

“Always,” I promised her, sliding in more.

“You’ve always been enough for me, Aleks,” she whispered on a long sigh as I withdrew and flexed in deeper. “More. More than enough.”

I closed my eyes on another muttered curse, my heart squeezing painfully in my chest as I pushed all the way inside her. We moaned together at the sensation — me filling her, her being filled. For a moment, I sat just like that, fully seated inside her and feeling how she seemed to relax and melt like she was home.

Maybe that’s what I was for her.

It was always what she was for me.

Never Berne, or Chicago, or Seattle, or Tampa.

Mia.

She was my home.

I dropped my forehead to hers as I began to move, slow at first, pulsing deep and filling her with long strokes. She clung to me, her arms around my neck, nails digging into my shoulders or back, heels pressing into the back of my thighs.

Words ceased to exist now.

It was just breaths and moans and whimpers, both of us lost to each other, to this moment, to a fantasy somehow coming true.

She was in my bed. She wanted me, too.

Enough.

I was enough.

Mia pressed a hand to my chest, pushing until I took her cue and rolled us. She was on top then, straddling me, her perfect body on display as she

took control. I roamed every soft curve with slow, curious hands as she rocked and rolled, rubbing her clit against my lower abdomen and throwing her head back each time she found that friction she wanted.

Soon, she was bouncing in my lap, finding her second release. This one was loud and unbridled, and then I was coming, too, holding fast to her hips as I flexed up into her again and again.

I carried her to the bath after, running it hot while I wiped us both down with a washcloth. Then I helped her step in, sliding in behind her and holding her back to my chest, my arms wrapping fully around her under the water.

We stayed like that until the water turned lukewarm, not a word to be said, just gentle touches and soft, sated sighs.

I memorized each smile she gave me as I towed her off and watched her slip into one of my t-shirts. We crawled into bed together. I wrapped her up tight. She fell asleep in my arms.

And then the morning came.

Along with a blow that sent our fragile house of cards crashing down.

CHAPTER 39

Under the Dirt and Grime

Mia

“Can’t breathe.”

I muttered the words into Aleks’s chest, his arms and legs wrapped around me and crushing me to him like I might disappear if he were to give me so much as an inch of space. We’d kicked the covers off, but he kept me warm, and I chuckled when he released me only enough to make sure I had breathing room but not enough for me to move otherwise.

“Better?” he asked, kissing my hair on a smile.

“Well, at least I’m not nose-deep in your armpit now.”

“Don’t act like my scent doesn’t make you feral.”

“Ew. Don’t say *scent* like that.”

“You love my *scent*,” he said again, rolling until he was on top of me. I laughed and shoved at his chest when he started sniffing under my arms and all around my neck like a hound dog. “And yours is like catnip to me.”

“I smell like you right now.”

“No,” he argued. “You smell like you. Jasmine. Honey. *Du schmöcksch wie sAlpeglüe.*”

“You’re doing that thing where you speak another language.”

Aleks leaned up on his elbows, still heavy on me in the most delicious way as he swept my hair back, his eyes searching mine. “I said you smell like an Alpine sunset.”

My neck flushed with heat, and I tickled the nape of his neck with my fingertips as a smile found my lips. “Why is that so corny it’s romantic?”

“They tend to go hand in hand.”

I sighed happily as he rested his forehead against mine, both of us touching one another in long, unhurried strokes.

“Was last night a dream?” I asked quietly.

“It was real, Strings.” He kissed me, his lips firm and sure. “All of it was

real.”

We stayed that way for a while, the sun rising over the city outside his windows. I knew there were so many people we’d have to answer to today, so many things we’d have to figure out, but I didn’t want to move. I wanted to live right there in that bed with Aleks until the day blended back into night, until I had no choice but to eat, or shower, or use the bathroom.

Too soon, my stomach growled loud and angry, and Aleks chuckled before planting a trail of kisses all along my neck up to my mouth.

“Breakfast?” he asked.

I sighed. “I guess.”

Another smile. Another kiss. Another flip of my heart. “I’m on it,” he announced, and then he reluctantly rolled off me, giving me a glorious view of his backside as he did.

I watched him shrug on briefs and joggers, biting my lip on a smile when he decided to forego his shirt. With a wink and a promise to feed me, he disappeared down the hall.

I flopped back into the sheets, smiling ear to ear as I let my eyes close. I was exhausted, body and mind and soul, but sated in a way I’d never been before.

I debated staying there until he brought a plate of eggs to bed for me, but selfishly, I didn’t want to miss the view of him cooking shirtless. So, I peeled myself out of bed, stopped in the bathroom long enough to pee and use my finger as a toothbrush, and then I ran my nails through my crazy hair to tame it as much as I could.

The kitchen already smelled amazing, potatoes frying in one skillet while bacon sizzled in another. He was just putting a cast iron loaded with eggs, cheese, and vegetables into the oven when I slid onto one of the barstools at the island to watch.

“Came for the show, I see,” he teased me, rounding the island long enough to reward my arrival with a long, toe-curling kiss before he was back to handling the stovetop.

“Couldn’t resist.”

I’d also brought my phone, though I’d set it facedown on the counter in front of me. I stared at it now, knowing I couldn’t hide from the people we owed answers to for long.

“Thinking about Isabella?” Aleks asked as he flipped the bacon.

“Among many others.”

“Call her,” he encouraged. “Let her yell at me. That always makes her feel better.”

I smirked, flipping the phone in my hand. I’d turned on my *do not disturb* last night so the thing wouldn’t buzz all night long. As soon as I turned it back to normal, the flurry of notifications I’d missed sprung onto the screen.

All of them faded to the background when I saw a recent text from Austin.

King of Fragile Egos (9 minutes ago): I wanted to give you a warning, but my publicist advised against it, so I’m sorry you’re waking up to this. I’m not doing any of it to hurt you, Mia. It’s just show business. And honestly, you should have known better than to pull something so stupid. It’s not right to lie to your fans for your own benefit. Garrett has a reputation in this industry that he’s worked hard for, and he was fair with his reviews of your album. Just because you can’t handle a little critique doesn’t give you the right to discredit him the way you and your team have been.

King of Fragile Egos (4 minutes ago): I hope you understand where I’m coming from. Maybe when the dust settles, you and I could get together. I really do miss you, love.

My heart beat faster and harder with each word, denting my ribcage and strangling my breath. I didn’t even click into his thread, just scrolled up to the other notifications I’d missed.

Google alerts and headlines assassinated me one by one, along with a string of missed calls and texts from Isabella, Giana, my agent, my tour manager, my mom, my dad — everyone I knew.

All of them either demanding I call them, asking if I was okay, or a combination of the two.

“Mia?”

I heard my name through what felt like a dense fog, my heart thumping in my ears now as the headlines popped up again and again.

“Mia, what’s wrong?”

Aleks was at my side now, tilting my chin with his knuckles, his concerned eyes finding mine beneath bent brows.

I couldn’t speak.

I just handed him my phone with trembling hands.

Exposed: Mia Love and Aleks Suter’s Relationship Was All a Lie

Austin Westbrook Spills the Tea: Inside Mia Love’s PR Nightmare

From Fake Love to Real Scandal: Mia Love and Aleks Suter’s Lies Exposed

Austin Westbrook Calls Out Ex Mia Love for Lying to Her Fans in Scathing Tell All

Sources Confirm Mia Love and Aleks Suter's 'Relationship' Was Just Smoke and Mirrors

Mia Love's Album and Tour Crisis: Is This the End of Her Career?

Aleks Suter and Mia Love's Publicity Stunt Gone Wrong: Fans React

I watched his face as Aleks scrolled through the headlines I'd just read, the ones now burned into my brain forever.

Tell all.

Lies.

Crisis.

Fake.

Exposed.

Austin had done a tell all with Garrett. There was an article and a podcast to accompany it. There was some inside source that had given them all the proof they needed. They were on a mission to take us down.

And they'd done it.

Black dots invaded the edges of my vision the more Aleks scrolled, and when he cursed under his breath, I used that word as permission to panic.

"Oh, God," I whispered, eyes welling with tears as I shoved a hand through my greasy hair. "Oh, God."

I stood, ready to pace behind Aleks as my ribcage squeezed painfully tight around my lungs, but my legs were like lead. I couldn't move. I was having a heart attack. I was going to die.

"Come here." Aleks dropped my phone to the counter, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me into him. I was in a daze, not fighting against him even slightly as he wrapped me in his arms. "Look at me."

But I couldn't.

I stared at my bare feet on his wood floor, heart racing faster and faster, ears buzzing.

They know.

They all know it was a lie.

"Mia, look at me."

When I still didn't, Aleks dipped his head until he was in my eye line. His hands were on my shoulders, steadying me. His eyes bore into mine.

"It's going to be okay."

