



TELL ME WHY IT'S WRONG

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE ROMANCE

B . C E L E S T E

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ME
WHY
IT'S
WRONG**

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Shout out to Micaela Smeltzer for letting me steal Daddy Cannon

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PLAYLIST

“Bad at Love” – Halsey
“Beautiful Crazy” – Luke Combs
“Body Moves” – DNCE
“Cruel Summer” – Taylor Swift
“Demons” – Imagine Dragons
“Feels Like Tonight” – Daughtry
“Just a Kiss” – Lady A
“Lonely” – Justin Bieber, Benny Blanco
“The Only Exception” – Paramore
“Yours (Wedding Edition)” – Russell Dickerson

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

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“Turn that off,” I tell the curly-haired squatter taking up residence on my leather sectional couch as I enter the room. There’s a permanent imprint of his ass on it from all the time he spends watching the flatscreen.

My little brother is watching some bullshit gossip show where my bandmate and best friend Zayne Gray’s face is plastered across the screen. Whatever they’re saying likely isn’t good, and probably bordering the truth knowing the crazy shit Zayne has done. When he still lived in Boston with his family, he’d constantly get into trouble with the cops and luckily was always let go with warnings. The shit he does now is usually ten times worse since he has money and a name for himself.

“It’s getting good though,” Chase says, pointing toward the TV with the remote as my face appears in a side shot with some chick I picked up after a gig a few weeks ago. My open palm is blocking the camera from getting a good picture, but the girl is soaking up the attention with a flirty smile that I’m now realizing isn’t even that pretty. At the time, she was a means to an end—relief for my aching cock, which she took care of the second we got into the car.

I groan and walk over, reaching for the remote to shut it off myself. “Don’t you have better things to do with your time than waste brain cells on shit entertainment, mate?”

“I think you’re confusing us, big bro. I’m not the one who’s done experimental drugs for years. Unlike you, I *can’t* risk any brain cells.” I can hear his light Australian accent really come through as he wrestles me for

the remote. He manages to bolt out of my reach and crank the volume higher.

Chase knows my past struggles with drug use and how hard the recovery process has been over the past couple of years. Two stints in rehab have left me four years sober, a feat I celebrate daily because there were days I sure as hell never thought I'd reach 32. He's supportive, just like our mother is, but he doesn't always think before reminding me of my poor decisions that left my mother crying at three a.m. because she thought I was wasting my life with white powder and smoke.

We turn to the screen when some petite blonde with perky tits barely contained in a skintight dress begins talking about the Violet Wonders world tour that ended last week. "Sources have told Hollywood Entertainment that a possible split is in the horizon for the eight-time Grammy winning group Violet Wonders. This news comes just three years after the band got back together following the public fight between frontrunner Garrick Matthews and drummer Zayne Gray. An insider says that the breaking point occurred during the last leg of their world tour that ended last Thursday."

I scoff at the woman's brass balls for making such a ridiculous claim. "An insider? You've got to be kidding me."

My brother snorts, the dark eyes that match his chocolate hair bright with amusement over the latest attack on the band. "You mean there's not trouble in paradise? I haven't seen Zayne around here lately."

Images of a bare ass thrusting forward into a random chick flashes in my head that make me internally cringe. "I had the unfortunate pleasure of catching him screwing a random at the welcome home party we had this weekend. Right over the back of the couch you're sitting on. Made the fucker pay to steam clean it. You'd know that if you left your room instead of brooding over a girl."

Chase glares at me, the three-day-old scruff across his jaw looking like the shadow I take a razor to every morning. "I'm not brooding over anyone, dickhead."

Eventually, I'm able to swipe the remote from him and hold it where he can't snatch it back since I have a handful of inches on him and far more muscle since I work out with my trainer routinely while he chooses to vegetate. He's lucky he's got a solid metabolism—he's always been a lanky kid and that hasn't changed now that he's 21 and eating all my food. "If that were true you'd take a shower, clean the room I so graciously gave you

when you wanted to get out of Mum's house for a while, and go outside to get some sunlight. You're paler than my bare ass, and that rarely sees any sun."

I'm not surprised to hear him grumble something under his breath before giving me the finger. He hates tough love, but I'll never stop giving it to him if it means seeing him live his life again. He's had a rough go of things, being broken up with by a girl he really liked, losing half his investors in the tech business he founded, and then getting a lawsuit filed against him by some mogul claiming Chase copied code from his company.

"You're an ass," he informs me, turning on his heel and walking out of the room.

"An ass who's right," I call after him, shaking my head as he disappears up the stairs.

I was more than happy to let him crash here when he first asked. With 11,000 square feet, my international-style home has plenty of space to accommodate him. When I first showed him and Mum the large, square, white-washed home I'd purchased, I could instantly tell they weren't impressed.

In an Australian accent far thicker than mine, Mum had said, "*It has no personality.*" To which my much younger brother had happily replied, "*I think he has three times as much personality than this cinder block, so it all evens out.*"

I'd snickered, our mother smacked Chase's arm, and they finished the tour of the, admittedly, lacking architecture. But I knew once I moved furniture in and hired a friend of a friend who was known for her interior decorating, Mum especially would see just how fitting this massive house is for me.

And I've made good on that.

My favorite room is the kitchen since me and Mum spent a lot of time together there growing up. She made sure both her sons knew how to cook, clean, and fend for ourselves. Even if I have the resources to pay others to do it for me now, which I do indulge in after hiring a housekeeper to clean the six-bedroom, four-and-a-half bath house, I still enjoy playing around with the recipes I've adapted over the years from both my parents and their families that were passed down.

It's come in handy since Chase's 'few day' stay has turned into months of him being my roommate. I don't mind giving him a room and a few

meals a day that we both enjoy. It's nice having another person around to talk to and torment, especially one as easy to tease as him, but he barely leaves anymore.

When I hear his door slam upstairs, I loosen a sigh and turn down the TV. I'm about to shut it off when one of the hosts starts sprouting more rumors to everyone tuning in. "Zayne Gray had spoken to reporters about going solo in the past, then agreed to reunite with Violet Wonders only months after teasing the public with the possibility of his first album. What do you think, Hollywood Entertainment? Check out the poll we posted on our website and tell us if you'd rather see a solo album from the sexy Zayne Gray or a new album from the once-was boy banders Violet Wonders."

Once-was? Clicking the power button, I curse under my breath and drop the remote onto the couch. I'm sick of people always pitting us against each other—not just Zayne, but all my mates. It's always a competition. When we announced our comeback, it became trending news for weeks. When we announced our first tour back together and the album releasing soon after, it was all anyone could talk about for months. But the buzz always ends eventually and that's when things get complicated.

Fame is a drug—it gives you a temporary high that'll leave you crashing and craving more.

But not as much as wanting a legacy does.

That's when integrity makes or breaks a person. It's why Mum makes sure to keep me humbled so I don't lose myself in the shit talk my name takes in magazines, tabloids, and media every single day. If it's not drama between bandmates, it's scandals of how we live our lives.

Too much partying.

Too many women.

The world looks at us like we have too much of everything, but most of us work our asses off for everything we have. I won't let anyone take that from me. Not with their petty words or mindless polls.

I'm walking toward the kitchen after a long shower to wash off the sweat from my workout earlier when Chase enters wearing jeans and one of his ridiculous t-shirts—this one saying *white and nerdy* across the front. Accurate for the five-eleven, pasty dork Mum adopted when he was a baby. He only has an accent when he's angry and exhausted and doesn't share any of me and Mum's looks. He says that's why he stays out of the spotlight, so people won't bring it up even though his adoption has never been a secret.

He even refuses to talk like us, catching himself on little things that me and Mum tend to say every so often, adapting to Cali instead of embracing where his family came from. It used to irritate me that he seemed adamant on being nothing like the people who took him in, but Mum always made me brush it off saying, *“He wants to be his own person. Let him be.”*

“Where are you going?” I ask, glad to see him look more like himself.

He grabs his keys and stuffs his wallet into the back pocket of his jeans. “Meeting up with a couple people since you obviously don’t want me around.”

I roll my eyes, unable to stop from smirking at him. “I thought *I* was supposed to be the melodramatic one of the family.”

His lips flatten.

Sniggering, I shoot him a grin. “I’m messing with you, bro. It’s good you’re getting out. I worry about you.”

“Well don’t.”

I hold up my hands in surrender at his clipped tone, feeling my phone buzz in the pocket of my loose athletic shorts. “Fine, have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t. Your options should be vast.”

I’m not sure what he says when he walks out because it’s spoken under his breath. I let it roll off my shoulders as I pull open the refrigerator. My phone goes off again as I grab a bottle of water, and when I pull the cell from my pocket I snort at the messages in the group chat I have with the guys.

Manning: You hear the news everywhere today?

Cal: The world wants Zayne for themselves

Jax: Greedy bastards

Zayne: Ur all just jealous

Me: You’re all twats

I set the phone down and guzzle half the bottle before digging through the pantry and taking what I need to make a late lunch.

When my cell goes off with rapid succession, I turn it on silent to tune out the noise. I’ll regret it when I have over 100 unread messages waiting for me, most which won’t amount to anything more than petty banter from the guys.

The only one I see pop up before busying myself with cooking makes me snort.

Kyler B: Once was, huh?

“Bugger off,” I muse aloud, picking up the device and typing a quick reply to my biggest solo competitor. We have a history that the media used to love highlighting, but he took the outlets by storm with news of the budding romance with his current fiancée. It was nice to have the heat off me while it lasted, but it appears the newest cycle is back and more determined than ever to get a rise out of Violet Wonders.

Me: Checking in on me, lover?

Kyler B: You wish

Me: Aww you love me. Try not to make little Bishop jealous

Kyler B: I regret texting you

Me: Your life would be boring without me in it and you know it

I don't get a response back, but we both know it's true. He can pretend he hates me all he wants, but the past is the past. I've done things I'm not proud of, things I can't change, but I'm not that person anymore. I tell myself as long as I remember that it's all that matters. But when the world is constantly against you, the truth blurs with the mixture of everybody else's perception of who you are.

Talk about a mind fuck.

My mind wanders back to what the world wants to know regarding me and Zayne. We've had our fair share of arguments, but it's expected. Close quarters even with friends grates on you after a while and being with four other guys in close proximity like we were on the bus can wear a person down.

We swore when Violet Wonders got back together that if we called it quits for good, it'd be a mutual agreement with amicable terms. Something all of us agreed on after taking time to consider the come-back. Nothing the media could use against us, even if they tried their best, would tear us apart then.

Sometime later I glance at a few messages that the very same drummer the media is suddenly obsessed with sends me. I know everything is okay between us despite what the sharks want everyone else to believe when I read what he says.

Zayne: Lazy Croc tonight?

Me: Count on it

The heat blowing into my 2001 Nissan Altima is the only thing filling the silence around me on the halfway abandoned street I'm parked on. The car is a hand-me-down from Grandpa Al that he gave me on my sixteenth birthday. Even though he offered to co-sign a loan to help me get a better vehicle years ago, I hold onto the one gift that still reminds me of my favorite person in the world.

Since his passing, all I have left is the blue beaded necklace hanging from the rearview mirror that I gave him when I was little, a picture of him, Grandma Birdie, and me taped to the passenger dashboard, and the oddly comforting smell of his favorite cigars lingering in the gray upholstered seats.

I'm sad not having him around to tell me corny jokes or check in on me all the time because he's overprotective, but toward the end he kept saying, "I just want to see Birdie again." And he did. Knowing they're together makes the pain settled into my chest worth it.

Blowing out a breath, I bring my hands to the heating ducts that blow measly lukewarm air onto my shaking palms. I know the unsteady quake of them is from more than just the cold 59-degree weather California has been plagued with far too early. It's not even October yet, and Mother Nature is already doing whatever she can to make things more difficult for me. You'd think growing up on the east coast would make these temperatures manageable, but I've always been cold blooded according to my mother and have the sweatshirt collection to prove it.

Thanks to my job writing for the L.A. Free Press, I was able to move to a warmer climate and soak up the sun like I've always dreamed of. Unfortunately, the sun doesn't even out Cali's many cons. Like the price of living. I know the area well enough to be okay sleeping in my car for the night until I figure something better out, because spending money on a hotel room is out of the question when I have more important things to use my funds for.

Almost on cue, my phone *dings* with the same reminder it gives me every evening at this time. I grab my bag, dig through the contents of piss-poor organization thanks to my bad habit of tossing everything inside freely, until I find what I'm looking for.

Unzipping the little black carrier, I stare at the nearly empty weekly pill organizer. It's a reminder of why I'm sitting in my parked car stuffed with all the belongings I could fit into the backseat and trunk instead of my cozy two-bedroom apartment right outside of Los Angeles. I was proud when I signed the lease—feeling grateful that I could live my dream as a journalist and afford such a great place of my own at only 21. But when work got rough, rent got raised, and my health started declining, I'd had to succumb to getting a roommate to help cover half the rent and bills. A roommate who recently moved back to New York City to pursue her Broadway dreams after spending years in the California Ballet Company.

I don't have any ill feelings toward Tiffany for leaving. I gave her a tear-filled hug and waved her off after helping her pack because I'm happy for her even though I knew I'd be screwed in the long run. When I got the eviction notice, I wasn't surprised. I'd like to think the property manager even felt slightly bad for me, not that the sweet older man could do anything about it.

So, here I am.

Poor.

Living in my car.

All so I can afford the medicine I need to stop my psoriatic arthritis from getting worse.

I know I'm lucky in the grand scheme of things. At least the doctors figured out why I was always in pain after dealing with stiff and achy joints, random rashes, and chronic fatigue for years. I know some people have a much longer diagnosis journey than me, so I should be grateful to have medicine preventing the disease from spreading. But it doesn't make

spending money on the treatment any easier, especially when funds are so low on the daily.

I tell myself not to complain, though there are days when the pity party starts and I'm the only one invited. Then I remember the few bad experiences I've had from the first doctors my mother took me to when the rash on my face kept reappearing and my fingers would constantly hurt. After the general practitioner I'd seen first made me feel like it was all in my head and suggested therapy and anti-depressants, I'd gotten a different opinion that led to the referral to a local rheumatologist. I'd had hope, but that was short lived. The initial doctor I'd gotten an appointment with was an older gentleman who could barely hear a thing. I'd repeated myself ten times and he still logged the wrong information into the computer, never letting me explain my history or get a word in otherwise. He'd passed his judgement the second I told him I was the patient after he'd looked between me and my mother the moment he walked into the room.

The words he asked still taunt me to this day. *Are you sure you're not overexaggerating like young girls tend to do?*

When you're young, very few people want to take you seriously. You're either seeking attention, drugs, or making it up because you're crazy. If my mom hadn't encouraged me to see another specialist, I wouldn't be where I am today. Sure, that would probably include not being homeless, but I'm sure I'd be too sick to even think about moving across the country to live out my dreams of writing for the press.

You're lucky, I remind myself despite my current circumstances. I do what Grandpa Al used to whenever he'd have his doubts. I think of three things I'm grateful for. His were always the same—Grandma Birdie, me, and his health.

One is instant. I have a wonderful family who love and support me even from nearly 3,000 miles away.

Two comes as quickly. I have a best friend who lets me vent whenever life gets to be too much without judging me for it.

And then there's three. I have a job. It may not pay much these days, and I may not have any insurance, but it's work. Better than some people have considering the tents set up on sidewalks for the homeless population that grows every single day. At least I have a car and an income, as small as it may be.

Taking a deep breath, I nod to myself and roll my shoulders back. Those three things are worthy of being thankful for, so I chant that to myself a few more times before staring at the sad apple and dry nut-based granola bar waiting for me as dinner. I know it isn't going to cut it but I'm not willing to drive into the city for something on a fast-food dollar menu, and I have to eat something so the medicine doesn't make me sick like I've learned the hard way in the past.

Clicking on one of the interior lights to see better, I grab my water and begin going through my nightly pill routine. I curse to myself when I realize I'm low on supplies, which means I'll have to go to the pharmacy soon to pick up what I need. I'm already cringing at the thought of the number the screen will show that'll drain even more from my account, but there's nothing to do but suck it up and look around for another job to supplement my income until I figure out a better option.

I count my blessings that tonight isn't injection night. I used to hate needles, but there's really no way around using one ever since the doctor told me I'd need to be on injectable immunosuppressants for the rest of my life to counter the inflammation in my body. I've learned to adapt, even if I have to close my eyes before stabbing myself with my syringe that gives me my dose of medicine.

If I roll the hem of my shirt up I'd find small spots along my lower abdomen where I inject each of my doses since I was taught to rotate the sites. It still freaks me out, but I don't cringe as much since getting the hang of it. The hospital educator, a lovely woman Mom and Dad took me to when I was still on their insurance, taught me the do's and don'ts—things I've had to engrave into my mind that way I don't mess up or hurt myself when it's time to self-administer each week.

Moving across the country to an entirely different coast means not being covered by my mom's insurance like I would have until 26, the age I'm turning way sooner than I'd like to accept. She told me to reconsider the job I'd been offered since I had a few years left of coverage, but I was eager. Excited.

Naïve.

I don't regret the decision to move, but I do miss the cheap copays and low stress pharmacy runs where I didn't feel like breaking down as I slid my card through the machine after the pharmacist read me my total.

My cell phone starts vibrating in the cup holder I tossed it in to charge, startling me out of my thoughts. After taking all my medication and putting away my things, I smile when I pick it up and see my best friend's name on the screen.

"Mrs. Moffie," I greet my newly married friend, instantly feeling my chest lighten the second I hear her featherlight laugh.

"Miss. Rylee," is what I get back. "It's so good to hear your voice. Is everything okay? You didn't answer my call this morning and I know you better than to give me a one-word reply. I had to make sure you weren't murdered or something."

I snort over her theatrics. It could be all the true crime shows we watched together growing up that always leads her to that conclusion. One time when an ex of mine had stayed the night, she blew up my phone and employed others to do the same when she hadn't heard from me the next morning. My ex-boyfriend and I had slept in, but Moffie was sure I'd been killed when my phone—which I'd put on silent and left in the living room—had rang without me picking up. I've learned to always check in now before she calls the local police to do a wellness check. Or worse. My parents. The last thing I need is for my family to find out I'm seeing someone because my friends barrage them with worried texts and phone calls about a man they didn't even know I was seeing.

Shoulders dropping slightly, I settle into the seat and rest my head back. "I'm fine. I had to finish packing my things this morning and ended up leaving before I could see anyone I talked to in the building. It was too bittersweet."

There weren't very many tenants I enjoyed chatting with at my old complex. Most of them were loud, or had loud pets that annoyed me, and others were too nosey for my liking. But there was a little old man who always walked his beagle that reminded me of Grandpa Al. We'd never exchange many conversations but being able to ask how he was when we pass each other, or ask how his dog, Bruiser, was doing, made me feel like I was that much closer to the man I missed dearly.

Moffie Mae, her God-given name that made me instantly love her, releases a tiny sigh that makes me frown. "I wish we had the room for you here, Ry. You know I'd offer you a couch if we had one but—"

"None of that." She and Eli have only been married a few months, and I wouldn't accept their offer to bum on their couch even if they had the room

in the home they just purchased in our hometown of Liberty. No offense to them, but it's one thing to hear a recap of their rabbit-like intimacy from my best friend, I don't need to hear it firsthand. "I'll figure something out. There's always a story to crack around here, which means I'll never go out of work. It's job security. Don't worry about me."

The pregnant pause makes me squirm because I know she'll suggest what she has every time we talk about my situation. "You could always go back to your—"

"No."

"Rylee..."

"I love my parents, Moff. You know I do. But I'm meant to be in California, not New York. They don't understand that, and they never will."

"They want what's best for you."

Sighing, I nod in agreement even though she can't see me. "I know, and I love them all the more for it. But I'd rather not worry them with my business. If they find out I lost the apartment, they'll send me money for a ticket and tell me to come home. It'll break my heart to tell them no."

The glorious thing about my friend is that she knows when to stop pushing. "Fine. If there's anybody who can make things work, it's you."

I've never done well with compliments and feel my cheeks heat with telltale signs of embarrassment over her sweet encouragement.

She continues to say, "You could always do what Birdie told us. Remember what she said right before we graduated high school about finding a wealthy man and marrying for money?"

We both laugh over the fond memory of my grandmother. She was a firecracker—always witty and fast on her feet. Mom hated that piece of advice, but always chuckled whenever her mother would give it because she knows nobody ever took it to heart.

But... "It's not an *awful* idea," I surmise.

I swear I hear crickets.

Then, "You're kidding, right?"

More crickets.

"Rylee!" I get scolded. "The last thing you need in your life is some old, wrinkly man to take care of all for some money."

My nose scrunches at the thought. "Who says he has to be old and wrinkly? It isn't like Grandma Birdie suggested we marry someone on the

verge of death who'd need sponge baths every day because they can't take care of themselves."

"Get real, Ry. Just because you live where all the hot celebrities are doesn't mean you're going to find some young thing to marry."

One of my brows quirks. "Oh, really? How much do you want to bet?"

"No," she says quickly, groaning after she realizes what can of worms she opened. "I know that tone. I'm not challenging you. This isn't some bet to see if you can prove me wrong. Plus, neither of us has money to spare."

True.

"And," Moffie points out. "It's stupid. We always said we'd marry for love. Remember? I got my happy ever after, so it's time for you to get yours. Even if you find it on the east coast."

My heart plummets into the bottom of my stomach over the thought of moving home. It's the last thing I want to do. The small town in New York that I come from is suffocating, with more cows than people in the rural community. There's no opportunity, no excitement. The town practically partied when a pizzeria moved into an old store front on Main Street, but the lack of population and traffic made it close a year later.

I always told myself I'd get out of there, and I did. I won't go back for more than a few days at a time to visit family around the holidays because I'm afraid of being stuck.

I drop my head onto the headrest. "You know, sponge baths don't sound so bad."

"You're hopeless."

I smirk. "But you love me."

"And I question why very often."

"You'd be sad without me."

"I'd certainly be bored," she surmises.

Knowing I need to eat now that my medicine has kicked in, I reach for my apple. "I need to get going so I can have dinner. I'll talk to you soon, okay? I promise I'll be fine."

"No old men, Rylee," she tells me in her serious voice. It's the same one I imagine she uses on her elementary class full of first graders. The thought makes me snicker.

"I'll do my best," I say before saying goodbye and hanging up. I don't want to hear a lecture on true love and fairytale endings that she's believed

in since the day we watched *Beauty and the Beast* for the first time. She's a hopeless romantic and I'm just...hopeless.

Grandpa Al has always believed that things happen for a reason, and his life may not have been easy, but it was *happy*. So, he must know what he was talking about to find contentment in everything he did.

Biting into my apple, I stare out the window and shake my head. Unlike Moffie and my grandparents, I don't believe in love at first sight, or anything related to it. True love seems more daunting than its worth, like we're pressured to find our one perfect person. There are billions of people on our planet—how can only one person be the main source of my happiness?

Exhaling through my nose, I turn to glance at the photo of my grandparents on the dashboard. They were free spirits, always smiling and laughing no matter what moods they were in. It's one of the reasons why I loved them so much—they were positive people who found something to appreciate in everyday life.

Swallowing down emotion, I squeeze the bitten fruit in my fingers. "What do I do, Grandpa Al? Send me a sign. Something."

Nothing happens.

And by the time exhaustion takes over sometime later, I let it take me into a peaceful oblivion to get what little sleep I can.

I'm awoken to the brutal ray of hot sunlight beaming me through the windshield, then the extra noise I soon recognize as my phone going off where I tossed it in the passenger seat.

Launching for it when I see my boss's name flashing, I hit the ACCEPT button and press the cell to my ear while wincing through the morning pain I have every day in my shoulders and back, certainly not helped by the uncomfortable seats I slept on. "Hello, Sarina."

"Took you long enough," my irritable, thirty-something boss greets me. "You wanted to know about any hot stories the press wants printed, and I found you one. Based on the history you have with the people involved, I think you're the best option to cover it."

I sit up too quickly, feeling lightheadedness take over. I blink a few times to adjust and dig through my bag for the travel notebook and pen I keep with me for times like this. "Who's the story on?"

There aren't many people I've covered that would require history for new stories. We're all sharks in the water circling people we could make money on. I'm not the proudest of what I've done to get a scoop, and even still wake up in the middle of the night when my conscious haunts me with the memories, but we do what we have to in order to make money for ourselves.

To survive.

"Violet Wonders," Sarina replies casually. I'm glad she can't see the way my shoulders straighten and square—my body becoming rigid with tension. "Specifically, Garrick Matthews. Word around town is that he and Zayne Gray are on the outs again and not one of the band members has said a word since news broke over the juicy gossip. There are whispers that he's thinking about leaving the group for good, some cell phone audio too that someone recorded. It's hard to make out, which is why the scoop is so sought after. You already have an in with them, which means..."

She thinks I can get the gossip.

I refrain from sighing...and groaning. I rest my forehead against the edge of the steering wheel and internally exhale. "Last time I was around them, things were complicated."

Her laugh is dry. "Rylee, if breaking a story that could make or break someone *isn't* complicated then I might be worried about you. Or maybe proud. It's a tossup."

My lips press into a flat line. Unlike major newspapers, free presses and tabloids don't care about morality that much. In their minds, you do whatever you can to get the story of the century even if it's questionable. Sarina certainly always tells me to forget about what I believe in for a decent payday, and I've had too many close calls with over drafting my bank account to second guess what she says.

But what I did...

Shaking my head to free myself from the memory, I sit up and remember how much I need the money. Even though my voice is reluctant, I tell her, "I'm on it. When is the deadline?"

"As long as you give me something juicy before anyone else can, I don't care. They're on my ass about online views, so we need something to spice up the e-readership. Do you think you can handle that?"

I've learned where Zayne Gray is involved, anything is possible, so I'm sure the Australian rocker won't be any different. "Yes."

“Good. We’ll talk soon then.” She disconnects before I can even respond, something that used to irritate me. Now I’m glad. I don’t want her to sense my hesitation over the job just because I’m not cut out like the others I work with. Maybe that’s why I got so close to Violet Wonders the first time to get a story. I didn’t play the same games or toy with their minds, I simply...observe.

Something tells me this time will be ten times harder, though, considering how it all went down all those years ago.

“What am I doing?” I grumble to myself, readjusting my seat and turning the car on. I pop a couple Motrin to dull the ache in my body and crank the heat to rub my hands together for some extra warmth, glad the sun is out. I open the internet browser on my phone and read the latest gossip on my new subjects. Sarina won’t want anything that’s already been reported, which means doing research every chance I can. New stories surface all the time, so whatever I get needs to be better than the rest.

My eyes snap to the picture on the dashboard, now hanging halfway off from the worn-down tape. I quickly press it back into place, hoping it’ll stay until I can find new tape at the pharmacy I’ll have to stop at later.

When I look at Grandpa Al, it’s almost like he’s staring right back at me as if to say, “*You asked for a sign.*”

But I’m not sure how Violet Wonders or the man I’m supposed to out is a sign at all, much less a good one.

The Lazy Croc is bustling with people grinding against each other on the dance floor beneath where the guys and I are perched in the VIP lounge. It's not the type of club people would expect us to occupy, and that's why we like it. Compared to other popular scenes in the area, we're under the radar here—content without cameras being shoved in our faces and things being yelled at us in passing.

Manning and Zayne are slamming back shots across from me while Calder times them to see who's faster. Jax's eyes are trained on something across the room, probably at one of the women eye-fucking us instead of the men they're here with. All the while my mind is wandering despite the loud bass of a shitty song *thumping* instead of dulling my thoughts.

An elbow meets my ribcage. "What's your deal, bro?"

Jax is no longer paying attention to whoever captured his attention, or the idiots going through shots faster than they do women, which is impressive. I'm hardly one to talk, but I swear it's always a competition between them no matter what the circumstances. Women, alcohol, press attention.

I tell Jax, "Not feeling it tonight. Might head out soon and get some rest."

We've got a long day ahead of us working on the rest of our next album. It's not even halfway done, and since we're still settling in after coming back from our tour, we haven't been as focused as we should be. Something always comes up—someone comes in late, hungover, or uninterested. Then

our producer opens his mouth and says shit that only pisses us off because we're off our game even if his irritation is justifiable.

"Pretty sure the chick with pink hair was checking you out earlier," Jax tells me, tipping his chin in the direction of one of the servers who's looking in our direction. "Curvy little thing."

There's no denying she's attractive, but the purr in his tone tells me he's set his eyes on her for the night. It wouldn't be the first time we've shared a woman or two, but I haven't done that in a long time.

All the women they employ here are eye candy. I spoke with the douche who owns it once, and Roderick—or Rick the Dick as I like to call him—says the prettier the women, the happier the customer. A scummy technique but not wrong, I suppose.

I shake my head at the shot Manning offers me, watching as he downs it in one go instead. I haven't had a drink in months even when the guys all called me out for it. The only one who doesn't push me on it is Zayne. He knows my limitations as well as I do and tries not to encourage me like the others because he knows where my line is drawn.

It used to be a lot more fun losing myself in alcohol or whatever recreational drug was available at the time. The short-lived escape was everything I wanted when the nights became longer, and the work became more demanding. But what started as a pick-me-up turned into a necessity and the second I realized I was addicted I reached out to Mum for help knowing she wouldn't judge me.

That's why I try not letting it bother me too much when she or Chase bring up my old habits. My old choices are out there for the world to dissect and discuss even if I wish I could bury them for good. But the truth is, I'm ashamed of what I've done to get by. I've cheated, broken laws, fucked up relationships, and all for selfish reasons. Because I could. Because I couldn't cope without a little destruction.

I act like I couldn't give less of a shit because that's what people already assume. I've learned it's nearly impossible for people to think any different once their minds are made up about me. To them, I'm a rich playboy who does what he wants when he wants. Sometimes, I even believe it.

Fingers snap in my face. "Dude."

I curse, scrubbing a palm down my tired face and sigh. "Sorry, mate. I'm knackered. Going to head home. I'll see you fools at the studio tomorrow?"

Jax groans. “If we’re going to the studio then we aren’t meeting until the afternoon. There’s a chick eyeing me down and I have every intention of not going to sleep anytime soon. Feel me?”

I snort as Zayne balls up one of the cocktail napkins and tosses it at Jax’s face. My first mate tells our bassist in his slight Boston accent, “You do realize you’re always the one that wants to meet up early to get shit done, right? We always want to sleep in.”

The point goes over his head. “Is three good? We can grab some food after. We all know this one will keep us as long as it takes until we get the best track.”

All eyes turn to me as I slide out of the booth. “What? You think Reg is going to take half-assed bullshit? Better if I tell us to do it over before that twat does.”

They snicker. None of us like Reggie, but he’s a damn good producer. One of the best in the industry these days.

Zayne tilts his chin up. “You out then?”

“Yeah. See if the little is home.”

He grins. “He still leaving the house and heading over to your mom’s place?”

Chase thinks Mum won’t rat him out, but she’ll always text me when he arrives. The first time he stormed out of my place he did catch up with friends for a while. But since, he’s just gone back to his basement bedroom at our mother’s until he thinks he’s allowed to come back.

“I told him he could come out with us, but he said he had other plans.” The guys shake their heads to some varying degree over the boy they all consider a brother. “He’ll get over things on his own.”

It’s Manning who brings up the legal battle Chase has been battling. “Did the ‘suit get dropped? Last I heard they didn’t have shit to go on and the trial would have been a joke.”

I nod. “Yeah it was thrown out.” It’s a good thing too, because I would have invested serious money to help him clear his name. The guys told Chase the same thing because they consider him family too and want the best for him, and we all know the man going after him thinks the name attached to his business means he can drain my little brother dry. It’s bull.

But Chase has always been adamant on doing things his own way—with his own money—so he wouldn’t have allowed me or my bandmates to throw any cash in his direction. The only exception was when I got my first

big paycheck and bought him an expensive pair of retro Air Jordan sneakers he'd been eyeing. Mum couldn't afford them at the time, but I could. Just like I could afford a house for her and the ability to keep her comfortable like she did for me growing up. She never asked for it, never demanded a cent like some people do when their own kids make it big, which is all the more reason to show her how much she means to me for supporting my crazy ass life despite going at motherhood alone.

When she and Dad divorced it was over a job Mum was offered at a ritzy hospital in California. He didn't want to leave Australia, where he's lived his entire life. Both their families are there to this day, and besides a few occasional birthday and holiday cards from my grandparents, we hear nothing else from extended family. Dad and I talk when we can, sometimes he'll send care packages from back home, but the conversations never last long because we don't have enough in common. He never fails to tell me he's proud of everything I've done though, and even attended a few Violet Wonders shows that we had in my home country during that leg of the tour. We'd met up backstage after we were finished and caught up before I was called away by someone on my team for meet and greets and interviews.

I know for a fact that my parents were having issues long before the job opportunity came up though. But the job was what cemented their separation. Mum wanted another kid but couldn't have anymore, and Dad didn't want another child unless it was his own. My mother thought the well-paying job in the Golden State would be the perfect chance to start fresh, so that's what she did when she told him she was accepting the position.

I don't blame Dad for not wanting to leave, but I wish he'd tried harder. That he would have fought for my mother. It's his loss in the long run, because Mum is the best woman I know. She's irreplaceable.

Out of solidarity for Chase, I try not bringing up my irritation over it. His adoption was a closed one, and he's never asked once about his biological parents. I don't know if it's because he doesn't think he'll get answers, or if he generally doesn't care. Mum adopted him when he was a baby, so she's the only mother he's ever known.

Waving off the guys, I escape out the back entrance to avoid the crowds of people. One of my favorite bouncers slaps my hand in passing as I wish him a good night before walking into the brisk air. I'm stuffing my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket to dig out a Lifesavers hard lolly.

Peeling off the wrapper and popping it into my mouth, I make my way toward the parking lot where my car is amongst a few other expensive sets of wheels.

Except for one that clearly doesn't belong.

Usually I'd let it go, not caring of others around me if I don't have to. But something draws me in the direction of the beaten-up Altima parked haphazardly off to the side, like someone may have done a little too much drinking before settling in the spot. I approach the driver's side and instantly notice a waterfall of long blonde hair cascading over the shaking shoulders of what appears to be a young woman in the front seat...crying?

I don't have many weaknesses, but one of them is definitely women crying.

"Fuck," I curse under my breath before rapping my knuckles against the window.

A yelp sounds from the inside, followed by the body in the seat jerking to the side. Startled eyes fly to where I stand outside her car, and I see her hand quickly grip the phone in her hand.

I raise my hands up to show her I mean no harm, even stepping backward to put space between me and the door. "I only wanted to make sure you were okay."

There's no doubt in my mind that she knows exactly who I am once her teary gaze locks with mine. Her lips part in shock and I don't think she blinks for a long moment. It's a tamer reaction compared to some I get.

My hands slide back into the pockets of my jacket. "So, are you?" I ask, voice slightly raised so she can hear me through the closed window. "I mean are you all right?"

She shakes out of the stupor and stares at the phone in her hand. I notice the slightest slump in her shoulders before she opens the door. One legging-clad leg drops onto the pavement, followed by the other, Canvas Slip-On shoes like Mum wears cover her otherwise bare feet. She doesn't make a move to stand or ask me for a photo or autograph which makes me intrigued over the stranger as she sits on the edge of her seat.

When she angles her face up, the parking lot lights hit her eyes perfectly, revealing one orb a muddy brown tone and the other a light blue rimmed with red as she tries blinking back tears.

I've seen those eyes before, I think to myself, a tug on my chest making me want to step closer to get a better look.

“My car broke down and I barely got it off the road, which was clearly a mistake.” Her hands gesture toward the other cars that make hers stick out like a sore thumb. “Look, if you’re going to call security then—”

The hell? “I’m not going to call anyone on you. Do you have an idea of what’s wrong with the car?”

She sniffs, crossing her arms over her chest after swiping her cheeks. “If I did, would *you* even be able to fix it?”

A smirk curls the corners of my lips. “So, you know who I am then.” All she does is blink, as if the comment is ridiculous. I sigh. “No, I’m not great with cars. But I know someone who is. He’s right inside if you want me to get hi—”

“No!” Her eyes widen and fear soaks into them, one of her legs quickly retreating back into the car as if to escape.

My hands go back up again, surprised by her reaction. “Okay. It was only a suggestion. Is someone coming to help you out?”

Nothing.

I can see the hesitation in her eyes, the need to lie, and I get it. I’ve heard Mum tell me plenty of times that women need to be ten times more cautious than men, especially in situations like these. Can’t say that doesn’t piss me off that any woman has to fear for herself, but I’ve heard horror stories over the years and seen things I’d rather not when I’m out traveling.

“Look, I mean you no harm. And I’d ask for your name, but I doubt you’d give it to me anyway. If you need my phone to call somebody, or want me to do it, I will. I’ll even foot the bill to get this towed somewhere. I know a few shops in the area that won’t charge you a kidney to get it fixed or cheat you out of proper service.”

I give her time to consider my offer, keeping my distance so she doesn’t feel pressured. It gives me ample time to take in her heart-shaped face and those doe eyes that exude innocence. I’m glad her darker blonde hair doesn’t cover the way they meet mine, though I wish there wasn’t defeat shining bright in them.

I’m certain we’ve met before because there’s no way I’d forget a gaze like that, but the harder I stare, the fuzzier the recognition becomes. Whatever scratched the surface is long gone by the time she speaks.

The smallest breath escapes her as she murmurs, “My name is Rylee. R-y-l-e-e.”