My phone started buzzing on the counter, the jolt of it so hard the thing

was moving across the granite like a bug. Aleks slapped it like one, too, before hastily shoving it in the pocket of his joggers to muffle the noise.

But it didn't matter what he did now, didn't matter if my whole team tried to shield me from the damage. I'd already seen it.

Headline after headline, article after article, brand after brand. There were photos of Aleks with the girl from last night, the one we'd set up ourselves, now used against us. There were pictures of when I dated Austin — the ones snapped during our fights when he looked calm and stoic and I was losing my mind.

He made me that way.

He *made* me crazy.

The manipulation, the gaslighting... it seeped into my bloodstream like poison, turning me into someone I didn't recognize.

And now, more than a year after our breakup, I still wasn't free from him. He *still* had power over me.

Months of carefully laid plans, all erased with just one interview where he said it was all fake.

"They're exposing us, Aleks," I whispered, finally blinking away my haze to look at him. "They're exposing *me*."

"Mia."

"This is it. This is going to ruin everything. My album, my tour, my *career*." That pressure was back in my chest, stronger than ever. "It's over. It's all over."

My phone was still buzzing in Aleks's pocket, and he cursed, fishing it out before his lips pulled to the side. He showed me the screen. "It's Bella."

I shook my head. I couldn't face her — not yet.

Aleks didn't question me or point out the very obvious fact that I one-hundred percent should be speaking with my publicist right now. He just declined the call and walked over to his couch, shoving my phone between the cushions before he returned to me.

His hands slid to frame my face, thumbs against my jaw, fingers curling in my hair.

"The Internet is ablaze. All the magazines, the news outlets, the talk shows. The fans... they... *God*, they'll be furious with me." Tears slid hot down my cheeks until they hit Aleks's skin. "Austin and Garrett won. They got what they wanted. This is it for me."

That made Aleks's jaw click, and he tightened his grip on me, waiting

until my eyes found his before he spoke.

“They didn’t win.”

“Aleks, did you see the headlines?”

“I did.”

“Then how can you possibly—”

“I know how we can shut them all up. I know how we can prove their story wrong.”

I blinked at him, over and over, frowning as I tried to think of what solution he had come up with because I didn’t see a damn thing as an option. They *weren’t* wrong — we had lied to everyone. “How?”

Aleks swallowed, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine like he was trying to think of something, like he wanted to have the answer, but also knew there wasn’t one.

I knew it.

He didn’t have an idea because there was no idea to be had. There was no way to save this. I’d dug myself into this massive black hole and now I’d be buried alive in it.

I opened my mouth to tell him that, but stopped short when he slid his hands down to grab mine. He kept his eyes on me for a long moment before his gaze dropped to where he held me. He brought my knuckles to his lips, kissing each one.

Then, he slipped the fake engagement ring he’d given me off my finger.

And he dropped to his knee.

“Aleks,” I warned, my heart racing again but for a completely different reason.

“Marry me, Strings.”

He sang the words like the sweetest song, each syllable tickling my ears like the perfect string of notes. One hand held mine, the other held the ring, and his gaze was steady and sure, his beautiful, dark eyes watching me and waiting for an answer.

“I... I don’t understand.”

“Marry me,” he repeated. “Not for show, not for some stunt. For real.”

My mouth was dry, hand trembling where he held me. “I... we can’t. They’ll know. They’ll know it’s fake.”

“No, they won’t.”

“They’ll think we’re just doing it to save our asses.”

“They won’t, Mia,” he assured me, squeezing my hand. “Because there’s

nothing fake about the way I love you.”

I couldn't contain the small gasp those three words wrenched from me. I covered my mouth with a shaking hand, brows folding together.

“You heard me,” he said, as if he could read my mind, as if he could sense the disbelief rushing through me. “I love you, Mia. I've loved you for years. I loved you when you slept down the hall from me and when you rested your head a thousand miles away. I loved you when you weren't mine to love, and I love you still. It's not fake. It never has been.”

He looked down only long enough to place the ring at my fingertip, and then his eyes were on me again, waiting for permission.

“I meant every word I said on that yacht. I've meant every touch, every kiss. There's nothing I want more in this world than for you to wear this ring, for it to mean you belong to me and I belong to you.” He swallowed, his voice cracking a bit when he added, “For you to be my wife.”

Fresh tears swelled in my eyes, blurring the beautiful image of this man on his knees for me.

“But only if you want this, too,” he added quickly. “If you let me have you, all of you... I'll be everything I can be for you. I'll be the best of myself, the version of me you've always seen under the dirt and grime. I can't promise I'll be everything you deserve, or that I'll be the best man you've ever been with. But I can promise you that you'll never know a day in this life without fierce, protective love. I can promise that I will care for you, put your dreams first, put *you* first in every way. I'll never try to contain you. I'll never try to change you. I'll always be right here, by your side, to cheer you on or push you to be better or hold you when you need to fall apart.”

He wet his lips, eyes dancing between mine.

“Even if they do think it's fake at first, they won't for long. Because when they see me bawling when you walk down the aisle to me, they'll know. When they see how I watch you perform in a sold-out stadium, they'll know. When they watch us grow old together, you the mother of my children and me still threatening to bury any motherfucker who dares to speak one ill word to you? They'll know.”

I laughed a bit through my tears at that, shaking my head as I hung on to every word.

“And even if they never know, even if they always wonder,” Aleks continued. “We'll know. *You* will know, Mia. You'll never have to wonder. From this moment on, I will be yours entirely.” The corner of his lips quirked

up. “To be honest, I always have been.”

He let out a shaky exhale, the speech done, and then he looked down to the ring and back up at me.

“So?”

“This... this is insane,” I whispered, but I was smiling, swiping away tears with my free hand.

“And genius.”

“And *absurd*.”

“You’ll be stuck with me.”

At that, I lowered to my knees, covering his hand with mine. “The only place I want to be.”

“Yeah?” Aleks’s eyes were filled with light and hope.

“Yeah,” I whispered, crying again, shaking my head and looking from him to the ring and back again. “I’m not getting a divorce,” I warned him sternly. “I mean it. If we do this—”

“I’d sooner walk away from a fight on the ice than ever let you go, Strings.”

I laughed, biting my lower lip as I searched him for any sign of this being a joke.

I found nothing.

He was serious. He wanted to marry me.

And *God*, I wanted to marry him, too. I wanted to walk down the aisle to him. I wanted him to wear a ring that told every woman he was mine. I wanted the headlines to be real — the touches, the kisses, all of it.

So, I pressed my finger into the ring just a centimeter, a silent request.

“Is that a yes, Mia Love?”

“It’s a *hell* yes.”

And when Aleks slid the gold all the way to my knuckle, the stormy gemstone sparkling even brighter than it had that day on the water, I smiled.

“Let’s bury this motherfucker under all the shit he’s talked about me,” I said.

Aleks had the grin of the devil when he helped me stand, like that was the only thing he’d ever wanted to do, like it was his purpose in life.

He pressed his lips to mine, one word vibrating through me before he was carrying me back to the bedroom.

“Let’s.”

CHAPTER 40

Sorry, Not Sorry

Ten Days Later

Aleks

Mia's childhood home was buzzing.

The faint scent of cinnamon and cloves mingled with the warm, buttery aroma of something baking in the kitchen, wrapping the air in a holiday hug. Voices carried through the halls, laughter bubbling over the occasional clink of glassware or scrape of chairs being adjusted. Every room seemed to glow, strings of twinkling lights and hundreds of candles casting soft, golden hues over the walls, illuminating the framed family photos adorning each wall.

There were photos of Charlie and Holly on their wedding day, of Mia as a newborn, of them as a family ten years down the line.

And there were photos of me, too.

I smiled at the photo from my first game in the states, Charlie's hand on my shoulder proudly, Holly tucking a shy Mia into her side on the other end. Then there was the one of my first Christmas with them, and one when Mia and I graduated high school.

Our history lived inside this beautiful house.

And now, we'd fill the walls with even more family photos.

I stood at the base of the stairs, watching the organized chaos unfold around me. I should have been helping, but my feet stayed rooted to the hardwood floors, hands tucked into the pockets of my suit pants. Our friends and family bustled by as I happily lost myself to the memories.

Mia's mom darted into the dining room with a bundle of greenery, stopping long enough to coach Chloe where she was adjusting the ribbons on the chairs that lined the living room where the ceremony would take place. The grand doors made of glass gave way to the stunning view of Lake Michigan beyond, a frigid scene that somehow made it feel even more cozy

inside. Liv was balancing a tray of steaming cider as she navigated toward the kitchen where Maven and Grace were, no doubt, finding creative ways to spike that cider.

If we thought the headlines about us being “exposed” were wild, they were nothing compared to when we told Isabella and Giana that we were getting married.

Really getting married.

Giana had threatened me within an inch of my life that I better not just be doing this to save my ass, that I better actually mean what I said. Isabella had asked Mia if she was sure about a dozen times. But I think the longer they watched us, the more they saw the way we held onto each other unfaltering... they knew.

The shock had only lasted a moment, and then the team launched into action — and that included my teammates and their significant others.

The season didn’t stop for us, no matter what was happening in our lives. But where there was a will, there was a way. We’d no sooner snuffed out our New Jersey opponents in Friday’s home game before we were all on a plane to Chicago. Maven and Mia’s mom led the charge yesterday, giving each of us our list of to-do’s to make this last-minute wedding come to life. And though we worked hard all day long, Isabella still made sure we had the evening for a rehearsal dinner and speeches — including one given by Jaxson, who roasted me the way only he could.

Now, we were a little over an hour from the ceremony start time for our small, intimate wedding. And tomorrow morning, I, along with the rest of the team, would be on a plane to Philadelphia for our next game.

There was no time for a honeymoon — not now, at least. Hell, there would barely be enough time to enjoy my new wife the way I really wanted to. But she had her own dreams to chase. Where my plane would go to Philadelphia, hers would carry her to New Orleans for the next stop on her tour.

Her still sold-out tour.

We hadn’t even entertained Austin’s “scathing tell all” with Garrett Orange. They may have felt like they won for the first few days while we were silent, while the Internet went feral and some of Mia’s fans turned on her. But the majority of them were waiting for our statement, hoping and praying that the rumors weren’t true.

Ignoring that whole mess was easy to do once we announced we had set a

date.

And just a little over a week after that tell all, we were tying the knot.

Sure, there were gossip sites and rabid fans who still questioned the validity of our relationship, who wondered if the whole thing really *was* fake. But there were *more* fans and journalists arguing the opposite. They showed photos and videos of us on repeat, the one of my proposal getting especially high circulation as fans shouted *how could this possibly be fake?!*

And it wasn't. It never had been.

Austin and Garrett had failed in their mission to dull Mia's shine. And as long as I was around, I'd protect her like the rare gemstone she was.

No one would ever know for sure that we'd started dating as a ruse — no one but those close to us, anyway. And we knew they'd never tell a soul. Maybe the theories would continue, but after today, I had a feeling all the naysayers wouldn't have a steady leg to stand on.

One shot of me sobbing like a baby at the sight of my future wife would surely shut them all up.

Wife.

The word made my chest swell, my heart race, my skin prickle with possession and the overwhelming desire to protect her with everything that I was. My nose already tingled with that sensation that comes right before a good cry — and I hadn't had one of those since my mother passed.

Today, the tears would be of joy.

The house felt smaller than I remembered in that moment, with all the people we loved most filling the space. When I'd arrived from Switzerland, this place had felt too big to wrap my head around. But, slowly, this mansion began to feel normal, natural. As close to home as I could get at that time in my life.

Mia and I had spent countless afternoons here as teenagers, lounging on floats in the pool or sprawled out on the living room floor doing homework. I could still picture her running down the stairs, her laugh echoing through the space, tugging me along by the wrist to hear her new lyrics. I'd pretended not to care about them, pretended to be annoyed — but I loved it.

Back then, she was just a girl with wild dreams and a reckless smile, and I was the boy trying my damndest not to cross the line her father had drawn between us.

And now? Now she was the woman upstairs in the very same room she used to sleep in, slipping into a wedding dress that would no doubt be my

undoing once I saw her in it.

A smile found my lips as I glanced at the front window, where a light dusting of snow had begun to fall, the flakes melting against the glass before they could linger. It felt poetic, somehow. The years between us had melted away, too — time and distance and pride keeping us from saying what felt impossible to admit out loud. Now, all the excuses, all the pretending, all the miscommunication dissolved like the snowflakes on that window.

It was just us, surrounded by our loved ones, ready to exchange vows and rings that would tie us together forever.

“Earth to Aleks!” A hand clapped down on my shoulder, and I turned to see Carter wearing his signature too-wide grin. He always looked like a kid in a candy store. “You good, man? You’ve got that ‘wedding jitters’ look.”

I huffed out a laugh, shaking my head. “No jitters. Just... taking it all in.”

Carter raised an eyebrow, following my gaze around the room. “Well, take it in later. Right now, we need your muscle in the dining room. Something about a garland that refuses to cooperate.”

He’d no sooner said the words before a golden retriever puppy ran past us with a high heel in his mouth, the poor thing struggling to drag it along as Liv chased after him.

“Carter! I swear to God, if your dog chews my Manolos, I will take your next tooth out without anesthesia!”

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath, and then he was shrugging at me with that goofy grin again. “Guess getting a new puppy this week wasn’t my brightest idea.”

“You think?”

He laughed with another squeeze of my shoulder. Then, he took off, chasing after Liv like he always had been. “Zamboni! Bad dog, Zambo. Drop it. *Drooop* it.” He pretended to scold the pup when he caught up with it, but I didn’t miss how he secretly scratched behind the thing’s ear with a wink like he’d trained it to help him get Livia’s attention.

I wouldn’t put it past him.

“Garland, Su Man,” he reminded me as he put his arm around our perturbed team dentist, showing her proudly that her high heel was unharmed. She shoved him away, but I swore I saw a smirk on those dark rose lips of hers.

I could hear the guys in the dining room calling for my help, but I hesitated, my gaze drifting to the stairs as if I might catch a glimpse of her.

My bride. My Mia. The girl I'd been so sure I could never have.
And now, the woman I'd spend the rest of my life proving I deserved.

• • •

Everything came together just in the nick of time, our guests who had doubled as party planners taking their seats and settling in to relax and enjoy the wedding with just ten minutes to spare. Daddy P stood begrudgingly at the altar made of reclaimed wood and draped with greenery, fairy lights, and chrysanthemums.

With the help of Chloe and Ava begging him, he'd agreed to be our officiant. I knew he was perfect because it would be short, sweet, and to the point — which was exactly what we wanted.

There were no groomsmen, no bridesmaids, just all our family and friends seated in the cozy space as the snow fell harder outside. A violinist played softly in the corner of the room as everyone settled in, and I stood by the stairs again, knowing it was just about time for me to take my place next to Will.

And then Mia would walk down the aisle to me.

I shook my head in disbelief, a smile curving my lips as my heart squeezed in my chest.

“Now that's the face I've always dreamed of seeing on the man about to marry my little girl.”

Charlie met me with a warm grin when I turned to face him, opening his arms wide for a hug. He clapped me hard on the back, holding me longer and tighter than usual before he released me.

“Shouldn't you be with that little girl right now?” I reminded him.

“She's having a moment with her mother, and if I have any prayer of holding myself together through this ceremony, I can't witness my two favorite girls in the world crying or I'll be in a puddle on the floor, too.”

“I've given up on any hope of holding back tears,” I confessed.

“Well, we can be a mess together, then.” Charlie's smile softened, his eyes searching mine. “It's a great day for this father. I have always been so proud to call you my son, even if you weren't technically family. Now, you will be.”

Proud.

My chest seized at the word. I knew he'd been proud of me as a hockey player, maybe even as a student. But... was he proud that I was the one his

daughter had chosen?

I thought about a moment in this house where I was everything *but* proud, when this man had found me with a handful of pills and talked me down. The next day, he'd insisted I get help, and I had. Other than that, we hadn't spoken of it since.

But could he really be proud Mia chose me if he knew what lived inside me?

Charlie shifted on his feet, glancing out the window at the snow as it thickened, the flurries sticking to the glass. He let out a breath that seemed heavier than the moment called for, his hands finding his pockets before his gaze returned to me.

"You know," he started, his voice low, "there's something I need to say before we do this."

"I'm sorry I didn't ask for her hand," I said immediately, knowing this was a conversation I should have had before this moment. "I know I should have gotten your blessing, your permission, before I even—"

"Permission?" Charlie's eyebrows shot up, his lips twitching as if to hold back a laugh. "Aleks, she's my daughter, not my property. She doesn't need anyone's permission to live her life."

"I know," I said quickly. "It's just... I wish I'd told you sooner. I know how you feel about—"

"Do you?" Charlie cut me off, his tone light but firm, his brow furrowing. "Because I'm not sure you do. You think I don't approve of this?"

"I know you're not happy about it," I said, standing straighter under his gaze. "I know you don't think—"

"How do you know what I think?" he interrupted again, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Son, I've been protective of my daughter since the day she was born. Do you blame me for keeping an eye on the teenage boy living under my roof with her at such a vulnerable age?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it again, unsure how to respond. I didn't blame him. Like I'd said to Mia, I would have been more upset if he *hadn't* threatened me. He was protecting her, just like I was now — like I'd always wanted to.