Surprise flickers across my face as I offer her a genuine smile. The name doesn't ring a bell, but I've met thousands of women at this point in my life. "Pretty name for a pretty girl, Rylee."

Those eyes that once filled with sadness now roll at my cheesy but true line. "Original."

One of my shoulders lifts. "Can't win them all, I suppose. How about that phone call?"

There's a brief moment of hesitation before she relents. "Yes, please." She waves her phone in the air and adds, "My cell is on 2% battery so tonight is clearly not my night."

Most women in her position would disagree, but I don't point that out. Rylee clearly doesn't give a shit who I am or who I know, which is a refreshing realization. Though it'd benefit her to agree to let Zayne come and check out her car. He's always loved tinkering with vehicles—he used to say if music didn't work out, he'd run his own garage. Everyone who pays attention to the media knows his obsession with them, including the collection of classic cars he has scattered throughout his various properties in Cali and Massachusetts.

If she'd let me get him, he'd probably be able to get this thing up and running again in no time flat even with alcohol running through his veins. But considering she's opposed to the idea, I let it be rather than pushing her.

I dig out my phone, letting a few Lifesavers fall to the pavement as I pull out the cell. Picking up the lollies with a set of eyes watching me shove them back into my pocket, I suggest, "Why don't I call a buddy of mine to come get this? It'll be cheap and I'll make sure you get where you need to go."

Her tongue drags across her bottom lip before her front teeth bite down onto it. Unlike most women I see lingering around here, her face looks absent of makeup. The natural beauty radiating from her clearly isn't something she acknowledges, something I respect.

When her eyes evade mine, I know there's something she's not telling me. Chase does the same thing when he can't admit whatever is on his mind.

I wait for a second.

Two.

Five.

Lowering the phone, I ask, "What is it?"

Rylee starts fidgeting before her head drops forward. "It's nothing. Can you make that call and see how much it'll be? I'm a little short on money right now."

"Tourist?" I guess.

She shakes her head.

My eyes narrow curiously. "You live around here?"

There's a pause. "Yes..."

I don't bother asking where because I sense she regrets telling me what she has already. I know pushing my luck to get more from her would probably fail. "Okay."

Making the call to one of Zayne's friends who runs a decent shop downtown, I give him our address and wait with Rylee until one of his men shows up. I watch him circle her car and tinker with a few things before loading it onto his truck.

It isn't until he gestures his chin toward me after examining the vehicle that I walk over to him. I recognize the man from the few times I've visited the garage when Zayne hung out there, so I slap his hand in greeting. "What's up, Ed? Thanks for coming out."

His eyes go over his shoulder for a moment, gaze directed at Rylee who's leaning against the hood of my Mustang. Her arms are crossed over her chest, hugging her jacket close to her body as she watches something across the street.

Eddie scrubs his cheek and murmurs, "I can't be 100% certain, but I think your girl is living in her car."

I gape at him with raised brows, hoping I heard him wrong. "Come again?"

His chin dips. "When I was looking around, I noticed the way her backseat is set up. She's got all the essentials. Not my first rodeo around here. I've seen it plenty times before. It's not uncommon."

Cursing under my breath, I give him a terse nod before he smacks my back in comfort and heads toward his truck.

I walk over to Rylee, teeth grinding as I contemplate my options. Eventually, I go with my gut. "Come on."

She pushes off the car with her bag thrown over her shoulder. "Where are we going? He didn't give me a bill or—"

"I've got it."

"You don't need to—"

“Can you afford it?” I pry, eyebrows drawn up in inquiry. I know the truth the moment her surprised glance meets mine that tells me she knows I do too.

So she doesn’t bullshit me. Her throat bobs as she replies, “No, I can’t.”

“Then come on.”

She doesn’t budge. “Where?”

I point toward my car, not giving away any emotion when I simply say, “My place, love.”

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T*his is a bad idea.*

Anxiety creeps into my chest as the famous singer drives past the gate after punching in a code, and down the long, circular driveaway that leads up to the front of his huge house. There's already a car parked in front of the garage, a shiny, expensive white BMW, and I wonder how many vehicles Garrick has as he parks beside it.

Taking in the white exterior of the house silently from the passenger seat, I twist my fingers together in my lap and feel my stomach flutter with nerves. I try not to think about what comes next because Garrick has given me no indication of what that may be. The car ride was quiet with only the sounds of passing traffic and city life surrounding us as we drove into the cul-de-sac he lives in.

I follow the famous singer to the front door after he gives me a few seconds to study the plain walls of the squared mansion-like building and the front yard that consists of mostly pavement and a few strips of bright green grass. There are no plants or trees, only a line of hedges planted in front of the gate to create a sense of privacy from the street. I can see where there must have been either a small tree or fountain in the circular patch of grass around the driveway, but someone must have taken it out. If Grandma Birdie were here, she'd insist on planting a small garden to bring color and life into the otherwise dull space.

He punches something into the lock pad on the door before pushing it open and gesturing for me to come inside. I stop before the threshold, suddenly regretting not telling him to drop me off at a random hotel. Why

did I have to tell him I lived around here? If Moffie was around, she would have reminded me of every single serial killer documentary we watched together that leads to my body being found in a ditch wrapped in a rug or something.

“You’ve come this far,” he points out, already a few feet ahead of me inside the foyer. His accent goes straight to my chest, making my heart do a little summersault. I understand why girls scream when he purrs into the microphone at concerts, a fact I know from the many, many videos Moffie showed me as soon as Violet Wonders made it big.

From here, I can see beautiful hardwood floors and bright white walls that match the white-washed exterior. There isn’t any furniture in view, save for the coatrack hanging up on a wall near the door that only has one measly jacket hanging on a hook, and an entrance mat on the floor by the door that’s basic gray color.

“Can’t say many women have been this hesitant to come home with me,” he muses more to himself than me. “Then again, we don’t usually get that far before things get heavy.”

I blanch. “Crass, much?”

He grins, unabashed by his bluntness despite the twisted look I give him. “You don’t seem like the type to offend easily, darling.”

My cheeks heat over his subtle pet name, but I don’t say anything because he’s not wrong.

He shrugs my silence off. “Are you going to come in? We won’t be alone. I have a mongrel that I house, feed, and tend to whenever he needs it. Don’t worry, he’s house trained. Well, for the most part.”

How did I not know that Garrick Matthews has a dog? “I’m surprised people don’t know that you have a pet. The public would eat that kind of stuff up.”

Garrick snickers, gesturing for me to come in again. This time, I do, mostly because I want to see his dog. I had a Chow Chow growing up that passed away the year after I moved, and my parents never got another dog.

Garrick closes the door behind me and leads me further into the home where the foyer opens to a huge open floorplan that has a den, living room, and dining room all spaced out. My eyes are greeted by pops of purples, yellows, and grays, all bright and welcoming, and I can’t help but gape at the nice furniture—all matching in color, style, and size—surprised at how well the décor makes the place feel so...lived in.

It's not too cluttered or too spacious, making it much homier than I would have imagined a bachelor like the lead singer in front of me would live in, especially considering the outside looks nothing like the inside. "He's getting up there in age. Twenty-one," he adds, referring to his pet. "Could benefit from a good bath and haircut. But I love him nonetheless."

A startled noise escapes my throat when another guy walks into the room with a bowl of something in his hands, surprise on his face when he sees us. One of my hands fly over my fast-beating heart as he says, "I didn't think you'd be home this early."

"Speak of the devil," Garrick chuckles, winking at me and gesturing toward the guy I suddenly recognize as his sibling. He doesn't get seen in the media too often, especially not with his famous brother, but he made a splash over an interview he gave a year or so ago about an old fling he had that didn't end well for him. "This is Chase, my little brother."

Blinking slowly, I turn to Garrick from the curly-haired boy in front of us. "The mongrel you were referring to is your sibling?"

Disappointment settles in.

Said brother scowls. "Why the fuck are you always referring to me as a dog?"

That makes the man who brought me home laugh, his shoulders shaking as his brother glares in his direction. "Because it's not far off from the truth. I thought you had a date tonight."

Chase looks away. "It ended early."

"It ended early, or you didn't go?"

I feel awkward standing here, but I don't know where to go or what to do.

"I'm not going to bail on someone, jackass. That's your style, not mine. It just didn't go well, okay?" The defensiveness in Chase's tone makes me shrink back a little, but not as much as when his eyes snap to me inquisitively. "Who is this? If you want some privacy I'll head to my room or go somewhere else. Just quit making everyone think I'm your damn pet."

A blush creeps over my cheeks at the implication left wide open and I don't know how to explain my being there. "Oh, I'm not...we're...er..."

The youngest Matthews rolls his eyes. "I doubt my brother invited you over to have tea and crumpets, so you don't have to play dumb."

"First off," Garrick refutes in a scolding tone, "I'm not British, so screw off. Secondly, Mum taught us how to respect women, so I suggest you

remember that right about now.”

His brother’s cheeks color. “Sorry,” he murmurs, not making eye contact with me. “And I know for damn sure you drink that nasty herbal shit before bed every night, so don’t act like you don’t have a tea obsession.”

As he walks away, Garrick calls out, “It’s good for my throat!”

When it’s just the two of us, he turns to me and rolls his eyes. “Brothers, am I right?”

I shrug awkwardly. “I’m an only child.”

“Ah.” His head cocks to the side. “Is that why you were living in your car? No protective brother or sister to offer you their home?”

My heart plummets into the bottom of my stomach. Unable to confirm or deny his allegation, I gape as he nods once.

“Thought so.” He sighs heavily, scratching at his shaven jawline. “You can stay here tonight until you figure out what to do.”

“I’m not g—”

“I have plenty of spare bedrooms,” he cuts me off, pointing toward the stairs. “And they all have their own bathroom so no one would bother you.”

My lips part, but I can’t force the words out. They’re tangled in my mouth, twisted around my tongue as I stare at the singer worth millions. Why would he offer me this?

I’m not surprised that the first words I blurt are, “I could be a murderer!”

He snorts as warmth licks my skin over the sudden outburst. “Sure, you could be. But I doubt it. Those eyes...” His narrow as he studies the two orbs I’ve always been self-conscious of. People in school used to pick on me over the two different colors. “Those eyes are soulful. I’ve seen them before, haven’t I?”

My heart *thuds*, *thuds*, *thuds* in my chest at the question I hoped he wouldn’t ask. Our interaction was minimal the last time we saw each other. It was a few minutes at best before Zayne Gray pulled my attention away. Back then, my hair was dyed a light brown, I wore a ton of makeup I don’t even own anymore, and my clothes wrapped around my body like a Christmas gift yet to be opened. It doesn’t surprise me he doesn’t recognize me.

Because I’m a terrible liar, I choose to divert the conversation instead of giving him any real answer. “There’s no way I’m going to stay here.

You're...*you*. And I hate being a burden even if you have a hundred rooms to sleep in."

Amusement flickers in his baby blue eyes. "I don't have a hundred rooms here, and you'd only be a burden if you fight me on this. I had to watch my mother struggle for a long time before she got on her own two feet. If I can help you in any way, I want to."

I've always been bad at accepting help. It used to bother Mom and Dad whenever I'd turn down their assistance, irritate them that I'd always let my pride get in the way of reason. But there were certain things I couldn't do on my own, and I'd have to compromise. Now is no different, I suppose.

"One night," I agree quietly. It doesn't sit well with me based on the staticky feeling shooting down my neck in warning, but what else was I going to do? A cab ride back to the city would cost a pretty penny and then there'd be room charges if I even found a hotel last minute.

When a grin stretches across his face, I hold my breath. He takes a step closer to me and reaches out to gently brush a piece of fallen hair out of my face and behind my ear, his fingertips leaving a scorching trail along my skin that makes me shutter a breath. "We could make the night interesting. Get rid of that frown."

Holy shit.

In the back of my mind, I anticipated this, knew a guy like him—someone who could be another Hemsworth brother with his tussled blond hair and smoldering blue eyes—would try something. Between the sexy accent, the way he towers over my small five-foot-four frame, and how he purrs his words while giving me *the look*, I'm two seconds from becoming a puddle.

But that isn't me, even if I really, really want it to be. So, I take a large step back once I control my drumming heartbeat. I'd like to think my reaction is out of shock, not arousal, but not even I'm immune to Garrick Matthews' good looks and charm when it's pointed directly at me as it is now. "I don't do random hookups. Been there, done that. They're not for me. And if that's the payment you expect for letting me—"

"Whoa, hold on." He quickly shakes his head, his hair gelled into slight curls tumbling over his forehead from the quick motion. "I'm only teasing, love. I mean if you were game then I'd show you my bedroom in a heartbeat. But I'm not saying I expect it."

It's hard to swallow as I wrap my arms around myself. "I shouldn't have come here." I eye the door, debating my options.

"Second floor, third door on the left."

His voice pulls my attention back to him, his genuine eyes somehow calming my nerves. "It's the spare bedroom you can have tonight. Chase and I don't have rooms near there, so it'll be all yours. No strings. Just somewhere to crash. We'll figure things out in the morning."

"We?" I can't help but ask.

One shoulder lifts. "Or you. But I know where your car is, so you might need my help for a little while longer. Until then..." His gaze drifts to the staircase.

To show he's serious, he steps away from me. His hands go to his pockets, his stance relaxed, and that makes mine mirror it. He's nothing like the tabloids have said if the few moments I've been around him are any indication.

Then again, I knew that from before. From the things Zayne had told me about his best friend.

My voice is barely audible when I say, "I appreciate this. Thank you."

His head bobs. "Goodnight, Rylee."

"Goodnight." I don't say his name because I feel like a liar—a fraud. I don't deserve to be on a first-name basis with Garrick Matthews. Especially not when he's being this kind to a stranger.

Almost stranger, I remind myself.

I wake up after a restless night's sleep and drag myself to the bathroom despite not wanting to leave the big, fluffy four-poster bed. Everything in this room is immaculate—wide, open space painted a light gray with French country stylings that seem so over the top yet perfect somehow.

There are details that show the effort put into making this place his own, and it makes me want to study each little piece I passed on my way to the bedroom last night with more observation to figure out who he is—the pictures of him and his family, awards on the shelves in the living room, and all the decorations that must mean something to him. Even the paintings on the wall in this room seem to have a point, something beyond matching the aesthetic. They're peaceful, flowers and country sides, and blue skies.

I'm guilty of judging a book by its cover, though I've been schooled once or twice during my time working for the L.A. Free Press. In the back of my mind, I know the celebrities that we print stories on are human beings. They just have more than the average person. Yet, I always have to remind myself that it's their quality that people are always so interested in. Like if they're a decent human or not, what scandal they're involved in, who they're dating or cheating on, and if there's something groundbreaking about their character.

More times than not, I realize that the people who have the most care the least because they think their value is all that matters in life. But one of my mother's favorite quotes that she got from some old-time Christian preacher is that 'the real measure of our wealth is how much we'd be worth if we lost it all.' Some of the stories I've broken for the free press didn't make me feel bad once I realized that monetary values were all these people cared about, because I wanted to see who they'd be without their fame shielding them.

But with Garrick...I can see that he's different, especially when he talks about his mother. His face softens along with his words. I've done my research on his entire family. I know he moved to California from Australia when he was younger, his mother worked in some plastic surgery ward in Hollywood's finest hospital, and his little brother was adopted when Garrick was eleven. Family matters to him and it always has because they had to struggle before he got a shot at making something of himself and provide for them.

Washing my hands after doing my morning business, I crawl back onto the bed and look around the room. There are beautiful paintings hanging on the wall, plants in the corners that I'm not certain are real, and a large set of windows covered by sheer white curtains bathing the room in natural early morning light.

I reach for my phone that rests on the nightstand and notice a few strings of texts from my parents and best friend. Responding to them so they know I'm not dead, I groan when my father calls immediately after my message to them is delivered.

"Hi, Dad." My voice is still groggy as I curl under the blankets.

"Hey, kiddo," he greets. His voice is gravelly as always, making me smile in comfort despite being surrounded in luxury. "You were supposed to call last night. Your mother was worried thinking something happened."

Shit. I'd told him my car was making a weird noise and that I needed to get it taken care of. Dad used to be a mechanic, so he kept asking me what sort of sounds it was making, and then promptly laughed when I tried to mimic the problem. I think his exact words were, "*What sound is that? A dying whale?*"

The soft blanket warms up my cold body as I snuggle in. "Sorry. Don't worry about the car, it's getting taken care of. I had kind of a crazy night, but everything is fine."

"What's wrong with the car?" he asks, something I should have expected.

I bite my lip. "Er..."

The disapproving grunt he lets out makes me frown. "Ry, how many times have I told you to get the details from the mechanic? They can overcharge and take advantage of—"

"My friend is handling it," I blurt, wincing at the defensiveness of my tone.

In the background, I hear Mom say, "You have a friend?"

I drop my head back trying not to be offended by the surprise in her tone. She knows how much I love Moffie, but we don't live in the same state anymore so we're not as close as we used to be. Tiffany and I were situational friends, hanging out when we were both at our old apartment, but we never did much outside of it together. So, I guess Mom's shock is justified.

But still. "Yes, Mom. I have friends."

Dad chimes back in. "Well, I'm glad you have someone looking out for you."

The curiosity is too much for my mother though. "Is this a *girl* friend or a *boy* friend?"

Thankfully, my phone alarm goes off indicating that it's time to take my medicine. *Saved by the alarm*, I think to myself. "I have to go take my meds, but I'll keep you updated on the car. No need to worry! Love you!"

I barely get a chance to hear the words back from them before hanging up and blowing out a breath of relief. Flipping onto my back, I groan and stretch over the side of the bed where my bag is resting on the floor.

My joints pop and crack as I dig through my bag and find what I need, prepping my syringe when I hear a knock on the door followed by Garrick's

voice. “You up, Rylee? I thought I heard you talking, so I wanted to let you know that I just got a call from—”

The door opens before I can respond, and his eyes instantly drop to the needle in my hand. Part of my shirt is up where I’m about to inject into my lower abdomen, but I pause when I see something dark shadow over his face.

His fingers grip the doorknob as he glares at me perched cross-legged on the mattress. “Did you bring fucking drugs into my house? After I went out of my way to help you?”

Blood drains from my face. “It’s not—”

“You need to go,” he informs me, his tone full of venom and not offering any room for explanation.

Despite feeling the icy tone penetrating my skin, I still try. “But I’m n—”

“Just stop. Jesus. I don’t allow that shit here anymore. I’m sure you know my past with things like that, but I’m clean now. I’ll call you a ride to take you to the shop where your car is, but that’s it. Nothing fucking more.”

His eyes snap between me and what I’m holding before he shakes his head and walks out, slamming the door behind him while cursing. My palm shakes as I lower the shirt and syringe and try calming my racing heart. I can hear him mumbling until it’s distant enough that I know he’s downstairs. Only then do I take a few slow breaths before doing what needs to be done, blowing out a breath before inserting the needle.

I channel my thoughts, so I don’t focus on the slight pain of the injection or the shake to my hands or the angry host waiting for me to leave.

One—I have medicine that controls my autoimmune disease and will make me feel better.

Two—I had a comfortable bed to sleep in last night, even if it was short lived.

Three—my car is fixed.

What Garrick thinks of me doesn’t matter, but I’m still shaken when I gather my things and climb out of bed. I’ve never been one for walks of shame, and this feels like one I’ll never come back from. *Me* a drug user? I’ve never even smoked pot in my lifetime much less anything else. The only thing that comes close is the cigarette I tried once that Moffie’s brother gave me, but I hacked up a lung so bad it turned me off from them

completely. He'd laughed, I'd blushed, and I swore I wouldn't try anything like that again just to get a guy's attention.

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, I avoid any possible interaction with the two men I know are home as I slip out the front door. It doesn't stop me from feeling the burning gaze plastered to the back of my head as I walk down the driveway.

Ten minutes later, a car pulls up outside the gate, and I find myself looking over my shoulder at the house one last time. A curtain is drawn back in the living room, but I know from the dark hair that it's not Garrick watching me, it's Chase.

I don't offer him a wave. A smile. Anything. Instead, I drop my head, grip my bag, and depart for the car garage where my temporary home is parked.

Do not cry, Rylee.

I suck in a breath and hear the driver ask if I'm all right. Grandpa Al used to say that it's okay to not be okay, but that doesn't mean I'm going to tell everyone I encounter.

So, I give him the default answer that I feed everybody because it's easier than explaining the truth. "Yeah," I croak, clearing my throat. "I'm fine."

I'm sure he can tell it's a lie, but he's not paid to care. That can be the fourth thing I'm grateful for today.

The guys all cuss me out after I tell them to take ten before we start again. I grab a bottle of water and drop down onto the leather couch behind all the instruments, scrubbing my face before letting out a heavy sigh of frustration.

Before I left the house this morning, Chase asked what happened with Rylee. It's rare I bring anyone home and even rarer I lose my shit and kick them out the next morning. Even the women that tend to piss me off get better treatment than Rylee did. But what else was I supposed to do? I know my strengths and weaknesses and being around any type of substance could make me spiral.

I can't afford to take time off for another trip to rehab, and neither can the band.

"What's got you in such a shit mood?" Zayne asks, plopping down beside me and nudging my leg with his knee. "The guys are all whipped from last night and you're riding them hard over *one* song. Maybe you should have stayed longer and gotten laid so you'd be less tense today."

In my defense, Jax keeps messing up the bridge. He came in hungover after only a few hours of sleep, so it's not completely on my poor mood alone that we're having to keep replaying the same song. "If we can't get it right next time, we'll move on to a new one," I offer, not addressing his other comment.

My friend studies me for a long moment while I down half my water to relieve my sore throat. I don't say anything as he shakes his head and settles an arm on the back of the couch. "You've always been a good liar unless

something's bothering you. But I'm not going to beg you to tell me. I'm sure it has to do with that chick you helped last night."

Eyeing him, he grins knowingly. "Taz called me this morning. You know he's a gossip."

What a shithead. "That man gossips more than Jax does, and that asshole is practically a middle school girl. Did Eddie tell him?"

Zayne snorts over the accurate comparison. "That's a good way to describe Jax. Yeah, Eddie told him. Taz told me he thought it was cool you helped the girl out in her situation. Ed, too, since he decided to blabber on about what an upstanding citizen you are compared to some people he's encountered during tows. Must be because the Aussie in you."

"Situation," I spit, the word tasting sour in my mouth as I glare at the floor. Reaching into my pocket for a wild cherry-flavored Lifesavers, I glower at the candy and rip it out of its wrapper with more aggression than necessary. "Her situation is that she's wasting her money on the wrong type of shit instead of supporting herself. I get that addiction is a struggle, but that doesn't make it suck any less when you're taken advantage of." When I see him gape at me with those unblinking whiskey eyes women go fucking nuts over, I let my irritation out. "What?"

Sitting forward, he rests his elbows on his knees and turns his head toward me. "What exactly happened? You normally brush this sort of shit off. People use us all the time."

He's right. I've learned to handle the users that come and go. It's part of the lifestyle since I made a name for myself. But when you're the giver, you need to set limits because the takers never will.

"She brought drugs into my house, mate. You know I can't have that around me. Last time it happened I nearly relapsed."

"But you didn't," he reminds me firmly, knowing the low moment I'm referring to. It was at his party, so I should have known what I was walking into—drugs, alcohol, and live porn. His get-togethers are notorious for stunts like that, even if he doesn't always engage in the activities himself. And I know it's because of me.

All the guys vowed not to have anything that could trigger me on the tour bus, but I knew that the stops we'd made at hotels were when they'd use whatever drug was given to them in their respective rooms. Coke was their go-to like mine was and it's because I got them hooked in the first place.

I promised Mum and Chase that any time I came close to using again, I'd tell them first. And the night of the party in question, I was shaking so bad from watching the powder disappear as partygoers snorted it that I had to excuse myself and call home at almost 4a.m. before I did something stupid.

Mum was sleeping but answered in full alarm, talking me down from relapse, and Chase picked me up because I was in no mindset to drive. Family means everything to me, and I know putting myself in the position of near death to get bombed isn't worth risking their sanity. Hearing Mum's tear-stricken plea to get clean before she had to see paramedics rush me to the hospital, or worse, was more than enough for me to say *I'm done*.

"Bro." Zayne punches my arm, brows drawn as he sees me come back from the train of thought that I wandered in. "Are you sure it was what you thought it was? Because Taz—"

"Don't you think I know what I saw? I've been there before, Zayne."

He raises his hands at my harsh tone. "I know. Shit. I'm just saying. Taz's younger brother, you know the mechanic at the garage, says he felt for this chick because he knows what it's like to have health issues. I mean the girl is basically living in her car because she can't afford anything right now on top of her medicine. That's got to suck for her."

I blink in confusion, having no clue what he's talking about.

Zayne senses the need to explain. "You know my mom has rheumatoid arthritis, right?" I nod slowly, unsure of where this is heading since he's not that close to his mother. He'd been put in temporary foster care when his parents went through some shit and ended up going from home to home for a lot longer than expected before his family got him back. Not that he'll admit it, but he still holds onto that despite helping his family out with whatever they need, his mother's medicine and treatment plans included. "Well, she's gone through the ringer trying to figure out the best kind of medicine to take. The pills she took didn't work, so they put her on injections."

"I thought you said your mum had to go into a clinic and get some sort of treatment?"

He sighs. "She does *now*. But they don't put people on that right away. They work up to it. Just shut up for a second and hear me out. Taz's brother, Mikey, and this girl—don't worry, they wouldn't give me her name because Taz has *some* confidentiality for his business—have to deal with treatment

that cost a shit ton of money. One time I remember Mikey saying the medicine he needs can cost over \$10,000 or some shit without insurance and he needs that to live. I mean, his brother makes sure he's covered since his diagnosis, but people like your girl don't always have it that easy if no one is up to bat for them. I had to watch my mom go through it too and it's rough."

My hand goes to my chin, scratching along the slight stubble growing on my jawline until I can gather my thoughts. A small amount of guilt builds in the bottom of my stomach over the possibility of what he's saying. "Why exactly are you telling me this?"

He gives me the same look that he shoots Jax when he says something stupid. "The guys at the garage found where your girl was storing her used needles and whatnot. Taz and Mikey recognized what they were right away because they have a needle collection just like it that they drop off at medical centers for waste. Experience, you know? And when she came in to collect her car Taz straight up asked if she'd been sleeping in it. Guess she wouldn't say much, but enough for them to give her some shelter pamphlets they keep around."

My shoulders straighten. If what he's saying is true, I kicked a homeless girl out of my house for using medicine she needs.

Nice going, asshole.

"Fuck." I drop my face into my open palms and grumble to myself.

Zayne pats the back of my shoulder. "You didn't know."

"She didn't look sick," I tell him.

"Does my mom?"

Well... "Not really."

He gives me a pointed look. "Did she look like a user? You'd know the signs. We both would."

I curse again after thinking about it, standing and gripping the back of my neck. The guys all look at me with curiosity as I head toward the door. "Let's stop for the day. We can figure out another time to come back."

There's a distant, "Thank fuck," from Jax followed by a relieved sound escaping Manning who was starting to get red-faced when I'd cut us off to redo the end.

It's Zayne who asks, "You going to be good? I could come with. Emotional support."

I shake my head, feeling like scum of the earth as I pull the door open. “I need to fix this mess myself, but cheers.”

They all wave me off as I snatch my keys from my pocket and head toward my car.

Rylee tried to explain this morning, but I wouldn’t give her the time of day. Guilt crashes into me even though my reaction is semi justifiable. I’ve been burned by people who try getting away with things because I show them even the slightest attention.

That’s an excuse, my conscience says. And I refuse to think about why I have the urge to make it up to her.

I pull around the back of Eastside Garage where I’ll most likely be left alone. There’s an employee-only entrance Zayne told me to use so any customers up front waiting for their cars to be finished won’t see me enter.

Taz’s office is in the furthest corner in the shop area, right where my first mate told me he’d be going over paperwork. I don’t know the man well, but I know he’s a workaholic with the determination to expand his business. Zayne used to tinker on a few junkers they kept here before his schedule became packed with Violet Wonders business. Sometimes I even wonder if he regrets agreeing to get back together with us to tour again. I knew he was content being behind the scenes, which is another reason I think the public will be disappointed when they hear he won’t be going solo—something I asked when we were alone the other day point blank.

His exact words were, “*Don’t be a fucking idiot.*”

“Hey, Garrick.” Taz takes my hand, grip tight as we shake before he gestures toward a stained green upholstered chair across from his desk. It looks like his guys have come in here after working on a few cars to sit down and chat with him, but I couldn’t care less.

Taking a seat, I drape an ankle over my opposite knee. “Rylee already took her car,” I state, needing confirmation anyway.

He nods. “Bright and early. Looked a little off, but we all have those days.”

“Off?”

Taz leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “You know the situation. Most people who have to take residence in their vehicles have a

reason to. But if there's anyone who can manage to pull their self together, it's her. Headstrong. I can tell. It's in her eyes."

Nodding slowly, I sit back in the chair. I guess it isn't just me she's mesmerized with one look. "I need to know where she went. I might have made a mistake."

His brows raise. "What kind of mistake? She do something she wouldn't have?"

"No, nothing like that." I glance around the room. There's a corkboard with a few different business cards, advertisements, and pamphlets hanging on it. "You told Zayne you gave her information on a homeless shelter, right? Do you think she'll go there?"

There's hesitation on his face that doesn't make me feel confident. "Can't be sure. She seems stubborn, so I suppose it'll depend how desperate she gets."

I don't like the sound of that. "How many times have you come across situations like this?"

"Here? A lot. California isn't a cheap place to live, especially not where the celebrities are. People think they can move here for a shot at stardom, and then learn real quick it doesn't always work out right away, if ever."

California has the biggest homeless population in this country, a fact I never thought of much until I brought Rylee home and Googled it out of curiosity.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I thumb my lids. "How dangerous is it to be sleeping in your car? Anything can happen out there."

"Can I ask why you want to know? I mean, anyone Zayne vouches for must be a decent person, but I can't help but wonder why you're so invested in this girl. I didn't think you knew her."

His curiosity isn't surprising, but not even I can explain it properly. "Guilt mostly," I admit, clearing my throat. "There was a misunderstanding. Or I think there was. I'd like a chance to apologize if I can."

"You're already paying for her car repairs and the towing," he points out. "That's more than most people would do, especially in your position. What more do you want to do for her?"

A small smile curls up my lips. "You have a girlfriend? Wife? Significant other?"

He gives me a slow nod, curiosity laced in the motion. "Wife."

“Do you do the bare minimum when you fuck up instead of finding ways to apologize to her?”

Taz winces. “She’d have my balls if I didn’t make an effort.”

I snort. “Exactly. I mean, Rylee and I aren’t anything special. But that doesn’t mean I don’t owe her an apology for being an asshole. At least I can own up to that.”

He considers that for a moment, watching me carefully. There’s something about his pointed gaze that I force myself to acknowledge. I don’t look away or break contact, and that seems to gain his respect. Dad taught me the power of eye contact when I was younger, saying that people will see your true motives if you let them look into your eyes for even a second.

Whatever Taz sees must be worth giving me what I ask for. “If she winds up at a shelter, it’ll be the woman’s one over on Weller Ave by the old strip mall. Won’t promise you that she’ll pop up, but it’s a start.”

I stand. “Thank you.”

“Garrick?” he calls out. Stopping at the door, I turn to him. “Who do I contact about the bill?”

Smirking, I pull out my phone and give him the number to my manager, Michael, before heading out of his office. A few mechanics notice me and stop what they’re doing. One waves, others gape. It never ceases to amaze people when I show up places. I’m not the most personable or best liked guy like Zayne is. I tell it how it is, even if my bluntness gets me into trouble, and I have a reputation that I can’t seem to change no matter how hard I try.

Some people will always see me as the stuck-up rich rocker who always gets his way.

But something tells me Rylee is going to give me a run for my money.

I've worked inside worse places than the rundown McDonalds currently offering me spotty Wi-Fi. I ordered one of their sad, wilting salads and a water despite the judgmental look I received from the teen behind the counter because I felt guilty for taking up a seat without ordering much. Though it doesn't look like many other people mind doing the same without handing over cash for crappy food.

Perched at a table in the farthest corner from the customers coming in and out, I set up my sluggish laptop that my parents bought for me as a high school graduation present and search through the latest tabloids online. One of my biggest competitors posted pictures of Garrick rushing out of the recording studio where Violet Wonders is working on their next studio album. It was from days ago—the same day I was sent packing from the subject's house.

Studying the grainy image, I realize he's wearing the same clothes as that morning too. But instead of the anger I'd seen plastered on his face when he told me to leave, there's shame. What could a man like Garrick have to be ashamed of?

Everything else posted about him lately is simply speculation. Sources that claim one thing or another about the Australian singer, and photos from the band's world tour this year. Nothing important is given away, and I'm not sure if I should be grateful or disappointed. After what happened earlier this week, I doubt any "in" Sarina thinks I have with the band will work. Garrick didn't even recognize me from my previous involvement with

Zayne, and I highly doubt Zayne will speak to me about what the media outlets are saying. Not that I blame either of them.

Blowing a piece of fallen hair out of my face, I remember the way his fingertips felt against my flushed skin when he moved hair behind my ear. Something as simple as that shouldn't have gotten a rise out of me, so I blame the lack of male attention I've gotten over the past few years. My last boyfriend was hardly serious, lasting only a few months, and the farthest we'd gone was him grinding on me one night in bed while touching my boobs.

I drop my head down and let my hair waterfall around me. "Better luck next time," I tell myself, nibbling my bottom lip.

I'm about to close my computer and throw away the remainder of my uneaten meal when I see a message pop up from Moffie.

IceQween:

Have you found a new place yet?

Frowning at the question, I debate on pretending like I didn't see it to avoid hurting her feelings. It'd be easier than explaining why I haven't even looked yet. As far as Moffie and my family know, I have steady work. The last article I got paid big for was a piece on some up-and-coming star who was caught coming out of a hotel room of a married record producer. It wouldn't have been that scandalous if she hadn't been 18 and he hadn't been one of the judges of the singing competition she won.

The article paid a lot because of the heat it got, leaving her to be stripped of the first-place title when the show's team felt it wasn't rightly earned. Last I heard, the runner up got everything—the trophy, title, and shiny record deal. And I got more opportunities to break similar stories for fast cash.

IceQween:

I know you're on, Rylee. DON'T IGNORE ME!

Well, there goes that idea.

CannonIsMine95:

I'm still looking

I cringe at the lie, feeling bad as I hit the enter key and watch it turn to read before the bubbles appear on the screen she as types a reply.

IceQween:

I found some that could work for you. I'll send links!

Moffie is ten times more organized than I am and always on top of things. I tend to wait last minute, and it irritates her. But how am I going to explain the places she finds won't work no matter how good of a deal they are?

Instead of being honest, I take a different approach before bailing as quickly as possible.

CannonIsMine95:

Thanks, Moff. Gotta go. Ttyl!

I'm thankful she didn't call. She's most likely in her classroom right now, using her work computer as the kids work on something. If she heard my voice, she would know in an instant that things aren't okay and demand the truth.

Packing up my things, I pull out the keys and see the Women's United Homeless Shelter pamphlet fall onto the floor. I've managed to avoid the inevitable for this long, but I'm starting to realize my other options are limited.

Go back to the east coast.

Or go to this shelter.

It isn't like it'd be the end of the world either way, but if I decided to walk into Women's United I'd feel like a fraud. I have somewhere to go, even if it's clear across the country. My parents would welcome me with open arms and help me figure things out with sound reasoning, but then I'd feel like a failure.

Which is worse?

Realistically, I know the answer. Failure is subjective—there are always other opportunities out there I can explore. My parents believe in optimism and positive thinking and used to say that failure wasn't the opposite of success but part of the journey. My mindset has always been different than theirs, though. I'd like to think I'm a glass half full type of person, but deep down I know I'm really the one who accidentally drops the glass and watches the contents empty onto the floor, making the point moot.

I'm walking to the car when I notice the sun setting already. I hadn't realized I'd been working so late.

Back home, I used to watch the sun go down through my bay window where Dad built me a writing nook. I wasn't big on reading even though both my parents are big book nerds, but I'd always bring my journal or

laptop to the window and write whatever was on my mind while the daylight faded.

I miss the simplicity of childhood. Back then, the only thing I had to worry about was getting homework done on time and being home before dinner so I wouldn't be given extra chores or grounded. Now, life is constantly throwing curve balls at my face waiting to see if I'll hit it or strike out.

Everyone takes advantage of the things they have because none of us realize how easily it can all be taken away. The innocence, ignorance—everything that makes life seem so peaceful is gone in a flash when reality takes a hold of you. And its claws are currently inches deep into me, refusing to let go.

During my lost thoughts of past naivety, I find myself pulling up to curb outside the homeless shelter. I've driven by it twice since getting the address and always find myself driving away in the end, talking myself out of it.

Another night in the car wouldn't hurt.

Other people need it more than me.

I have other options.

My hands grip the steering wheel, squeezing and twisting until an unruly sound comes from the motion. Putting the car in park, I stare at the front doors. The building is welcoming—well kempt with a bright yellow door and trimmed grass. Their white sign on the front lawn is lit up with lights surrounding it so anyone can see it during the nighttime, with the OPEN 24/7 in clear bold letters.

Swallowing, I turn off my car, examine the messy contents thrown about it, and grab my bag from the passenger seat.