"And when you two came to me with this whole 'pretend to date' stunt, I'll admit, I was worried," he continued. "Not because I didn't trust you, but because I've always known how Mia feels about you."

My stomach hollowed at his words, and Charlie's eyes softened as he

nodded.

“Oh, I’ve seen it,” he said, a faint smile curving his lips. “The way she looks at you... it’s been there for years. I just wasn’t sure what you wanted.”

I couldn’t fault him for that. Sure, he’d put boundaries in place when we lived under the same roof, and at the time, I’d resented it. But after that... we never spoke about any of it again, mostly because I was afraid. Afraid of what he’d say. Afraid he’d confirm my biggest fear — that he didn’t think I was the right one for his little girl.

“I honestly thought you’d go after her once you both moved out of this house,” Charlie added, like he was reading my thoughts. “But you didn’t. And I guess I worried that maybe you didn’t feel the same way. At least, until that July Fourth.” He swallowed then, his expression serious. “I wondered then if you loved her so much it was killing you.”

His words hung in the air between us, heavy and unspoken for far too long. When I finally replied, my voice was low, thick with emotion.

“I did,” I said, my chest tightening as I admitted it aloud. “I always did. I just... I didn’t think I was good enough for her. I didn’t think I deserved her. And I especially didn’t think *you* thought I did.”

Charlie’s expression softened, and he let out a long breath, nodding like he’d known all along. “Aleks,” he said, his voice steady, deliberate, “I’ve watched you love my daughter for years. I may not have known your true feelings for sure, but I knew you cared about her. I knew you’d always look out for her. I knew you wanted to see her happy — even if that hurt you sometimes.”

I swallowed.

“You’re not here because you’re perfect,” he continued. “You’re here because you’re exactly who she wants. Exactly who she’s always wanted. And that’s all the proof I’ll ever need that you deserve her.”

His words hit harder than I expected, like a fist to the dusty cage around my lungs. All the doubts about my worth fluttered away with the hit, my next breath lighter, and that emotion that had threatened to strangle me all day tightened its grip.

My eyes welled a bit, but I held the tears at bay. Charlie gave me a knowing smile and clapped my shoulder again, his grip firm. “Now go stand where you’re supposed to be,” he said, his voice breaking the tension with a small grin. “She’s been waiting long enough.”

Before I could respond, there was a small commotion at the top of the

stairs. Both of us turned just in time to see Mia step into view, the cream satin train of her dress gathered in her hands as her mom fussed with the hem.

The house, the noise, the entire *world* fell away.

She was radiant, her silky brown hair framing her face in curls that dusted the heart-shaped bust of her gown. Her cobalt eyes were lined and smoky, her lips a sunset pink. I caught sight of her dimple, of the beauty mark just above it, the one I could draw with a marker in the exact right spot even blindfolded.

It was the kind of beauty that didn't really exist, the kind that seemed fake if you saw it online or in a magazine. It vibrated off her, around her, strengthening with every smile she flashed.

Timeless, that's what she was.

And also... slightly pissed.

"Aleks!" Her voice rang out, snapping me back to reality. "You're not supposed to be standing there! Cover your eyes or something!"

I scrambled to obey, turning toward Charlie with a sheepish grin as I raised a hand to shield my face. He laughed, shaking his head as he pulled me into one last hug.

"You've got this, son," he said, his voice gruff with emotion. "Now get up there before she yells at you again."

He clapped my back as he let go, and I hurried into place next to Daddy P, who raised a brow at my flustered state.

"Smooth," he muttered under his breath, smirking. "You going to cry next?"

"Like you won't fold like a faulty skate blade when you and Chloe finally tie the knot."

His eyes flicked to his bride-to-be then, a watery smile finding him as he watched her holding his daughter's hand.

"You've got me there."

The violinist in the corner shifted seamlessly into a new song, the soft melody drawing the room to silence. Holly pressed a kiss to her daughter's cheek before taking her seat, and Charlie climbed the stairs to offer Mia his arm.

The moment she slid her hand into his, he glanced at her with a look that could have melted the snow piling up outside. They shared a brief, private exchange—words I couldn't hear but could feel in the way her shoulders relaxed and his chest lifted with a steadying breath.

And then, together, they began their descent.

My eyes stung as they drew closer, the weight of the moment sinking in. This wasn't a dream or a fantasy. This wasn't a show we were putting on for the cameras — although, Isabella *did* conveniently give a few of her favorite shutterbugs an inside hint about where they could hide to get the first look at the intimate affair.

It was real.

She was real.

And she was walking toward me.

Mia's dress was pure elegance, a breathtaking combination of modern design and timeless romance as she made her way toward me. The strapless bodice hugged her figure, the sweetheart neckline emphasizing the delicate curve of her collarbones and shoulders. The fabric was structured yet soft, folding into flawless pleats that cinched her waist and flared into the skirt.

From the waist, the gown flowed in a cascade of creamy silk, its dramatic side slit revealing a hint of her leg as she walked — a bold, yet graceful touch. The asymmetrical draping added movement and texture, catching the light with every step. The cream silk against all the greenery and the white and red flowers filling the space pulled together the holiday feel of the affair.

It was only November, but it felt like Christmas. It felt like a snowy morning in Berne with Annaliese and my foster siblings. It felt the way she always made it feel no matter what it took her to do so — special and warm.

My heart ached at the absence of her. I longed for a different reality, one where she could be in that front row next to Holly. My hand floated to my chest, pressing hard enough into my suit so I could feel the chain necklace she gave me beneath it.

She was always with me, even if I couldn't see her.

When they reached the altar, Charlie turned to Mia, cupping her face with one hand. His lips brushed her cheek, and though his words were soft, I caught them anyway. "You'll always be my little girl," he murmured.

Tears blurred my vision, and by the time he placed her hand in mine, they were spilling over.

I knew it was useless to try not to cry, but *fuck*, I didn't even make it to saying our vows.

"You weren't kidding, huh," Mia teased, her voice low and warm as she stepped closer. "You're really going to lose it before the ceremony even starts?"

“I told you I would,” I replied, a smile breaking through my tears. “And no one’s going to think this is fake after they see me like this.”

Mia shook her head, her own eyes glistening now. She pressed her free hand to my chest, her thumb brushing against the fabric of my suit, against the chain beneath it like she’d caught me just moments before and wanted me to know she understood.

“I don’t care what anyone else thinks,” she whispered. “I only care about you. About this moment right here, right now. About us.”

My heart clenched at her words, and before I could stop myself, I dipped my head and kissed her.

The room erupted into murmurs and soft laughter, Carter yelling out a deep, “*Atta boy!*”. To my right, Will groaned dramatically.

“In case you forgot, you’re supposed to wait for me to say you can do that,” he grumbled.

The crowd chuckled, but I didn’t pull away immediately. I pressed my forehead to Mia’s, my lips curving into a grin against hers.

“Sorry,” I murmured, though I wasn’t.

“Not sorry,” Mia whispered back, her hand tightening around mine.

I straightened and turned to Daddy P, who was glaring at me — but it was a loving glare.

“Well,” he mumbled, adjusting his notes with a dramatic sigh. “Let’s get this over with before you two start making out again.”

Zamboni barked from the audience like his puppy senses were telling him we’d fail that test.

And I winked at him, knowing we would.

CHAPTER 41

Edible Arrangement

Mia

“Okay, I know today is all about you and Aleks and this beautiful wedding, but can I just gloat for a second because... Garrett is getting absolutely *roasted* online right now.”

Isabella did a little happy dance with that announcement, shimmying her shoulder as one hand scrolled through her phone and the other plucked the olive from her martini and popped it into her mouth. Her bright pink hair was pulled into an elegant bun at the nape of her neck, the top of it slicked back, and her eyes were dramatic and emphasized with a dark cat-eye line. Her piercings glimmered in the light, tattoos standing out against the black spaghetti strap dress she wore.

“Everyone is saying he’s unreliable and that he’s become a resentful old man with some weird fetish with trying to take you down,” she continued, her eyes alight with glee as she shook her head and kept scrolling. “Some are even saying it’s Austin still trying to control you after your breakup, that Garrett is his little puppet.”

I listened with a soft smile on my lips, heart full as I looked around the house at all our family and friends gathered together. Warmth spread through me like a cup of hot tea, the snow outside making the scene inside feel even cozier, somehow.

My eyes caught on where Aleks was across the room. He stood with Will Perry and Vince Tanev, the three of them chatting animatedly while they sipped an old expensive scotch my father had broken out for the occasion. When my husband’s eyes found me, the corner of his lips tilted, and heat spread through me again at the way his gaze dragged from my head all the way down to my satin Gianvito Rossi heels.

Husband.

The word curled around my heart, snug and warm, like an animal

burrowing into its forever home.