"You can do this," I tell myself with a nod of the head before getting out and locking the vehicle. I don't have many valuable things, mostly sentimental pieces given to me by Grandpa Al and Grandma Birdie that made the move to Cali, but nothing anyone would want to take if they had the opportunity. Even my parents said some of the stuff is junk, but it's my treasure simply because of who it once belonged to. "One night, Rylee. One night and you can figure out what to do in the morning."

I'm halfway to the door when I hear a familiar accented voice ask, "Do you always talk to yourself?"

Yelping, I spin and swing my bag around in defense. It smacks the tall, lean body standing behind me and the person in question stumbles back from the unexpected blow.

“Hell, sweetheart.” Garrick steadies himself while I stare wide-eyed at him and try calming my erratic heartbeat. One of my palms flattens against my chest and I feel the hammering slowly start to go back to normal. “What is in that thing? It packs a punch.”

I shake my head in disbelief at the six-foot-something singer. “What are you doing here lingering by a homeless shelter?” Readjusting my bag over my shoulder, I take a deep breath and exhale to calm down. “Do you volunteer here or something?”

It’d be a cruel joke fate is playing on me if I get sent to the one place Garrick Matthews volunteers.

The small snort that comes from him tells me I’m way off. “No. Though, I’m sure my management team would love to set something like that up to make me look good. Maybe I’ll bring it up to Michael when I get home.”

Not able to stop myself, I roll my eyes. “I think the media will probably have a way to negatively spin *the* Garrick Matthews volunteering at a women’s homeless shelter out of all the places this side of California has.”

The grin on his face stretches, showing two identical dimples and perfectly straight white teeth. It’s only then I realize the banter we’re having is one of old buddies. Our last interaction surfaces, and an invisible fist grabs my heart and crushes it, reminding me to stop the conversation.

Sensing the mood change, he steps toward me. “I’ve come here every night for the past week, actually.”

I gape. “Why?”

Now *his* eyes roll like I asked if the chicken came before the egg. “Because of you. I need to apologize for what happened. I feel like a complete dick for what I said.”

The similar sense of discomfort coats my skin as I evade his eyes by staring down at the tips of my shoes.

Suddenly, a pair of brown leather boots come into my line of vision. Hesitantly, I shift my gaze upward from the expensive looking footwear until I meet his eyes. “I’m sorry, Rylee. I jumped to conclusions and I may have been wrong.”

May have. “You still think I was doing drugs in your house,” I state, refusing to let the hurt bombard my tone.

“In my defense,” he replies casually, “I don’t know anything other than your first name, that you sleep in your car, and that you most likely have some sort of medical condition. And yes, the garage owner told me. Well, Zayne told me first but he’s friends with Taz, which is how I know Ta—” He winces at his rambling. “It doesn’t matter. What I’m trying to say is that I don’t know you, but that doesn’t mean I should have assumed the worst. For that, I’m sorry.”

Blinking at his flustered apology, I absorb his words slowly. He didn’t have to say any of that or track me down, but he did both.

My throat tightens at the emotion welling inside it. “I appreciate that.” The words get stuck, causing me to clear my throat. “But you didn’t have to find me. It was an honest mistake. Like you said, you don’t know me.”

There’s a brief pause between us that makes me uncomfortable, so I take a step back to get some air. His presence is overwhelming, and I can’t figure out if it’s in a good or bad way. When someone like Garrick Matthews pays you any attention, those blue eyes find ways to lock you in and make it hard to focus.

It’s when he softly says, “You don’t have to go in there” that has my breath catching. His head tilts, eyes warm yet demanding as they settle on me like he’s trying to will me to agree.

Maybe that works on some people, but not me. Not when I feel like I’ve exhausted all of my other options at this point, short of dialing my parents and telling the truth.

Feet feeling pinned to the ground, I let my shoulders drop a fraction. “We both know I do.”

For a moment, Garrick looks over his shoulder at something. It gives me time to study him a little better and I can see why he’s graced just about every magazine cover there is in existence. He’s won Sexiest Man Alive twice, and always has more features than his bandmates when Violet Wonders gets interviewed. Something tells me it’s the sharp jaw and patrician nose paired with those eyes that can make anyone turn stupid in a heartbeat. He’s a heartthrob whether he wants to be or not, molded to be everybody’s weakness.

When his focus turns back to me, he shakes his head. “I’ve got the room, and with my schedule, I won’t be around too much to bother you. But

there'd need to be ground rules."

Is he...? "I can't—"

"Before you say no," he cuts me off, "at least come get some dinner with me. I'm hungry and I do my best talking when my stomach is full. One dinner, Rylee. That's all I'm asking."

"But why?" My brass question has him arching his eyebrows. If I had money to spare, I'd bet not many people have questioned him. "You have no idea who I am, so there's no reason for you to waste your time to help me. I'm nowhere near your level of fame or wealth. In fact, we're exact opposites. It doesn't make any sense why you'd take me on like a charity case when you can be focused on anything else."

Saying it out loud only makes me more doubtful of his motives. It isn't like a kind celebrity is unheard of. You hear about those types of good-natured human interest pieces surrounding stars all the time, but it's almost always attached to an ulterior motive. Very few people in this industry are genuine.

"I never want to hear you call yourself a charity case again," he informs me, voice low like the not untrue label offends him. "I used to hear people call my mother that growing up. It's common knowledge by now that I started from nothing, from the very bottom. Food stamps. Near homelessness. I was helpless to do shit and my mother was prideful. I still hate when people think getting help means they're worth nothing more than somebody else's charity."

I blush over his explanation, feeling bad that I struck a nerve when he means well. But I don't get a chance to apologize before he tells me, "It's your eyes."

Instinctively, my fingertips flutter to the bags I know are under them from the bad sleep I've gotten over the past couple of weeks.

His hands go into the pockets of his jeans, ones that fit his long legs a little too well, as he lifts his shoulders. "You know how people say that the eyes are the mirror to the soul?"

I nod once.

"Well, your eyes are kind. Sad, but kind. Genuine. And...hopeful. You remind me of some of my favorite people in life, and that makes it hard for me to miss an opportunity."

A dry, doubtful laugh bubbles past my lips as I cross my arms over my chest. "And what opportunity is that?"

There's not one moment of hesitation from him. "To help you."

I stare.

He stares back.

I let out a breath.

He gestures behind him. "Dinner. Everyone needs food, and I'll buy. Hear me out, Rylee. If you don't like anything I have to say, then you can come here and do things on your own. But I'm more than willing to help in any way I can."

It's hard to think when he's watching me with a close eye, speculating what my answer will be. I want to tell him no because I'm stubborn—to find some way to back out of what he's willing to do.

"I don't want to be an 'opportunity' to you either," I inform him.

"Everybody is an opportunity to somebody else," he counters confidently. "The difference is how you let the moment unfold. I'm not here to use you for anything, but I am offering *you* that curtesy."

Pressing my lips together, I turn to face the building again and study the distant silhouettes of people inside. If I decide to walk away from Garrick, then I'd be walking into a warm place to sleep, somewhere to eat free food, and feel less embarrassed than if I walked away with the singer who's waiting for an answer.

So even I'm surprised when I say, "One meal, that's it."

And even as I say it, the conviction in my tone laughs at me like it can taste the lie.

The tongs of the fork scrape against the ceramic plate as I move around the vegetables. I know the man sitting across from me is staring, but I don't feel like paying him any attention.

After a while of listening to the soft, classical music playing from somewhere in the room, and the soft-spoken chatter of other customers around us, I stab one of the carrots and say, "You should eat before that gets cold."

His steak smells amazing, but it was also the priciest thing on the menu. I've never liked taking advantage of others when they've offered to pay, even if they insist. Next to the antipasto salad, this chicken dish was the next cheapest item.

Suddenly, my plate is pulled away from me and a new one appears. The juicy meat I was eyeballing as soon as the waiter dropped it in front of Garrick is now taunting me mere inches from my face.

I have no option but to look at him for the first time since a waiter dressed in fancy garb seated us. “Why did you do that? I wasn’t done eating —”

“You ate two carrots, love. And you looked absolutely miserable doing it.” He picks up his fork and knife and starts cutting the seasoned chicken breast I ordered. “You were eyeing my steak like I eye most women. I was a little jealous to be honest. First time I’ve ever gotten green over a slab of meat.”

My lips flatten. “Stop doing that. Your charm isn’t going to work on me.” *Lie*. “And I agreed to dinner so we could talk but you’ve barely said anything.”

Half his lips curl upward. “Conversations usually work both ways, you know. Unless you’re crazy, then I suppose you only need one person.”

“*You’re* the one who suggested we get something to eat and talk. This is your proposal.”

His fork halts halfway to his mouth before he lowers it. “And *you’re* the one who doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

I start to say something but resign to the fact he’s right. Sinking into my chair I blow out a reluctant breath. “Fair point.”

Garrick chuckles and sets down his utensils. “I’ll put it bluntly. I have a house with plenty of room for you to crash in until you’re back on your feet. But there are things I need to know before we make that commitment.”

Commitment. The word makes me nibble the inside of my cheek. How many times had I scared off potential boyfriends with that word? Hearing it from the man sitting across from me does things to me that I’d rather not think about.

Swallowing past the ball of nerves in my throat, I nod. “Okay...”

“Do you do drugs?”

Our waiter comes back in that very instant to refill my water, one brow quirked as if he’s also waiting for an answer. It isn’t until he leaves that I train my eyes at the man who asked the question. “No. Not unless you count my methotrexate and other prescriptions I have to take every day.”

He taps a finger against the table as he studies me like those blue orbs are lie detectors. “Would you take a drug test?”

It's a bad time to take a sip of my water because I choke on it as I hear his inquiry. In a hoarse voice, I blurt, "You don't believe me?"

He blinks.

Blotting my chin with a napkin to wipe up the water that escaped, I clear my throat. "I... If you really want me to, then yes."

"It's nothing personal," he tells me. Seriousness crosses his face, any trace of flirtation and playfulness from before is now gone. "When you're a recovering addict, anything can trigger you. It doesn't matter how long you've been clean. It takes one bad decision to mess up any progress you've made. I refuse to do that to myself and to the people closest to me."

I get it. He needs to be sure I won't screw up his sobriety if we both agree to be temporary roommates. "Okay. I'll do a drug test."

There's a moment of pause between us before he nods once. "You'll need to try finding a job."

Before I can stop myself, I wince. "Well, I actually have one." I focus on cutting up the steak and stabbing a piece with my fork. "It doesn't pay very well is all. I've been looking for extra work here and there, but nothing has caught my eye."

"Any insurance?" he randomly asks.

My shoulders slump at one of the biggest hurdles I've dealt with. "Nope."

"You need a new job then."

I scoff, glancing up at him. "It's not that easy. This place is saturated. Maybe if I wanted to be a fast-food worker or waitress I could find something, but that isn't what I want to do."

"Then what do you want to do?"

Stalling, I take a bite of my dinner and look around the restaurant he brought me to. It's one of those fancy ones that has separate dining rooms. The one we're in is spread out, more secluded, and I have a feeling he paid extra for the isolation.

"Rylee."

Chewing with my mouth half-full I explain, "I don't want my food to get cold."

His eyes narrow knowingly, but he starts eating too. Even I know better than to believe he'll let it go just like that. "What do you do?"

"I'm a writer." I barely hear my own voice, but the star across from me must have super-sonic hearing.

“Like a screenwriter?”

I slowly shake my head.

“Books?”

My bottom lip is sucked into my mouth by my top two teeth.

He sighs. “Rylee, talk to me.”

I set down my fork and sit back in the chair until our eyes are locked. There’s no way he’s going to be okay with what I’m going to say, so I brace myself. “The reason this won’t work out is because I write for the L.A. Free Press. I get paid per article that they publish, and there’s a lot of competition in the tabloid world, as you know.”

I’m not surprised to be met by silence.

“Listen, I appreciate what you wanted to do for me. It’s more than anyone would have even considered, but—”

“Do you feel bad?” he cuts me off.

I blink a few times. “Excuse me?”

He regards me with a causal demeanor, and I don’t understand why he’s being so levelheaded. “Do you feel bad about what you write? What they publish?”

“I...” I swallow my words, considering the answer I give him for a few moments. “Yes. Well, maybe like 90% of the time I do.”

His head cocks. “Why do you do it?”

“It’s money.”

“At what cost?”

What does that even mean?

“I’m pretty good at reading people, Rylee. You seem like the type of person with strong morals. So why have a career that breaks your internal code so often.”

Again, I’m speechless, unable to conjure a better answer other than the financial benefits. It’s a job that used to keep a roof over my head, food in my stomach, and gas in my car. Even if I struggled with the outcome of what I wrote, it was something that supported me.

“It’s not all bad,” is what I come up with, but my answer is weak at best.

He shakes his head, an empty smile tilting the corners of his lips. Eating in contemplation with his eyes on his plate, I can’t help but wonder what’s going through his mind.

I’m half tempted to grab my bag and leave before he can tell me to, but I suck it up and wait it out instead. He told me I could go at any time, but

something is urging me to stay.

He gestures toward my food. “You need to eat something.”

I stare.

His brows pinch. “You clearly have a thing against eating cold food, so sitting there staring at me—as flattering as it is—won’t do you much good.”

I can’t help but shake my head, fighting the heat that wants to settle into my cheeks. “I don’t understand you. I just told you I work for the kind of people who have gone after you and your band before. Why aren’t you angry?”

“Do you want me to be?” he returns, popping a piece of chicken into his mouth. A shoulder lifts, and once he swallows he says, “I’ll let you in on a little secret of mine, love. Anger gets you nowhere. It takes up too much room inside a person—blocks their creativity and ability to love something instead. Being angry isn’t worth it.”

Letting that soak in, I play around with the steak until I find myself nodding along in agreement and taking another bite.

“Did you write about Violet Wonders?”

A few second pass, my chewing slow and calculated as I gather some courage. Suddenly, the meat doesn’t taste so good. “No.” I look at him through my lashes, conscience heavy. “I wrote about Zayne though.”

He stops eating, his plate half-empty as he studies me rather than what’s left of his meal like he was doing before. This time, I feel his eyes on me like fire licking the surface of my skin. It doesn’t burn, but it’s there to remind me that anything can happen if I move in even the tiniest way.

The fork in his hand slowly gets placed on the table. “We have met before, haven’t we?”

My nostrils twitch as an indescribable feeling fills my chest. “Once.”

“Those eyes...”

Our one interaction was over in a blink, but I still remember the way he watched me when Zayne brought me into that club they were hanging out at. I’d had my doubts about going through with the story, especially when I saw how Garrick Matthews was watching me with so much interest I almost believed he liked me. But I needed the money more than I needed the boy-bander’s attention, and he wasn’t who I was there with anyway.

“Zayne introduced us a few years ago. I look different now, but—” I cut myself off, taking a deep breath and getting to the point. “I was tight on

money and my boss kept pressuring me to get a story. It's an excuse, one that I'm not proud of, but I was desperate."

His jaw ticks, but he doesn't say anything. I'm not sure if I like his silence, but I brought it on myself.

"I took some photos during one of the get togethers you guys were having. He invited me and I saw an opportunity." Eyes lowering, I feel the atmosphere shift with the realization of what photos I'm referring to. "I'm sorry for what I did but those pictures... The story helped me get by. They got me out of a tough spot for a while."

The only sound around us is the clattering of plates and utensils, and the low murmurs of other conversations. Our waiter is stationed on standby close enough where I'm sure he's getting an earful.

It takes a few awkward moments before he finally decides to speak. "You're the one who leaked pictures of him with the drugs, aren't you?"

I close my eyes.

Take a deep breath.

Then nod.

There's a quiet curse that escapes him before I make myself look up. He's scraping a hand through his thick hair, looking confused and contemplative.

"It was wrong of me," I repeat. "But you don't understand. Sometimes we have to do bad things to make ends meet. That's what I did."

"You could have found another story."

I lick my lips. "You're right. But instead, I chose the one that I knew would make me money. The one that would pay the rent and help me buy food for myself and pay for my medicine. Does that make me horrible? Probably. But when was the last time you struggled to afford things you needed to survive? Or when you had to make a tough decision even if it impacted your moral beliefs because it was that or feeling half-human and in need of some relief because you're sick? You have the money and the means because you're Garrick Matthews. Just like Zayne is...Zayne. People like you have the chance to get better because you have the resources. I'm not trying to justify what I did or make it seem right. It wasn't. But at least try to understand my perspective."

His gaze moves over my face, paying attention to every detail available to him—my thin, expressionless lips, my button nose, and how my right eye

is slightly bigger than my left one. I'm nothing like the women he's involved himself with, but I'm not self-conscious over it.

He lifts a hand, eyes going to the wait staff until our waiter tips his head once when Garrick says, "Check please."

My heart drops, but I accept defeat. He may have not started with money, but his life is saturated with it now. Why would he want to put himself in my shoes?

Once he gets the check, the waiter also brings over two boxes for us. I don't dare touch mine, feeling bad about taking anything from Garrick after he slides some cash into the folder before passing it back to the server.

"Come on," Garrick tells me, pointing toward the Styrofoam box. "Put your food in that and let's go."

I blink. "What?"

It's obvious that he's upset, but he doesn't let it show in his tone or expression as he scrapes his chair back to stand. "The money I've earned has been with the memory of what it was like to struggle. I don't want to go back to that place because I'll never forget what it was like. For me. For Chase. For my mum."

There's a pause.

"I'm rich, Rylee. Not heartless."

I see my brother's shirt before I notice the rest of his get-up as I pour my shake into a glass. It's hard to control the amusement on my face, so I take a sip of my drink to hide the smile.

"Did you tell Mom that you moved a girl in with you yet?" he asks, walking over to the drawer he hides Swedish Fish in and digging some out.

It's hard to concentrate on his question when I eye the sexy Velma from *Scooby Doo* plastered on his shirt with a quote next to it that reads *I like my women nerdy, curvy, and dirty*. I can't help but snort. He's wearing his thick rimmed black glasses that amplifies his nerdiness even though I'm 99% positive he doesn't even need them to begin with, and a pair of black and white checkered skinny jeans. "What are you wearing? You look like you did when we let you dress you as a child."

He ignores me. "Did you tell her?"

"Why would I? It's no different than one of the guys staying here. Zayne has crashed here for a while. So has Calder." Giving him another once-over, I can't help but bust his balls. "Seriously, though. Are you about to film a porno where some desperate housewife needs an IT guy? Maybe needs her router unplugged and plugged back in? Someone to check her code?"

He doesn't find me funny. Lowering his palm full of lollies, he glowers. "Are you going to keep using your sarcasm as a way to mask the fact you're actually pissed off? Because if you are, I'm going back over to Mom's, so I don't have to be the butt of your jokes all the time."

Frowning, I realize he's being serious when the annoyance shines in his dark brown eyes and by means of the barely-there accent. "I didn't mean it literally, Chase. I just like messing with you. And since when do you have a degree in psychology? I'm not masking anything."

"You can't bullshit me. I know you too well. Ever since you brought Rylee home you've been in a bad mood. You want to help her, but you're not talking to her. You're obviously avoiding each other and it's awkward as hell around here, so what's going on?"

Staring at my drink, I stifle a sigh. He does know me better than most people—better than Mum, even. The only person who has him beat is Zayne, and that's a close call. "Not sure what to say to her, man. That's all. I'm sorry if I've made things weird for you here. I want you to be comfortable."

My little brother glances away, then pulls out one of the purple stools from under the island and sits. "There was something I wanted to run by you, actually. I haven't brought it up to Mom yet..."

It's not often he asks for my advice, mostly because I tell him what I think anyway without him wanting my opinion. I sit across from him, pulling my shake in front of me. "It must be serious if you're talking to me about it before her."

We're both close to our mother. She's been the constant rock in our lives, supporting and encouraging us in any way she can. Without her, I'm not sure where either of us would be.

He shifts, elbows resting on the edge of the white granite countertop and pushes his glasses up his nose. "I'm thinking about getting my own place. It's about time I get out of Mom's basement and your house and find something just for me."

Surprise renders me speechless. He's never talked about his interest in moving, but it shouldn't shock me that he wants to. He has the money to do what he wants with, and he's careful about how he spends it like Mum taught us to be. I probably scared him when I nearly drained my account on drugs back when I used. Not that I've told him, but he inspired me to be better. To save, to be frugal, and cautious with my spending.

Gripping the glass, I say, "Shit, man. That's great. If that's what you want to do, you know I have your back. I know some great realtors around the area that won't trick you into spending more money for shit places."

He nods, almost mindlessly. Knee bouncing, he asks, “Do you think Mom will be upset?”

That’s what he’s worried about? “Mate, you’re 21. If you went to college, you would have been out of the house long before now. You have the money, you’re responsible, there’s no reason Mum would be upset. Hell, you’ve had a better head on your shoulders than I have, and she trusts me out in the world.”

Mum may even be happy to be an empty nester, not that she’d ever admit it. And I’m not about to shatter his bubble. “I think she’ll be fine, Chase. You know she’s always been in our corner. If this is what you want, she’ll do what she can to help. She’d be a good person to go house shopping with.”

He considers it, then nods. “You’re right. And I’m sure you’ll be happier having your space back.”

I refrain from making a smartass comment that might upset him. If he’s not here, one of the guys will be. My house hasn’t been *just* my space since I signed my name on the dotted line. As soon as Sasha, my interior designer, furnished it, everyone showed up and stuck around to celebrate it being my first real home since rehab. It’s been the only property I own that feels like mine, something to settle and grow in. The entire first floor is modern-rustic—open, light, wood, and white accents with pops of color in the furniture and art, but with pieces that remind me of the split-level colonial I grew up in with Mum and Chase before Violet Wonders was even a thought in the back of my mind. On the outside, people think it’s another celebrity home with money to burn. With little to see, there’s less attention from the press. I don’t mind the boring assumptions people make from the outward appearances because I know the second I step inside I’m home.

The feeling only intensifies when I see friends and family linger, making themselves comfortable and admiring the photographs from over the years and the hard work put in to bring me where I am. Having my brother here has reminded me how badly I want to fill the space, how much I enjoy having people here, but I’ll never admit that to him. Not when he wants his own space that I hope he experiences the same feeling in. “You know I like having you around, but if this is what you want to do then I’ll support you no matter what.”

Chase is quiet as he glances down at his folded hands, and I wonder if there’s something else on his mind. But if he wants me to know, he’ll tell

me in his own time. “Thanks, G.”

I drum my fingers against the edge of the counter. “Want to play something on the Xbox?”

His eyes snap upward. “You have time?”

I’m not supposed to meet the guys until tomorrow for another recording session, something I negotiated to move back when Rylee agreed to stay here. “Yeah. I think Zayne mentioned stopping by later, but I’m not sure. He’d probably play a round of Call of Duty even if he sucks at it.”

That makes my brother laugh. “He’s not very good at most of the games we challenge him to.”

I grin. “That’s why it’s so entertaining.”

We both snicker.

He checks his phone and frowns. “I can probably play a round now, but I actually have plans later.”

“Look at you, Mr. Popular. Work?”

He fidgets with his glasses. “Er...no.”

I cock my head. “Date?”

His shoulders lift. “Something like that.”

“Does Mum know you’re putting yourself out there again?” Not that it’s any of her business until Chase makes it, but she’s always been nosey about who’s in our lives.

Pushing himself up and shoving the stool back into place, he shoots me a wry grin. “If she doesn’t need to know about the girl you moved in here, then she doesn’t need to know about the girl I’ve been seeing.”

Touché. “Does that mean this is serious if you’re seeing the same someone more than once?”

Anyone who doesn’t know my brother wouldn’t notice the smallest tick he has when something bothers him. His right eyebrow twitches. But I notice every time because I’ve spent a lot of time helping raise him.

All he says is, “I’ll get the Xbox set up.”

I watch as his disappears from the room, my curiosity officially piqued. If he doesn’t tell me, I’m sure Mum will figure it out on her own. She could have been a private eye if she wanted to because she has eyes and ears everywhere.

I debate on going upstairs to see if Rylee wants something to eat since she hasn’t been downstairs yet. From what I read online she needs to have a routine eating schedule to take her medicine with. As soon we got back here

the night of our dinner, I locked myself in my room and Googled everything there was to know about her condition once she came clean about it.

Luckily, I keep everything well stocked in the kitchen, and for the most part it's all healthy. Chase doesn't think I know that he hides Captain Crunch in the back of the cupboard, but I've seen it. Same with the Swedish Fish he keeps tucked away that he's stopped trying to hide at this point.

Then again, I can't tease him. I've had a sweet tooth for as long as I can remember, and ever since I stopped using I've found myself craving some of my old childhood favorites like sugar is my fallback. When Dad sends care packages, he still includes Caramello Koalas because I'd always begged for them when I was little. I rarely share whatever I get with the guys when they see anything arrive from Dad, and only let Chase dig in because Mum would give me the eye if I hoarded it all myself.

But for whenever my stash is gone, I keep Lifesavers in my pocket to suck on. Or anywhere, for that matter. The guys tuck them away in the studio in case I ever run out, and the smartasses even made the poor stagehand on tour bring me wild cherry flavored ones every night, all picked out from the variety pack bag because nobody told the poor bastard that you could buy bags of only that flavor. He looked pale when I found a different flavor in the mix he'd sorted.

After a few moments of contemplation, I decide to bite the bullet. Being around Rylee is still off-putting knowing what she did, but I can't completely blame her. Zayne was the one drinking and doing drugs, and he was doing it publicly. Anyone could have snapped a picture and sold it for a decent amount that night. It just happened to be the girl I felt for that perpetrated the event.

And the more I think about what she said to me at the restaurant, the harder it is to stay upset with her. Anger has no place in my mind, especially when I was the one who supplied the drugs the night that picture was taken. Zayne had taken them off my hands and I was stupid enough to believe he'd get rid of them so nobody could use them the way I'd wanted to.

Rylee makes a strong point about people like me and the guys having the means to get the help we need if we want to. I'm just as guilty over what consequences followed that article, so holding a grudge is pointless.

I approach the cracked door of the room she's staying in. It's in a hallway offset by a few other guest bedrooms, a bathroom, and an open living area that doesn't see much use unless there's a party. I try keeping

people on the first floor if there's a gathering, but there are always a few people that linger if they get the opportunity. It's why I've stop hosting if I can help it, not wanting to lose control of what happens in the walls I've created as my sanctuary.

During the welcome home bash we had, I'd fought tooth and nail to have it anywhere else, but Zayne's newest house was under renovation, Jax's is too far out of town, and Manning and Cal's house doesn't have the kind of security needed for us to get together. Zayne promised he'd keep things regulated, but spent more time buried between random women's legs that night than helping me stop the plus-ones from roaming upstairs and nearly trying to break into my room.

Brushing off the irritation over how that played out, I focus on the woman currently on the other side of the wood door. She's been here two days now, and we've had barely any interaction. I told her where to sleep, where to leave her dirty laundry—which she insisted on cleaning herself after asking where the laundry room was—and to help herself to any food in the kitchen. Beyond that, we've stuck to our own spaces.

"...love you too. Bye." I knock and prop a hip against the doorjamb, crossing my arms on my chest as I watch her set the phone down on the mattress. She's made the bed almost as perfectly as the woman I hire to clean the house, and she's kept the room spotless like it usually is despite telling Yasmin, my housekeeper, she didn't need to clean it.

Rylee gives me an awkward smile. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself."

"Before you say anything about that being some kind of lover who could offer me a place to stay," she begins, making me cringe at the doubt she immediately thinks I have, "it was my best friend Moffie."

"Moffie?" Can't say I've heard that one before and California supplies some unique names with celebrities trying to outdo one another with the outrageous bullshit they slap on their offspring's birth certificates.

A nod. "We've known each other since we were little, but she lives across the country in New York."

New York. Huh. I never detected an accent from her, not eastern or western. Not like I do on Cal and Manning who are both from downstate near the Big Apple. "Is that where you're from then? I rather like the east coast. Too cold in the winter though, yeah?"

She shrugs, playing with the throw blanket resting on her lap. “You get used to it, but I don’t miss the brutal winters. We were more central, so we got a lot more snow and ice than other places.”

I gesture behind me. “Well, I was coming up to say you can get some food anytime you want. I know that’s important.”

She blinks, a small smile forming at the corners of her lips. “Food is important?”

I chuckle at myself. “Food and eating are generally important, but people with your circumstances shouldn’t break habit because I’ve made you feel uncomfortable. I read about it.”

I’m surprised when that almost-smile curls downward. “You haven’t made me uncomfortable. If anything, that’s what I’m doing to you. You’ve still offered me somewhere to sleep, and I appreciate it more than you could know. More than I’ve *let* you know.”

All I manage to do is tip my chin before glancing down the hallway. I’ve never taken well to serious conversations. After a few minutes, I clear my throat and scratch the side of my neck with one of my fingers. “Yes. Well then...” I step back. “Chase and I will be in the den if you need us. Get something to eat if you’d like.”

I don’t wait for her reply before I walk away, hands digging through my pockets to pull out a hard lolly and pop it out of its wrapper. When I find Chase waiting for me, I drop down next to him and accept the controller he offers me.

Without looking in my direction, he quietly asks, “Want to talk about it?”

And all I say is, “No.”

I’m not sure what time it is when I hear the creak of floorboards from footsteps that are too light to be my brother’s come from behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I notice Rylee creeping down the stairs in an oversized sweatshirt that goes half-way down her sweatpants-clad thighs and hides the soft curves that I’ve noticed one too many times in the short time she’s stayed here.

She startles when she sees the flicker of the TV screen light up the otherwise dark room with me sitting in front of it. “I didn’t know you were up.”

One of her hands grips the staircase railing like she's contemplating going back up, but she remains still.

"Couldn't sleep so I figured I'd watch something. This infomercial suddenly makes me want to buy an air fryer."

Slowly, her eyes trail to the screen. "I've always wanted one of those."

I pat the couch. "Come have a watch."

Her hesitation doesn't surprise me, so I shrug and turn back to the commercial like it doesn't bother me. In reality, her presence makes me hyperaware of everything. Chase snorted when Rylee walked downstairs yesterday after I went to her room and saw me smooth my hair down like it mattered what she thought of its naturally unruly waves. I elbowed him, he elbowed me back, but didn't say a word.

"You don't have to join me," I relent casually. "Just thought you might not be able to sleep either. What better way to exhaust yourself than watching people try to sell you mundane things you don't need?"

"I don't know. It sounds like that woman is close to selling you on the Ninja air fryer."

She's got me there. "Don't tell anyone or I'll deny it, but I ordered a Snuggie once because of these commercials. It's in my closet."

Rylee stops at the end of the couch, closer than I expected her to get. "Did you really? Not even I have one of those and I'm always freezing."

I gesture toward her outfit. "I can see that. Do you always sleep in that? It looks...cozy."

Oddly, she can pull it off. I've seen many women of all shapes and sizes and enjoyed exploring just about every body type offered to me, and I've never really cared about what they wore because I was more focused on what was underneath. But Rylee looks cute in the too-big clothes hanging off her body, and it's almost endearing to see her fidget.

Tugging on the sweatshirt, she shifts on her feet until she decides to sit down on the arm of the couch. "Mostly. My old roommate used to get annoyed with me because I liked keeping the apartment warm. She thought it felt like hell, and I'd be in at least two layers with a blanket on me."

The tidbit interests me, so I don't let the opportunity slip away to ask about her previous situation. "Is this roommate still around?"

She shakes her head. "She moved to New York City to chase her dreams. I'm happy for her, but that was sort of the end of the end for me. My best friend sent me a ton of potential places I could look at, but I'd need

a roommate still to split the costs and there's a lot I need to consider before I commit."

"Like?"

Her lips rub together, her eyes aimlessly staring at the TV. "My job. Steady work. I don't want to get somebody's hope up and then let them down by not being able to keep up my end of the deal. That's not how I was raised. Tiffany would have to pay a little more than her half on the months I couldn't get paid what I needed for my share so we wouldn't lose the apartment. She never complained, but still."

I respect that, even if I still don't appreciate her type of employment. "Are the places your friend found around here?"

Her eyes trail off. "Yeah. Most of them aren't horribly priced, either. I've been looking on Craigslist—"

"*Craigslist*?" I cut in, staring at her in disbelief. "Are you a snag short of a barbie, love?"

"Am I a...? What does that even mean?" She blinks, her nose scrunching as she gives me a confused look. "Do you just randomly remember that you're Australian when you talk sometimes? It's hard to tell."

I roll my eyes. "Are you *stupid*? *Daft*? A *moron*? Some things sound better the way we say them. Less insulting, in this case."

"What sounds better?"

"Things like...brekkie."

"Brekkie," Rylee repeats slowly, eyes narrowing. "Is that breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Why can't you just say breakfast?"

"Brekkie is shorter. You Americans always make things longer than they need to be. Australia is a mouthful too, but I won't go into the specifics of why we don't waste our time with proper names because that's not what we're talking about."

"It *could* be."

I eye her. "Craigslist is the worst place to find a roommate. There are actual killers on there. You'd be better off asking around."

"Killers exist everywhere," she points out matter-of-factly. "I could randomly meet someone and think they'd be the perfect roomie, and then find out the hard way that Ted Bundy is their idol. And who am I going to

ask? I don't really know anybody here besides the people I've worked with or worked uncovering."

One of my brows arch. "Uncovering, huh? Perhaps your job is more interesting than I gave it credit for."

"You know what I mean." She sighs, sliding onto the cushion closest to her and curling her legs toward her chest, hugging her arms around them. "I know you don't like what I do, and I get it. I don't always like it either. But it is a job. For now, at least."

I can't help but wonder, "Is this what you've always wanted to do?"

There's a moment of quiet, contemplation swirling in her eyes as she stares off. "Yes and no. I've always wanted to write. I thought I'd be a journalist, not a tabloid writer. But when opportunity knocks..."

We fall into silence, save the television on as background noise. I won't reprimand her for doing what she has to because I have no right. Everyone does something they're not proud of at least once in their lives. At least Rylee has the sense to feel bad about it.

Eventually, she breaks the quiet. "My family doesn't know that I lost the apartment. Or that I'm struggling."

Shifting my body to face her, I ask, "Why not?"

"Do you like worrying the people you care about?"

Fair point. "No. It's never fun."

She gives me a pointed look. "They've always supported me in my endeavors and made sure I knew I had a home to come back to whenever I needed it. But I was determined to prove to them I'd make it on my own out here. And I've done a fairly good job up until recently. The last thing I want to admit is defeat at 25, even if they'd get me the first ticket they could and welcome me home."

I watch her for a moment, noticing the way her soft features ease when she talks about her family. I can relate. "You're close with them."

"Yes."

I smile. "I am with mine too."

She cringes. "I know."

"Ah." I suppose someone in her position would know that. "Right."

Resting her chin on her bent knees, she stifles a sigh. "I love my family, but I love being here and being independent. Except, I'm not independent anymore because my job hasn't been picking up any of my stories, I have

no insurance, I'm constantly worrying about if I can afford my medicine, and it's..." Words fading, she shakes her head.

Hearing the waver of her tone, I offer what little comfort I can. "You can still be independent while letting people help you, Rylee. Nobody can strip that from you."

Her tongue pokes out the side of her mouth, like she wants to believe me but doesn't know if she can. Swiping it over her bottom lip, she gives me a terse nod. "I guess."

Both of our attention turns back to the television, where the host has moved on to the Ninja grill. "Guess we missed our shot," I joke, getting a small smile from her.

"It isn't like I have the money for one anyway," she replies easily, eyes darting to me for a moment before turning back to the TV.

We don't say much more than that, watching television mindlessly until she decides to try going back to bed. I wish her a goodnight, she offers me the same, and I watch as she walks up the stairs, focused on the way her short legs take small strides with each step.

She can't be much over five feet—barely coming up to my chest when she stands in front of me. Yet she walks with a sense of authority, a power that I can see even in those baggy clothes.

Rylee may think that her current situation has stolen something from her, an integral part that I can tell she holds on tightly to, but she doesn't show it in the way she carries herself. She's sure of who she is and what she wants, and fights for how she lives.

Not many people can say the same, especially to people like me.

Everything about her intrigues me, and it isn't just because of the innocence she exhumes. The girl disappearing into my guest bedroom doesn't look at me like most women do—where my fame is front and center along with the things they can get from me by acting like they genuinely care. At least she admitted what she did to Zayne rather than trying to hide it. She may have a questionable job, but at least she's honest about it.

Rylee knows that there's no real difference between fame and infamy, because the second we're given the money and attention, we're bound to make mistakes. Most people wouldn't think twice about extorting that in the press, but there's something unique about the woman upstairs that makes me think I don't know the half of what makes her tick, but I want to.

And the urge to figure out everything I can about the petite blonde becomes tenfold as I turn off the TV, grab a glass of water, and head to bed myself.

OceanofPDF.com

I'm walking into my boss's office in the heart of the city feeling anxiety creep into my throat as I raise my hand to knock on her door. I twisted my hair into a neat braid, slipped on my best pair of black skinny jeans, tucked the olive-green button-up into them, and slid into a pair of flats that don't look like they've been through a war. Forgoing makeup because I woke up late and knew I'd get stuck in traffic I paint a smile on my face and hope my nerves don't show.

"Come in," Sarina calls through the door.

I've always had a hard time liking Sarina Cunningham. She has a no-bullshit attitude that I can respect, but there's nothing else about her that I resonate with. The 35-year-old woman constantly wears a scowl on her perfectly done-up face like she hates the world, and I can't fathom why.

"Hi, Sarina."

"You're late."

I glance at the clock hanging on the wall, cringing when I see she's right. "I'm sorry. There was an accident on—"

"I don't care." She looks up from the paper in front of her. "You know why you're here. I need updates."