“God, this makes me so happy. Look! People are making the best fucking memes.” Isabella shoved her phone in my face, and I snort-laughed at the image of Garrett with an orange face and little devil horns, his expression enraged as he watched an image of me covering my mouth as tears flooded my eyes the first night at MSG when the audience screamed for an encore.

“I just hope we can finally put this all behind us,” I said, meaning every word. I found that, for the first time in my life, I didn’t care what anyone thought about me or my relationship with Aleks. I had nearly melted down when the exposé came out, and yet Aleks had remained calm, his hand in mine as he found a solution. I realized that day that I don’t have control over what anyone thinks of me, but I do have control over what I think of *myself*.

I know my heart. I know my intentions. I know my talent, my music, my journey.

And now, I had a man who wanted to proudly stand by my side and remind me of that power any time I lost sight of it.

He was the miracle cure for any anxiety I had left hanging on, and staring down the barrel of forever with him, I found I didn’t have a worry in the world.

“I did not see this coming, you know,” Isabella said, and when I blinked out of where I’d been yet again staring at Aleks from across the room, I found her with a knowing smile. “You swore to me on that plane to New York that he didn’t mean anything to you, and I foolishly believed it. Don’t get me wrong,” she added quickly. “I saw the way you looked at him, the way he looked at you. But I never thought either of you idiots would admit it. I fully expected to have to pick you up off the floor when this was all done.”

“That makes two of us,” I admitted softly.

“I also expected a *banger* album full of angsty love songs,” she said with a dreamy sigh. “Alas, my dreams are shattered.”

I smirked.

“You better still be able to write music when you’re all happily married and getting fucked down on the daily,” she threatened, her long stiletto nail circling my nose before she booped it. “Otherwise, I’ll be calling up Aleks and telling him to do something stupid to get you in your sads. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Hate to break it to you,” Aleks said, making Isabella jump a bit as he rounded from where he’d walked up behind her and put his arms around me.

He pulled my back to his chest, kissing my neck as I flushed red hot. “But I used up all my stupid in the years I didn’t admit how I felt about our girl. Afraid I’ll be nothing but a loyal, devoted husband now.”

Isabella pouted. “There goes our future Grammys.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure,” Aleks said, kissing my neck again. Chills swept over my skin. “I’ll give her plenty of inspiration. Promise.”

“Ew,” Isabella said, but she smiled as she said it. “That’s so cute. I hate it. Is there traffic on this street when it’s snowing? Think I’d like to throw myself in front of a plow right now.”

I rolled my eyes at her dramatics, kissing her cheek when she shoved Aleks off me long enough to give me a hug.

“I’m happy for you, babe,” she said sincerely. “Now, go enjoy the rest of your wedding night. We have a flight in the morning.”

I smiled, both at her sentiment as well as the fact that the flight she mentioned would carry us to yet another sold-out stadium show. It would be my first performance as a married woman, and I couldn’t wait to share that with my fans.

When Isabella left us, Aleks wrapped my hands up in his, kissing my knuckles before he toyed with where my engagement ring hugged the new diamond wedding band beneath it.

“Let’s grab you a coat and some boots,” he said. “I’d like to take my bride for a walk in the snow.”

• • •

The soft sound of snow beneath our boots was the only sound breaking the stillness of the night when Aleks led me outside. It was still snowing now, and it was the soft kind of snow that made it seem like the whole world had turned down the volume, a kind of quiet like nothing else.

Through the windows of the house, I could still see our family and friends in the warm glow of candles and fairy lights, all of them smiling and laughing and eating and drinking. It warmed me in a way I couldn’t explain, to see our worlds mixing like that — Giana and Isabella taking selfies, my mom holding Ava’s hand as she pointed out each of our Christmas ornaments, my father geeking out as he talked hockey with Vince, Jaxson, and Carter.

Aleks had been a part of our family for years, but this felt different. It felt... permanent.

It was permanent.

I leaned into him as we strolled past the twinkling lights strung up along the path in Mom's garden, his arm wrapped firmly around my waist as snow fell on our heads and shoulders. The garden didn't look like much right now, but it bloomed beautifully every spring. And in a way, the plants hibernating for the season felt right tonight. It felt like the end of one season in my life and the promise of another on its heels.

My breath puffed out in little clouds, mingling with his as he turned to kiss the top of my head.

"Sorry we have to wait to take our honeymoon," I said softly, glancing up at him. "We should be exiting under a stream of sparklers and rushing to the airport right now."

Aleks shook his head, his dark eyes glinting under the soft glow of the lights, snow clinging to his lashes. "I'm not sorry. I'm excited for you to tour, and I have my season ahead. We can vacation in the summer." His lips curved into a wicked grin. "Until then, I very much look forward to fucking you in every hotel from here to Tokyo."

"Tokyo, huh?"

"You've got a show there, don't you?"

"Not yet."

"Yet being the keyword."

"I do have a European leg kicking off in February, though. What do you think about London?"

"I think anywhere with you is exactly where I'm meant to be."

My eyes flicked between his, heart swelling at his words, at the sincerity I saw behind them.

"I can't believe this is happening," he said, voice soft as he swept my hair back with glove-covered hands. "I can't believe you said yes."

"I've always crushed on you. Don't tell me you didn't know that."

"I thought you did in high school," he said, his breath visible against the dark night. "But after that drunken attempt at a kiss, you blew it off like it was nothing. And then you were dating every guy who was the exact opposite of me."

"You wouldn't touch me." I argued, poking his rib.

"Your father made it clear I couldn't."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"Trust me, that was the hardest night of my life."

"What about after?"

“Well,” he said, sighing like there were a hundred regrets in that one word, “like I said, you blew off what happened like it was a mistake. I thought it was just a drunken slip. And the one time I did get the nerve...”

“You flew to L.A., and I was with Ian,” I finished for him, remembering our conversation the night we’d finally admitted our feelings. “*God*, I wish I’d have known. Ian was such a loser. The guy only wanted to talk about his music or how saintly he was for all his charity work — that I’m pretty sure he only did to hear people tell him how amazing he was.”

“I was going to tell you everything,” he said. “I had this whole speech...”

“Oh?” I snuggled into him as we wound closer to the lake. “I’d love to hear it.”

“Don’t get greedy. You’ve had enough of me groveling at your feet, haven’t you?”

“Never enough.”

He smirked. “My question is why didn’t *you* ever say anything?”

“After you rejected me?! Yeah, wasn’t exactly in the mood to get told you saw me more like a little sister.”

“I never saw you as a sister,” he said darkly.

“Well, I know that *now*. But... I saw you with all these gorgeous models and women who lived out loud, and I... I just assumed I wasn’t your type.”

“And I assumed I wasn’t yours.”

“Remember how we said *fuck our thoughts*? Well, I’m pretty pissed at our assumptions, too.”

Aleks chuckled, warming my arm with his hand as he pulled me to a stop at the side of the house. We’d walked the path and circled back, but I guessed he wasn’t ready to go inside just yet.

“I don’t regret much in my life, but I do regret not telling you how I felt sooner. Then again... this whole pretending to date thing has been pretty fun.”

I threaded my arms around his shoulders, and his hands found my waist and pulled me flush against him. “If you could have read my mind when you kissed me on that beach...”

“You were wet, weren’t you? Dirty girl.”

I shoved at him playfully, rolling my eyes, but he held me tighter.

“Maybe I should write Garrett Orange a thank-you card. If it weren’t for him being a little twat, this might have never happened. We might have never happened.”

“You’re right,” I said, pressing up on my toes to kiss him. “We should send him flowers.”

A kiss.

“And chocolates.”

Another kiss.

“Gift cards.”

A deeper kiss now, each of us moaning.

“Maybe an edible arrangement.”

“I’ve heard you can send a bag of dicks to people. Gummy dicks,” I clarified, grin growing wicked against my husband’s lips. “Seems more his style than an edible arrangement.”

“Hmm... I can think of an edible arrangement I’d very much like to sample right now,” Aleks said, hands sliding down to grip my backside and pull me against him.

I laughed. “That was not your best.”

“What can I say? You render me stupid,” he said. But then, the teasing was gone, his kisses deeper, more urgent, the snow falling harder as if it sensed the shift in energy, too. “Here, let me make it up to you.”

His lips claimed mine, the snow swirling around us as the world disappeared. We were on the dark side of the house, the one with very little windows, no viewing access for our guests inside. And I didn’t mind the bite of the cold as Aleks pressed me into the old, worn brick. I didn’t feel cold at all when he bunched the fabric of my dress, pulling it up, up, up, until he had access to my lace panties beneath.

He groaned when he felt me through the lace, fingers skating a teasing dance from my clit to my entrance and back again. I hiked my leg around his hip, begging for more, and he answered with a finger slipped beneath the fabric and pressed deep inside me.