Clicking my tongue, I nod once and take a seat across from her, trying not to show how uncomfortable I am with her strong brow arching with impatience. "I've been looking into what angle I can take with the story. There's no indication that there's going to be a Violet Wonders split like everyone is claiming. The band is working on their album regularly—"

"Have you spoken to Zayne Gray?"

I pause, taken aback by her abrupt question. “Um...no.” Why would she think he’d have anything to do with me after what happened? “I don’t even have his contact information anymore. Even if I did, I’m sure he would have changed it by now or blocked me.”

Sarina leans back in her chair, posture straight and shoulders squared as she regards me. Her lips are bright red, her eyes are lined perfectly with brown liner, and her cheeks are tinted with a perfect shade of pink that makes her cheekbones pop. Sometimes I wonder why she’s behind the scenes when she looks like she can be the type of celebrity we write about.

Before she says anything, I try offering her what little I do have. “Garrick Matthews may be my in. I can’t really discuss why or how, but I crossed paths with him, and I think I can get something straight from the source.”

One of her thinly plucked brows raises. “I suppose you have a pitch for me?”

My lips part, hesitation over what I’m about to propose heavy on my tongue. “Well...I know you wanted the gossip on whatever is going on between him and Zayne, but I don’t think there’s a story there.” She waits for me to continue, displeasure on her face. “The reason nobody has gotten the scoop is because there isn’t one. But what if we did a human-interest piece instead? Like, instead of trying to get what everybody else is, we can do something that shows a lighter side of the singer. A lot of people love that kind of stuff.”

When I’m met by silence, I shift in the seat. I cross one leg over the other, wait a few seconds, and then put it back down while she stares at me. I can’t tell if she’s considering my idea or debating on how to fire me.

“What sort of story?” she finally asks.

I lick my lips. “The media has reported on Garrick’s public displays for a long time. You know, the partying, drinking, drugs, women, but what if that isn’t who he is? We can uncover a side of him the world would fall in love with. Things like that go viral all the time.”

A noise raises from her throat turning into a dry laugh parting her painted lips. “Rylee, the world already loves Garrick Matthews. Women go crazy over the bad boy. Why would they want to know he secretly loves kittens and volunteers at soup kitchens behind the scenes?”

It’s hard not to be amused over that given my conversation with him outside the women’s shelter. “People like feel-good stories,” I reason to no

avail.

“But that’s not what we do here.” She sits forward, elbows resting on the edge of the desk with a pen in her hand. “We write about who the stars are dating, who they’re fucking on the side, and how many times they’ve been arrested. We get the dirt, not the broom that sweeps it up.”

I swallow, knowing this isn’t going in the direction I’d hoped for.

She clicks the pen and brings it down to the paper, marking it with edits. “You’re going to get me something good by the end of next week. I don’t care what it is, but it needs to be in my hands and ready for print. With men like Zayne Gray and Garrick Matthews, there is plenty to write about. Find something like you did last time.”

Her dismissal as she focuses back on her edits tells me it’s time to leave. The unspoken threat of ‘or else’ is clear, so I don’t even bother saying a word as I sulk out, gripping my bag in defeat.

If I don’t get the story, I’m done.

What did I expect? The L.A. Free Press has had posts go viral hundreds of times. Our best-selling issues are ones that talk about the celebrities in rehab and those who’ve gotten into public brawls over something stupid like women, cars, or awards. None of them focus on who the celebrities are, but rather what they do to cause a scene.

Standing outside, I take a deep breath and let the sun soak into me. “What am I going to do?” I ask myself, squeezing my eyes shut.

I wish Grandpa Al and Grandma Birdie were here. They always gave me the kind of advice that made everything seem better—like I could do anything even if it seemed impossible. Even Moffie would give me a pep talk that would encourage me to figure something out before I threw in the towel.

But I have nobody.

Emotion creeps up my throat, but I shove it back down. “Deal with it, Rylee,” I tell myself firmly. “You’ve come too far to give up now.”

But that doesn’t help battle the eerie feeling burrowing itself into the pit of my stomach.

Garrick has helped me more than he knows, so how am I supposed to get Sarina the story she wants without breaking what little trust he’s given me by allowing me to stay?

There aren't any cars at the house when I pull into the normal spot mine occupies. Normally Chase's spotless BMW is parked here, but Garrick mentioned that his brother has been spending more time out of the house lately.

I try to keep my distance from the boys so I'm not in their way, but I've been told in the past that makes me look standoffish. Who knows what Chase Matthews thinks of me. He hasn't exactly been warm, but I haven't put in the effort either. He probably doesn't like his brother taking in strays—a joke Garrick made to Chase after the whole dog comparison went awry the first night the Aussie rocker brought me home.

Sitting in my car, I stare at the pavement surrounding the front of the white house and frown. Everything out here is a blank canvas. In comparison, the backyard is on a solid piece of land with flower bushes, shrubs, and a decent-sized private patio that nobody seems to use very often considering it's a quiet space. We're far enough away from the 405 where traffic is barely noticeable, and none of the neighbors are close enough to just show up. Yet, I've been the only one who likes going out there after the sun goes down and enjoying the subtle breeze and peaceful silence as I watch the wind caress the greenery.

Blowing out a breath, I walk toward the door and realize I don't have the key code to get inside.

Or Garrick's number.

Shit.

Readjusting my bag on my shoulder, I look around in contemplation. The back is gated off and I'm not coordinated enough to jump it to get to the backyard, not that it would matter. I know for a fact the sliding glass doors off the back hall between the kitchen and den are locked anyway when nobody is home, and I don't even see Yasmin's—the woman Garrick hired to clean his gigantic house—car anywhere which means she probably already left for the day.

Just my luck.

I pull out my cell phone and bite my lip trying to figure out what to do. Considering I don't know anybody who knows I'm staying here my options are limited. I drop my head forward and let out a long groan, doing nothing as my bag rolls off my shoulder and onto the pavement. Nudging it over with my foot, I sit down on the step leading to the front door, rest my elbows on my knees, and prop my chin up on the heel of my palm.

Scrolling through my phone, I notice a few news alerts from Hot in Hollywood claiming they're doing a live interview with all of the members of Violet Wonders next week. Spine straightening, I stare at the article in disbelief, wondering why Garrick hasn't said anything.

He doesn't owe you an explanation.

I close out of the alert and sigh, wondering what they'll ask him. The media has been speculating something new every single day, so it shouldn't surprise me that their PR team wants a reputable source to ask them questions and clear up any rumors. There's nobody better to do that than Penny Gomez.

So why do I feel betrayed?

Garrick and I don't talk that often—we're not even a step above acquaintances as far as I'm concerned. I'm the homeless girl with a questionable job that he took in because he felt bad, so he doesn't need to tell me what he does or doesn't do. But a warning would have been nice since he knew where I was going today. He'd stopped at the end of the stairs I'd descended from on his way to the garage door, gave me a slow once-over that had made my toes curl in my flats, and said, "*You look lovely today, Rylee.*"

He wasn't pleased when I told him I had a meeting with Sarina, but didn't voice his objections either, especially when I told him I had my reservations about it.

In the almost two weeks I've been staying here, the man from down under had made it clear time and time again that he's no longer the hardcore partier he once was. He'll still get pictured with random women on occasion, that much is clear from the Instagram photos he's tagged in every day and the articles that surface online, but they never look like he just hooked up with them somewhere public like old times. Not once has he stayed out late or come home drunk or tweaked like I would have expected the younger version of him did, and he even goes to bed earlier than I do claiming he has an early start to his days that he needs rest for.

It isn't like I don't put an effort into having conversations with the Matthews boys. The few times I've talked with them, it never lasted beyond me asking if their days were good or if I could help with something around the house. Chase would always give me a funny, cautious look, and Garrick would simply smile and tell me what he did. But not before his little brother would give him a quick glance of warning, as if anything they say could

wind up in the next breaking news story their phones chirp with when something juicy happens.

It's a reasonable reaction, which is why I try to stay out of their way and stick to my room as much as possible. I don't want to act like I'm prying or digging up anything for Sarina or the press to dissect.

Usually, the moment I close my bedroom door I walk over to the double paneled private balcony doors—which Garrick said every bedroom has to show off the beautiful view—and sit in the sunlight to research other story ideas and new apartment listings that I can't afford yet. Garrick has invited me to eat with them sometimes when we're all home, and I'll typically agree so I'm not rude, but nobody says more than a general thanks for the food.

Last night, Garrick made my favorite homecooked meal after he found out I loved meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and although I'd never admit it to my mother, his beats hers by a long shot. I even had seconds which is rare, making the man who cooked it beam in ways I've only seen Moffie do when someone tells her they love her quirky outfits.

Chase always goes out after.

Garrick escapes to his room or the small home gym I discovered he had after looking around once when I was home alone.

Moffie and I will text back and forth almost every night before bed to check in, never breaking our routine once. I never tell her where I am or what's been going on, and I pray she can't tell that there's cause for concern or else she'll spend her hard-earned money to fly here and check in on me in person.

It feels like hours go by as I sulk against the front door and read through various news articles when the front gates open. I perk up, expecting to see Chase's BMW roll in, but it's Garrick instead.

I stand up, joints stiff from sitting for so long, when he parks his Mustang next to my car and quickly walks over to me. "What are you doing on the— *Shit*. I never gave you the code for the door, did I?" He'd given me the gate code and told me he'd write down the one to the door too, but he got distracted when his manager called him, and they got into some argument about doing interviews to balance out the things being said online ever since audio was released of what sounded like Zayne's drunken voice telling someone he didn't want to be in the band anymore.

I never pushed Garrick on the code because I didn't want to demand anything from him. Taking a bed, a space in the home he got by all his hard work, is enough.

I offer a measly, "It's okay."

He shakes his head, eyes hard. "How long have you been out here? I would have expected Chase to be home by now." His eyes go to the fancy smartwatch on his wrist. "He was only supposed to look at a few estates today, and that was hours ago."

I brush it off, trying my best to pass it off as no big deal. "He's been out more. And I haven't been out here that long. But I do need to use the bathroom so..."

I've had to pee since I got here but distracted myself with photos of Zayne that have been making waves across social media. It hurts to see the tall, good-looking drummer in some of them knowing the short time we spent together years ago. In most of the ones he's tagged in on Instagram, there's always women surrounding him, some perched on his lap, others kissing his neck while he grins, and all of the beautiful women looking like the exact opposite of me.

When I'd first taken on the story Sarina wanted, I knew I'd have to blend in, but no amount of tight clothing and done-up hair and makeup gave me the unashamed confidence these women have. They see what they want and go for it, and I wish I had even a fraction of that.

I remember the first time I met Zayne was after I'd studied his routine and went to his favorite café in the city. I'd purposefully bumped into him so he'd notice me, and he'd *definitely* noticed the way my shorts had been a little too short and my top a little too tight and revealing. I felt awful about playing him, but Moffie had told me he did the same with hundreds of women which barely made me feel any better. He'd flirted with me, made me genuinely blush with his focused attention, and then asked me out. The word 'no' was on the tip of my tongue before I'd forced out the opposite, smiling like he'd made that day the best day of my life.

It didn't take long to realize Zayne Gray was, and still is, a great person. It was obvious that he loved his friends and bandmates, and I enjoyed hearing about his passions outside of music that I hadn't known about previously.

Maybe that's the biggest reason why I'll never forget the day I approached the bathroom at the club we'd gone to together feeling

something heavy pressing against my chest as I opened the door, lifted the camera, and snapped a few pictures of him bent over the counter with the line of white powder covering it.

He didn't deserve it, and I know that.

Nothing Moffie could say when I deposited the money from the article made me feel better, and she'd flown here to console me, bringing my favorite foods and movies to binge while we locked ourselves away in my apartment until she had to go back to New York.

And now here I am, online stalking him to make sure he's happy, that he's *okay*, while staying at his best friend's house.

When I look down at the time on my phone, I realize that nearly two hours have gone by since I got back from Sarina's office. Time flies when you're stuck in your head wondering what other job you can get once your well-known boss fires you for not getting her a story on time.

Garrick taps my arm, causing me to blink at the hand resting on it. "You all right, Rylee? You spaced out."

Blushing, I give him a small smile of reassurance. "Long day. Sorry."

I follow him inside, listening as he talks and sets his things down on his way to the kitchen. "I'll write down everything you'll need so this never happens again. You should have my number too, in case of an emergency."

My face twists, and I'm thankful his back is to me so he can't see. "You don't have t—"

"You keep saying that, but you're not listening to my answer," he cuts me off, amusement clear in his tone. "But you go do your business, and we'll discuss that when you're done because clearly you need it drilled in your head a little more."

Slowly nodding despite my hesitancy over the conversation he wants to have, I set my bag down on the couch and head to the small half bath off the kitchen. I can hear him shuffling around, opening and closing cupboards, running water, and scraping back a chair as I wash my hands.

When I walk into the kitchen he gives me a once over and says, "You look beautiful. I like your hair like that."

I fight the heat from sliding into my cheeks, flattening my shirt with my palms. "You told me that this morning."

"And it's still true."

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I walk over and take the seat across from him, wondering if it's just second nature for him to pass off

compliments with that flirty charm of his. “My boss is a stickler for looking professional even though nobody will meet her standards.”

Skepticism crowds his face. “Why?”

I must make a face because he snickers when I say, “She looks like the love child of Elvis Presley and Gisele Bündchen and dresses like it too. Legs for days, skinny, never a hair out of place or an outfit that she recycles. I’m convinced her closet looks like an outlet store.”

“You sound envious,” he remarks.

“No...” Okay, so maybe I’m a little jealous of her. “Well, I wouldn’t mind the clothes. She *does* have nice taste. But I’m not so sure I’d want the height.”

“Why not?”

His puzzled face makes me snort. “It’s not like I have anything against tall women. My best friend is five-ten. But there’s an advantage of being short, like not being hassled at the grocery store when people can’t reach things.”

Garrick laughs at my introverted nature. “But wouldn’t you be the one doing the hassling if you’re too short to reach things on the shelves?”

“You just climb them.”

He gapes at me.

I shrug. “We do what we have to.”

“You’re not even *that* short, Rylee.”

“The shelves are really high.”

We stare at each other before smiles crack our otherwise serious expressions.

He leans back in his chair. “So what happened at work? You said you had a long day, so it must have to do with Gelvis.”

Confusion smacks me in the face. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

One of his shoulders lifts. “Gelvis. You know, Gisele and Elvis combined. I don’t know her name, love. Work with me here. I’m trying to keep up the conversation.”

“You make her sound like a Marvel character. Her name is Sarina.”

He waits for me to answer him.

Sighing in reluctance, I obey. “She wants me to pitch her a story next week, and I’m stressed. It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.”

I debate on what to do. I could skirt around the conversation, but something tells me he won't give it up that easily, and I've already divulged the worst I've done at my job. "I tried getting out of doing some sort of exposé on you that she wants me to write. You're all big news right now because everybody thinks Violet Wonders is officially breaking up after that audio released of Zayne talking about leaving. I'm sure you've seen it all."

His arms cross and rest on his chest. "I tend to avoid looking up anything to do with us actually. But I've heard some things from our people. Not that the audio circulating everywhere proves a thing."

He's right, even though his defensive nature makes my eyebrow want to rise. Nobody can clearly make out whatever the drummer says in the audio clip because there's too much background noise and static from wherever the person who recorded their conversation was hiding their phone.

Garrick's eyebrows go up as if he's still expecting to hear more about my day, so I drop my shoulders and realize I have no choice. "All Sarina is interested in is the hottest gossip. I proposed doing something softer—"

The grin stretching across his face tells me I'm in trouble before he even says, "I assure you, Rylee, there's nothing soft about me."

I don't bother commenting on that. "I just thought if we could do some sort of human-interest piece to show the world a different side of you, then it'd get me out of hot water."

His playfulness evaporates. "Hot water how?"

Evading his eyes, I suck my bottom lip into my mouth and think about the past few months. The few pieces I have written were torn apart because they didn't compare to the Zayne Gray one I have attached to my name. Everyone tells me I need to channel that article in order to get paid the same for new ones. "Sarina hasn't been happy with my performance at work. I know it wouldn't be the end of the world if I was fired, but it's the job that's helped me survive this crazy place since I moved here. Moving on from it would feel like..." I don't even know how to describe it. "It would feel like the reason I came here was disintegrating right in front of me. Then what's left?"

"Besides your pride?"

I shoot him a look. "Anyway," I draw out, ignoring his commentary. "She shot down my idea and told me I needed to give her something by next week because there's a lot of pressure on the tabloid lately."

He's quiet as I sink into my chair and realize how screwed I am. I'll have to just tell Sarina that I can't deliver and accept my fate. I've been looking at different jobs online before bed every night, knowing subconsciously it'll come to that at some point anyway.

"Does this job mean that much to you?"

I close my eyes. "It's not the job."

A pause.

"Ah," he says in realization. "It's the money."

It sounds pathetic when he says it aloud, but I can't deny it. Money is essential to everyday life, there's no way around it. But there's more than just a monetary value to it—it encompasses everything we do. It can consume us and our motives like it has mine.

I'm surprised when a hand reaches out and taps mine until Garrick pulls my attention back to him. "You have to remember that money is just paper. It's a tool. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with wanting to make good money and provide for yourself, but it should never hold more value than the essential purposes it serves. I'm surrounded by people who lust after wealth and material things because they've gotten a taste, and they lose themselves in it. But what happens when it goes all away, hmm? What are we left with if that's stripped from us? Whoever we are is who we have to live with for the rest of our lives."

I'm taken aback by everything that just came out of his mouth, unable to come up with a response before he continues. "I think if I lost it all, I'd be content with what's left behind. If I only had my soul, my morals, and the knowledge I procured, I'd be okay."

I have no idea who the person is sitting across from me, because it's definitely not the rocker who once was seen leaving a public bathroom with *three* different women all looking equally disheveled. "That was..."

He smiles softly. "The truth."

The quiet that follows his sure, brazen statement is full of tranquility.

Would I like who I am if I lost everything?

I frown. "I wouldn't." His eyes pierce mine, waiting for an elaboration. "I wouldn't like who I am, not if I kept doing what I have been. I think I always knew that which is why nothing I've submitted to Sarina has ever been good enough by her standards."

"It's because you gave your conscience a voice," he says simply.

And he's right.

Again.

Damn. “I wish the world saw this side of you. All Sarina cares about is who you’re dating, sleeping with, or cheating on.”

He rolls his eyes like that’s the most absurd things he’s heard. “Quite the combination.”

The back of my neck tingles. “We both know that’s big news in this industry.”

Garrick doesn’t argue. If anyone could understand, it’s someone who’s always been front and center in this world.

I click my tongue. “Why didn’t you say anything about Hot in Hollywood? I overheard you telling Chase that you’re annoyed with all the interview requests you’ve been getting because you don’t want to speak to people about what the press is saying.”

I’m not sure what I anticipated his response to be, but it wasn’t the confusion furrowing his brows. “What about Hot in Hollywood?”

“Your interview with them next week. It’s all over. The show confirmed today that Violet Wonders is sitting down with Penny to set the record straight.”

He curses, shifting his hips upward until he produces a phone from his back pocket. He stares at the screen and reads through something before mumbling to himself. “Bastards. Didn’t even think to consult us first before setting it up.”

“They can do that?”

His irritation already confirms as much, but he still says, “It’s not the first time they’ve pulled this, and I doubt it’ll be the last. My manager likes to think he’s in charge, but Michael seems to forget who pays him.”

He didn’t know.

Palming his jaw, he drops the phone onto the table and pushes it away. “Michael and my PR team want the media to stop circulating bullshit because it’s taking away from their promotional efforts for the upcoming album. It’s less about what Violet Wonders will come up with and more about what Zayne or the others are going to produce if we split. They think if we clear things up, the people will move on.”

“You don’t think they will though.” It’s not a question, I can see it on his face—hear it in his tone. He’s doubtful.

It’s a few moments of him staring at the phone a few inches away from him before he looks at me. “We’re older now. I’m 32, Zayne will be 31

soon, and the others are right behind us. The public is expecting us to settle down and stop living the lives we used to. They want us to grow up.”

I can’t really argue with him there. It’s why child stars get so much flack in the press once they step out of whatever roll they made it big in. They can make one little mistake and suddenly everybody is accusing them of being out of control. Some of my favorite actors growing up are always under the microscope with the public wondering when they’ll settle and marry or have children of their own. And I can’t say I haven’t been part of the problem, waiting for the day they announce they’re getting married or having their first child.

He murmurs something under his breath before chuckling dryly. “That would certainly create a buzz, wouldn’t it?”

I go to answer but stop myself, unsure of what he means. “I’m not following.”

“If the infamous playboy settled down.”

“Like...dated?”

“I’ve dated plenty, Rylee.”

My eyes widen. “Marriage?”

He grins.

I fidget with my thumbs. “I mean...yeah. That would definitely change the narrative. But that wouldn’t really solve all your problems. The people are going to think whatever they want to about your band. I mean, you split once. That’s why the plausible chance you guys will break up again riles people.”

The way he stares at me makes me squirm. There’s an intensity in those blue eyes that makes me wonder what’s building behind the depths. “But the people always believe in what the majority does no matter what the truth is. It’s why media outlets have such a huge following. The bigger the story, the more gullible the viewers.”

I blink.

Part my lips.

Close them.

And blink again.

Eventually, I get out, “Okaaay...”

He laughs lightly as if my confusion is funny to him. “I think I can help both of us.”

This should be good. “And how is that?”

“You’re going to write a story.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. Isn’t that the problem that started this whole thing? “About what?”

His eyes twinkle with mischief. “My marriage. Your boss wants to know who I’m dating, but anyone can report on that even if it’s bull. Instead, you can write about the day Garrick Matthews got hitched.”

I tap my fingers against the table anxiously. “You want me to write about you getting married to some random girl?”

That idea doesn’t sit well with me, and I don’t let myself think about why.

“No.”

I wait, even more confused.

He reaches forward again and captures my hand, his palm draped over my overheated skin. One of his fingertips taps my ring finger. “I want you to write about *us* getting married. Two birds, one stone, love.”

I doubt the first reaction he expected was the loud burst of laughter that shot past my lips, but that’s what he gets.

I wait for him to join me.

But it never comes.

Then he says, “Marry me, Rylee.”

Rylee is pacing in front of me, hands twisting into fists at her sides. She stops, glances at me for a few moments as if she's waiting for someone to tell her she's being punked, and then begins all over again.

I watch silently, partially amused by her reaction. Sure, it wasn't a romantic proposal, but I wasn't expecting her to look like I'd told her the cops were here for her.

"Rylee," I finally say after watching her wear the floor down.

She doesn't stop moving.

"Rylee." I laugh when she ignores me and stand from my seat at the table when I can't take it anymore. Walking in front of her until she has no option but to halt her frantic movements, I place my hands on her shoulders and say, "You need to breathe, love. I'm not asking you to give me a kidney or a child."

The high-pitched sound that rises from her throat makes me snort. "A *child*?"

I grin pointedly. "See? Could be worse."

Her unblinking eyes penetrate mine. I compose myself, trying to hide the entertainment she's unknowingly giving me. I could think of every other reaction I'd be given if I suggested this to another woman—happy squealing, tears of joy, then probably great sex. Nothing like this.

Lowering my hands back to my sides slowly, I offer her an explanation. "You need a good story to give your boss so she gets off your back, *and* you need the money for your medicine. Right?"

“Among other things,” she agrees hesitantly, voice hoarse.

I nod in reassurance. “I need a story to break apart all the bad press we’re getting from these vultures. No offense.” She shrugs, indifferent to the fair term. “If we do this, we’ll both be set. You’d get a story printed and get your money, and I’d get people off my back about Zayne splitting.”

Well, not completely off my back. Then the press would be digging into who my bride is, if it’s a shotgun wedding, and who knows what else. But it’s better than putting pressure on the guys to act certain ways so nobody thinks there’s a rift. It’s put a strain on all of us, especially Zayne and me with the new polls being created on social media to see whose side the public is on.

It’s not me the majority is voting for.

To make the deal sweeter, I point out what I’m sure she’s worried about for a long time now. “Look, I have great insurance. Your medicine will be a lot cheaper once you’re added to it. It’ll be affordable. You wouldn’t have to worry. It doesn’t have to be forever. Two years is a reasonable amount of time, especially in this climate. You’d be covered 100% without any of the concerns that you’re dealing with now.”

I can see the breakthrough in her clouded eyes as she takes in the offer. My brows go up as her lips part to answer, the anticipation building and hard to repress. “Garrick...”

My mouth goes dry hearing her say my name, something she hasn’t done often since I met her.

She sighs heavily. “You don’t even know my last name.”

I cock my head. “True, but I can’t say that necessarily matters in this type of situation considering it’ll be changed regardless.”

It’s clearly not the right thing to say, because her muffled disbelief rapidly changes to blatant irritation. “What if I want to keep my last name? Some men change *their* last names when they get married.”

“Is this your way of saying yes?” I ask hopefully, trying to gauge her reaction.

“That’s me saying that you can’t just assume I would go along with this crazy scheme of yours even if it is mutually beneficial.”

I stuff my hands into my pockets, wrapping my fingers around one of my Lifesavers. “What’s your last name, Rylee?”

A heavy breath escapes her. “Simmons.”

I look her over, matching the name to the person standing rigidly in front of me. Her shoulders are pulled back with caution and her eyes don't leave my face despite mine roaming over her curves. It makes sense why Zayne was interested in her—she's beautiful in a librarian kind of way, sans the glasses. Not too tall or too short, or too skinny, and doesn't act like we're gods walking the earth. Quiet but blunt when she needs to be, witty, and not afraid to call me out.

To put it simply, Rylee Simmons is refreshing. She's the breath of fresh air I need right now, which is why I need her to say yes. "I need it to be you. You've never fawned over me or pretended to be somebody you're not. In fact, you seem unimpressed by half the shit I say which is a change from my norm. It's exciting, really. This'll work, and we'll both get something we need in the end."

"It's not..." Her eyes close as she steps away from me, giving me her back and letting her shoulders drop. Hands going to her hair and playing with the braid, she shakes her head. "I feel bad for even considering it because the idea of not having to worry about my medicine is a weight off my shoulders, but it's not right."

My footsteps are quiet as I approach her, lightly putting my hand on her shoulder to turn her back around. "Tell me why it's wrong."

When our eyes lock, the raw sadness coating her blue and brown orbs makes me frown. "Two years is a long time, but not long enough at the same time. Marriage is important to me, Garrick. It's not something I ever thought I'd do more than once because when I'm committed to somebody, that's it. I grew up in a household where we believed that getting married is sacred and we do it for love, not convenience. There's no divorce and no escaping what you vowed to do. You're asking me to go against those beliefs, and what's worse is that you're making me consider it as the best option I have right now. Like I should settle for this."

I've always considered myself an empathetic person, and the pure hurt radiating from her is soaking into me like acid rain that I refuse to seek cover from. "Rylee..." How can I ask her to do this if she feels so strongly about her beliefs? "You should never settle for anything in life. If there's one thing I grew up believing in, it's that. I had to see my mother go through a hard time after she and my father divorced, and it wasn't easy for any of us adjusting to the life she was rebuilding. I understand if I'm asking

too much. But just know that if there's anyone I'd want to do this with, it's you, Rylee Lynne Simmons."

A surprised laugh bubbles from her. "I'm not sure where you got Lynne from because that isn't my middle name."

I shrug. "Shot in the dark. It was that or Marie, but that didn't feel right."

An eyebrow quirks. "I don't have a middle name, actually. My parents couldn't decide on one, so they decided not to bother."

Huh.

Her phone goes off, causing her attention to dart to her pocket where it rests. I watch as her hand fiddles with it before the sound stops, and when she doesn't move or glance up at me, I wonder what she's thinking.

I hear a faint sigh. "I'm not telling you no," she finally says, eyes shyly peeking up through her lashes. "I need to think about it. If I...if we do this, there are going to be rules."

"Agreed."

She nods once. "We'll have to get to know each other better. Fake marriage or not, I'd like to know the real person I'm changing my name for."

The smirk spreads before I can stop it. "I take it you're not that attached to Simmons then?"

Her lips flatten. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Matthews. I was pointing out that some traditions change over the years. Plus, I'm not the one who has millions of dollars' worth of merchandise with my name on it. It'd be unfortunate if you had to change yours."

Rylee has the brain and the beauty, not that the revelation is shocking. "You think on it and let me know." I shoot her a wink and add, "You know where I live."

She eyes the stairs for a moment before turning her gaze back on me. "Thank you."

"For what?"

Her lips rub together, eyes going back to the staircase like she'd rather escape than finish her thought. "For thinking of me and giving me time to figure out what to do."

Knowing there's nothing I can say to that, I nod and watch as she disappears upstairs. It isn't until I hear the door click closed that I let out a long breath and grab my phone off the table.

“Hey, man,” I greet as soon as the line picks up. “Can we meet somewhere and talk?”

Kylar Bishop is waiting in the corner of the Lazy Croc’s VIP lounge for me, an arm thrown over the side of the booth as he watches some workers prepare for the club to open.

When I approach, he doesn’t even bother turning to me before he says, “We could have met somewhere else. The owner kept trying to convince me to invest in this sketchy ass place.”

I snort, sliding in across from him. Only then does he turn to me, an eyebrow drawn when I speak up. “That’d be Roderick. He’s always looking to expand. Ever been here before?”

The pretty boy’s dark eyes roll as he checks out the lounge. “No. I know this place is your hangout. Plus, the club scene has never really been for me.”

The Lazy Croc is where a small inner circle knows where to find us. Despite the many ups and downs surrounding this place, we always gravitate toward it.

I grin. “I suppose that’s because you always enjoyed playing house with little Bishop instead of spending it with people your own age.”

His responding glare makes me snicker, but he doesn’t deny the claim. “Why did you even ask me to come here?”

“Because you’ll give me unbiased advice unlike everyone else I know. The boys will tell me to do whatever I want, my mother will give me a five-day lecture on every reason why it’s a bad idea, and Chase is a wildcard. Wily, that one.”

Curiosity floods his otherwise taut features, his arm flexing where it still rests across the back of the booth. He says he’s over the drama my brother caused him and his girl, but I can see there’s still irritation flickering whenever I mention the youngest Matthews. “Aren’t you close with your mother? If you know she won’t approve, then you probably shouldn’t do it.”

I lift a shoulder in contemplation. “I’ve done far worse things. This is saintly compared to half my life decisions.”

He’s silent, taking in my vague introduction into what I’m about to say.

“I’m thinking about getting married.”

He blinks, cocking his head. There's a microsecond of surprise before he wipes it away and shows his indifference again. "Repeat that for me."

Amused, I repeat myself and watch as his eyebrows dart toward his hairline. "It's one of my better ideas, really. In hindsight, Mum would be celebrating this one if we had to rank some of my past choices."

He drops his arm and settles into his seat, giving me a dumbfounded look. "You do realize you can't marry yourself, right? I know how much you love yourself, but it's not legal. You'll need another human. I know you're not picky, so you have your options open, but then you'd have to be stuck with them. There's a lot to consider. Wait a minute." His eyes narrow. "Why the hell *are* you even considering this? You've never had a serious girlfriend once in your life."

Even though me and the competition eying me down have never been close, he'd still know whether or not I want to put a ring on it because of how many mutual acquaintances we have in the industry that gossip worse than bored housewives. "There's a first time for everything. Look at you. You've been salivating over the same girl for years. How is Leighton, by the way?"

"That's not true and you know it." He gives me the same overprotective look he always does when I bust his balls about her. "And she's doing fine. Asks about Chase sometimes. And you. Mostly you out of solidarity."

"Little Bishop loves me more than that and you know it."

His glare strengthens.

Chuckling, I relent. "Her name is Rylee."

He eases his tense muscles. "How long have you known each other?"

"What are you, my mother?" I counter in amusement, watching as he shakes his head in exasperation. "We've known each other for about a month now give or take."

He gapes.

"What?"

"A month," he repeats.

I smile casually. "Yes."

"Thirty days."

"Or less."

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose like he's never heard of this before.

“How many people have married after barely knowing each other two weeks? There are literally reality TV shows of people getting engaged after a day. Haven’t you seen the one where they’re in pods and can’t even see each other’s faces? They talk through a wall until their insanity gets the better of them, and by day five all of them are claiming true love by the person’s voice alone.”

Kyler drops his head forward. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you watch that kind of shit. Or that you’d pull this.” Scrubbing his chin, he asks, “So what is this about anyway? Is Rylee pregnant or something?”

“How many times have I told you, mate? No glove, no love. It’s the golden rule.”

“Treat others the way you want to be treated is the golden rule,” he disagrees.

I wave him off. “Same difference.” The muffled snort I get from him has me smirking. “I need Rylee’s help to get the media to move on from Zayne and Violet Wonders and she needs mine for her own personal reasons. It’ll be mutually beneficial for the both of us by getting married. At least with a marriage, they’ll move on faster than if Zayne is leaving.”

“Is he leaving?”

My teeth grind. “Isn’t that the question of the century?” I’ve asked the man in question point blank, and he’ll never look me in the eye when he gives me a one-word answer. *No*.

“The more pressure on him, the more he could decide this life isn’t worth it,” I say, voicing my concern aloud for the first time. “He doesn’t need that. Not after last time he made headlines.”

Kyler doesn’t need to know the person who outed Zayne is the one I want to put in a wedding dress and slide a ring on, though I’m sure his reaction would be comical. He says, “It sounds like your mind is already made up about this marriage thing, so why am I here? If this is your way of saying you want me in your wedding—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve got plenty of mates for that. You *may* be able to pass as the flower girl, but I’d have to talk to my girl about that, and you’d look terrible in purple. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves here. I need your advice on what you think.”

“Of the wedding you’re already set on?”

I nod.

He curses. “Garrick, I don’t need to be the one to tell you that this is a ridiculous idea. Even if you get married, the media is going to still surround you. And what happens if you get divorced? Is Rylee in the industry? Is she used to the publicity that she’ll get when your together or if you split up? Leighton still isn’t okay with the way cameras follow us around when we’re out. People are always going to be in your business even if you don’t want them to be. You’ll be making a bigger mess and adding another person in the mix.”

I can hear his *just like you always do* without him saying the words. It’s how he looks at me, speculative and judgmental. Not something I’m unused to, especially from a Bishop. I do tend to pull others into my bullshit, and usually without thinking it through.

“So, tell me this,” he continues. “Who are you really doing this for? Because you’ve never cared about what everyone thinks of you or your band. It’s why you’ve done whatever the hell you wanted even when it pisses people off. This isn’t about getting the press off the band’s ass or protecting Zayne.”

For once, I don’t answer right away. A noise below grabs my attention, causing me to watch a few bartenders arrive for their shift and prep the bar area. Stools are taken off the counter and placed on the floor, and the televisions are all turned on and playing the same boring ass sports channel that the guys all contently watch before they open to the public.

“Rylee needs this,” I finally tell him when he makes no move to force it from me.

A humming noise comes from him.

I inhale slowly and drop my head onto the cushion behind it. “I just need to convince her to accept the offer.”

“And if she can’t be convinced?”

For once, I don’t have an answer.

Sarcastic or not.

RYLEE

The soil isn't as rich as I would have liked, but I know Grandma Birdie wouldn't have let that stop her from trying to bring something beautiful to life. She and Grandpa Al spent a lot of time in their flower and vegetable gardens, teaching me everything I know. During the summers, they'd even sell what they didn't keep at the local farmer's market in Liberty, and I'd sometimes come and help out. They'd give me some of the money they made, which I always put into my bank account for something big.

All the money I'd saved up at random jobs as a teenager was put toward my move to the Golden State. I didn't know what it was I was saving for whenever I'd deposit my paychecks, I only knew whatever it was would be worth it.

Staring at the cheap tools and plants I bought at one of my favorite stores in the city to make sure I have everything I need I get to work while the sun is out.

Garrick had to go into the studio today, though I may have eavesdropped on the conversation he had on the phone in the kitchen with someone from the band saying he could use the extra studio time. Whether he really does or if he was giving me space, I'm not sure. He hasn't pressured me into answering his proposal since bringing it up yesterday, but we both know there's a timeline. If Sarina expects a story from me by the end of next week, that doesn't give me a lot of time to think. Or overthink, which may be a blessing in disguise. I always was a last-minute type of person, and the results usually showed it.

I'm not sure how long I'm outside when I hear the doors slide open behind me. I look over my shoulder and see Yasmin smiling at me with a broom in one of her hands. She's a smidge shorter than me, with black curly hair and a few natural streaks of silver and tan skin that I envy. There's nothing exciting about my borderline fair complexion or the slightly wavy hair that falls flat every time it grows past my boobs.

"It looks so different out here," she says, resting the broom against the doorjamb and walking out.

I smile. "I hope he likes it." When I asked if it was all right to do something to the space, Garrick told me to do whatever I wanted. Chase made a weird noise and rolled his eyes that made his older brother shoot him a look, but otherwise didn't give his input even though this is his home too.

She walks over and examines what I've done from over my shoulder. "I think he'll love it. He's talked about hiring someone to do landscaping for a while."

My brows go up. "Really?"

Her smile is light. "You seem surprised by that. Haven't you noticed the attention to detail inside? It was only a matter of time before it reached out here. The boys are busy most of the time, but Garrick sometimes ventures out here and writes music. I've seen it myself."

Sitting on my heels, I swipe beads of sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. "I wouldn't have thought he cared since the front looks so..." I make a face. "Boring."