“Mine,” he said, voice low and gravelly in my ear as he curled that finger. “All fucking mine.”

I bucked against his hand in answer, fingers deftly shoving his coat out of the way so I could work on his belt, his pants. When I had them unzipped, I shoved them down just past his ass, and Aleks didn’t seem to mind the cold either as he pulled me into his arms and ripped at the dainty lace fabric of my panties until they shredded.

“Aleks,” I said on a laugh of disbelief.

He didn’t apologize, just shoved the ruined panties into his coat pocket

and put his hands on me again. He held my ass as he lifted me, my legs wrapping around him, and then I was pressed into the wall, spread open, and claimed.

Aleks took one hand off me only long enough to line himself up, and then he flexed in, slowly, inch by inch, our foreheads together and breaths puffing out in hot white steam between us. It was still so quiet, the snow snuffing out every noise. All I heard was his low groans and pants as he worked himself inside me, my heart thumping loud in my ears.

My orgasm built lightning fast. He was my husband now, and something about that, combined with the fact that we could get caught at any moment, had my body bubbling like a hot spring.

“Mine,” he ground out, his voice strained against the shell of my ear as he thrust deep.

“Yours.”

Another thrust.

“Forever.”

“Always,” I echoed, and Aleks picked up his pace, pressing more into me so he could balance my weight as his hand slid between us. He circled my clit, kissing me hard enough to draw blood, and I came with a whimper against that possessive mouth of his.

I was still moaning and shaking when he caught his own release, and the feel of him emptying inside me egged my own climax on, lengthening it until I thought I’d pass out from the vibrations. I was on birth control. I didn’t want babies right now. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t hot when he spilled inside me like that, that I didn’t think about how mad with desire we’d both be when the time came for this man to put a baby in me.

For now, I was perfectly content being a lovesick newlywed fucking in a dark corner as the snow fell down around us.

And I liked his plan — traveling the world together, him flying to see my shows and me flying to watch his games.

One day, we’d settle down.

But right now?

We were just taking off.

EPILOGUE

Better Not

Summer

Aleks

The sunlight filtered through the gauzy white curtains, bathing the private bungalow in golden hues. The sound of waves lapping gently at the shore filled the air, blending harmoniously with the rustle of palm trees swaying in the breeze. It was paradise, the kind of place you only see in glossy travel magazines.

But nothing compared to seeing her here, with me.

Mia stretched out on a towel by the infinity pool, her sunglasses too big for her small face and her bikini barely covering enough to keep me from losing my mind. She was glowing, her skin kissed by the sun, and even though I held a book in my hands, I hadn't turned a page in ages. My eyes were drawn to her like a magnet, flicking over her every movement, every curve. She must have felt it because she finally looked over at me, lifting one eyebrow above the rim of her sunglasses.

"You're staring again," she said, her lips twitching like she was trying not to smile.

"Can you blame me?" I replied, letting the book drop to my lap. "You're the most beautiful thing here, and that's saying something, considering this place looks like it was plucked straight out of a dream."

She rolled her eyes, but the blush that crept up her neck gave her away. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously in love," I countered, leaning forward and letting my fingers drift to the tie on her hip. I tugged at it lazily, grinning when her breath hitched. "Speaking of love... have I mentioned how much I'm enjoying this honeymoon?"

"Maybe once or twice," she said, trying and failing to sound unaffected.

For a long moment, I soaked in the feeling of just getting to touch her whenever I wanted, of knowing I had the power to make chills race across her tan skin. I reveled in the feel of the sunshine, the breeze, and the particular drug that was Mia Love.

The season had flown by in a blur after our wedding, Mia traveling the world for her tour and me chasing the Stanley Cup with the guys. We didn't take it home this year, which was a blow to all of us. All we'd wanted was a back-to-back championship, to bring the Cup back to Tampa and have a boat parade with our friends.

We'd fought hard, grinding through each round of the playoffs and proving to the league that we were still a force to be reckoned with. But in the end, it just wasn't our year. Vancouver outplayed us and everyone else they faced.

Strangely... I was happy for them, which wasn't really my *modus operandi*. Then again, it seemed everything about my demeanor had changed since making Mia my wife. I listened more, argued less, shared the puck more, partied hardly ever. She brought out the best in me.

She also helped me bite the bullet and start going to therapy.

I'd grumbled and complained at first. It wasn't that I didn't know I needed it, but it was uncomfortable. It was fucking *hard*. But every week, it got a little easier. My therapist helped me work through my feelings about my parents, helped me see that who they were had nothing to do with who I was. I was the only one who saw myself that way, who felt that I was destined to fuck up the way they did. And after a few months of sessions, I was beginning to realize that what happened to my parents hadn't really been their choice, either.

They were impacted by a disease that wreaks havoc on everyone it touches. Even if they'd wanted to stop using, it was nearly impossible to do without a support system — which neither of them had.

My anger turned to sadness, my resentment melting into understanding.

They were just two humans doing their best.

And now I was doing the same.

I still got into more than my fair share of fights on the ice, though.

I had a reputation to uphold, after all.

And while I was battling it out with my teammates for the championship, Mia was dazzling the world with her music. Any chance I got, I flew to watch her shows, marveling each time at how her fans showed up for her. They

didn't just enjoy her music, they loved it. They loved *her*. They put thought and time into their outfits for each show, made signs, screamed for her all night and long after her glittery heels left the stage.

The headlines now were all about what I'd always known to be true about my girl.

She was a star.

She was a phenomenon.

And I was just the lucky sonofabitch who got to bask in her glow.

I leaned back again, dragging my eyes over her. "So, are you going to tell me why after we split that bottle of wine at dinner last night you drunkenly kept insisting that Isabella is going to hate you?"

She laughed, shifting to sit up and face me. "Okay, but you can't tell anyone yet."

"Scout's honor," I said, holding up three fingers in a mock salute.

She bit her bottom lip, hesitating for a moment before blurting out, "I've already started working on a new album."

My eyebrows shot up. "Already? You're on break!"

"I know," she said quickly, waving her hands like she could explain her way out of it. "But I couldn't help it. The ideas just started coming to me, and I had to get them down."

"And why would Isabella hate you for that?"

Her shy smile was my undoing. "It's pretty... lovey-dovey."

I couldn't stop the grin that spread across my face. "Lovey-dovey, huh?"

"Yes, so brace yourself for some seriously sappy lyrics," she said, pretending to groan.

"Need me to break your heart?" I teased, slipping my fingers under the tie of her bikini again.

She smacked my hand away, laughing. "You better not."

"Never, Strings," I promised, holding her gaze and hoping she felt the truth in that word. "Never."

I kissed her forehead, letting my lips linger there for a moment before pulling back with an idea forming in my head. She was still looking at me curiously when I stood and scooped her up in one smooth motion.

"Aleks!" she shrieked, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Don't you dare!"

"Oh, I dare," I said, laughing as I walked to the edge of the pool.

"I just did my hair!" she protested, but she was laughing, already

plugging her nose like she knew the inevitable was coming.

“I happen to love how your hair looks soaking wet.”

“It’s cold!”

“You’ll warm up in the sun.”

“Aleks! We are not teenagers anymore. Put me down.”

She was still laughing, kicking her feet the more I dangled her and teased like I was going to throw her in.

“Put you down? Okay.”

“No, wait!”

“I always follow orders, *Wife*,” I quipped. And then I tossed her into the pool.

She hit the water with a splash, and when she surfaced, her glare was as sharp as her smile was wide. “You’re dead, Suter!” she yelled, swimming to the edge.

I reached down to help her out with a hearty laugh, letting her pinch my side when I had her up on the pool deck once more. My fingers trailed over her goose-pimpled flesh as she shivered in my embrace.

“G-going to k-kill you,” she warned, but she was hugging me like she had other plans, instead.

I smirked against her wet hair, leaning down to whisper in her ear as my fingers found their target.

“You’ll have to catch me first.”

Then, I pulled the strings tied at her back and around the top of her neck, releasing her bikini in one swift move. I held it over my head in victory, looking back only long enough to bask in the view of her shocked face before I was howling with laughter and racing off toward the beach.

“Aleks!”

She screamed my name again and again, along with various threats, as she chased me toward the beach. It was private — because fuck if I’d ever let anyone else see my girl like this — but she covered herself anyway as she chased after me.

We both went into the water when she caught up, her tackling me and wrangling the bikini from my hands as I felt her up under the water like a teenager.

She wanted to hit me.

I wanted to kiss her.

And I couldn’t think of a better life to live.

EPILOGUE TWO

Bark, Bark

Carter

“Did you take a pill before coming in?” Livia asked me, hanging one hand on her slim hip as the other pointed a very sharp tool in my direction. “Because that shot only numbs your jaw, and I *know* you gotta be high to say what you just said to me.”

“Come on, Liv. Look—”

“Doctor Young,” she corrected me, one dark brow sliding up into her hairline. “This isn’t a barbecue at Daddy P’s house. You’re in my chair, at my job, and you will respect me and call me by my hard-earned title.”

Fuck.

My cock hardened at her tone, at the way she snapped at me, at how she made me feel small and somehow made me buzz to life at the same time.

“Yes, Doctor,” I breathed.

Livia narrowed her gaze, dropping it to my lap before she rolled her eyes. “Oh, my God, Carter, you don’t seriously have a boner right now?”

“Can you blame me? That was fucking hot.”

My words slurred a little as my jaw began to numb.

Livia pinched the bridge of her nose, that sharp tool still dangling in her other hand. Her dental assistant stood by silently, a mask covering part of her shocked face, though I could see the young girl’s eyes flicking between me and Livia. What I could see of her skin was flushed red. But I had no shame when it came to Livia Young, and it seemed she wasn’t afraid to speak her mind, either.

“Carter, you are in my chair because you were hit in the face, and your two lower central incisors have been blown to bits like a mortar went off in your mouth.”

“I love when you talk dentist to me.”

“And the only lesson I will be giving you,” she continued, waving that

tool around like a wand. “Is to get a better mouth guard and learn how to dodge a high-sticking.”

She was so gorgeous I could barely think straight as I listened to her threats, the corner of my mouth lifting helplessly. Deep brown skin, smooth and enticing, dark black hair pulled into a tight, professional bun. She wore little makeup today, and she was still stunning.

But I also knew that woman when she wasn’t wearing a white coat.

I knew her in silky, body-hugging dresses and sky-high heels.

I knew her with red-painted lips and gold metal through every hole on her body.

And I had a sneaking suspicion she owned more than a few leather outfits that had whips to match.

“Come on,” I begged again, swinging my legs over the chair so I could sit up and face her. “Look at me, Li— er, Doctor Young,” I amended when she cocked a brow. “I need help.”

“I won’t argue that.”

“And who better to teach me than the master herself?”

Livia sighed, nodding to her assistant to take a break and leave us alone. I could hear the distant sound of drills and water picks from rooms down the hall as the door opened, the assistant left, and then it was just the two of us.

Liv crossed her arms, leaning a hip against the counter as she finally released the tool she’d been holding fast to. Even in the sharp and harsh light of the fluorescents above us, and even with a strange pair of magnifying goggle things strapped around her neck — she was still a knockout.

“What exactly are you proposing?”

I sat up straighter, hope ballooning in my chest. “Simple — I want you teach me how to break a woman’s back in bed.”

“There are magazines for this, you know,” she shot back. “And YouTube.”

“You think I haven’t tried that?” I grabbed the back of my neck. “You think I’m not embarrassed as fuck to admit to anyone, least of all *you*, that I’m still a virgin?”

Something sparkled in her eyes at that.

“I mean, unless you count the one time a puck bunny let me stick it in her butt, which I don’t, because it was in a room with three other guys getting to do the same thing.”

Livia barked out a laugh. “Okay, I want that story someday, but while

we're on limited time... why do you want this?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I shrugged. "I'm a professional athlete. I go out at least twice a week and have girls hanging all over me, but I can never land the deal. Either I run them off with my pathetic attempt at flirting or I get them home and fucking choke." I ran a hand through my hair, shaking my head as I looked at the ground. My jaw was really numb now, and I knew she needed to do her work before it wore off. "I'm hopeless, alright? Somehow, I figured my shit out on the ice. I'm in the NHL now, no longer being sent down to the AHL, and I've got a lot to offer someone. I just... I can't prove that if I can't get past first base."

Livia's gaze softened.

"Plus, I'm horny."

She scoffed at that.

I beamed with my broken-tooth grin, swallowing down the fact that the woman I'd *most* like to prove myself to was her. But I couldn't admit that — at least, not yet. Maybe one day she'd see me as more than an annoying fly buzzing around her, but for now, I just needed her to see enough to give me this.

Livia tongued her cheek. "What's in it for me?"

"What do you want?"

"A million dollars."

I laughed heartily, but then coughed and choked a little when I realized she was serious.

"You're kidding," I tried.

"Not even a little bit."

I blinked at her.

"Listen, I make good money. I'm a dentist. But at this point, all my best friends are married to, or seriously dating, a millionaire. And then there's Mia, who will probably hit a billion soon. And judge me if you want to, but I'm a bad bitch just like the rest of them. I deserve to jet set around the world, dress myself in diamonds, and buy myself a bougie ass car on a man's dime just because."

"Done."

The word was out of me even before her little speech finished. The truth was she didn't need to convince me, but I did agree with her. She deserved to be spoiled. If she let me, I'd happily give her the passwords to all my accounts and watch her drain every single one. Besides, I'd just signed a new

contract with the team, one that guaranteed me more money in the coming seasons and came with a fat signing bonus, too.

What the hell was I going to spend that money on that would be better than bedroom lessons from Livia fucking Young?

Liv tilted her head like she didn't believe me, or like she didn't think I realized she was dead serious.

"You'll give me a million dollars," she said, deadpan.

"I'll give you two."

Her eyes shot wide at that. "*Two-million* dollars, and all I have to do is help you unleash your freak?"

"See?" I waved my hand toward the space between us. "Tell me this isn't a deal you can't refuse."

She tapped her chin with one long, dark red nail, and I wondered what it would feel like to have those nails digging into the flesh on my back.

"No one else knows," she said.

That hope that had ballooned inside of me surged so quickly I thought my chest would pop, and I was practically panting as I leaned forward in my seat, nodding. "I won't tell a soul."

"I'll teach you, but I also get to use you," she said. "Whenever and wherever I want. If I send a text, you come running."

"Faster than I ever have in my life."

"You don't get to say no to anything until you try it at least once."

My heart skipped with a mixture of fear and curiosity. "No backing down."

"I mean it. No matter what I propose, you hear me out and try before saying yes or no."

"Use me, Liv. I'm yours."

She chuckled at that, a pathetic little laugh like she pitied me. Then, she opened the door and called for her assistant to come back in.

"We're drawing up a contract, too," she said, waving her finger at me. "And you're going to take this seriously, or I'll drop the whole thing and still take your money — which you will pay me up front, by the way."

"Yes, Mommy."

"Jesus," she muttered. "You're more eager than that puppy dog you adopted."

"Bark, bark." I panted, too, for good measure, tongue flopping out before Liv shot me in the eye with the water pick.

“That’s enough. Now, lie back and open your mouth.”

“Wow, we’re getting started already, huh?” I rubbed my hands together as I did what she said.

But Liv ignored me, firing up the drill.

I thought it kind of looked like she had a little too much fun causing me pain.

I thought I kind of liked it, too.

What happens when a professional hockey player with no game off the ice enlists his team’s confident and fiery dentist for spicy lessons in love? **Find out in [Stand Your Ground](#)**, book 5 in the Kings of the Ice series.

Can’t get enough of Mia and Aleks? [Catch up with them in this bonus scene](#).

Fall in love with the other Kings of the Ice couples!

[MEET YOUR MATCH](#)

Book 1

TROPES: Pro Hockey Romance Forced Proximity Opposite Sides of the Track Interracial/Multicultural Couple Workplace Romance Enemies-to-Lovers Vibes

[WATCH YOUR MOUTH](#)

Book 2

TROPES:

Pro Hockey Romance Teammate’s Little Sister/Brother’s Best Friend Road Trip Forced Proximity One Bed Age Gap Opposites Attract Forbidden

[LEARN YOUR LESSON](#)

Book 3

TROPES: Pro Hockey Romance

Single Dad/Nanny

Forced Proximity

Spicy Lessons

Grumpy Sunshine

Age Gap

Opposites Attract

Found Family

MORE FROM KANDI STEINER

[The Kings of the Ice Series](#)

Step into the high-stakes world of professional hockey, where passion burns as fiercely as the ice beneath their blades. The *Kings of the Ice* series is a collection of sizzling, emotional sports romances filled with raw tension, forbidden love, and heart-pounding action—on and off the ice. Whether it's a second chance at love, an enemies-to-lovers feud, or a slow burn that leaves you breathless, these stories will melt your heart while keeping you hooked until the final buzzer. Perfect for fans of angst, steam, and unforgettable happily-ever-afters.

[The Red Zone Rivals Series](#)

Welcome to the ruthless world of college football, where rivalries are fierce, emotions run high, and love is the ultimate endgame. **The Red Zone Rivals** series delivers unforgettable stories packed with forbidden romance, heart-stopping drama, and swoon-worthy heroes fighting for glory on and off the field. From delicious fake dating tension to second chances that will steal your breath, these angsty, steamy romances are perfect for readers who love a little heartbreak before the happily-ever-after.