Yasmin waves a hand in the air. "That's for show. When he first moved here a few paparazzi tried getting photos. He didn't want to give them anything to talk about."

"Does that happen here a lot?"

"Oh no." She walks over and squats down next to some of the yellow pansies I planted. "In fact, this area is typically secure. Of course, some people can be bought off, but it's rare. Most people live here for the privacy so few will sell anyone out. But, you know how people are about money these days..."

Her words are soft, the statement not directed at anyone specific, but that doesn't change how I react to it. I make a face as I stare at my dirt-covered gloves. "Yeah, money has a way of influencing people..."

A sharp inhale comes from her. “Oh, Rylee, I didn’t mean you! I’ve met some interesting people in my day, and you’re one of the genuine ones despite your past.”

My eyes fly over to hers. “*You know?*”

It’s the sympathetic look that goes right to her mocha-colored eyes that makes me flop on to my bottom and heave out a sigh. “I’m friends with Garrick’s mother Elaine. He confides in me like an aunt sometimes. Plus, he and Chase hardly talk quietly and Elaine’s youngest has always had a lot to say.”

I cringe. “I bet.”

Reaching over, she pats my arm. “It’s nothing getting to know you can’t fix. I’m team Rylee. You’ve brought something into this house that’s been missing since Garrick moved in.”

What on earth could I bring here? “I don’t think there’s anything I can provide that he doesn’t already have. I’ve looked around the place and swear I find something new every time I wander.”

Yasmin laughs goodheartedly. “Life. That’s what you bring. Not that I’ll ever admit it, but I worry about that boy sometimes. Me and his mother both.”

“Garrick?”

Something somber crosses her features as she nods, standing up again and brushing off her dress. “He’s always so hesitant, so serious. It’s rare he makes spontaneous decisions, yet here you are. And I’m glad for it.”

It’s a moment before I ask, “Why?”

She seems to know what I mean. “He cares deeply about everyone and everything, so much so that he forgets to look after himself. If he meets someone who makes him rethink everything, who makes him happy, then I hope whoever she is sees what a lucky person she is to have him and he the same.”

My tongue swells as I try to swallow.

Yasmin walks back over to where she left the broom and picks it up. “You should plant violet pansies too. I think he’d love those.”

“Really?”

“Violet is his favorite color.”

I don’t say anything before she disappears back into the house, closing the door behind her as she goes.

It's a cop out when I wait until the clock strikes one before I open my laptop and click on my best friend's username. I nibble on my thumbnail as I click on her profile picture, an Avatar from her favorite anime series that her and her husband love watching together.

CannonIsMine95:

I need some advice.

I know it'll be a few minutes to get a response, so I uncurl my feet and slide off the bed to look out the window of my room. The view is of the beautiful houses on the hills. Garrick's house sits on a slightly elevated piece of land, which means there's a wider view of the landscape around us, including a gorgeous sunrise in the morning that I discovered early on when I couldn't sleep and would sneak out to the balcony to watch with a blanket wrapped around me wishing I had some of my mother's famous hot chocolate she always made when the weather started cooling down.

I'm absently studying the other elegant houses neighboring this one when I hear the telltale *ping* of an incoming message.

Walking over, I graze the screen with my eyes and let out a tiny sigh knowing this conversation probably won't end well for me.

IceQween:

Bring it on

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I rub the sweaty heels of my palms against my sweatpants and roll my shoulders back before typing.

CannonIsMine95:

Hypothetically speaking, what would you do if you were offered a chance at a better life, even if it's temporary?

I know Moffie is at the school she teaches at right now trying to control her classroom. This time of day is when they usually go over whatever book of the week they were assigned to read with their families so they can come in and talk about it. My best friend has always been a huge nerd and loved talking literature with my parents since none of them could have a lasting conversation on the topic with me.

IceQween:

It depends on the hypothetical terms. What do I have to do for this life? What's the cost? If it's temporary, will I still have a better life than I did before getting that chance? Or would it be the same one I'm going back to when it's over?

It shouldn't surprise me that she'd have all those questions. She never makes a choice without thinking of every avenue something could take her down. It's why I've always consulted with her before I've made up my mind about something important.

IceQween:

What's going on, Ry?

Of course she'd know this isn't a hypothetical situation we're talking about. Then again, I've always started conversations like this when I needed her thoughts. Like the time I asked her if, hypothetically, it'd be a bad idea to lose my virginity to Tony Walker on prom night our senior year of high school. She'd come back with a firm "it's a bad idea for you to lose your virginity to him anywhere at any time." Unlike Moffie Mae, I've always preferred having someone more experienced to teach me the ropes, but she'd convinced me Tony Walker was not the boy for the job. It's probably a good thing because I heard he had to get treated for an STI before he went off for college, so I dodged a big bullet there.

CannonIsMine95:

I think I'm going to get married

Instantly, a videocall starts ringing through and my eyes widen as I stumble off the bed. Why is she calling me when she's at work?

CannonIsMine95:

Aren't you in the classroom?

IceQween:

PICK UP RIGHT NOW, RYLEE!

I groan and slowly sink back onto the bed, counting to three before I accept the call. Instantly, I'm greeted by screaming kids in the background of a brightly painted classroom that I helped Moffie decorate when she first got the job at Liberty Elementary.

When her face comes into view, I know the frantic nature of it isn't because of the little demons running wild around her. "What the hell do you mean you're going to get married?" Her voice is a whispered hiss, her hazel eyes lined with blue liner and shadow, her favorite color, before scoping out the screen like she's trying to figure something out. "And where are you? That looks like a ritzy place. Can you even afford that right now? You shot down all the places I sent you because you said it was out of your price range."

The accusation in her tone makes the guilt feel ten times heavier in my chest. "I'm not at a hotel right now..."

Moffie stares at me, then her eyes snap at something off the screen. "Timmy, I swear if you don't put down that glue you'll be sitting in the corner during the next playtime. Do you understand me? Yeah, that's what I thought."

I try to get out of this conversation as fast as I can. "You should get back to—"

"Don't chicken out," she throws at me, eyes narrowing. Her pink painted lips are pinched as she scowls. "As soon as I read your message I had to make sure you weren't stroking. *Marriage*, Rylee? What's going on? Where are you right now?"

I try to explain, but the words get clogged in my throat. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and do my best to tell her what's been happening. "You're not going to be happy."

When I open my eyes again, I see wariness enter her facial features, but she doesn't say a word.

"For the record, this wasn't my idea. It was proposed to me—" I wince at the word choice. It's not how I thought I'd be proposed to, and part of my heart is crushed knowing I'd dreamt of this exact moment only to accept I'll never get one like it again. Not a first, but not a last either. "The person in question thinks it'll be a good idea for the both of us, and he's offering me the help I need to make ends meet. It's..."

I shrug, not knowing what to say other than, "It's not ideal. It isn't what I thought I'd get, but it's something I'm seriously considering. This could help me in a lot of ways, even if the arrangement ends."

It takes her a few long moments before she blinks. "*Arrangement*? This is what? An arranged marriage? Do you even know anything about this guy? Who is he? How'd you meet? Have you even—"

"You're not going to believe it."

She deadpans. "I've watched you do questionable things all our lives, Rylee. There's not a lot I wouldn't believe you'd get involved in. In fact, I don't know why any of this surprises me."

Ouch. "That's not fair."

"What's not fair is you clearly lying about where you've been for the past who knows how long. What's unfair is that you obviously don't trust

me considering I'm only now just hearing about you *getting married* and acting like it's a job opportunity."

It isn't often Moffie gets angry with me. We've had our disagreements, but it's not anything we've ever gotten too heated over. Minus the time we didn't talk for an entire day because we didn't agree on who Hermione should have wound up with in *Harry Potter*. Since she read the books and I haven't, she still feels Draco Malfoy is the better option.

"I see your point," I finally reply, ignoring the ache in my chest. "But I didn't keep anything from you on purpose. You know me, Moff. I wanted to figure things out on my own. And I'm telling you now, asking you for advice, because I trust you. I need help because I'm freaking out here."

I can tell she wants to stay angry, but when her shoulders drop a fraction I know she's relenting. Like Garrick, she doesn't let herself get lost in the negative feelings. Curiosity gets the better of her. "Fine. Who is this guy?"

My lips press together in a firm line for a moment before I sigh. "It's Garrick Matthews."

She stares.

I nod slowly. "Sarina wanted me to do a piece on him and then all of a sudden he's right there helping me at the stupid club when my car broke down, and now I'm at his house—"

"You're at *Garrick Matthews'* house?" Her voice is no more than a high-pitched squeal, and I'm thankful that none of her elementary students would know who that even is. Their mothers...sure.

I wince, rubbing my ear. "Yes."

Her head shakes in disbelief, despite her insistence that I wouldn't be able to surprise her anymore since I've obviously made plenty of questionable choices in the past. "Is this the same Garrick Matthews of Violet Wonders? Or like one of those Hollywood lookalikes who get paid because they resemble famous people?"

"It's him, Moff. *Actually* him."

She blinks a few times before looking away, her hands coming up to brush her frizzy curls away from her face. When she stares back at the screen, there's wonder replacing any irritation she had over me and my predicament. "I feel like you're about to tell me this is all a joke and I'm freaking out for nothing, but wherever you are is way too swanky to be a Motel 6, and you're doing that thing with your nose that you always do when you're stressed."

“What thing with my nose?”

She taps hers. “You scrunch it.”

“I do not!” Hand flying to my nose, I realize it’s doing exactly what she says. “Oh my God. How long have I had that tell?”

Moffie snorts. “Since forever. How do you think your parents always knew when you lied to them about something?”

“I just thought I was a terrible liar.”

She shrugs. “That too.”

I frown. “We’re getting off topic here.”

She sighs heavily. “You’re right. We’re supposed to be talking how you somehow got tangled up with Garrick-frigging-Matthews. Are his eyes really that blue? Have you seen him naked? Have you *slept* with him? Oh my God! If you did, you need to tell me every single detail. I need to live vicariously through you because I’ve read he’s a total freak in bed.”

I’m so glad I’m the only one here, because there’s no way Yasmin couldn’t hear this if she were still cleaning.

“Does he know you love The Wild more than his band? Has he seen your screenname before? I mean, your username is literally CannonIsMine. Not Garrick. You had posters of Cannon Rhodes on your bedroom wall for years.”

The Wild is a band that started a little before Violet Wonders formed and has killed it from day one. I still listen to them religiously and run to the app store every time a new song drops to download it. Moffie teases me for following some of the band members on social media, but she’s no different with her favorite celebrities. Including the man I’m staying with.

And as for Garrick... “We haven’t really sat down to talk about that sort of thing. And, *no*, we didn’t sleep together. You know I’m not like that, I can’t believe you’d ask.”

“Okay, first, you’re the one who was dead set on losing your virginity before you graduated high school. And then you were determined to make it happen before 21, and we both know how that turned out. Don’t get all prudish on me now that you’ve found the *exact* guy you’ve been looking for who can teach you a thing or two.”

How does she even hold that over my head knowing we have the same body count when it comes to sex? “Can you not bring that up? I was young and stupid. Everyone made sex seem like such a big deal back then.”

“It is a big deal. I’ve told you that a billion times and you still went to some random dude to get the job done like you were paying a contractor to do reno work for a day.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “Let’s not talk about that.”

“Fine. I’ll move on to my second point. How come you haven’t told the man who asked you to marry him that you’re obsessed with his competition?”

I groan. “It’s not like it’s a big deal. And I’m not as obsessed as I used to be. Working here and writings stories on people has made me realize that celebrities are people too.”

She gapes. “You mean the people you write bad stories about? The ones who have human feelings that you rip into for a quick buck?”

“Not you too. You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“Oh, so Garrick knows about that?”

“Yes.”

“And how does he feel?”

“How do you think?” I quip.

She hums. “You want my honest opinion? Are you sure, Rylee?”

This can’t be good.

“For as long as I can remember, we’ve talked about our future husbands. Who they’d be, what they’d do, where we’d live together with them. You and I always dreamed of being neighbors and raising our families next door to each other. You never wanted this.” I go to speak, but she cuts me off. “Let me finish. You need to hear this. All these years, you’ve closed yourself off from dating or being near a guy because of your health or your job or some other excuse, and I’ve seen what it’s done to you. You’re lonely, Ry. You’re not happy. You’re being drained by trying to make ends meet, so you’ll never get the dream life you’ve wanted if you keep running yourself ragged.”

I blink. She’s not really suggesting...?

My best friend offers me a soft smile. “I think you should do it.”

I must have heard her wrong. “What?”

Her chin dips once in confirmation. “I think you should take him up on his offer. If he can help you out, then say yes. You deserve to let someone take the pressure off your shoulders.”

“But we’ve always talked about finding true love. You have Eli and you’re happy—”

“I’m not saying you have to fall in love with Garrick,” she says plainly. “But maybe he’ll be good practice for the real deal. He can take the edge off and help you live a little because you’ve spent years only existing. Living paycheck to paycheck, stressing out over if you can afford this or that. He’s rich. He’s willing to help. It seems kind of like a no brainer. You’re not me and Garrick certainly isn’t Eli, you can do whatever you want, Ry.”

I can’t believe this. “I thought you’d talk me out of it.”

“I know. You always seek me out when you want me to shoot you down because you need somebody to agree that you’re making stupid choices. If you *really* wanted to be talked out of it you would have called your mom. But Garrick Matthews is...Garrick Matthews. I mean if Grandma Birdie were around she’d be cheering you on with pom-poms. It’s not like he’s some 90-year-old you have to bathe and push around in a wheelchair. This could be fun for you. You’re not your parents, you’ve never believed in the same things they did, so live your life the way *you* want to and don’t worry about the things they always preached.”

Still in shock, I shake my head. I thought Moffie believed in the whole only-marry-once thing too. The way she talked, she didn’t believe in divorce or anything else either. “Are you just saying this because you’re a fan?”

She grins. “Maybe. I’ve got enough time saved up that I could make a trip out to see you and the eye candy you locked down. Eli wouldn’t understand, but he’d still come support you no matter what. You’re family.”

I huff out a laugh, knowing she’s right. There’s nothing Eli wouldn’t do if it makes Moffie happy. And I want that someday too.

“And maybe Garrick knows Cannon,” she adds nonchalantly.

I glare at her, not finding her as funny as she thinks she is.

She giggles. “I’m just saying, this could be really good for you, girl. I forgive you for not telling me sooner, but now I’m invested.”

Great.

“So, what are you going to do?” she asks.

It isn’t until much later, long after we hang up when she had to stop one of her kids from drinking paint, that I walk downstairs when Garrick gets home. My hands are twisted together, my heart racing rapidly, my forehead dotted with anxious sweat as he looks up when I approach him.

He’s in the kitchen getting dinner ready, something with herbs and spices from the smell, when I blurt, “I’ll do it.”

He stares with raised brows.
I stare with nervous eyes.
And Garrick says, "Okay."

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RYLEE

My heart is beating so hard that it vibrates my ears with every step I take alongside the man in a silk blue button-up and black dress pants. My eyes are glued to the shining polish of his dress shoes, which the florescent lights reflect off of as we walk. My lackluster flats and dress don't compare to the material sophistication wrapped around his lean yet toned body.

Garrick tried offering me money to buy anything I wanted for the occasion—a new dress, shoes, anything to make me more comfortable. But instead of accepting the cash he'd handed me, I decided to don my best white summer dress that I haven't worn in years that was a little too short and a pinch too tight, and my best pair of ballet flats. My hair is down and curled to the best of my ability, and I put makeup on that hides the dark circles under my eyes so nobody can see how little I've slept since agreeing to this.

Getting married.

Getting married to *Garrick Matthews*.

I wish my parents were here. Moffie. My grandparents. By the time I said 'yes' Garrick told me he'd get something set up two days from then. Forty-eight hours. Not a lot of time to plan a wedding, yet plenty of time to talk myself out of it and then back in again.

The deciding factor was the updated e-statement I got online for my monthly medication costs. A number that made me cry myself to sleep the night after I agreed to walk into this courthouse. There'd been a soft knock

at the bedroom door before I'd drifted off, but I pretended not to hear it. Whoever was behind it thought better to leave me be.

Nausea settles into the pit of my stomach as the arm wrapped tenderly around mine stops us in front of the judge appointed to cement our fate with pretty words and dried ink.

Chase is standing off to the side, looking as dressed up as his older brother in a maroon shirt and gray slacks, watching the two of us with indifference.

When Garrick told him our plan, he hadn't said anything for a long time. He studied both of us with a close eye, glanced back at his brother, and said, "Mom is going to kill you."

I'd froze.

Garrick chuckled.

Chase agreed to be our witness.

Here we are.

It isn't until we're almost done repeating our vows, which I stumble over making Garrick's blue eyes light up with humor and even Chase fight a secretive smile, that I realize what comes next.

When Judge Jenson says those six words that has my body locking, I try not to suck in a breath when the Australian in front of me steps closer until our shoes touch. One of his hands gently cups my cheek, his eyes seeking silent permission to kiss me, and I know I can't say no.

Giving him a barely-there nod, he leans down and closes the gap between us. I swallow my startled breath when his pillowy lips brush against mine, not demanding more than a tender kiss for show. Blood rushes to my face when he pecks my bottom lip, then the top one, and finally both of them together before drawing back enough to graze his nose along my cheek and caress my parted lips with his warm breath.

My heart drums wildly as I run my tongue across my lips and try fighting the blush when his eyes watch me closely, noticing every little movement I make in awareness of his body right there towering over mine.

I take a step back with a shy smile, and with a safe distance between us again, the judge completes the ceremony looking about as pleased as he can be for two strangers. "I hope you two always find happiness with one another. Congratulations."

The words strike me, a blow right to the heart, and Garrick must see the panic in my face. He takes my arm and places it on his, guiding me back

out so Judge Jenson won't see whatever mood I'm radiating. I can hear Chase follow behind us until we're outside the judge's quarters, and that's when the reality of what I just did sinks in.

Oh my God, I'm married.

It isn't until I know we're clear before I let out a tiny breath that relieves some of the burning in my lungs, but the hyperawareness and unreadable emotion is still packed inside my chest cavity, imploding by the second.

It's Chase who says, "There's a car waiting out back for you two. I'll go out the front to make sure nobody got tipped off."

My eyes go between them. "You think someone would do that?" They both stare at me with brows raised as if I'm ridiculous for asking that. When I realize they're right, I blush deeper than I already was. "Stupid question. I'll shut up now."

Chase tries to hide a smile, but I see the way his lips curl slightly at the corners. He and Garrick may not be blood related, but they have the same mannerisms. His older brother just doesn't hide his amusement as well.

Garrick puts a hand on the small of my back and gestures for me to walk down the same narrow hallway that leads to the back doors we came in. We're quiet for a few moments before he says, "Breathe, Rylee." His hand puts more pressure on my back, gently soothing me. "Are you okay?"

When I was little, I figured my wedding day would be the happiest day of my life. My father would tear up when he saw me, and let a tear shed when he put my hand in my future husband's to officially give me away, and my family would watch with tender smiles as I said 'I do' to the love of my life.

Instead, I can't sort through the wide variety of emotions all swirling around in my head. There's fear, regret, and panic, and deep down, contentment, hope, and faith that everything will work out how it should. But not even that little faith eases any of the guilt over my family not being there.

Relaying that information to Garrick is near impossible in the moment, so I remain silent until I can express myself with words instead of emotions.

Not pushing the matter, he stops us by the door and squeezes my shoulder. "This is going to work for the both of us, Rylee. Everything will be okay."

I inhale slowly, lifting my eyes to his and see the sincerity staring back. We don't move, don't say a word, as we watch each other in the silence of

the building.

It isn't until his chin dips once, his hand returns to the small of my back, and the other pushes open the door for me, that we leave the courthouse behind us as Mr. and Mrs. Matthews.

In the quiet ride back to the house where we don't touch or put any effort into expressing ourselves and the severity of what we've done, something drastic happens.

Everything changes.

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GARRICK

Normally, I don't bother ordering nearly every item off the takeout menu unless the guys are here, but I have no clue what Rylee likes.

Despite not having said a word since we got home, she's curled up at the end of the couch absentmindedly watching TV instead of locked away in her room like usual. I think she feels obligated to stick around down here considering what today is, not that I'd blame her if she needed space.

I've never given much thought about marriage before now, never considered who my future bride would be or what it'd feel like to find love. Mum never preached anything of the sort to us because she wanted us to find happiness in any way we could—whether that was in a significant other, family, career, or otherwise.

But Chase is right. When Mum finds out what I did, she'll be furious. She may have never pressured either of us to get married and settle down, but she'd want to meet the person I'd put a ring on and be at the wedding to support me.

Frowning, I reach into the pocket and pull the velvet box out. Peering over at the couch where Rylee's blonde hair cascades over the back, I let out a small sigh and walk over to her with the jewelry I purchased the day after she said she'd marry me.

Without saying a word, I hold out my palm with the closed box positioned in the center of it. I watch as her eyes slowly trail down toward the offering before widening comically large.

"What is *that*?" she squeaks.

I nudge her to take it, lips wavering at the corners. “I didn’t want to give it to you at the courthouse in case there were paparazzi. This is your story to break, not anybody else’s. But this is yours to have. For show. When this is...” My lips press together as I clear my throat. “When all is said and done in a couple years, you can do as you please with it. Sell it. Keep it. Whatever you want. You could get good money for it if you choose to put it on the market. No hard feelings if you do.”

Rylee doesn’t lift her gaze from the box before hesitant hands reach out to take it. She doesn’t open it and doesn’t speak despite her lips being parted as if she wants to.

The ring isn’t anything too fancy. According to the man I bought it from, it’s a Waverly Diamond—an oval-cut 0.75 carat diamond set on a plain silver band. The manager of the shop tried getting me to spend more money on something far more extravagant, but I had a feeling Rylee wouldn’t like that. Any time I offer her anything, she cringes at the thought of accepting it like she’ll break out into hives if she touches anything that I buy her.

As refreshing as that is, it’s also slightly grating. I want to help her, provide what she needs to be content. But if she constantly refuses, it’s impossible for me to feel needed. And that’s inevitably what I want to be.

Needed.

Essential.

Ever since my name became known, I’ve had to sort the differences between being loved and needed, and used and wanted. The only thing I’ve pictured for the woman I’d give my name to someday is that she’d feel the former toward me—to give me a reason to work my ass off and come home knowing there’d be someone there who saw me without the masked persona.

Rylee doesn’t want to need anyone.

She’s afraid to.

Our situation is complicated because she needs my resources to get by, and she hates it. I just hope she doesn’t hate me in the process.

When my wife finally opens the box, the sharp intake of breath is the only reaction I need to know I chose right. Her eyes go from the ring resting in the holder to me, glazed with cloudy emotion, and says, “It’s beautiful.”

Wanting to lighten the mood, I shrug and say, “Beautiful ring for a beautiful woman.”

A watery laugh is what I get from her, and I accept it happily. It's all I need. "Want to eat? The delivery boy will get a hefty tip once he hauls all the Chinese food I ordered here. Wasn't sure what you wanted."

"Chinese?"

I grin. "Is this where you tell me that you'd prefer pizza? It is your wedding night after all. What the bride wants..."

Her nose scrunches, and her muffled voice offers a small, "Chinese is good."

"Good."

We stare at each other.

This time, a comfortable silence weaves into the crevices of everything left unsaid.

Good.

We settle on a mindless sit-com while we eat, neither one of us really paying attention to the slapstick humor based on the glazed expressions we cast toward the screen and pick through the various boxes of food.

Rylee's focus on the show gives me ample opportunity to *really* look at her. I've definitely cast my gaze her way whenever I could, but she always retreats upstairs and away from my attention before my eyes can give her a thorough once-over.

I know her eye color makes her self-conscious—she looks away as soon as anyone notices how dark the brown tone is in comparison to the crystal blue one that's a touch lighter than my own. But what she probably doesn't know is that everybody who sees them is instantly enamored by their unique beauty. It's like when she smiles. Nobody can resist smiling back when those doe eyes and soft lips are pointed in their direction, even if they're in a piss-poor mood.

I know firsthand.

The honey blonde hair that was down earlier is now thrown up into a messy bun, the same kind I see Mum don often. Except on Rylee, it's artfully done without meaning to be. A single piece rests against her now makeup-less face, and I'm itching to reach over and brush it away if it means seeing her shiver again over my touch.

Her skin is slightly lighter than mine, not pale, but not tan either. I wonder if she gets in the sun whenever she can or if she prefers staying in. There's a freckle at the base of her wrist, and two more in almost a perfectly straight line, making me want to connect the dots and see how far they go.

"You're staring," she remarks, drawing my attention up from the freckle I haven't seen often since she layers in clothes that hide her figure. I wish I could have properly enjoyed her body earlier when it was showcased in the dress she wore to say her vows, making me damn happy she didn't accept my money to buy something else.

She's still looking at the TV, but there's a hint of pink dusting her cheekbones. Before I can comment on it, she tucks her feet under herself and says, "And don't use some cheesy line about admiring the view."

Damn, she's good.

"My mother told me not to lie though," I come back with, smirking when she side-eyes me with a quirked brow.

Eventually, whatever thoughts are filling her head sort themselves out. Her eyes leave my face and go back to the television. "You wouldn't be lying. You'd be evading the truth. Everybody does it."

Sounds interesting. "What truths have you been evading, Rylee? You seem to be upfront with me. Most people in your shoes wouldn't be, least of all with your profession."

She cringes at the reminder of her employment and what story she'll have to craft for her boss. I asked her if she started yet, but she told me she wanted to wait until after the "job was done". A job—as if marrying me is a 9-5 task she wakes up to dread every day.

Maybe she does.

Rubbing the clamminess from my palms onto the jeans I changed into once we got home, I heft out a sigh and brush off the feared thought before it eats at me. "We need to talk about that."

Her eyes dart to me. "About what?"

"Your job." I scratch at the denim, feigning an itch to stall. "Once you submit your article and get the payout, you'll need to quit."

This time, I'm the one looking anywhere but at the woman who's staring me down. Her eyes burn into the side of my face, but I try playing it off.

She doesn't like it there anyway.

She gets paid crap.

She feels trapped.

I'm doing her a favor.

"Garrick," she chokes out, and I hide the frown that wants to waver my otherwise neutral lips at the shake of her tone. "I can't just quit."

"You can." I give her a heartfelt look of encouragement. "You said that if you had nothing left, you wouldn't like who you are anymore." Rylee's silence is more than enough for me to continue. "I'm giving you an out. You don't need that job, not now. Write the piece, get paid, and tell your boss where to kiss it. You know I'll make sure you have everything you need. Medicine, money, whatever you want."

"I'm not the kind of girl who wants to depend on others. That... It scares me. Anything can happen, and then what?"

"We made a deal."

"We rushed into a deal," she agrees, panicked as she fiddles with her fingers. "But what about when our time is up? Two years seems like a long time but that'll be here before we know it."

My nostrils twitch. As much as I don't want to think about that or the domineering feeling that comes with such a cemented statement, I give her the best answer I can. "We'll figure it out when the time comes. But know this, Rylee, you'll be taken care of even then. I'll never take anything away from you, even after we go our separate ways."

I don't want to acknowledge the bitter taste that leaves in my mouth, or the heaviness that creeps into my chest like a darkness eclipsing the beating organ in my ribcage. Refusing to think about it, I push it away and tell myself I'll deal with it another time.

The doubt in her eyes, the fear, is identical to the emotions I saw when I proposed this idea. It's the same look that crossed her face after we walked out of that courthouse. She trusted me enough to believe I'd take care of her, which is the only reason she said yes.

But now she's second guessing that.

I've never trusted easily, so I know it's hypocritical to be offended that Rylee doesn't put faith in me unconditionally. No amount of money can buy something like that—no ring can cement the promises I've made to her, not when there's an impending date hovering over our heads that reminds us we're on a timeline.

"I promise," I say softly, eyes pleading for her to believe me.

Her lips press together, eyes studying me for sincerity, before she nods once. “Okay.”

I settle back onto the couch, easing my tense muscles, and loosening a sigh. “I was staring at you because you’re a catch, Rylee.”

“A catch,” she scoffs quietly, readjusting on the couch. “Sure, I’m a catch. But the fishermen I’m used to want a catch and release. They don’t want to keep me. They just want to say they caught me for the bragging rights.”

She doesn’t try masking the bitterness in her tone, so my interest piques. “Do you *want* to be caught?”

There’s a moment of pause, and I want to know what she’s contemplating—the truth, or a fraction of it. “By whom? You?” Her tone is light, but her two-tone eyes show reluctant acceptance when we lock gazes. “Considering both our names are on the marriage certificate, I’d say I already have been, Mr. Matthews.”

The thought of claiming someone like her should excite me, but I can’t show that. Not yet. Not until she’s truly accepted this. “I’ve never been fishing before, but it seems there’s a benefit to being caught by me, *Mrs. Matthews*.”

Her brows go up in inquiry.

I smirk. “The fisherman who gets to keep the fish, also gets to eat it.”

The blush darkening her face tells me she understands exactly what I mean.

“I’m curious,” I murmur, moving closer until the slightest hitch of her breath curls my lips upwards. It’s the exact sound I hoped to hear as my lips neared hers. I stop short, teasing, waiting, and when she doesn’t object, I press a featherlight kiss against lips that taste faintly of cherry Chapstick.

Humming against her lips, I praise the choice. “One of my favorite flavors.” She doesn’t need to know my absolute favorite is what I’d happily taste if she opened her legs for me.

The tip of my tongue traces the seam of her lips before she parts them and lets me deepen the kiss. As much as I want to touch her, I keep my hands to myself and wait to see if she makes the move.

If I listen close enough I can hear her heartbeat racing, thumping, drumming to the rhythm of mine as she experimentally touches the tip of her tongue against mine. Groaning into her mouth, I run my tongue along

her teeth before drawing back and nipping her bottom lip before letting it go.

Her face is flushed, eyes glazed, as she draws the same lip into her mouth and studies my face carefully.

“Interesting,” I purr, testing my luck and leaning in for one last kiss, only brushing the corner of her mouth this time.

She doesn’t say a word as I pull away and stand, but her eyes follow me as I flatten my shirt, clean up the coffee table of the boxes and silverware, and tell her I’ll be upstairs if she needs me.

I know she won’t follow.

Won’t knock.

But I can’t help but smirk at the way those eyes of hers lit up the second I leaned in with a feeling I know all too well.

Lust.

And that’s when I know there’s hope.

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GARRICK

Chase walks into the home gym I occupy every morning, holding a big box in his hands. “There’s a new delivery guy on our route. When he saw the name on the package I think he got a hard-on. Pretty sure I saw him taking a selfie of himself in front of the house.”

It’s common knowledge where I live nowadays. The gate around the property does its job separating the public from me, but with Rylee here, I have to be careful. After moving around some vehicles in the garage, I had her pull her car inside so nobody could see her plates and trace her here to me because you can never be too safe.

I set down the dumbbells, wipe off my sweaty forehead, and pause the music blasting in my ears. 80s rock is always my preferred go-to when I work out, but Reg has been on our asses about figuring out the rest of our album, so I’ve been listening to instrumentals for the past hour and a half trying to go through lyrics in my head.

“Thanks, Chase.” I rip open the top and peel back the side flaps.

My brother steps forward to inspect what’s inside, his face twisting with confusion. “I didn’t think you liked these things.”

“Rylee said she always wanted one.” I pull out the air fryer box and examine the pictures of fried food on the sides. “It’ll be her wedding gift from me.”

“Christ, you already gave her that huge ass ring—which she hasn’t worn once—and you’re paying her medical bills. *Plus*, you’re planning on putting her on your insurance. Don’t you think that’s enough?”

I set the box down and sigh. "I'm trying to make her happy, mate. You do that for people you care about."

"You don't know her!"

"I know that she's a decent person."

"She sold out your best friend," he points out dryly.

"And she feels awful."

"She was paid to sell out you too and look where that got her. Right in the middle of it all." The judgement in his tone reminds me of the times he talked about Leighton Grier, and I know this has nothing to do with me and Rylee anymore.

"Sometimes," I tell him carefully, "we have to risk getting hurt if it means doing the right thing. All of what you said may be true, but she's never willingly done anything to harm me. The least I can do is hold up my end of the bargain since we've made the agreement already."

He looks away, staring at the wall of mirrors behind the work out equipment while he considers what I said. When he glances back at me, he sounds cautious. "I still think she's getting more out of this than you. Just be careful, okay?"

"I will."

"Have you talked to Mom?"

Wincing, I put the air fryer back into the box it was delivered in and close the flaps. "I spoke with her this morning, filling her in on what's bound to come up in the media."

"She knows about Rylee then?"

"Well..."

Chase rolls his eyes. "You're scared of her, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't say 'scared' exactly." But not even I'm convinced by that. "I told her to give us a day or two before she comes over. She wasn't very happy, but she agreed."

That conversation involved a lot of raised voices, genuine apologies, and countless questions about my new bride. There may have been some cussing to, and not from me.

But overall, Mum wasn't angry.

Disappointed, yes.

Sad she wasn't at the wedding, yes.

But not angry.

I'd take it.

“Have you found a house yet?” I pry, grabbing a towel and wiping off. “Mum mentioned there may have been one or two you were considering.”

“Want me out already?” he jokes. I whip him with the damp towel, making him scowl and step back. “Gross, man, I don’t want your stank on me. And yeah. I’m talking to the realtor today about one of them. It’s not in this area, but not too far away. Burbank.”

I’m not surprised he’s planning on going to a different suburb. He’s always been here, whether at Mum’s house or mine, but prefers the area Zayne lives when we go to his place. “Well, I hope you get it. You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“When the papers are signed,” he agrees.

We fall to silence for a few minutes.

Taking a few swigs of my water, I gesture toward the door. “I need to shower and get some work done, but maybe later we can go do something? Rylee has been working on the article so she’ll be busy, but we haven’t been out just the two of us in a while.”

Chase shifts his weight, glancing down at his phone before dropping his shoulders. “I want to, but I’ve got some stuff going on today. Rain check?”

He’s been dodgy more so now than ever, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t dying to know what’s got him this way. “Girl trouble?” I guess, despite telling myself he’ll let me know with time.

“Something like that,” he murmurs.

“Does this mean you’re over Leighton?”

His shoulders go rigid. “How many times do I have to tell you that I’ve been over her for a long time now? She’s engaged to Kyler. I’m not going to pine over someone who’s obviously not interested.”

Chase’s heated tone tells me to back off, but I’ve never been that smart. “I’m sorry, but I saw them in the city the other day and she asked how you were. Have you talked to her at all?”

“I apologized,” he grits. “What more is there to say?”

Realizing this is a losing battle, I hold my hands up in surrender. “Fine. I’ll drop it. But I know you two were friends before...things progressed.” I remember an old conversation about just how far things went with them but force it away. “Thought maybe it’d be nice to see you two talking again is all.”

“Can you just...” His eyes dull with hurt as he shakes his head. “Can you just stay out of it? There’s nothing going on with me and Leighton.

We're not friends. We're not anything. I'm cool with it and she seems happy. I've got plenty of friends anyway."

I can argue that easily, but I stay quiet.

"So, rain check?" he prompts, backing toward the door.

I nod once. "Sounds good. Let me know when you're free and I'll make sure to set time aside."

It's never hard to flex my schedule when I'm not touring, but whatever is going on in Chase's life might make things slightly more difficult. And as much as I want to know whoever this chick is that's clearly got him flustered, I know I have no reason to butt in where I don't belong. Brother or not, he deserves to have his secrets.

After bringing the box to the kitchen with a note on it for Rylee, showering, and changing, I grab an early lunch and lock myself in my room to work.

It's a few hours of writing lyrics and trashing them, cursing myself for not feeling the song, and nearly throwing my earbuds across the room when my phone buzzes where it rests on the desk.

I expect to see one of the guys' names on the screen, maybe some ridiculous photo of Jax's food since he loves wasting our time with pointless shit like that, a hounding Reg asking for progress updates, or a string of suggestive emojis from an old hookup that occasionally grace my phone when they want something from me.

Instead, it's Rylee's name.

Rylee: Thank you for the air fryer

Rylee: You didn't have to do that

Grinning, I thumb out a reply before turning it on silent and shifting back to the open laptop in front of me.

Garrick: I told you to stop saying that, but you're welcome. Next time you tell me I don't have to do anything I'll find a way to punish you. And I'll give you another promise, Rylee. You'll like it.

I wish I could see her reaction.

I'm not surprised when she leaves the message on read without replying back.

RYLEE

I wake up early after only getting a few hours of sleep, too busy picking at my nails and skin like I've done ever since I was little when anxiety got the better of me. Not even the pretty view I'd gotten up to look at could sooth the jitters that submitting my piece to Sarina has caused.

Her expression was unimpressed after skimming the article, and I had to remember what Garrick told me before I left. *"Don't let her walk all over you. You're stronger than you think."*

When Sarina asked how she was supposed to publish a piece without a name attached to the "supposed bride" of Garrick Matthews, I pointed out that the L.A. Free Press readership would double because everyone would be waiting for more answers to be reported. Her bosses would see the spike in online views and work toward the next follow-up to triple the attention. With the right connections and dollar amount, anyone could sway someone at the courthouse to talk, and for an even bigger buck, see the marriage certificate firsthand.

But that person wouldn't be me, and I'm dreading the countless people who would happily hand over money to see the information that's bound to make headlines everywhere.

I'd walked out of her office and couldn't help but smile to myself because of how much lighter I felt knowing I'd be done as soon as I got paid. No more judgmental looks from her or heavy guilt from the stories I chased after. Garrick was right, I'd be happier without the responsibility this job forces me to take on.

When I'd gotten back to the house, I followed the scent of popcorn to the den where I saw my favorite childhood movie paused on the TV screen. Garrick was stretched out on the couch with a grin on his face as he said, *"Figured we'd celebrate your big day with your favorite movie."*

The look of confusion on my face must have been enough to make him add, *"I overheard you tell my brother that it was the best Disney movie ever made because she fought for everyone else selflessly."*

I told Chase that after he tried insisting that Elsa was the superior childhood princess, but I didn't know Garrick was even listening to our banter. It was over breakfast, and he was on the phone with someone on his team across the room cancelling more interviews like he did Hot in Hollywood. That hadn't gone over well with whoever was on the other end.

Before Garrick had hit PLAY, he reached out and played with a strand of my hair before he'd added, *"It's funny. He usually prefers brunettes. I'm usually the one with a thing for blondes."*

It was nice to spend time watching nostalgic classics, comfortably quiet with no expectations attached. We asked each other random questions, like what the best kind of movie snack is—I said popcorn, he said sour gummy worms. Or if I preferred movies over books—which I do, though he admitted he likes books better because his mother got him into reading at a young age. When I told him that I didn't have a big sweet tooth, he'd asked for a divorce, and when he admitted he'd never read or watched *Harry Potter*, I suggested couples therapy.

Chase had seen us, shook his head, and walked upstairs to his room, not coming back down until I'd decided to go to bed.

I'm not naïve enough to believe I can live my life the same way I did before—that ended the second Garrick and I stepped out of that courthouse. But the little moments shared between us in private, binge-watching old childhood movies, bickering about which ones are underrated or overrated, and teasing each other about the icebreaking reasons we'd end this marriage before it even began, is the type of distraction I need to stay sane.

To believe it'll be okay.

But the lack of sleep after getting the article okay-d by Sarina is bound to be only the first of many sleepless nights. I texted Moffie saying it was a matter of time before my name was everywhere, and then left a vague voice message on my parents' answering machine telling them they may hear things and that I'd explain when I could.

They called, I said everything was fine, then chickened out saying I had to go. My phone has been off since.

With a thin blanket wrapped around me, I walk over to the balcony doors to see a few joggers out like they are every morning, and vehicles come and go from neighboring houses. It's strange to be surrounded by obvious money, and it's become a game to guess how much each house and expensive car is worth and who lives where. I'm certain I saw Mia Casanova leave one of the houses yesterday with a small toddler beside her.

I remember being assigned to the reality star shortly after the Zayne article hit. Sarina wanted the Free Press to break news on the cheating scandal surrounding her and her now husband Dylan first, but I didn't want to touch it. I'd still been sick to my stomach after spending the money I'd gotten to hurt the Violet Wonders drummer. He'd been kind to me, and I didn't give him the same curtesy. Nobody besides Garrick and Moffie know that, and I can't imagine what my parents will say if they ever found out. It's one thing to admit I got married on a whim to a famous singer, and another to admit why.

Absentmindedly, my thumb grazes my naked ring finger where the diamond Garrick gave me days ago should be. I look down, flatten my hands to examine my short, thin fingers, and stifle a sigh.

The ring is beautiful, beyond what I could have imagined, but the thought of sliding it onto my finger makes this too real. And I know, deep down, I don't deserve to wear such extravagant jewelry. It's fit for someone better matched for a guy like Garrick, and that isn't me.

The thought was sweet. I'm sure in a matter of hours when the world sees the latest Hollywood gossip, that ring will be more of a required accessory to cement the news rather than a kind sentiment to mark our situation. It's necessary for the arrangement. That's all.

He hasn't brought up his text from the day before, so I haven't either. And neither of us has said a thing about the kiss, even though I've thought about it constantly. I think of it most at night, when I crawl under the blankets and remember his mouth on mine, his scent engulfing me, then his suggestive promise over text. But not even the self-induced orgasm has eased any of the tension building from what's to come.

Balling up my hand, I walk away from the window and change for the day. By the time I leave my room, it's nearly nine in the morning and I know the latest edition of the L.A. Free Press is live. If my phone were on,

I'd get a news alert, probably a text or two from Moffie, and maybe even something from my parents congratulating me on another article written. They don't always approve of the content, and they *certainly* won't approve of this one, but seeing my name online still makes them excited for me. Especially Dad, who's been my biggest supporter since I told him I was leaving for California.

"*If anyone can make it out there, it's you, kiddo,*" he'd said during the dinner I announced my big news. He'd hugged me, then Mom did, and as much as she tried to smile, her glassy brown eyes told me she was having trouble supporting me knowing I'd be so far from her.

We wouldn't be able to get our nails done together and then gorge out on something unhealthy or spend too much money at movie theaters for films that didn't live up to the hype. I know she's been worried about my health since the day I told them I was moving away, but regardless of her concerns, it never stopped her from wanting what was best for me.

If I have to live my life with a chronic condition, I might as well live it to the fullest doing what I want. That means moving, struggling, and figuring out how to make it work. Pain and all. I may not be proud of what I've done to get by, but I *am* proud of never giving up despite the obstacles against me.

I smile at the thought as I walk downstairs, knowing I still have a little time before my normalcy fades into the oblivion of national news. This is bigger than California because Garrick has been a name in the industry for years. Stories of women always surround him, including polls and predictions of who has the kind of power to make him settle. A listers, B listers, up-and-coming stars are always on the list. Singers, actresses, models. Never someone like me, and I know the second my name is posted people are going to drag it through the mud.

You're stronger than you think, Garrick had told me.

I guess we'll see soon enough.

My stomach grumbles when I smell the bacon before hearing it sizzle the closer I get to the kitchen, and I'm about to greet the man in front of the frying pan when I stop dead in my tracks at the older, female version of Garrick standing there instead.

Chase is at the counter, a bowl of cereal in front of him looking amused as he sees me halt at the doorway.

Turning with one hand on her hip, the slender woman with blonde hair at the stove says, "So you must be my daughter-in-law."

I swallow air, wide-eyed as I hear the faintest snort from Chase. His mother walks up behind him, smacks him upside the back of the head, and gestures toward his cereal. "Eat your damn Captain Crunch and stay out of this, Chase Leroy Matthews." Even from here, I can see the faintest pink settle on his cheeks.

The woman who's clearly been here for a while based on the pancakes, eggs, and other assortment of food on the counter is looking at me again, her pretty face unreadable as she eyes me up and down. I'm in a pair of flare jeans that have damaged, stained hems from the amount of wear they get, and a faded long sleeve shirt that used to look more red than the pink it is now.

"Um..." My eyes dance over her facial features, ones that I can instantly see she passed down to Garrick, before looking to Chase. But his eyes are focused solely on the cereal that he's shoveling into his mouth, which means he'll be no help to me here. So, I force out, "Hello, Mrs. Matthews."

Another muffled noise from the youngest person in the room has his mother rolling her eyes at him before turning to me. "You can call me Elaine, Rylee. We're family now, after all." The reluctant comment has her eyes raking over me again, her lips twisting in contemplation. "I must say, you're not what I was expecting when Garrick told me the news. Quite suddenly, I might add."

I blush, keeping my eyes on the floor knowing she probably would have pictured someone famous standing in front of her and sharing her family name and not some small-town girl from New York with barely a penny to her name.

"I don't mean that in a bad way," she says as if she's reading my thoughts. "Heaven knows my boy doesn't need a bad influence in his life long-term to help him make any more poor decisions. He's good enough at doing that on his own. Though, I won't lie, I'm not very fond of the one he made here without even introducing us beforehand. I suppose your family knew and attended the ceremony?"

My eyes shift around the room, willing Garrick to appear at any second to help me out. I don't even hear him moving around the house, which tells me he's not here.

It's Chase who confirms. "Your husband went for a run, *sis*." The smile in his tone makes me want to glare at him for finding this funny, but I'm already making a bad impression on their mother and I know how important she is to Garrick.

Sighing lightly, I tell her the truth. "My family doesn't know. They live in New York and things happened...quickly." It's better to give a half-truth than a lie. I have no clue what Garrick did or didn't say. Does he even know she's here? Did he purposefully leave me to fend for myself?

Elaine hums, studying me again before finally nodding. "That's what my oldest said. It's a shame. He mentioned you were close to your family. This is a big deal, so I'm sure they would have wanted to be there to support you like I would have wanted to for my son."

It's hard to swallow past the shame lodged into my throat, so all I can do is nod and wipe my sweaty palms along the sides of my thigh. At least I brushed my hair and teeth before coming down. It's about as nice as I've looked in days, probably since the wedding.

After a long moment, she nods once and walks back over to the stove. "I suppose what's done is done. I'd like to get to know you. Why don't you tell me about yourself starting with how you like your bacon?"

It takes me a few seconds before I shuffle to the island and sit at the stool next to Chase. He's still trying to stuff his face so he doesn't have to contribute, but there's a small grin that I think has to do with my obvious discomfort over the grilling I'm about to get from his mother.

But I do as my new mother-in-law asks and give her a little view into my life—not before I kick Chase under the island and watch as he spills some of his cereal.

My life is nothing exciting, and there are parts I certainly skip, including why her son and I tied the knot, until she seems a little more satisfied with the situation. Not happy, that's for sure, but her gaze doesn't look nearly as venomous as it did which I consider a small win.

I can't say she likes me, but she doesn't show her dislike either as she nods along and asks follow-up questions in between. All the while Chase ping-pongs back and forth between us like he's invested or waiting for me to screw up.

Offering to help once she's finished cooking, I grab plates and glasses from the cupboard while she gathers silverware, and freeze when she bluntly asks, "Do you love my son?"

It's a miracle I don't drop the plates, but there's no doubt the woman whose been eyeing me like a hawk since I came downstairs saw the way I locked up at the question.

Before I can answer, a new voice saves the day as an overheated, sweaty body comes up behind me and presses itself into my back. "Of course she does," Garrick announces, pecking me on the cheek and ruffling my hair that's barely contained in a frizzy ponytail. "I wouldn't have married her otherwise."

The lie settles deep into my chest, sinking its claws into my heart. When I turn, Garrick drapes a bare arm over my shoulder and tugs me into his side. His sleeveless shirt is drenched and he's still breathing hard as he catches his breath, the soft sound of music crooning from the air pods in his ears before he fiddles with his phone to turn off the music.

I know that anything I say will be dissected by his mother, so I choose my words carefully. "I'm very lucky to have Garrick in my life. He's the most respectful guy I've ever met and has helped me when he knew I needed it most."

Garrick squeezes me. "Because I knew you'd never ask."

My eyes shift upward, a genuine smile softly lifting my lips. "I appreciate it."

He shoots me a wink before turning to his mother with a cheeky grin. "Brekki smells amazing, Mum."

I don't miss the way her gaze moves back and forth between us, trying to figure us out. Whatever she sees, she accepts, and I wouldn't mind knowing what that is. She gestures toward the table, waving her hand around. "Wash up and help your wife finish setting the table. Chase, when you're done pretending to eat so you can eavesdrop on your brother and sister-in-law, you can get ready for the next showing we leave for in an hour. I have a good feeling about this one since the last offer fell through."

It's funny to watch the Matthews boys in action, not blinking once as they listen to their mother's orders. Garrick pecks my cheek again, too close to the corner of my lips like he'd done the night of our wedding, leaving my face flushed despite the contact barely lasting a millisecond.

He jogs upstairs while Chase grumbles under his breath and finishes his cereal before dragging himself up too.

I'm setting a plate down when a soft hand reaches out and captures mine. "My son didn't even bother getting you a ring? And here I thought I

raised him better than that.”

My eyes widen when I realize the ring is currently in its box in my suitcase, still packed because I’m afraid the second I put my clothes anywhere else, something bad will happen.

I know this is my home for now—that Garrick wouldn’t kick me out unless I did something unforgivable. The lingering unknown still taunts me, and if it ever comes to pass, I want to be ready to leave. To pick up my bag and walk out the door without a moment’s hesitation.

Pulling my hand back, I offer her a shy look before tidying up the table. “He did, I just...” Her eyes are piercing me, and I force myself to meet the blue orbs staring back that Garrick clearly inherited from her. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel real. Like I forget this is happening. It’s a lot to take in, I suppose.”

She straightens, eyes going down to my bare hand again. “I’d like to see it if that’s all right. I’m curious as to what my son thinks is appropriate jewelry. I used to worry that he’d ask one of his friends to help him pick something like that out, and I think that scares me more than him doing it himself.”

Something about her chiding tone makes me smile, and it’s the first real one that’s graced my face since seeing her. For a second, I wonder if she can tell the difference. “The one he chose is perfect for me, though I would have been fine without one at all. I’m not big into...well, big things. Expensive things make me uncomfortable most of the time.”

Her abrupt laugh surprises me, one of her hands settling on her hip. “Sweetheart, you married the wrong man if that’s the case. But it’ll be interesting to see how quickly that changes once your relationship blooms. And based on what I’ve been seeing online and hearing from my book club girls, the world is waiting to see how this will work too. This has only just begun for you.”

My throat feels like it’s closing in.

I knew this would happen.

Welcomed it.

Wrote about it like a challenge to the world.

But I knew I’d never be ready for the truth, especially not when my name becomes attached to the articles.

Elaine reaches out, a sincere but serious look on her face. “Yasmin seems to think this is going to last, and I trust her word. She’s always been a

good judge of character. It's my boy who has a heart of gold and will do anything for the people he cares about that I worry about."

My brows pinch. "Why?"

"Because very few people in his life extend him the same courtesy."

I hear the words she doesn't say perfectly clear, nodding as I press my lips together.

Don't hurt my son.

"He deserves someone who will treat him with the same kindness he offers others," I agree, not giving anything away.

I don't know what to expect her to say in reply, but all she gives me is, "I have a feeling about you, Rylee."

She doesn't elaborate about whether it's a good or bad one, and I'm grateful. I'm not sure what all of Garrick's dealbreakers are, but something tells me if his mother doesn't approve, it's probably best that my bag is still packed.

When the man in question joins us back downstairs, hair damp and body smelling clean and masculine from whatever bodywash he uses, we sit side by side so close that I can feel his body heat soak into me.

His leg bumps my thigh.

His arm presses against my arm.

When I look at him, he smiles.

And I wonder what he sees when his eyes take in my face slowly, first one eye, then the other, until his eyes roam toward my lips.

I don't know what he's thinking.

And I'm glad.

The resignation letter attached to the email for Sarina is still left unsent as I stare at the computer screen. The telltale ache in my eyes says I'm seconds away from getting another headache, the third one this week from stress, while I will myself to hit the SEND button.

My thumb raises to my lips, my teeth nipping at the crooked edges of my nail, until I feel another set of eyes on me from the curly-haired boy sitting on the couch across the room. So, I bite the bullet. "Can I ask for your advice?"

Chase glances up at me from his laptop, blinking slowly. "You want advice from *me*? Didn't our mother give you enough earlier?"

Elaine Matthews definitely gave me a lot to think about, but considering my job never came up even though she tried digging, nothing she said could help me now. “Would you give up your job if you were in my situation?”

A gargled snort comes from him. “I’d never be in your situation. Marriage has never been for me, especially not to someone like my brother. Total attention-seeker. Talk about draining.”

I force myself not to frown. Chase has never struggled like I have, so I doubt he’d be able to put himself in my shoes. Leaning back in the dining room chair, I internally sigh and drop my hands into my lap. “I’m not saying I love this job because I don’t. But it’s still *mine*.”

The excitement I’d had over being free of Sarina went away the second I saw the money deposited into my account. It’s money *I* earned. Not some given to me or supplied by someone else in control. I’d been in a relationship like that in the past, not a serious one, not one I’m scarred from, but one I *learned* from.

I don’t want to rely on anyone and feel like I’m never able to contribute.

Chase’s head cocks as he stares at me for a few seconds before smirking. “You’re going to give Garrick a serious challenge. I’ve met some of the bimbos he’s had around. They never want anything of their own as long as they have him. He probably has no idea what to do with you.”

I’m not sure I like the feeling that buzzes under my skin. It reminds me too much of past jealousy over petty things that riled me up—an ex getting into a new relationship, or someone at work getting a promotion when they don’t put in as much effort as me. My voice is quiet when I simply say, “I like my independence.”

“You can still have that without this job. Just find something else. It isn’t like he’s going to lock you up in here, though you may want to consider it for a while.”

Face draining of blood, I squeak, “Why?”

“You’ve worked in this industry for how long? C’mon. Everyone is going to be on you the second you resurface. They’ll want to know how you snatched him up, why, when, and everything in between. Garrick gets followed everywhere he goes. He ignores it, pretends the people pointing cameras don’t exist, but they’re there. Always harassing. Always waiting for the next story. You should know that since you were one of them, ready to sink your talons in the second you got the chance.”

His words penetrate the part of me that I like keeping locked up. They're true, and that's why they hurt. "You don't like me, do you?"

"It's not that I don't like you. I just don't get you. And it's hard for me to trust people that I don't understand."

I cringe. "I get that. And just so you know, I never wanted to do him any harm by writing about him. Or anyone I was assigned to."

He shrugs. "Doesn't mean you didn't."

My throat feels tight as I stare down at my lap, my fingers twisting together nervously. "I'm afraid of who I'll become if I have to start relying on other people, that's why I don't know what to do about this."

Chase stands, closing his laptop and slipping it under his arm. "Hate to break it to you, but you signed up for this knowing that there was going to be attention on you and what cost it'd be for *both* you and my brother in the end." His tone comes off matter of fact, not too harsh or condescending, but not light either. Not that I'd expect him to spare my feelings. "If it makes you feel any better, the fact you're worried about losing yourself means you'll always be cautious about staying humble. My brother may be an annoying asshole sometimes, but he's probably the most selfless person I know. I don't think you have anything to worry about, especially not with him."

I know anyone could say that in defense of the person they care for, but I believe Chase when he tells me I have nothing to worry about. Garrick has given me space and proven himself to be respectful time and time again.

After breakfast, he told me he'd help his mother clean up so I could go on with my day. He never once asked about my lack of ring, though I saw his eyes trail to my bare finger, and always found ways to answer his mother's questions without lying because he knows it makes me uncomfortable. He hasn't pressured me to do anything more with him, or even sent any more suggestive texts that make me blush.

Garrick is a good person.

And the world *will* know that.

I bite down on my thumbnail the same second I hit the SEND button, listening to the *snap* of my nail sync with the *message sent* noise I receive as soon as the task is done.

It's step one to making Garrick see that I trust him, to show I know who he is.

"Thank you, Chase."

He pauses for only a moment at my soft tone before walking toward the stairs, calling over his shoulder, “Just don’t hurt him. We both know he doesn’t deserve that.”

Two warnings in one day tells me all I need to know about my husband.

While he’s off worrying about everybody else around him like his mother and Yasmin says he is, his family will always have his back. And even though it’s temporary, I’m glad to be part of it.

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GARRICK

The door to the studio flies open, and the guys pour in with Nelson, one of the security guards, stepping in front of the wood separating us and the paparazzi gathered outside. The building is somewhat soundproof, a nice feature knowing the second that door opens it's a rush of loud voices and clicking, blinding cameras.

Considering I've been avoiding their texts and calls save the "be at the studio at 3" message I sent the group chat, I'm not surprised to see a mixture of glowering and disbelieving expressions staring back at me. My feet are propped up on the edge of the sound board, a keyboard in my lap, and a casual smile on my face.

"Boys," I greet, carefully sliding the board off me and dropping my feet onto the floor.

Manning winces as Zayne shoves him and Jax out of the way until he's standing in front of me. I don't expect any hearty congratulations from any of them, but I also didn't anticipate the furious expression my friend is giving me. "What the fuck, Matthews?"

The guys all cringe, Cal seemingly finding the plant in the corner of the room fascinating, and Jax studying the records hanging on the wall as if they haven't been there all the years we've come here. I meet Zayne's eyes, but he barely locks my gaze before he gestures toward the recording room.

Following him in, I say, "I know you're all probably wondering why I didn't tell you—"

"Why *her*?" he growls, slamming the door closed and facing me with pure white rage I've only seen on his face one other time. It was right

before the band called it quits. He walked away and never looked back until I reached out to make amends over what had gone down between us.

It takes me a few seconds to understand his question. “Rylee?”

“Why. Her?”

I blink. “I’m not following, mate. She—”

He cuts me off again. “You could have chosen anyone, and you had to pick someone who fucked me over. You’re one hell of a friend, Matthews.”

I hear a muffled “oh shit” come from outside the room and know we have a captive audience watching. “Rylee came clean about what happened, Zayne. She never hid the article about you or her contributions to it. I was going to tell you.”

He throws his hands up before turning around, gripping the sides of his neck. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? Am I meant to be happy that you married a girl *I* introduced you to when *I* was seeing her?”

Instantly, I know what he’s implying, and I don’t like it. Eye twitching, I clench my fists that are tucked into my armpits where my arms are crossed. “I wouldn’t have done that to you. I’ve never touched a girl you laid claim to. You or any of the guys.”

His eyes snap to me, raw anger challenging me. “That’s hilarious considering you *married* the one I actually saw something in.”

Shit. “You really liked her?”

“You know I did.”

“I—”

“I went to you, Garrick.” One of his hands flies out toward the guys watching through the glass, all looking like they wish they had popcorn right about now. “The guys all told me I was fucking crazy for going after her because it wouldn’t last with our crazy schedule, but *you* told me to do what made me happy. And up until the day those goddam photos surfaced she was the thing that made me happy. I felt normal. Not like some guy from Violet Wonders. A dude who liked a girl and wanted it to work. That’s it. She didn’t ask about the band or the money or the fame. I could talk to her about anything and not feel judged or used. You told me that was something special when I went to you about her.”

I scrub a hand down the side of my face. It’s no secret that I’m a tool when it comes to women—a cheat, a player looking to have fun for a while before growing bored. And, sure, I’ve been known to steal women a time or

two from others, but that was when I was out of control. Younger. Stupid. I never once went after someone that I knew a bandmate was into.

The day I met Rylee...

It's a blur. Everything from that period was because I'd been so focused on trying to pull myself out of the pit of overwhelming anxiety I'd buried myself so deeply in. I was ten times more selfish than usual, only concerned with myself, on trying to get healthy and fight the intense need to seek out anything to ease the craving.

The world had taken a backseat to my sobriety—Chase, Mum, my friends, my *career*. I don't recall a lot of the shit that happened because it wasn't what I wanted to concentrate on then.

Not Zayne's problems.

Not what Rylee did to him.

All I remember is the way my eyes always found hers from across the room the night Zayne introduced us. How I'd twitch whenever one of his hands touched her waist, or when she'd brush up against his side to get closer whenever he'd talk over the loud music. They didn't stay long, and that made me irrationally angry.

The feelings I recall vividly—the keyed-up intensity that I blamed on the detox. How the emotions fed into my need to escape. I begged myself to call someone to get me out of there before I did something stupid. Like use. Like go after them because, deep down, I knew where Zayne was going and what he was doing every time he slipped into the bathroom.

I'd been there.

Fuck. I taught him the ropes.

I'd relived those exact moments constantly over the years, but the woman's face was always out of focus. Her hair was brown, her body was fucking sinful, and those eyes...

I didn't want to believe it was Rylee.

It wasn't until she even told me we'd met before that it clicked into place.

All those feelings, those choppy memories, because of a girl I didn't even know.

I dropped the ball on my best mate's feelings in favor of my own, and clearly crossed a line by giving her my last name. And as much as I want to feel bad, to tell him I'd take it back or make it better, I couldn't do either. I'd given Rylee my word.

“Zayne, I’m sorry,” I tell him honestly, voice rough but sincere. I’m sorry for more than just what happened with me and Rylee. I gave him the drugs that night, making me partially responsible. I’m the reason a lot of shit has happened to him—to all the guys. “I was going through hell back then. You know some days were worse than others, and I was struggling.”

He looks like he wants to grab the microphone and smash it through the glass. Face red, he distances himself from me. “That’s the thing, Garrick. You may have been struggling, but so were the rest of us. We put everything on pause for you. We stopped touring. Stopped recording. Took a hit in the media. In sales. As long as you got better, we didn’t care about any of that shit. But it’s always been about you and what you wanted. The few times any of us have tried getting something for ourselves, you have to do something that pulls it back to you because heaven fucking forbid anyone else is happy around here.”

He barely takes a breath before continuing, and I know better than to try speaking, to reassuring him anyway I can. “Did you know I was sick to my stomach when the tabloids blasted my photos everywhere? I thought you’d relapse if you saw them. I thought I’d ruined everything for you because I wasn’t done having fun yet. I felt like the shittiest friend, the most selfish ass I could have been because of what I’d been caught doing. And what was worse was that the first girl who seemed normal, who granted me a sense of peace, was responsible for the biggest regret in my life. Yet here you are, all this time later, with the same woman I poured my heart out to you over. So, out of the two of us, who’s the *real* selfish friend?”

He’s met by silence as I take in every word, every accusation, and every truth that slips past his lips.

I can’t refute any of it.

I’m a shitty friend.

I *used* to be a shitty friend.

I used to be selfish.

Indifferent.

A hothead.

Sometimes I wonder if I’m still that person, trying to mask my true personality with layers of fake bullshit so people won’t hate me. Like maybe one day that version of me will resurface the second it becomes too tiring to pretend I’m anything but.

I know that version of me was ruled by drugs and alcohol, woven together by poor decisions, and stitched up by the users who wanted whatever was left.

For a split second, I feel hollow. As if I'm not standing in the middle of the recording studio with my band, being watched and scrutinized by my friends, but rather somewhere far, far away.

I wish I was.

But I'm not.

"I'm sorry," I tell him again. "We all know how I used to be, and hell, maybe I'm not that different now. There are things I can't explain—" My eyes subtly move to Nelson, still guarding the door. Despite the graying man working with us for a while now, one can never be too careful of what they divulge around others. "—but I do want to explain myself if you'll let me. We can do it at the house if you're comfortable. Or somewhere else if you'd prefer. But you should know, mate, that I did this for you too. If I'd known about Rylee and you..."

Well, I can't say I'd choose differently. I guess that makes me as bad as he says I am.

My offer is a long shot, one I'm not sure he'll take, so I try not to let it sink in too deep when he says, "I need some time to think. I'm not saying no, though. Until then, you can all get your parts recorded today and I'll come back to do mine. If Reg has a problem with it, tell him to kiss my ass when he gets here."

He opens the recording room door and doesn't look back as he approaches Nelson. They speak quietly between each other before the guard nods once and opens the door for him, helping him get through the masses gathered outside.

The remaining members of Violet Wonders all turn to me.

Jax says, "Bro, we didn't even get to have a bachelor party. The fuck?"

Manning smacks him.

Cal rolls his eyes.

I do nothing but advise them to get inside so we can start the session. It's the only thing that'll keep my mind off things, a temporary fix, but better than the alternatives.

I close the front door behind me with thoughts weighing down every step as I drop my shit down and heave out a long sigh. Chase is gone doing whatever he's been secretly sneaking out to do, which is a blessing in disguise, because I don't feel like dealing with him while I talk to Rylee.

He may not admit it, but he doesn't mind having her around, especially since he has someone to torture who will actually react unlike me. I've gotten used to his shit and know how to dish it back, but Rylee is hesitant. Unsure if she should cross that line with him. The only time she ever has was when movies were brought up, and the passion in her voice when she talked about some of her favorites made me want to hear her talk about other things she was into if it meant hearing that heat in her tone.

Her car is parked in the garage, but there's not a sound coming from inside the house. Sometimes I'll get home and she'll be in the kitchen making herself something to eat. The other day, she even tried cooking dinner for Chase and me, but she'd managed to burn the spaghetti sauce, overcook the meatballs, and make a huge mess of the stovetop in the process. I tried not teasing her about it, but it was obvious both me and my brother found her valiant efforts amusing and not even her cute, tinted cheeks could keep us from saying anything.

I head upstairs after checking the backyard where she's started a small flower garden with the help of Yasmin. I check on the progress every day I get home, sometimes even watching her methodically play in the dirt. The plants definitely add to the aesthetic, and Yasmin winked at me when I smiled at the purple petals gracing a majority of the flowerbeds.

I'm about to knock on her cracked door, but the silence inside makes me ease it quietly open instead. She's sound asleep on one side of the bed, her hands balled up under her cheek like a pillow, half covered with the throw blanket Yasmin insisted on keeping in here because she said this room is "the coldest one in the house", not that I knew that. I wouldn't have put Rylee in it even if it's a more isolated space if I'd known.

Walking in, I study the bags in the corner that she's clearly living from and spot the closed ring box sitting on top of her clothes. My lips twitch, but I decide not to think much on it.

Turning to Rylee, I watch her chest slowly rise and fall with peaceful breaths and carefully pull the blanket up to cover her better. She makes an

unintelligible noise I can't make out, then drifts back off, curling a hand around the hem of the blanket and tugging it closer to her face.

I want to ask her about her history with Zayne, get a feel for what she felt before she sold those pictures. There's nothing I can do to change what we've already done, and neither of us can go back in time to stop her from snapping those photos if she ever considered him more than a job, but it'd give me peace of mind. I may not remember a lot from the time period, but if I think hard enough I remember the way she'd stiffen around him, hesitate like she was never completely comfortable.

She sure as hell doesn't hesitate around me.

The more I watch her sleep, the more I realize that there's a reason she captured my attention the first time. Sure, looks had something to do with it. But there's an air about her, something that encompasses her tiny frame that people can't help but find captivating. Knowing how much I hurt Zayne, I don't want to think about why she broke past the haze I was in that night, and the many nights following, because then I'm playing a dangerous game.

If I make the wrong move, my best friend will call it quits again, Rylee will be caught in the middle, and the press will get everything they wanted and then some from the drama. The others will be collateral just like before.

History repeating itself.

I'll need an answer soon enough from her, but I back out and close the door quietly behind me until then.

By the time I change into my typical work out attire, there's a message waiting for me on my phone.

Zayne: Ur an asshole

Garrick: I know

Zayne: Let's hope she doesn't fuck you over too

It's the only approval I'll get from him.

And I take it.

RYLEE

I know it's going to be a rough day when I wake up and my body is limp with fatigue, my stomach twisted with nausea, and head pounding with a migraine to the point my ears *thump*.

This usually happens after my injection—side effects that beat me up for a day or two before making me feel halfway normal. It's not always so bad, but the stress of news alerts with my name attached to them, paparazzi coming into the small cul-de-sac that Garrick has unsuccessfully tried hiding from me, and my poor decision to avoid my family has led karma straight to me.

After relieving myself in the bathroom, I walk with heavy limbs back into the bedroom and crawl into the warm blankets until I'm flat against the mattress. My eyelids weigh down as I slip back into sleep hoping a few extra hours will help make a difference. Yasmin and I were supposed to work on building a small garden box for vegetables, something she seemed excited about when I told her old stories of my grandparents and the summers I'd spend at their house, but I don't see that happening now.

I'm not surprised when I wake up from the quiet knocking on the door that syncs with the throbbing in my temples. I try to answer but it comes out in a garbled groan, which makes the person behind the door crack it open.

"Rylee?" The accented voice is full of worry, and I can't pick my head up or open my eyes to see it carved into his face. Suddenly, there's a hand on my forehead and a soft curse coming from him as he sits on the edge of the bed. "You're burning up, love. Are you sick? Cold? Is it your medicine? I read online that this can happen."

“Meds,” I confirm, squeezing my eyes closed as tight as they can go to block out the light. “Can you get me some Motrin please?”

He’s quick to act, getting up and walking to the bathroom. The medicine cabinet is well stocked with my medication and some painkillers that help for moments like these—some that I bought, and others that showed up a week or so after I agreed to stay here. Yasmin told me Garrick had her make sure I had everything I needed.

As he’s walking toward me, I feel the telltale sign of something bad about to happen. Pressure forms in my stomach, violently rising up my throat until I’m bending over the side of the bed and emptying my stomach onto the carpet. The white, pristine carpet. Hair is being pulled away from me, though I’m sure I got vomit in it already, and a hand rubs my back in comforting circles.

“Shh,” he soothes. “Deep breaths.”

“I puked on the floor,” I cry weakly.

Embarrassment will smack me hard later, but right now all I can focus on is the horrible taste in my mouth. I faceplant into the mattress and let out a shaky sound as Garrick stands up and goes to the door.

“Yasmin,” he calls.

Oh no. I sit up, feeling dizziness take over, and say, “I’ll clean it up,” in a small voice.

I don’t expect him to widen the door, roll up the sleeves of his shirt and shake his head. “*I will clean this up.*” When his housekeeper arrives, she gasps at the mess. “Yas, while I get this cleaned, can you help Rylee to the bathroom. She’s going to need to wash up.”

I pry my eyes open and stare at the man giving orders. “I don’t need—”

“You vomited on yourself, and I’d put you in the tub myself and wash you off, but you’d probably be more comfortable if Yasmin helped. I’ll get everything set out here. Okay?”

I don’t have the energy to argue. He helps Yasmin get me to the bathroom and has the water in the tub running before leaving his employee to help me. Not wanting to strip down completely, I pull off my sweatshirt with Yasmin’s help and get into the streaming water. Because it’s hard to stand, she guides me to sit on the side of the tub while she helps me wash my hair.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

She pats my shoulder gently in comfort. “I have three kids, sweetheart. This is nothing.”

It barely helps, but I’ll take it.

I’m soaking wet by the time she’s done but at least getting sick helped the pressure in my head ease enough for me to stand on my own without risking falling. Yasmin sits me on the closed toilet seat while she fetches me fresh clothes to change into after I dry, and I hear the faint murmurs of her and Garrick until she comes back in and clicks the door closed behind her.

She helps me dry and brush my hair. “I haven’t seen him treat anyone like this before.”

I offer her a timid smile. “You mean he hasn’t cleaned up puke from any of the women that’s stayed here before?”

She laughs lightly. “You’d be the first.”

Wanting to groan over that, I internally shake it off. All I say is, “Lucky me.”

Her hand squeezes my arm as she turns her back while I change. She knocks on the door twice, signaling Garrick to walk in once I’m all set.

“You don’t—”

I yelp when he picks me up, cradling me to his chest and carrying me out of the bathroom. I protest when he walks us out of the room and down the hall, but all he says is, “The room smells like vomit. You can stay in mine for now until we air it out.”

I blush.

“And don’t say you’re sorry,” he tells me firmly, eyeing me knowingly. “It happens. I’ll get you some water and medicine after you’re settled in.”

He nudges open his bedroom door and carefully brings me inside. My nerves skyrocket the second we get into his space, but I don’t have time to look around or overthink before I’m being placed on a cloud-like mattress that I imagine came from heaven itself.

“I’ll be right back.”

He’s gone before I can blink, and I barely remember him getting back, passing me some pills and water, before I fall back asleep.

here’s a fuzzy purple blanket folded on my bed that wasn’t there when I was carried out this morning. As I approach the new item, I graze the fleece material and smile when I pick it up.

“A Snuggie,” I laugh, shaking my head as soon as I realize what it is.

“I never use it,” a new voice states from behind me, causing me to whirl around. Garrick gestures toward the piece. “It’s been collecting dust in my closet since it arrived. Don’t worry, I washed it.”

“It’s purple,” I state dumbly.

He snickers at the astute observation. “Violet, to be more accurate. My favorite color.”

I blink a few times. “I thought you always joked about that when people asked. Most men say blue or black or something.”

He casually strolls into my room and sits on the edge of the bed, seemingly not caring about the mess I made in here earlier. Though whatever he and Yasmin did to the carpet makes it look like nothing happened at all, a magic trick I’ll have to ask her about. “I prefer colors with personality. The guys hated me when I came up with the band name, but nothing else stuck. Then all of a sudden we had branding and merchandise that were all violet and they learned to deal because the people loved it.”

I don’t remember the origin story of how Violet Wonders got their name well, only that Garrick was the one who’d suggested it. Obviously, it stuck.

“What about you? What’s your favorite color?” he asks, his eyes on the Snuggie instead of me.

His casualness makes me study him for a moment before I shrug. “I don’t really have one. I guess it depends on my mood. When I was little I’m pretty sure I told everybody that it was pink. My room was painted that color, my bedspread was the shade of bubble gum, and so were my pillows, curtains, and everything else.”

His head cocks, something flashing in his eyes as they capture mine. “And what’s the mood now?”

My tongue runs along the seam of my lips as I study him, then the Snuggie in my hands. “I suppose violet isn’t so bad.”

He grins. Instead of torturing me with more comments, he changes topics. “You’re feeling better, yeah?”

“Yes, much. Thank you for...everything. I’m not sure how you got the stain out, but I’m glad you managed. And I’ll make sure to thank Yasmin next time I see her too.”

“Yasmin likes you.”

“Still doesn’t mean she had to do what she did,” I reason quietly. “Not everybody would have, so I appreciate it.”

Garrick is quiet for a moment. “I would have called your mother to see if there was anything I should have done, but I didn’t have the passcode to your phone, and I don’t know what they know about us.”

This time, I’m the quiet one.

“Chase said you haven’t been answering your phone,” he adds, leading to a conversation we haven’t touched on before.

“I wasn’t aware he was keeping tabs on me,” I murmur, slightly hurt over the idea he’s been keeping an eye out.

One shoulder rises casually, either not hearing the strained tone in my voice or not caring. “He’s quiet half the time, but the other half he’s watching. It sounds creepy, but that’s just my brother. He’s a wallflower.” His brows raise. “So?”