[The Becker Brothers Series](#)

Four brothers finding love in a small Tennessee town that revolves around a whiskey distillery with a dark past — including the mysterious death of their father.

[The Best Kept Secrets Series](#)

Charlie's marriage is dying. She's perfectly content to go down in the flames, until her first love shows back up and reminds her the other way love can burn.

[A Love Letter to Whiskey](#)

An angsty, emotional romance between two lovers fighting the curse of bad timing.

Close Quarters

A summer yachting the Mediterranean sounded like heaven to Jasmine after finishing her undergrad degree. But her boyfriend's billionaire boss always gets what he wants. And this time, he wants her.

Make Me Hate You

Jasmine has been avoiding her best friend's brother for years, but when they're both in the same house for a wedding, she can't resist him — no matter how she tries.

The Wrong Game

Gemma's plan is simple: invite a new guy to each home game using her season tickets for the Chicago Bears. It's the perfect way to avoid getting emotionally attached and also get some action. But after Zach gets his chance to be her practice round, he decides one game just isn't enough. A sexy, fun sports romance.

The Right Player

She's avoiding love at all costs. He wants nothing more than to lock her down. Sexy, hilarious and swoon-worthy, *The Right Player* is the perfect read for sports romance lovers.

On the Way to You

It was only supposed to be a road trip, but when Cooper discovers the journal of the boy driving the getaway car, everything changes. An emotional, angsty road trip romance.

Weightless

Young Natalie finds self-love and romance with her personal trainer, along with a slew of secrets that tie them together in ways she never thought possible.

Revelry

Recently divorced, Wren searches for clarity in a summer cabin outside of Seattle, where she makes an unforgettable connection with the broody, small town recluse next door.

Say Yes

Harley is studying art abroad in Florence, Italy. Trying to break free of her perfectionism, she steps outside one night determined to Say Yes to anything

that comes her way. Of course, she didn't expect to run into Liam Benson...

Washed Up

Gregory Weston, the boy I once knew as my son's best friend, now a man I don't know at all. No, not just a man. A doctor. And he wants me...

The Christmas Blanket

Stuck in a cabin with my ex-husband waiting out a blizzard? Not exactly what I had pictured when I planned a surprise visit home for the holidays...

Black Number Four

A college, Greek-life romance of a hot young poker star and the boy sent to take her down.

The Palm South University Series

#1 NYT Bestselling Author Rachel Van Dyken says, "If Gossip Girl and Riverdale had a love child, it would be PSU." This angsty college series will be your next guilty addiction.

Tag Chaser

She made a bet that she could stop chasing military men, which seemed easy — until her knight in shining armor and latest client at work showed up in Army ACUs.

Song Chaser

Tanner and Kellee are perfect for each other. They frequent the same bars, love the same music, and have the same desire to rip each other's clothes off. Only problem? Tanner is still in love with his best friend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This series wouldn't be possible without Rhiannon Gwynne and her husband, Josh Brittain. Thank you for allowing me an inside look at what it's like to play in the professional hockey circuit (and be the wife of a player!). Your constant help has made each book in this series shine.

To Nadine Kilian, thank you for being my go-to beta reader for all things Swiss German. I almost put my foot in my mouth so many times by using High German language, and that would not have been authentic to our lovely Aleks. I appreciate all your time, energy, corrections and guidance.

To my husband, Jack – I wrote half of this book while cooking up our first baby and the other half as a brand-new mom. I wouldn't have been able to do either without your unwavering support. You are the most incredible husband, partner, and now, father. I am beyond grateful for your existence.

To my momma, Lavon, and my bestie, Sasha – I will never make it through a book without the support from the two of you. I love you endlessly.

To Tina Stokes, my Executive Assistant and dear friend – thank you. You stepped up even more than usual during my maternity leave to keep things rolling, and you cheered me on through writing the end of this book when I returned. Your fresh ideas for marketing this series are directly linked to its success, and I am so grateful for your effort. Love you big.

A huge thank you to all the amazing women in this industry who have been my writing buddies through various parts of this book. Laura Pavlov, Elsie Silver, Lena Hendrix, Catherine Cowles, Staci Hart, Karla Sorensen – I'm honored to be on this journey with you.

Thank you to the crew at OSYS Studios for bringing these books to life in audio. I am so lucky to have you on my team.

To Isabella Bauer – thank you for keeping social media running while I was on maternity leave. I am so in love with you, I had to name the most bad ass character in this book on your behalf. I hope you love her as much as I do. Besos, baby.

To my team of beta readers: I cannot properly thank you for your patience and love through this one! I left you hanging for a LONG four months, right

when things were getting good. Thank you for being so supportive of me taking a break to adjust to becoming a new mom. Your feedback was instrumental in this installment. A huge and heartfelt thanks to Frances O'Brien, Elizabeth Turner, Sarah Green, Allison Cheshire, Kellee Fabre, Sarah Green, Marie-Pierre D'Auteuil, Janett Corona, Jayce Cruz, Gabriela Vivas, Anna López, Carly Wilson, Nicole Westmoreland, Anna, Lily Turner, Diana Daniel, and Jewel Caruso. I am so happy to have you all on my team.

To the team who helps bring my vision to life: Elaine York with Allusion Publishing, Nicole McCurdy with Emerald Edits, Nina Grinstead, Kim Cermak, the whole team at Valentine PR, Shaye Lefkowitz and Lindsey Romero with Good Girls PR, Ren Saliba and Staci Hart with Quirky Bird Cover Design – THANK YOU. From editing and formatting to photography and promotion, it truly takes a village. I'm so thankful for each and every one of you.

A huge shout out to my rockstar agent, Ariele Fredman. I am so thankful for all you do to fight for me and my books. Thank you for helping to bring this series to a wider audience across the UK and its territories. I have faith there's even more magic to follow.

Thank you to Sophie, Ethan, Paloma, and Laurie-Maude with UTA, as well, for all you do for me.

I want to send a big thanks to Saida, Alice, Alexa, Rakhi, and the rest of the team at Curtis Brown/Dialogue/Renegade. It's absolutely amazing to see this series in bookstores all over the UK and Australia, and I'm eternally thankful to you for believing in these books as much as I do.

To Janelle and Bonnie, thank you for bringing these stories to life in the most fun ways! I am obsessed with the Lyla June cards for each book and the character stickers that illustrate each couple and their little quirks. I love you both.

Elizianna, thank you for the spicy artwork for each book in this series. Your talent is out of this world and I feel honored to have your time and energy.

To Rosie – my curious, smiley, precious daughter. You were with me for this entire experience, from cheering me on from the womb to cuddling me in-between writing sessions once you were on the outside. I will never think of this book and not think of you, too. I'm so happy you're here. I'm so thankful we were blessed with your arrival.

And finally, to YOU, the reader. If you've made it all the way to these

acknowledgments, it's a testament to just how amazing you are. Truly, none of this would be possible without you. Every single day, I'm blown away by your support, and I never take a moment of it for granted. Thank you for diving into my stories, for sharing them on social media, for leaving reviews, and for championing indie authors like me. You're the reason I get to live my dream, and I'm forever grateful. Let's connect on your favorite social platform — I'd love to be friends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KANDI STEINER is a USA Today and #1 Amazon Bestselling Author living in Tennessee. Best known for writing “emotional rollercoaster” stories, she loves bringing flawed characters to life and writing about real, raw romance — in all its forms. No two Kandi Steiner books are the same, and if you’re a lover of angsty, emotional, and inspirational reads, she’s your gal.

An alumna of the University of Central Florida, Kandi graduated with a double major in Creative Writing and Advertising/PR with a minor in Women’s Studies. Her love for writing started at the ripe age of 10, and in 6th grade, she wrote and edited her own newspaper and distributed to her classmates. Eventually, the principal caught on and the newspaper was quickly halted, though Kandi tried fighting for her “freedom of press.”

She took particular interest in writing romance after college, as she has always been a hopeless romantic and found herself bursting at the seams with

love stories she was eager to tell.

When Kandi isn't writing, you can find her reading books of all kinds, planning her next adventure, or pole dancing (yes, you read that right). She enjoys live music, traveling, hiking, yoga, spending quality time with her family (fur babies included) and soaking up the sweetness of life.

CONNECT WITH KANDI:

- NEWSLETTER: kandisteiner.com/newsletter
- FACEBOOK: @kandisteiner
- FACEBOOK READER GROUP (Kandiland):
facebook.com/groups/kandilandks
- INSTAGRAM: @kandisteiner
- TIKTOK: @authorkandisteiner
- WEBSITE: kandisteiner.com

Kandi Steiner may be coming to a city near you! Check out her “events” tab on her website to see all the signings she’s attending in the near future.