Lowering the Snuggie, I place it back on the bed and walk over to the window. “I’ve been getting a ton of calls, texts, and emails from people since some of the headlines started.”

A Modern-Day Cinderella Story

How A Reporter Snagged A King

Meet the Woman Who Tamed Hollywood’s Biggest Bachelor

I hadn’t planned to shut my phone off completely because I knew my parents deserved answers, but my name was everywhere, and my contact information along with it. I’m always told to reduce the stress in my life so I don’t make myself sicker, but that’s basically impossible when the world is contemplating if I deserve my new role or not. The only peace I got from people wanting interviews was when the device was off and far, far away from me.

Moffie had instant messaged me to let me know my parents were hounding her for answers, but the best I could do was “tell them I’m fine and that I love them.”

She’d said one thing back.

Chicken.

Blowing out a breath, I shake my head and lean my hip against the wall. “I knew this would happen. Your brother told me I’d need to change my number, but I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that. At least, not so soon.”

“We can go somewhere to get you a new—”

“No!” I blush at the quick answer, seeing the way his brows dart up at the reaction in return. “I’m an introverted person by nature, so knowing what’s probably waiting for me...for *us*... I don’t even know if there is an ‘us’ you know? I mean, of course there is, but not really. You’re...you. And our situation isn’t ideal, so what the hell would we even say to people? I know how this works because I used to be the person on the other end of this situation. I don’t feel like walking into a trap.”

“Take a deep breath,” he directs calmly, not commenting on the jumbled rant of worried words that fly out of my mouth.

I do as he says.

“Another. In for three. Out for three.”

I nod once and close my eyes, letting oxygen flood my lungs and ease the tightness trying to suffocate me from within.

My eyes remain closed when his soft voice penetrates the wall I’ve built up. “When I was in rehab, I’d have anxiety attacks when life became too much. I was always thinking about what would come after I left, if I’d relapse, if I’d stay strong. I worried about what my family, friends, and fans thought of me. My situation was public knowledge, something my team chose to be honest about when they had to cancel or postpone tour venues.”

Cracking my eyes open, I notice that he’s sitting back against the headboard, eyes closed like he’s lost in thought. “My counselor there taught me breathing techniques. How long to inhale, how long to exhale. It doesn’t always work—” He opens his eyes and catches me staring at him. “—but it does the trick when we let ourselves give it a chance.”

Our eyes don’t stray from one another’s as he pats the empty spot beside him on the bed. My feet push me forward despite a part of me wanting to hesitate until I’m cross-legged next to him, body stiff and chest tight from panic.

I ask, “How do you deal with it? The anxiety? The fame? People like me coming after you all the time?”

His legs stretch out in front of him, one ankle crossed over the other, and arms resting on his broad chest. “Some of us don’t have a choice. It was hard to adjust when Violet Wonders first made it big because none of us saw it coming. We soaked up the attention at first since we’d never experienced anything like it before. Got whatever our money could buy us. Lived the high life without thinking anything or anyone could touch us. We felt invincible, until we realized we weren’t.”

His somber tone tells me it wasn't easy figuring that out, and he confirms as much. "It was only a matter of time before one of us went off the deep end, and it was no surprise to anyone that it was me. I'm glad though. I don't think Cal or Jax would have been able to pull through it if they had to. They don't have many motivations outside what our music can do for us. Zayne, me, Manning, we have things to fight for. I still worry about them going too far like I did and never being able to come back from it."

Garrick's eyes are focused forward, staring off at the wall across the room, lost in whatever thoughts are circulating in his head. It's hard to decipher the emotions he must be feeling, because he keeps a steady grip on the mask he's always wearing.

The one of sarcasm.

Humor.

Indifference.

Who are you, Garrick Matthews?

When his head turns, he leans it against the upholstered headboard behind him and blinks lazily. "It's hard to face people when you don't know what they'll say, and you can never properly prepare yourself for it because anything can happen. But that doesn't mean you can avoid them forever. That goes for the people who will be shouting our names and shoving cameras in our faces when we leave the house, which we'll have to do eventually, and the people you've been ignoring on your phone who actually give a shit about your wellbeing."

Heat settles into my cheeks. "I don't want them to be mad at me."

"So what if they are? It'll likely only be for a little while. They're your family, Rylee, you can't avoid them forever. They mean too much to you, I know they do."

How can he say that with so much certainty? "I'll never understand how your brain works."

The subtle smile is almost unrecognizable on his face because it's not full of humor or charm. It's light and genuine, comforting. "Trust me, you don't want to understand my brain. It'll save your sanity." He bumps our shoulders together. "If my family can forgive me for the things I've done, then yours can forgive you for this. You got married, Ry, you didn't do drugs or get arrested or hurt anyone. This isn't the end of the world, no matter how people out there try making it be."

My heart reacts to the nickname. "Moffie calls me Ry."

His brows go up. "Should I call you something else?"

Quickly, I shake my head. "No, it's fine. My friends call me that."

A small grin tilts his lips. "Are you telling me we're friends?"

I shrug. "Friends. Married. You cleaned up my vomit, and very few people can say the same."

He chuckles. "Fine. Friends. Though I can't say I kiss many of mine. Or marry them for that matter."

The word 'friend' is simple enough, but the meaning is less so. There's a stigma to it, expectations. And I'm worried I can't fulfill them because the only other friend I've ever had is Moffie and she's used to me by now.

He fidgets for a moment, eyes going to me, then away like he's debating something. If he's already regretting the loose label, it's the quickest friendship I've ever had.

"What?" I ask nervously.

His head turns to me, but when he looks in my direction it doesn't seem like he sees me. I wait until a few seconds go by, only to watch him shake his head. "It's not important," he decides.

I'm not sure if I believe him, but I don't push him either—because part of me is afraid of what's casting the shadow over his features, and the other part of me is worried I won't be able to do anything about it.

"I don't kiss my friends either," I tell him, unsure of why I felt the need to divulge that.

"Are you sure you want that label?"

He's giving me an opportunity to open this up to more, and the way he's pressed against me, his musky, manly scent wrapping around my heart and tugging, makes me want to consider the option. "I'm not sure what label works for us," I admit, resting my head back.

"Fair."

"We're not like a lot of people."

"True."

"There's a lot to learn," I remark.

He nods along.

I'm quiet, contemplative. Uncertainty has a way of gripping you until you don't know up from down. "But I think friends is safer." It's a soft statement, full of caution and reluctance because certain parts of me would love to explore more.

But more with Garrick Matthews seems dangerous, even if Moffie thinks I should live a little and let him show me what he knows.

My inexperience is probably what's masking every other desire to kiss him the way he kissed me. Like I want it—need it. I chalk it up to pent up frustration and file it under things to distract myself over so I don't jump his bones.

Friends, I tell myself.

"You're probably right," he murmurs.

He doesn't seem to believe it though, and it makes me feel bad. The last thing I want to do is hurt his feelings or somehow mess whatever this is up. It'll make leaving ten times harder when our time is up, and I have to leave. All the warnings I've been given by his family is fresh in my mind because I know they're right.

Garrick doesn't deserve to be mistreated, and maybe me telling him 'no' and keeping this at bay is what's best to preserve both our feelings for the future.

I think back to my conversation with Chase the other day. "*I never wanted to do him any harm by writing about him.*"

"Doesn't mean you didn't."

Garrick's brows furrow when I frown, sinking into the spot I occupy and wrapping my arms around myself for comfort. "About what you said, earlier... I have hurt people, and I'll hurt my parents even more when they find out about us...about *this*."

Even thinking about whether there's an 'us' is hard to say. Not even two months ago there was barely a me, just a frail version not much more than a ghost drifting through life.

He doesn't grace me with an answer.

Doesn't tell me it'll be okay.

He offers me silence.

Like he knows it's exactly what I need.

RYLEE

Grandma Birdie used to say that challenges make you strive, and trials make you strong, but I'm not sure what words of wisdom she'd give me now. If she were here, she'd be throwing a tantrum while listening to the same garbage I'm subjecting myself to before Grandpa Al would come tell us to stop torturing ourselves.

"This is definitely the story of the season," the woman on the screen says to her co-host, each one putting on pretty faces for the cameras. "Who would have thought someone could tame a man like Garrick Matthews?"

I roll my eyes, stabbing a piece of chicken with my fork. "He's not a lion," I grumble, hearing a soft snort come from Chase sitting on the loveseat across the room.

Her co-host turns from her to the camera, a Cheshire Cat smile on her face. "The question is, *how long* can Rylee Simmons keep him in check. The lead singer of Violet Wonders was just seen coming out of a club last month with a young woman looking awfully intimate. Without any statements from Matthews or his new bride, we have no details that support their relationship is going to withstand the pressures of his fame. It wouldn't be the first time our favorite rock star was caught cheating."

The pretty brunette laughs like the idea of his infidelity is amusing to her. "It could be another short-lived Hollywood romance. Who has the record for quickest breakup?"

"There was the seven-day marriage from one of the Reiner twins," the redhead remarks, crossing her legs elegantly. "But the court documents

from the newest couple were signed over a week ago, so at least they won't be breaking any world records if they decided to split."

The women's chit-chat fade as their show cuts to commercial, making me scowl at my half-eaten food. Since it wasn't my idea to put this on, I ask, "Why do you watch this stuff? It can't be fun listening to people bash your brother."

When all I hear is the clicking of computer keys, I glance up to see him heavily focused on his laptop.

"If you're not even paying attention, I'll change the channel to—"

"Garrick used to watch these shows," he tells me, eyes not lifting off whatever work he's plastered to. "It used to drive Mom nuts because she could see what it did to him, but he said he'd rather know what they were saying so he was prepared and not walking in blind."

Shifting on the couch, I adjust the plate in my hands and feel my appetite slip away. Garrick hired a few trusted people to come bring me into town to run errands, and the cameras followed relentlessly. I was advised by Garrick's team not to engage, to keep my head down, but it was hard when people were shouting at me from every which way as I filled my prescriptions at the pharmacy counter. The manager of the store had to get help escorting people out and looking none too happy about the added work in his day.

Maybe if I read whatever is being said about me, I'd know what to expect next time I have to leave the house, bodyguards alongside me or not. "I guess that makes sense."

Chase's eyes lift. "If you weren't curious, you wouldn't be sitting here enduring it. You're like him, you want to know."

I start to refute, but he eyes me in challenge which shuts me down. My shoulders drop as I settle into the couch cushions. "Do you think people believe this?"

"What?"

I point my fork at the TV. "What they're saying about Garrick. I haven't even known him long and he's not like they say. And if everyone thinks he's a cheater, there's no way they're going to buy into us being in a healthy relationship."

His head tilts. "Why do you care?"

I gape. "What?"

“Why do you care about what they think? It’s not important. You said it yourself, Garrick isn’t like what the press says. All that matters is who his inner circle knows he is. Plus, you guys didn’t do this for people to think you’re in a healthy relationship anyway. You’re using each other. Let it go.”

My head dips, hair shielding my face as I suck in a deep breath. Am I part of that? His inner circle has been people he’s known for years, ones he trusts unconditionally. He’s never made me prove myself worthy of his trust, but that doesn’t mean he has any for me.

“Ah.” He closes his laptop. “This is because of your parents, right? You’re trying to convince yourself that they’ll believe this is the real deal so they won’t feel so bad.”

My eyes peek through my lashes. “How do you know about that?”

“Uh, because I have ears.” His tone comes off as dumbfounded. “You waited until Garrick left to meet his manager before you started pacing around and talking to someone about what you’re going to do about your mom and dad.”

He’s referring to the conversation I had with Moffie after I realized I couldn’t keep conveniently missing my parents’ calls. Between my best friend and Garrick, I’d sucked it up and answered on the third ring when Dad’s name popped up on my screen.

Dad meant business. “*Come home, or we’re coming to you.*”

Considering my options were limited, I’d bought a plane ticket for three days from now and told them when I’d arrive. It’s better than them coming here and being part of the circus show surrounding Garrick’s house. Even with the extra security making sure nobody gets in, people still haven’t relented. Every morning there are people lingering outside with their camera bags on their shoulders and eyes on the house.

With only one way on and off the property, it means going through the people who instantly point their lenses at you like you’re their next meal ticket. And speaking from personal experience, it’s probably true.

“I don’t know what I’m walking into,” I tell him, crisscrossing my legs. Normally my parents don’t make it a secret that they’re upset by something I’ve done, but it’s been almost complete radio silence since I confirmed my trip to see them. I have no clue what’s going to happen when I see them at the airport or what they’ll say when I show them the ring. The last thing I want is for them to be disappointed, but I can’t expect anything less.

The twenty-one-year-old is reflective for a moment before he sets his laptop on the cushion beside him and props an ankle over his opposite knee. “Does my brother know that you’re going?”

Slowly, I shake my head.

“He’s going to want to.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Because this is as much his problem as it is yours. You faced our mom, so it’s only fair he faces yours. I’d bet money that he’ll be upset you didn’t talk to him before making plans.”

I make a face. “He’s got plenty of things going on here. The band is recording their new album—”

“You’ll only be gone for a few days max.”

“Violet Wonders is doing an interview on Midnight Madness.”

“Which they can postpone or do without him,” he counters again.

I give him an unamused look. “His responsibility isn’t to me, Chase.”

Of course, he has a dispute. “You’re married, Rylee. You’re both responsible for each other. Tell him when he gets back. It’s better than him finding out after you left.”

My nose twitches. “I wouldn’t just up and leave.”

He stares in disbelief.

“I wouldn’t!”

“You don’t like confrontation,” he states.

“So? He’s done a lot for me.”

He picks up his computer again. “All I’m saying is that if you want my advice, you should talk to Garrick about your plans later. Rip the Band-Aid off. The hard part is already over.”

“Getting married?”

He cracks a wider smile. “Living to tell the tale of meeting our mom. Very few women can say the same. She made one cry once. It wasn’t pretty. Snot everywhere.”

I gawk at him.

Amusement settles on his face. “It’s true. My ex blocked me on her phone and all her social media after her and my mom had a one-on-one conversation. Mom still won’t tell me what they talked about, but whatever it was clearly didn’t go well. Don’t think she’s not still cautious of you. She doesn’t dislike you, but she isn’t going to be waving any foam fingers your way until she knows for sure.”

“If she knows what for sure?”

“Who you are. What you want.”

Panic seizes my heart.

He must not sense it. “If anything, you’re in a comfortable position with her.”

I let out a choppy breath. “Am I supposed to know what you’re saying?”

“You’ve intrigued the great Elaine Matthews,” he states simply. “She’s going to be watching you, and that’s not a bad thing. We’re a loyal family. All it takes is one small indication that Garrick feels something for you to have her protection.”

My eyes widen. “You don’t mean...”

“What I mean,” he replies slowly, like I’m a five-year-old in need of thorough explanation, “is that you shouldn’t be worried if your parents believe this thing between you and my brother is real. If my mom thinks it is, it’s because there’s something believable to be seen no matter what these idiots are saying in the media.”

Having no idea what to say, I choose to finish eating my lunch despite my lack of appetite. Chase goes back to work the same time the show comes on again, leaving me absentmindedly watching the women banter about the state of my current relationship.

She’s a gold digger.

She’s not even that pretty.

It’ll never last.

And the problem is, they’re right about more than one thing.

When the doorbell rings a few hours after Chase leaves to finalize some paperwork with a real estate agent, I’m not sure what to do. Nobody said anything about people coming over, though I’ve noticed Garrick’s team tends to show up whenever he dodges their calls. I met his manager Michael shortly after the article of our marriage went viral and it didn’t go well. There was a lot of glaring and backhanded compliments from him to me.

Garrick threatened to fire him if he made one more comment and I know the heated calls he’s been having back and forth with him hasn’t indicated their relationship has improved any.

I don't get the chance to decide on how to proceed when I hear someone entering the digits into the keypad on the door.

Then it opens.

I'm gaping by the stairs as Zayne walks in, looking exactly as I remember. Same short, sandy blond hair a shade or so lighter than mine, and those whiskey eyes that made me stupid the second they checked me out.

And they're pointed right at me.

His style hasn't gone anywhere either—jeans and a fitted tee that probably has stains on it from working on a new project in his garage, black leather jacket, and worn black boots. Casual. Laid back. Just like him.

I take a step backward until I almost trip on the first stair step. "Garrick isn't here."

He rakes a hand through his hair, looking back at the partially open door before sighing and closing it. "I figured as much when he didn't answer the door or his phone. Chase?"

I simply shake my head.

"Christ," he grumbles.

Nudging my bare toes against the runner on the stairs, I rub my lips together as the drummer of Violet Wonders stares at me. I'm not sure what he sees, how he feels, but there's no resentment on his face. In fact, there's nothing.

Maybe a flicker of surprise, but once he realized it was me it went away in a heartbeat.

"Zayne—"

"I should have called," he says at the same time. He scratches the side of his neck before jabbing his thumb behind him. "I can go. I just thought I'd talk to Garrick. Spontaneous decision."

"You used to make a lot of those," I note in familiarity, regretting it the second the words are out.

His expression drops. "Yeah. Turns out you did too. How much money did you get off of those pictures anyway? Must have been a great payday for you."

My stomach twists. "Zayne—"

"There's nothing you can say to me," he cuts me off, not sounding angry but resigned. "I don't want to hear you're sorry because I can tell you are. It's all over your face. And I know you were going through some shit,

even if you barely talked about it. Garrick mentioned your situation when he explained things the other day to me. For the record, I'm sorry you're struggling."

I barely get out "thanks" because it doesn't feel right to thank him for anything when I should be groveling and begging for his forgiveness. As much as I want to apologize, I can tell it's the last thing he wants to hear.

He clears his throat and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. They're looser, not showing off the toned legs I know he has from working out. He used to talk about how much his trainer made him hit the gym to stay in shape for appearances sake.

He looks good.

Healthier.

His eyes are brighter, unlike the last time I saw him where they looked distant and dull. I have no clue what he does or doesn't do these days and haven't asked Garrick because it's none of my business. I'm not sure the man I married would even tell me. Everything we've talked about, the little tidbits about ourselves, are things that wouldn't be groundbreaking if leaked since there's no evident trust between us.

I risk civility. "You look good. Hopefully everything is going okay for you now that you're back from tour."

I spent almost two weeks with Zayne before I'd ruined any chance of even a friendship with him for money. He told me he didn't want to go back on tour because he enjoyed being closer to home, but he knew the guys were eager to start traveling again once Garrick was out of rehab.

I don't know if he remembers telling me that he didn't want to stay in the band for much longer. The first time he'd disappeared to the bathroom at the restaurant he'd taken me to, I didn't know what he was doing behind the closed door. But by the third trip, always longer than the last, I noticed the shift in him—the way his eyes wouldn't sit still, how his leg always had to move. It was when his nose started bleeding halfway through dessert that I'd suspected the drugs.

After he'd cleaned himself up, he'd told me, "*I wish Garrick would stay there longer because I'm over this shit.*"

But here he is. Still doing it.

I want to ask if he's happy, but I don't.

I heard the audio clip that sparked this whole situation I'm involved in, and I picked out little bits and pieces but nothing that painted a full picture.

But what I heard that nobody else seemed to was the pain in his voice when he talked to whoever recorded him.

"I'm not using," he states.

My eyes widen, lips parting to say something before he cuts me a look that challenges me to stay quiet.

"I know that's what you're asking."

"I..." Words get trapped in my throat.

He nods. "Thought so."

"I just..."

"Listen, can you tell Garrick I swung by? I don't think it's a good idea if I stuck around. Doubt he'd be okay if he knew we were alone."

My nose scrunches. "Why?"

He shakes his head, chuckling dryly. "I know my best friend, Rylee. He doesn't do things like this. Even for someone in need. Give them money? Sure. Marry them? Hell no. I wouldn't be surprised if he liked you the day I introduced the two of you." There's a silent question in the sure statement, but unlike him, I don't answer it.

Clicking his tongue, the drummer turns to the door and grips the handle. "I hope you're doing okay too. Being with him can be a handful I'm sure, no matter the reason why."

I hesitate only for a minute before softly admitting, "It's not so bad. He's a good guy."

Zayne takes a few long moments to look at me, but it doesn't make my toes curl the way Garrick's sweeping gaze does. "Yeah, he is."

Neither of us say goodbye before he leaves, and it's only then I take a deep breath and head up to my room.

Picking up my phone, I type out a text to Garrick before staring at it and backspacing each letter. He's busy.

Tell him later.

About what? Zayne? New York?

Dropping backwards onto the bed, I stare at the ceiling and hug a pillow to my chest. If Grandpa Al were here, he'd tell me everything would be all right. If Grandma Birdie were here, she'd tell me to go after Garrick and "make a man out of him" like she told me to do at my high school graduation when a family member of one of my classmates that was dressed in army greens was walking toward the parking lot.

“You don’t see men like that every day, Rylee. You have to snatch them up before you let all the good ones go.”

I used to get embarrassed whenever she’d forget to use her inside voice and let everyone in the tri-state area know how single I was, but now...

I’m going to take her advice.

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RYLEE

Encroaching on Garrick's space feels wrong as I raise my hand to knock on his closed door where music is playing. It's soft, acoustic, and I wonder if it's his own or someone else's. I haven't even lingered by his door since the morning he put me in here after *the incident*.

Before I can even touch the wood, the door swings open. Startled, I stumble back, nearly tripping on the floor rug in the hall. Garrick reaches out and catches my arm before I fall on my ass, trying to hide his amusement by pressing his lips together and steadying me.

"You good, Ry?"

Ry. I don't think I'll ever get used to him saying my name like that. But we agreed.

Friends.

I repeat that again as I peel my arm out of his grip and nod, flattening my shirt like he wrinkled it somehow. "I'm good. Er, can we talk? We don't have to talk here. We could go somewhere else, or—"

"You've been pacing outside my room for five minutes, love. It's fine to talk in here, though you've created a bit of a draft. May want your Snuggie to keep warm."

My cheeks fire at his teasing tone. I didn't realize he'd known I was out here. "I wasn't sure if I was allowed to come here. It's your space..."

Hurt flashes in his eyes, but quickly vanishes into something neutral. "What's mine is yours now, remember?"

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, giving him a lame nod. "Right." My voice isn't convincing as he gestures toward the open room, watching

as I sneak past him and stop in the middle of the space that's so...him. "Wow."

He sidles up beside me, crossing his arms and examines the room like I'm doing since I didn't bother to last time. As soon as I felt better, I'd rushed out of here like it was on fire, like if I stayed too long I'd get far too comfortable. "My home away from home," he muses.

It's painted an off white, sans the wall with the bed frame built in, which has built in espresso brown shelving. His king size bed fits perfectly into the open space, like the shelving was custom made exactly for it. Each shelf surrounding the bed is full of books, awards, CDs, and other knick-knacks that seem random to me, but probably mean something to him, just like the décor scattered around the house. His bed is covered with different tones of white and brown, and there are guitars, pictures, and posters of his band hanging up strategically on the other walls. The music is coming from the small desk set up in the opposite corner that has a laptop and speakers stacked on it.

"Is this your song?" I ask, gesturing toward the laptop. "It's pretty."

He smiles, warmth settling into his face as he walks over to the computer and hits a few buttons to turn it down. "It's a work in progress. Haven't been very motivated lately, but I've been working my ass off to get shit done."

"Why haven't you been motivated?"

"There's been a lot going on."

"Oh." I nudge the beige carpet with my toes and stare at the chipped blue paint on my nails that I need to redo at some point. "Because of me, you mean?"

I don't hear him approach, but he's suddenly guiding me to sit on the bed. I hesitate a few seconds, staring at the comforter and wondering how many other women have been in here—something I was too sick to wonder before I passed out wrapped in his linens.

"Everything is clean," he murmurs, causing me to glance over my shoulder at him. I blush knowing he read my face. I sit on the very edge of the mattress, feet hovering off the ground and eyes trained on anything but him. "Are you here to ask me to go with you to New York to see your parents?"

My eyes deceive me, flying to his with a fish-out-of-water expression on my face. "How did you—"

“Chase called me earlier.”

I frown at the admission.

“He didn’t think you’d tell me, so he wanted to give me a heads up.” There’s a heaviness to his tone that I can’t fully read, and I’m not sure I want to. It reminds me too much of how Grandpa Al would sound if I did something that upset him. It was never often, thank God, but enough to make me recognize the tone.

There’s quiet between us only for a few moments before I move my head up and down to confirm his suspicion.

The side of his lips kick up. “Then Chase owes me money.”

“What?”

He shrugs casually, walking back over to his laptop and tinkering on it for a few seconds until the music cuts off. “He bet me that you wouldn’t say anything, and I countered saying you would. Got me \$100. I’ll split it with you.”

All I can do is stare.

When he turns to me, he’s smirking. “I told him you’d feel guilty for not telling me. I’ve got to admit, I figured you’d blurt it out tomorrow because you couldn’t keep it in anymore, so I’m glad I didn’t specify *when* you’d come clean, or I would have lost the bet.”

“It isn’t like you’re hurting for it,” I grumble, a little offended they’d use me as a means to gamble.

“Aw, don’t be like that. I’ll give you the Benjamin Franklin when I tell him to pay up tomorrow. He’s out with friends tonight or I’d bother him now about it.”

“I don’t want your money, Garrick.”

“Then what *do* you want?”

I don’t answer that very loaded question considering my response changes by the day. If he knew how many times I’ve touched myself in the bed he bought, this conversation would turn very quickly. “How would you know I’d feel guilty anyway?”

“Because that’s who you are.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You stole some Swedish Fish from Chase’s stash in the kitchen and then replaced them with a whole new bag.” His eyebrows raise as if to challenge me to argue, but I don’t. “You used the money you got from the article to get something you didn’t even need to.”

All I say is, “Do you have cameras in here or something? I swear, you and Chase always know when I do something.”

“You’re not exactly sneaky, Rylee.”

Well...true.

“I was low on sugar,” I tell him to explain why I took the candy. “I get like that sometimes after my flares. It’s not always as bad as it was that day you helped take care of me but sometimes it can be.”

“Who did you have to take care of you before when it’d get bad? You could barely keep your eyes open, Rylee. You need help.”

I shake my head. “Sometimes Tiffany would come and go, or if she could tell I was really sick she’d stay home instead of going out with her friends. But I never asked her to because it’s not fair to her or anyone who has to deal with me when I don’t feel good.”

“Why not?”

The fact he asks that so genuinely, confusion pure in his eyes, makes the flutters in my stomach rise to my chest. “It’s not anybody else’s problem. That’s why. My parents used to drop everything for me when I was sick. They’d take time off work to go to doctor appointments with me and flex their schedules to make sure one of them was home in case I needed them. In the beginning, it probably wasn’t a bad idea. Before we knew what was wrong I’d lost a ton of weight and looked...not so good. Mom cried, Dad would struggle to look at me, and my grandparents would always threaten to take me to the hospital to get fluids or a feeding tube put in.

“It was hard for them to believe something was going on internally. Most people assumed I had an eating disorder or something. But then the pain would start and the headaches...” Sighing thoughtfully, I shake my head. “When you have a chronic condition, the realization that you’re in it for life doesn’t hit you right away. The right medicines will help, but that doesn’t mean there won’t be days when you’re feeling perfect. As soon as you realize you’re in it for the long haul, you also start understanding that so is everyone else around you who cares about your wellbeing. It’s suddenly not just your life that your disease is controlling, it’s theirs too.”

He lets me take a moment to let that soak in, the words rehashing old thoughts and bitter feelings over what I’ve been handed in life.

I’m lucky. So lucky.

One—they found the psoriatic arthritis early enough that it didn’t cause too much damage.

Two—it only took a year to find the right medication combination to make me feel halfway human.

Three—despite being worried, my family still gives me enough space to breathe without checking in 24/7 like they used to.

“It’s not fair to anyone for being stuck with somebody like me, having to change their plans or cancel them to take care of me if I can’t for some reason. They would in a heartbeat, but...”

“You’re prideful.”

I offer a small “guilty as charged” smile.

“I get it. It’s not easy feeling like you have to rely on anyone.” His words are light. “If it changes anything, I’d cancel plans for you anytime.”

When I look at him, I see someone who is too good to be true, like I’m waiting for the moment it’s going to melt away like an illusion.

Sighing, I fidget with my hands. “Chase says you’d want to go with me to New York. It isn’t like I didn’t tell you because I thought you’d say no. I just know you’re busy. I’ve already caused enough of a stir for you—”

“I already bumped up our tickets to first class. We’ll leave at eight the same morning you’d booked,” he says plainly, sitting at his desk and stretching his legs out in front of him. “I suppose we could have done coach, but there’s more room in first class, and less of a hassle when we’re recognized.”

I blink slowly. “Oh.”

“‘Oh’ is right. You also probably didn’t think of what will happen when, not if, someone posts that we’ve been spotted on a plane headed to New York. By the time we land at the airport, there will be paparazzi everywhere wanting a first look at the newly married couple. Airport security will barely be able to control them, and they’ll need to call in reinforcements.”

I gape, saying nothing.

“So,” he continues, “I got my manager to get us a car. It’s the least the asshole could do. He also called security to ensure that we’d be safely taken off the plane by police escort and brought to our ride without any problems.”

Swallowing, I look down. How many videos have I seen of those scenarios that I always brushed off like they were fiction. Completely made up. Unimportant, which to me, they always had been. It isn’t like anyone wants an exclusive with a broke ass girl from the middle of nowhere. “I didn’t think of any of that.”

“Why would you?” he asks softly, voice caressing me with comfort. “If anyone should apologize for causing such a stir, it’s me. You entered my life and have to deal with everything that comes with it. That means no more privacy. No more plane rides where all you have to deal with is a little turbulence and the horrible snacks. It’ll take time getting used to this lifestyle now that you’re in it for a while.”

“And do we have that?”

“Do we have what?”

I meet his eyes. “Time?”

He understands the question I’m not asking, his answer causing me to suck in a deep breath. “If you’ll allow me, Mrs. Matthews, I’ll give you as much time as you want.”

There are no expectations attached.

No assumptions.

I simply nod, a silent agreement between us left unspoken.

Swiping my tongue along my bottom lip, I bring up his visitor. “Zayne stopped by earlier looking for you. I’m not sure if he said anything to you about it.”

By the surprise raising his brows, I’d say not. “When was that?”

I shrug. “This afternoon sometime.”

His nose twitches, and I realize it’s similar to what mine does when I’m lying. Except the discomfort on his face tells me something else is going on in his mind.

When he decides to speak, I’m wary of the question. “Can I ask you something personal?”

Nibbling my lip, I give a hesitant nod. It’s the least I can offer him.

“How did you feel about him?”

I should have expected that to come up eventually, but it still makes me squirm when he directs those blue eyes on me. “Zayne was sweet to me. Talked to me about anything. Didn’t act like he had a bunch of money even though it was obvious that he did. The world knew him, everyone we saw loved him, and it was...strange.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

He’s right, so I stop stalling. “If I’d have given it a chance, I could have seen us becoming friends. I enjoyed the talks we had. Anything else would have never worked for a lot of different reasons.”

Garrick seems stricken by that. “Why not? You’re beautiful, Ry. A—”

“Catch,” I finish for him, remembering his little speech. Fighting the heat rising up my neck over how that conversation ended, I rub my palms down my thighs. “I know. But back then I was a much different person, and so was he. Today he seemed a lot more levelheaded compared to when I knew him. He told me he wasn’t using.”

The man in the room cocks his head.

I frown. “Was he lying?”

“He and I don’t necessarily talk about that sort of thing. I’ve noticed a difference in him too but didn’t want to assume.”

Makes sense. “Nothing happened between us if you’re worried about that. Then or now. And nothing will. I’m not like that.”

“I never said you were.”

I tap under my eye. “It’s in your eyes.”

“I don’t want to hurt him,” he says.

“I think we already did.” I sigh, knowing it’s true even if we both hate it. “But he seemed okay. Not angry. He must take after you.”

“Lord help us all if I’m his influence.”

I crack a grin. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Garrick. You’re a good man. He even said so himself.”

“Did he now?”

A nod.

He hums, looking contemplative as he thinks about it. Yet all he says is, “Interesting.”

GARRICK

The second Violet Wonders topped the charts we all knew everything would change. People liked us and wanted more—more music, more interviews, more appearances. It was suddenly about having the right manager and look, professional branding, and everything in between. We had to dress and act a certain way, say specific things, and censor our opinions.

We were silenced.

Rushed.

Crowded.

I hated it.

I hated the feeling of being controlled and trapped, two things I walked right into until I used drugs to escape it. It was like I walked out of the cage marked “fame” and right into the one labeled “addiction”. Always gated, closed in, with people watching like a damn circus.

Mum helped ground me when it got to be too much, when I started living out the life everyone seemed to think I was supposed to since gaining stardom. The parties, the women, the alcohol, it was all provided with a wink of an eye.

The moment Mum realized I was drowning in it, she reached into the pit I’d dug for myself and pulled me out.

And it started with a movie.

A classic.

My family’s favorite, one we still watch to this day.

“Watch a movie with me,” I say, stuffing my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants. They’re an old pair I always put on when I’ve got a good workflow going. It’s tradition, something I never want to break in fear that I’ll fuck up or lose focus.

Rylee looks around. “There’s no TV in here.” She doesn’t hide her surprise when she scopes out the décor, mostly images of my family and friends from over the years and a few of my favorite custom shoots from back when Violet Wonders first got together. Just because I hated most of those days doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate what they’ve done for me all these years later.

I grab my laptop off the desk and bring it over, leaning against my pillows that are propped along the headboard. I learned the hard way that it’s better to have as many pillows as possible there to avoid potential concussions if things get a little too heated with whoever is in bed with me.

Though, most people wouldn’t mind going home with a mild concussion given to them by someone like me.

“Come here.”

She doesn’t. Standing up, she turns, and watches as I go to my video library and pull up the film that always helps me whenever life gets to be too much.

“Mum used to put this on for me,” I explain, not moving my eyes from the screen as it begins to light up with the beginning. A nostalgic feeling settles into my chest, and I smile at the feeling. “She told me that we’d watch it any time I needed a break. It’s like people who use music as an escape. She trained me to use movies to let me forget about the music scene and everything expected of me for a while. I think she’d meant that we’d watch different ones, but I always come back to this one.”

Curiosity must get the better of her, because she walks along the opposite side of the bed until she can see the screen. It starts in black and white, the credits filling it slowly as the music begins. “Is that...*The Wizard of Oz*?”

I grin, turning to her to see wide eyes and parted lips. “Yes. You look surprised.”

She blinks. “Well, yeah. Sort of. I figured you’d like some sort of action film. Like the *Fast and Furious* movies or something with Liam Neeson in it.”

Patting the spot beside me, I set the laptop down next to my legs and wait for her to sit. "I've never liked action films that much. Too much blood and gore and not even a good storyline. Chase loves that shit though. Every time we have a movie night and it's his choice, he chooses something he knows I'll hate."

A small smile settles onto her face as one of her knees bends to rest on the bed. She's contemplating joining me, hesitant as she stares at the comforter. "I bet you make him watch some pretty interesting stuff in retaliation."

I shrug. "Nah. I try finding something I think we'll all love when it's my turn."

I don't miss the way her brows raise like she's shocked over that. One day she'll realize how I work, but it'll take time. "Who all joins you for these movie nights?"

"Is that your way of saying you want to be invited to the next one?" I tease.

It's hard not to be amused over the faint pink dotting her cheeks. "No. I mean, I don't know. Maybe? I'm curious, that's all."

"It depends. Usually Chase, me, and Mum have them once a month if I'm around. Sometimes we'll do a virtual one if I'm on tour to keep tradition alive. Other times, the guys will join in and we'll do it at one of their houses and whoever hosts gets to choose the film. Mum doesn't come to those, but Chase will occasionally. Mostly because I drag him along so he'll get out more often."

"He seems to go out plenty now."

"He's up to something," I agree lightly, "I don't know what though. Chase doesn't always tell me things, but if it's really bothering him he will." I think back to our house conversation and smile to myself knowing he confided in me. "I try not to take it personally. There are plenty of things I don't share with him. We're all allowed our privacy."

"Like what?"

That's a conversation for another day, so I point toward the computer. "Are you going to watch this with me? I can get snacks if that's a deal breaker, but it'll be good for the both of us to relax for the night. I'll even share my Caramello Koala's with you if you're down, keep a stash of them in here so Chase doesn't get to them. I'll keep all body parts to myself, though if we share popcorn I can't promise we won't have one of those

first-date moments where our hands accidentally brush and then we look longingly into each other's eyes for an awkward amount of time."

She sits down, a fair distance between us as she eyes me skeptically. "Where'd you get that from?"

"I'm a movie buff," I tell her honestly, "and my mother's favorites are romances. I've seen plenty. Know the moves. Rest assured, I'll do my best to control myself."

There's a moment of silence between us.

Then, "Is this a date then?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "If this were a date, I'd take you out to a nice dinner somewhere I know we won't be bothered. Maybe I'd even cook for us here. We'd take a walk after sunset, watch the stars, and grab drinks to talk some more. If this were a date—" I eye her up and down, noting the black leggings and sweatshirt combo she loves wearing so much. "—we wouldn't be on this bed watching a movie, and those clothes wouldn't still be on you."

She flushes.

Squirms.

And eventually settles in.

I claim victory, turning the screen towards her so we can both see it and trying not to let her see how her presence affects me.

Her legs clench.

My cock hardens.

But we both pretend that this is nothing.

She falls asleep halfway into the movie, and I watch her while debating if I should wake her, move her, or let her be.

I choose the latter.

When the screen goes black, I look at the time and quietly manage to get the blanket over her until she's tucked in. She lets out a content sigh, shifts, buries her face into my favorite pillow where she's already left a drool mark, and slips into a deeper sleep.

I suppose I get it. My bed is comfortable as hell, probably one of the more expensive pieces of furniture I invested in. And even though it's a king size with plenty of room, I know crawling into the other side and turning off the lights is out of the question.

Rylee is turned on by me, there's no doubt about it. She'll act like she isn't, but I see the signs. The way her legs shake, her teeth bite into her bottom lip, and her face flushes. There's a glaze in her eyes when she steals glances at me that matches my own, but we leave things untouched and unspoken because it's easier.

I don't want to be her friend.

I want to be more.

I *married* her for Christ's sake.

But I don't dwell on it as I walk out, adjust my hard cock, and close the door behind me to head downstairs for a drink. Chase is sitting in the dark, working on his laptop again with the TV on as background noise.

I say, "We watched *The Wizard of Oz*."

His attention turns to me. "I take it she told you then?"

I wink. "Like I said. I expect the money in my hand tomorrow morning. It'll be travel money for Ry."

"Ry, huh?" he muses.

"Shut it," I mutter. He snickers, I smack his arm, and drop down beside him. "You've been working a lot lately. I take it business is good despite the partners dropping?"

He moves over to put more space between us like I'm somehow crowding him, tugging at the collar of his t-shirt. "It's been steady."

That's all I get. *Steady*.

"And the house?"

"Officially mine."

"Congrats, mate."

He murmurs, "Thanks."

The mood dampens, and I study the profile of his stoic face as he clicks the keys on his laptop and stares at the screen.

We watch the TV in silence for a while. Whatever he's doing on his laptop has ceased, his attention glued to the show playing that I don't recognize.

It's a moment or two before I say, "She's a good girl, Chase. Go easy on her for me."

His head turns a fraction. "You like her, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Mom said she may be good for you."

I smile. "She will be."

“So you’re going with her to New York?”

“Yes, I am.”

He hums.

We go silent again.

The show plays.

A cleaning commercial runs.

I sip my water.

Then his own murmured admission renders me speechless. “I got a girl pregnant.”

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GARRICK

I *'m going to murder them.*

It's the first thought that crosses my mind when I open the door and see three mischievous, painted faces grinning like the assholes they are in their decked-out costumes.

"I told you no," I all but growl as Jax shoulders pass me with Calder and Manning following suit.

The only one who doesn't look excited to be here in an expensive getup is Zayne. He gives me the look we usually share when Jax and Calder make stupid choices before I gesture for him to come in and close the door behind him.

Jax turns around. "Technically, you said no to the annual Halloween bash at the Lazy Croc. Which, by the way, is total bullshit. That's our tradition. Now that you're married, it's like you're pussy wh—"

"Enough," I cut him off.

He raises his hands up. "I'm just saying. It's nothing the rest of us haven't thought. Except Zayne maybe, but we know why he hasn't weighed in on the whole marriage thing."

"Jesus Christ," Zayne grumbles under his breath, walking over to the fridge in an outfit that doesn't look too far off from his usual. "You got any beer here?"

He knows I don't. "You'll have to settle for whatever is in there."

"Actually," the asshole to my left clearly heading this whole thing butts in. "We'll have that covered momentarily. There are refreshments waiting outside, along with a few surprises."

I scrub a hand down my face. “You did not do what I think you did.”
It’s Manning who said, “He did.”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath in and hold it for a few seconds before exhaling. When I open them again, Zayne is standing in front of me with a handful of wild cherry Lifesavers in his hand. I grab one and pop it into my mouth, uncertain of what will happen if I speak right now.

“I tried telling them it was a bad idea,” Zayne tells me under his breath.

Cal hears him anyway. “Bad ideas usually end up being the best nights though. We haven’t gotten together since Garrick moved his new bride in. Don’t you think it’s time for us to meet her? What better way than a Halloween party?”

“What are we high schoolers?” I counter, glaring at Calder and shaking my head. “Like you pointed out, this isn’t only my house anymore. I need to run things by Rylee and Chase first, and I know for a fact Rylee won’t want to have a hundred people here.”

For that matter, neither do I. Didn’t they see the handful of people still waiting outside the gate? I all but lost it when some douchebag in tighter skinny jeans than what Jax wears asked me which window Rylee’s bedroom was when I returned home from running errands. If the security guard wasn’t out there ready to handle it, I would have thrown punches.

Jax smacks Cal’s chest with the back of his hand and mumbles, “Pussy whipped.”

I’m about to lose it when Zayne grabs my shoulder and says, “I’ll handle this.” I don’t know what handling it looks like, but I don’t wait to find out because I don’t want to look at my bandmates right now.

Walking upstairs, a small head with loose blonde hair peers around the corner. I don’t say anything as I walk over and tug her into my arms in a spontaneous hug, absorbing the warmth and sweet scent she gives off. I don’t expect her to return it, but two hesitant arms eventually wrap around my waist once the surprise clears.

“This is nice,” I tell her quietly.

There’s a moment of pause. “It is.”

It’s strange how something so small can feel ten times more intimate with her—a stolen look, a random hug. Rocking us slowly, I squeeze my hold around her until we’re pressed chest to chest with no room between us and bury my nose into the crown of her skull, inhaling the floral scent from her shampoo.

The assholes downstairs start making more noise, Zayne yelling at them to knock it off and failing miserably. I'm going to have to go back down there and stop this before it goes too far.

Again.

When did I become the parental friend?

The day you got sober, the voice in my head answers for me.

"I'll get rid of them." Not ready to pull back, I let out a small breath and add, "But they want to meet you."

Her body goes rigid. "Why?"

"They're my friends. Family, really."

It's a few moments before her body eases, probably feeling the way my heart reacts. "I get it. Moffie will murder me if I don't let her meet you when we're in New York."

"How are you feeling about that?"

She makes a strangled noise. "Not great, but like you said. Worse things could happen."

At least she'll give me that. Brushing fingers through her hair for a few seconds, I step back and offer a comforting smile as I reach out my hand to hers. "Are you ready to meet some of the most unstable people in my life? They don't bite. Maybe Jax, but only if he's five shots in. He prefers redheads anyway."

Rylee gives me a skeptical look. "Is that supposed to make me feel any better about going down there?"

"It's not a firing squad, love."

We stop at the top of the stairs. "It's your friends. Your *band*. I've listened to your music before. Meeting them is..." She doesn't finish the thought before our attention is grabbed by the people gravitating at the bottom of the staircase.

Jax and Cal are both grinning as they scope Rylee out. It's Jax who whistles and says, "Shit, you got a sister?"

Cal snorts.

I glare.

Zayne shakes his head in the background and disappears back into the kitchen.

Rylee tightens her hold around my hand as we walk down to meet them. I thread our fingers and don't let go as we approach my group of overwhelming, yet lovable buddies.

“This is Rylee. Rylee, the guys.” I point to each one shooting off a name, though there’s no doubt in my mind she already knows them. She offers them each a timid smile, her face growing redder until we land on Zayne.

Jax—the dickhead—says, “Oh, you know him already, huh?” Manning offers a choked laugh that he covers with a cough and Calder snickers where he’s downing a beer by the island that’s already covered in about every type of alcohol there is that certainly didn’t come from me since I had Yasmin dump everything I had here.

I glare at the men responsible, but they brush me off and turn to the woman clenching my hand until there’s barely any feeling left in it.

Cal looks her up and down until I clear my throat and get a smirk out of him. “You chose well, bro. I can see the benefits here. What’s your life story then?”

Rylee’s eyes dart up to me in panic over the question. I step in for her. “She doesn’t need to explain anything to you, especially not when you show up uninvited like this.” Jax hands Rylee a beer, but I take it from him. “Neither of us drink. You know that.”

“*You* don’t drink,” Jax counters matter-of-factly. “That doesn’t mean your wife can’t have a little fun while you play guard dog. Right, Rylee?”

She starts to say something, but I cut her off before she gets the chance to. “I know you hate change, mate, but you’re going to have to deal with this one without being an asshole.”

Manning grabs a water and passes it to Rylee, which she accepts shyly. “Ignore Jax, he’s just trying to get a rise out of you.” He directs that at me, then shifts his attention to the woman keeping close to my side. “We’re not that bad, even if Jax makes you want to believe otherwise.”

Sighing, I set the confiscated beer down on the counter. “That’s hard to agree with when I said no party, yet here we are.” My eyes go over to where Zayne stands off to the side, nursing his own drink. “What are you even supposed to be?”

Examining himself, the drummer lifts his shoulders. “James Dean.”

I roll my eyes. “Nice.”

Jax gets the tequila bottle open. “People are already on their way. I can’t cancel now. It’ll be small. Promise.”

We all know that’s bullshit. Our gatherings are never small, even if that’s what we intend it to be. People tell their friends who tell *their* friends,

and suddenly the house is overrun by assholes looking for an in.

“You do realize I can get everyone escorted away if I decide not to let them in,” I inform them all, eyeing each of them. “Just because I’ve been able to cut back on some of the security doesn’t mean that there aren’t still potential breeches that can happen, especially if I open my home up to a crowd. We’d practically be inviting the paps in to get a look.”

“It’ll be fine,” Cal promises. “We’ll keep an eye out for people being sketchy. C’mon, man. You never have fun anymore, and it looks like your girl could use some in her life.”

Glancing down, I notice the pale tone to her skin and sigh. “I don’t think you’re interrupting her expression right.”

“Two hours,” Jax reasons.

I look to Manning. “You’re okay with this too, I suppose?” He usually goes along with whatever the majority wants without questioning it, and since I got clean, it’s been them against me on most decisions.

“You haven’t been that involved with us over the past few months. Long before...” His eyes go to Rylee, apology settled into them when they lock eyes. Then they return to me. “With the press badgering all of us to comment on the status of our friendship and stability of the band, it’s hard to convince them we’re fine when we’re barely seen together.”

“Not to mention the cancelled interviews,” Cal adds from across the kitchen where he’s pulling out an unopened bag of pretzels I bought for Rylee when she said they were her favorite.

I point out the obvious. “The media hasn’t said a word about the band since news about Rylee and me have hit online, so that doesn’t even matter. Plus—” I throw a hand toward the front door. “The people loitering on my property probably took pictures of all of you coming in. Problem solved if you’re worried about the rumors starting up.”

Zayne walks over to Cal and takes the pretzels, shoving them back into the cupboard and ignoring the frown he gets from his bandmate. “We could have handled the media without the drastic measures you’ve taken like we’ve done hundreds of times before,” he remarks, eyes roaming to Rylee and then me. “But I get why you did it.”

“Despite that,” Manning intervenes. “It’d just be nice to see the guys together again. Maybe this party isn’t the worst thing. We could use time enjoying ourselves instead of going for each other’s necks like we are in the studio.”

Considering he's not typically the voice of reason, I don't find his words that endearing. Especially with everyone besides Zayne nodding along, not shocking since the two guys who started this are determined to make it happen.

The album is almost done with the exception of a few tweaks that we need to make. Reg will get us back in when he needs us to get everything finalized, so we won't be snapping at each other like the last few recordings have gone.

"No," I repeat. "We could have done a fucking movie night if you wanted the bonding experience. We haven't done one in a while."

It's Rylee who murmurs, "Garrick..." Ignoring the tools in the room, I turn to face her, head cocked, and brows drawn. "You should have fun and spend time with them. I don't want to mess any of that up."

I doubt there's anything I can say that will convince her otherwise, so I don't try arguing the fact that I'm content staying in with her. When it's just Rylee and me, she opens up. Tells me about stories of her Grandma Birdie and their gardening, or her parents taking Sunday drives and stopping to get milkshakes in the summers at their favorite ice cream shop, or all the old recipes she and her Grandpa Al would make in the kitchen together that she still remembers today even without the original recipe cards that were lost in a fire at her grandparents' home years ago.

There's a peace to her when she talks about her past, her childhood and family, and it's ten times better than watching my friends act like idiots around women, and strangers making fools of themselves when they approach us at things like this because they want something.

No matter what she thinks, a night spent here is always going to be better than one at the Lazy Croc. As I get older and grow more comfortable in my situation with her, I realize this is the life I want for myself. Peaceful. Quiet. Something cemented.

"You heard the lady." Jax clasps my shoulder and pulls out his phone. "Let's get this shit started. It's been too long."

Zayne and I exchange a wary look.

Rylee nibbles her bottom lip.

"It'll be okay," I assure her, pressing a kiss to her cheek and making her entire face turn red when the guys all gape at us.

Manning's lips waver into a smile.

Zayne's twitch.

Jax grins.

And Cal is too busy bombarding my kitchen for food to care that I can't seem to stop touching Rylee.

She's my new addiction.

Two and a half hours into the party and there's no way it's going to stop anytime soon. Jax is drunk and dancing with two blondes, Calder is trying to schmooze a group of women who are staring between him and Manning, and Zayne is nowhere to be found.

Rylee escaped upstairs to lock herself in her room, despite me trying to convince her to stay with me, over an hour ago. It leaves me glaring alone at every asshole who knocks something over or pulls out something from their pocket that definitely shouldn't be around me.

A nail scrapes down the front of my chest, snapping my attention to a girl with black hair giving off fuck-me-vibes that I'm certainly not feeling. Maybe six months ago I'd be tempted, but not tonight, not when there's someone upstairs I'd rather be with. I peel her hand away and get an offended look from her and the girls behind her clearly cheering her on.

I don't recognize half the people I pass as I make my way into the kitchen. Most of my cupboards have been raided, leaving no more than plates and glasses in them, and the garbage is overflowing with wrappers, cans, and bottles that I know Yasmin will be yelling at me for since she's all about recycling and saving the environment after her and my mother joined a stop global warming tree hugging club.

Cursing, I pull my phone out.

Garrick: How are you holding up?

Rylee: Talking to Moffie

Garrick: Want company?

Rylee: Stay with your friends

I don't know if she noticed before leaving me to the people here, but my friends ditched me as soon as the women arrived. Sans Zayne, who I study the room for. Knocking on the half bath downstairs to make sure he's not inside doing something he shouldn't be I press an ear against the door and then turn the knob to see it's empty.

He held strong for the most part during the first few months of my sobriety, and always hounded the guys if they talked about whatever

substance they had while we were on tour. But I know behind closed doors is a different story, a different side of him.

If he really is clean like he told Rylee, then I have nothing to worry about. I know firsthand how easy it can be to crack though, so I want to make sure he has my support the same way I had his.

When I realize the bathroom is clear and the entire downstairs is missing the James Dean drummer, I head outside to see a lone figure sitting on a lounge at the corner of patio furthest from the house.

I drop down in the lounge beside him, easing into the chair. "You didn't want to come," I state plainly.

It takes him a few seconds. "Do you blame me? You didn't even want us here anyway."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to see you."

We're quiet, both looking out at the flower garden. In the dark, it's hard to see the work Rylee and Yasmin have put into it. The lights don't reach as far as the wooden beds they installed on their own, but I enjoy seeing the addition, nonetheless.

"Is it hard for you?" It's a dangerous question to ask, not wanting to open old wounds but not wanting to ignore them either.

He stretches one of his legs out, drawing up the other and resting a beer bottle on top of his bent knee. His fingers twitch around it before he murmurs, "Being here isn't. Seeing her isn't. But watching you interact with her? Yeah. Especially doing it sober."

My eyes go to the beer, which I realize isn't even open. "She's upstairs. You can come inside if you want to. The coast is clear if you're out here to avoid us."

He doesn't address my offer. "Was it like that back then?" His eyes find mine, his question pinching my brows. "It's ironic, I guess. I was too focused on getting high versus paying any attention, and you were busy paying attention, so you didn't get high. I've tried thinking about that night, and I don't remember anything. I have no clue if you two flirted, if you danced, if you made a move while I was getting fucked up. I gave you shit for not remembering her before marrying her, but I'm a fucking hypocrite."

Fingers digging into the edges of the armrests on my chair, I shake my head. "You know me better than that. You were there with her, even if you weren't with her all the time."

"That answers my question."

My jaw ticks.

He sighs. "You always did notice a pretty woman when they were around."

I have nothing to say to that, so I stand and gesture toward the house. "We all had our issues back then. I wouldn't call you a hypocrite for reacting the way you did because maybe I subconsciously knew exactly who she was when I saw her again."

Zayne shakes his head, staring at his beer and dropping his head back. "She's comfortable with you."

I shrug. "I suppose."

"She wasn't with me."

I don't say anything other than, "You coming in?"

He contemplates it. "Nah. Think I'll enjoy the peace for a while longer. Holler when you want help shutting this down."

I reach a fist out that he bumps. "Will do."

Walking back inside instantly makes my temples throb when music that I vaguely recognize as some 2000s hit blasts. I roll my eyes and make it through the crowd, trying to keep track of where my mates are and cringing when I see a blonde bobbing her head over Jax's lap on my couch while another claims his lips.

"Fucking hell," I grumble, turning my back on the asshole and scouring the room.

"You look lost." The voice belongs to a soft-spoken woman who can't be more than twenty when I look down at her short frame.

"Not lost," is all I say, beginning to walk away before her hand catches my arm.

"Looking for your wife?"

I eye her carefully, the question not settling right.

She steps into me, rising on her tiptoes and whispering, "It's okay with me if you have one. We can still have some fun if you're bored."

I know she isn't referring to boredom over the party still in full swing. Before I can brush her off, she's tugging on my shirt with impressive force and taking my lips as soon as I'm bent low enough for her to reach them.

And that's when I see Rylee standing at the top of the stairs gaping at me. Even with everyone else around, it's the hurt smacking me straight in the chest that I know belongs to her.

She quickly turns and disappears back down the hall, with me close on her heels after quickly yanking back from the stranger and taking three steps up the stairs at a time until I'm at her bedroom door. "Ry!" I call out, knocking and wiggling the locked knob. "It wasn't what it looked like." I cringe at the line, blowing out a breath. "Well, I suppose it was what it looked like, but I did *not* initiate it."

Besides the noise from downstairs, I hear nothing else. It doesn't stop me from knocking more, knowing where the key is to the lock if it comes to that. "Please don't shut me out, love."

That's when I hear, "Don't call me that."

Her choppy voice tells me all I need to know without seeing her face. "I'm sorry for what happened. I wasn't expecting her to do that, it took me by surprise." My palm rests against the wood. "If you let me in, you can kick me. I bet that'd make you feel better."

My eyes widen when the lock clicks and the knob starts to turn. I step back when she cracks the door open. "It doesn't even matter, so just go back downstairs and have fun."

"You know that isn't true."

"We're not..." She doesn't have to finish the fading sentence. *We're not a real couple.*

That doesn't mean there aren't real feelings though. "Can I come in?"

Her eyes turn wary, the light from inside the room showing the glassy gaze that makes me want to kick myself.

"I can brush my teeth first," I joke, hoping that'll lighten the mood. She doesn't so much as crack a smile though, so I sigh and wait until she opens the door further so I can slip inside.

Closing the door behind me, I lean against the wood with my arms crossed over my chest and study the pajamas she's in. My eyes narrow. "Is that my shirt?"

Her hand quickly goes to the white tee covering her body, looking like a dress on her short figure. "It was in my laundry when I took it out of the dryer and I just..."

I wave it off. "Looks good on you."

Dodging my eyes, she stares at her bare feet which shift on the carpet. She rarely wears socks around here, which I find interesting considering she admitted to me she's obsessed with collecting quirky pairs. When she showed me the ones stuffed into a side pocket of her bag, I lost count after

thirty, thirty-one after I bought her a pair with kangaroos on them so she had a piece of me in the collection. Then I asked when she was going to unpack. She'd given me a quiet, "*I don't know. When I'm sure.*"

I never asked her what she was waiting to be sure about because I didn't want to know. It wouldn't be likely that I'd like the answer.

Rylee sits on the edge of the mattress, one of her hands wrapping around the posters of the bed. "Does that happen a lot to you?"

As much as I want to lie, I don't. "Not as much as it used to, but the women I hung around in the past would go after what they wanted without a single thought. Some don't think twice before sitting on our laps or making moves like that."

She doesn't give me any reaction to that, which is worse than seeing disgust or anger.

"Rylee—"

"We're not in a relationship," she tells me, though it sounds more like she's trying to convince herself.

"We're married."

"You know what I mean."

Dragging a palm down the side of my face, I grip the side of my neck. "What if I told you I wanted that?"

She stares.

"The relationship."

Her brows rise.

Taking a risk, I walk over to her and stop in front of where she sits. Caution locks her body as those two-tone doe eyes rake up the front of me until they're settled on my face.

"We're already married," I reason, squatting down to be closer to eye level. "Why not give it a shot? We know each other better, have the time, we made a commitment—"

"Our commitment is going to end."

My jaw ticks. "Who says?"

She gapes. "We did."

Reaching out, I take both her hands into mine and settle them on her lap. "How about we take it a day at a time? We don't have to think about next week or next month or next year."

"Or two years from now?"

"Or then," I agree.

Staring down at her lap, she lets out a small noise that almost resembles defeat. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve never had a serious relationship.”

Flipping our hands, I trace the lines on her palm with my fingertip and murmur, “How ironic, neither have I. We can pop each other’s cherries.”

The reaction I get makes it hard not to snicker when I see her eyes widen and cheeks deepen red. I’m tempted to ask her what other cherries I can pop, but I hold back from making the comment despite curiosity nipping at me.

Instead, I soak in the way she shivers when I continue tracing her palm. “You’re not going to argue? Tell me why it’s wrong?”

“I think...” Her breath is airy, choppy as she exhales and watches me trail my finger up her sleeve and along the vein of her wrist. “I think neither of us needs to say that aloud to know it’s probably the truth. We’re very different people.”

Humming, I bend and press a kiss on the center of her hand. Then another to the inside of her wrist. “Yet here we are, despite the circumstances. You going to give that up without even trying?”

Another shuddered breath. “No.”

“Mmm. Good. Might make the next two years very frustrating otherwise.” Without warning, I stand and gently lay her back until her eyes widen in sudden fear. It takes one look between us for her to ease as I crawl onto the bed and kneel with her body spread out between my legs. “Relax,” I command lightly, pressing a kiss against one corner of her lips and then the other. Her hands bolt to my chest, resting her shaky palms flat against my racing heart.

One of my free hands trails between us until it settles between her legs, cupping her over the cotton pajama pants she has on. Her body squirms, thighs closing to trap my hand exactly where her body wants me.

“Garrick...” The single word is barely audible, her eyes fluttering as I apply the right amount of pressure. Her head tilts back, giving me perfect access to her neck.

My lips pepper kisses along her skin, stopping at her collarbone and inhaling. When her hips arch into my hand, I know my efforts aren’t in vain. I give her what she needs, feeling the heat through the cotton.

The noises she makes fuels me. I lift her shirt and pay attention to every inch of skin on her torso, trailing my lips up to the valley between her bare

breasts and hover over one of the puckered nipples. “I’ve got you, baby girl.”

Within minutes, she’s writhing under me and gasping out choked noises as I slide my hand under her waistband and am greeted by naked skin. Moving closer to the trimmed curls lining her wet slit, I draw out her loud moans as I play with the bundle of nerves until she’s saying my name in ways I want to hear on repeat for the rest of my goddam life.

My cock grows painfully hard in my jeans and only gets worse when I feel her tighten around my finger as I play with her soaked pussy.

“That’s it,” I coax, fingers paying special attention to where she needs me most as I work a digit in and out of her slowly, then carefully add another. She’s so tight I worry I’m hurting her, but the way her hips lift to meet my hand as she holds onto my shoulders in a strong grip tells me otherwise.

“Garrick—” Her breath hitches as I quicken my pace, hooking my fingers and finding the perfect spot. “*Oh God.*”

Needing the pressure in my groin to ease, I turn her on her side and tuck myself behind her so we’re spooning. Pulling her toward me so we’re as close as we can be, I start grinding myself against her pert ass until I hear her gasp and clench the two fingers I’ve managed to ease inside her.

I don’t want to make her feel like she has to do anything more, but if I don’t cum—whether in my fucking jeans while listening to her noises, or with my cock in my hand in the bathroom replaying every second of what just happened—I’m going to fucking combust.

What does me in is the way her ass keeps the pace with every thrust of my fingers, keeping us in sync as I hear the wet, slapping noises of my hand and digits entering her pussy until she breaks apart in a shattered cry.

The second I hear the drawn out, orgasm-induced way she says “Garrick” has my cock emptying right fucking there along with her like a fourteen-year-old dry humping his first girlfriend.

We lay in silence, my fingers easing out of her and adjusting her pants back into place before my arm curls around her side to keep her against me.

Her body is sated, resting against me as she catches her breath. Burying my face in the crook of her neck, I murmur, “I’m looking forward to doing that again. And more.”

“More?”

Smiling against her skin, I press a kiss there and nod. “Definitely more, love. Ever had an Australian kiss before?”

There’s a moment of pause. “I don’t even know what that is.”

So fucking innocent. I swear I’m ready to go again simply from that alone. “It’s like a French kiss—” The tip of my tongue ghosts over the back of her neck and trails over to find the pulse on the side. “—except down under.”

I hold her while a shiver runs down her spine, but don’t push her to reply.

Sometimes the silence says it all.

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RYLEE

Garrick gives me a jacket to put over my head and sandwiches me between him and a beefy officer who's leading us out of the airport. Hidden away, I see the telltale signs of cameras flashing from my view of the ground as I keep the barrier up to shield me and hear masses of muffled voices that are drowned out by the headphones put on me before we left the plane.

Unlike me, Garrick isn't covered by anything besides sunglasses and a backwards baseball cap to cover his unruly blond hair. Nothing that conceals his identity. He stays close, always touching me to reassure me he's there, knowing what he's doing since I keep stumbling as we rush through the cleared area security prepped in advance of our landing.

We'd made it an hour into the flight before I noticed a cell phone pointed in our direction from the corner of my eye. I'd leaned into Garrick, burrowing into his side, and whispered, "*Someone is taking pictures.*" He dropped an arm around me, shifted his body to shield me from the people pointing phones at us, and gave me one of his earbuds to watch a movie with him as a distraction.

The protective side of him is still strong, but I know if I look back he'll have a neutral expression on his face—not smiling or frowning, not paying any attention to the people calling out to him or stopping to sign things and take pictures.

He used to do that.

People applauded him for it, said he was one of the few who happily interacted with fans wherever he went because he was grateful.

Until people like me ruined it for him.

I frown as we stop at a sleek black vehicle, the windows heavily tinted, as the door opens. I slide in first, followed by Garrick, and only lower the jacket when he taps my leg and peels it off me, then moves the headphones to rest around my neck.

My hesitant eyes go to the windows where a huge crowd of people are being kept back by police barriers and officers. Eyes widening at the sight, I slowly shake my head.

The car starts moving a few moments after someone puts our bags in the back, and I find myself moving toward Garrick until our sides are pressed against each other.

He puts my seatbelt on as I lose myself in my surroundings, then takes my hand, threads our fingers, and squeezes my palm once. "It's a lot to take in."

That's an understatement.

He says something to the driver before we make our way through the crowds, a sheriff's vehicle leading with its lights on, and a regular cruiser tailing close behind.

It's only then I say, "I'm sorry."

I don't tell him why.

But he understands. "You didn't know."

"I should have." The crowd of people seems endless, and the idea of everyone being here because of him...*us*...seems unbelievable to me.

Suffocating.

Sarina used to say that the repercussions of our work doesn't matter as long as the job is done, and our purses are padded. For a while, I pretended I was okay with that.

But this...

"I should have," I repeated in a whisper, more to myself than him.

He squeezes our fingers together again as his only reply, and I'm glad. I'm not sure I want his forgiveness.

Not yet.

I'm dreading the moment we pull up to my parents' house, taking a roundabout way to ensure nobody followed us. I asked Garrick if we could stop at a hotel first, the nearest one being half an hour away from my

I hometown, but he simply looked at me and said, “*Rip the Band-Aid off, Rylee.*”

The fact he knows I’d make a million excuses not to go right to their house tells me he’s a little too perceptive. Even if I hadn’t texted Mom to let them know when we’d landed, she would have found out. She lives for gossip sites like TMZ, usually filling *me* in on the latest celebrity news whenever we talk. Now, I wouldn’t be surprised if Garrick and I are plastered on the tabloid’s homepage as we speak.

Blowing out a breath, I sink into my seat and stare at the rustic blue farmhouse style home. Everything is the same as it always has been minus the few little renovations Dad worked on inside. The windowpanes and shutters are still white, the flowerbeds are empty from the cold season taking over the pretty greenery, and there’s still a large dent in the corner of the enclosed porch from where a FedEx driver backed into it when I was in high school.

I’m not sure when, but Garrick had pulled his hand away from mine. Maybe it just happened, maybe it happened as soon as we left the airport parking lot. He undoes my seatbelt since I haven’t made a move to and turns to me, knee brushing mine. “They love you,” he reminds me, a fact I’ve known my whole life.

That doesn’t make this any easier. Any time I’ve done something wrong, I always think they’ll hold onto a grudge. Like the time I washed all our colored and white laundry together and turned everything pink. Dad had to go to work in a pink polo because they didn’t have time to go to the store to buy new ones for him, and his coworkers gave him flack for weeks.

Or the time I accidentally scratched their car during my first three months of driving and made it worse by trying to get an old high school crush to buff it out before they noticed.

There have been countless times when I messed up and was terrified of letting them down, and all those incidents were nothing I should have wasted my anxiety on. Puny compared to the one I’m freaking out over now.

I look to Garrick. “How can you face this like you’re not scared? You’re about to meet two complete strangers who won’t be happy with either of us.”

I swear he smiles, but masks it. “I have to deal with strangers all the time, including angry ones. Plus, I’ve done drugs.”

“Okay, first, what does that have to do with anything? And second, please don’t let that be your icebreaker when you meet them. They’re, er, conservative. Sort of.”

He snorts. “I’m sure they’ve done their research on me already, Rylee. I married their daughter, they’re going to want to know who I am and what I’ve done, and all my little rehab stories and pictures from back then are still plastered everywhere online. Everything they need to know about my past is one Google search away. But, if it makes you feel better, I won’t outwardly introduce myself as the former addict who loves giving their daughter orgasms.”

Oh my God. I’m not sure how he can joke about this, even if he’s had plenty of practice dealing with unhappy people. “These aren’t just any other strangers you’ve met, Garrick. They’re my parents.”

He nods, seriousness washing away the playful nature of his expression. “I know. They mean a lot to you, just like my mother means a lot to me. And you did well in that situation, like I’ll do here. I can’t promise they’ll like me, but I won’t give them any reason not to. But they’re going to forge their own opinions about me on their own if they haven’t already, and neither of us can stop them.”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out my ring, winking as I eye it stunned. “Don’t think I didn’t double check to make sure we brought this. It’s all about the appearance, right?” Taking my hand, he gently slides it onto my finger and brushes a kiss just above it. I feel every single nerve in my body fire even after those lips retract and he brushes a thumb over the piece of expensive jewelry. “Are you ready, wife?”

I shiver at the title, wondering if he can hear the *thump, thump, thump* of my heart. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that.”

“Better start, love.” Pecking my cheek, he opens his door a crack before shooting me a weighty look and stuffing the ring box back into his jacket pocket. “Your parents are walking toward the car.”

I think my heart stops.

There’s a thick tension in the air as we sit around the living room, a large open space painted yellow because Mom said it was warm and welcoming. Everyone is spread out in here instead of cramped

around the kitchen table like we would have been since most serious talks happen there.

Like when my goldfish died, and Mom tried telling me it went to boarding school. Or my rabbit, which they said got a letter to Hogwarts. I knew that was bullshit, but I let them lie and used the opportunity to ask if we could get a cat.

They'd said no.

Every time they wanted to talk about something big, it happened at the chipped, square table that Dad proudly found at a garage sale. He'd sanded it, repainted it, and said the wear it'd gotten over the years gave it character. The bottom has random drawings from when I was little and got ahold of permanent markers, and it used to house some of my old gum until Mom found out and made me scrape it all off and then grounded me for a week.

A long time ago, Dad announced he'd lost his job at the table during dinner. His eyes had been glazed with stress, Mom patted his hand in comfort, and I stared at them wondering what that even meant for us since Mom didn't work.

And I'll never forget the time they gave me the dreaded sex talk at that very same piece of furniture when I started dating Fulton Ramsay. I'm not sure if their intention was to scare me from having it, but it worked. Especially when my father said the word 'condom' and my mother told me I should go on birth control.

I'd like to think that the room venue means this won't be as bad as I assumed it would, but I know the real truth is that Dad twisted his ankle and has to prop it up on his recliner with an ice pack on it.

"Did you see a doctor?" I ask, staring at the swelling on his foot.

Garrick shifts beside me on the couch, eyes roaming to my father's injury as well. He offered a hand in greeting when my father approached him outside, and Dad may have been reluctant, but he still shook it. Mom and I gawked. Dad grunted something and limped back inside with all of us following.

It's been quiet since.

"No," is all he says.

"Oh." A few more seconds pass uncomfortably quiet before I add, "Maybe you should, just so you're certain there's not a break."

Mom cuts in, a hand wrapped tightly around her cup of tea. "It's just sprained."

I nod slowly, not bothering to ask how they know, and trailing my eyes down to the new carpet they had installed within the last few years.

Garrick nudges my leg with his, letting me know he's there for me. It's him who addresses the elephant in the room. "I understand if you're upset with us because my mother wasn't very pleased when she found out about our marriage either."

Both my parents stare at him with unblinking, unreadable expressions. It makes it hard to swallow, but Garrick takes it in stride like it doesn't faze him. "I'll take care of your daughter, help her through what's to come by being attached to me, and we'll be safe."

My face heats over his version of safe and the one I'm clearly thinking of that must have been front and center in my mind from PTSD of that safe sex talk all those years ago.

Dad clears his throat. "What hurt us more," he declares, looking only at me, "is that we found out online. Not by you. Your mother was upset you didn't even tell her you were seeing anyone, much less..." His eyes go to Garrick for a moment, his lips twitching downward.

There isn't disapproval on his face necessarily, but he definitely doesn't approve either. Unless Garrick can prove otherwise, he'll be Switzerland about it while Mom takes lead on how she feels about our situation.

I sink into the couch cushion. "It happened so suddenly I barely had time to process myself."

Mom shifts toward me, one of her hands reaching out to find Dad's beside her. "You never liked talking to me about boys. Did you not trust me enough to ask for advice? Or to vent? To at least tell me what their names were?"

Internally, I groan, side-eying my husband whose brows are raised as he scopes out my face. I ignore his curiosity and direct my attention fully at my mom. "It isn't like I dated *that* often. There were only a few guys."

"And you only told us about Fulton."

Gee, I wonder why. "None of them were serious anyway," I counter.

She sighs, setting her cup down on the table next to her recliner. "Apparently, the seriousness of a relationship doesn't matter considering you *got married* without so much as saying a word about it."

I'm at a stalemate when Garrick cuts back in, reaching out and taking my hand. "It's my fault, Mrs. Simmons."

Unlike his mother, she doesn't tell him to call her by her first name. A thought I bury for now to overthink about later when I'm alone.

My *husband* interlocks our fingers. "It was a whirlwind romance that we both got swept away in, and I know how the media works, how the press and paparazzi would have dissected every little thing about us before Rylee could truly give me a chance. The second I saw your daughter I knew what I wanted."

To my horror, Dad grumbles, "I'm sure you did" just loud enough for all of us to hear.

"Dad!"

Mom hides a smile, Garrick tries to fake a cough to cover his surprised laugh, and I gape at my parents with what I imagine is red tinting my whole face that matches the color of the flower painting hanging on the wall.

Subconsciously, my nails dig into Garrick's hand until he wiggles it loose and flexes. When I look down, I see the crescent marks left behind on his skin. "Sorry," I murmur.

He pats my knee. "Rylee has had to endure a lot as soon as the news came out, as I'm sure you've seen, and I knew if we announced it sooner we would have been harassed for far longer. It's not a good excuse, and I'm sorry that we hurt you and my mother. I felt it was best, and Rylee went along with it because I've been in this business long enough to know how it works."

I can't help but look at him, awe sprinkled into my overheated face. He says it so simply, so calmly. Like I almost believe it when he says, "I care about Rylee very, very much, and I would hate to see anything happen to her. You've raised a lovely woman. She keeps me on my toes, seeing more than just the dollar amount attached to my name or the career I'm known for. She's the first person who isn't afraid to question me about what I say or do. I'm sure my brother would agree, since he witnesses how she handles my theatrics daily."

"Your brother lives with you two?"

"He recently bought a house," Garrick explains to Mom. "But he's been staying with us until he gets through closing and can move in. I love having him around. I'm close with my family."

"And your parents?" Dad inquires.

"Divorced. My father is still in Australia and my mother lives near me in California. Rylee met her the other day. My father knows about her as

well, and I'd like for them to meet one day. He and I aren't very close, but we do keep in touch."

I know Garrick talks with his father because I hear them on the phone once in a while. The first time I heard his father say "g'day, mate" in a thick accent reminded me of all the episodes of *The Crocodile Hunter* I'd watched with Dad growing up. Garrick's never brought up the possibility I'd meet him face to face, and I don't know if he's saying that to appease my parents or if he means it.

Mom and Dad exchange a long look, and I've stopped trying to figure out what they silently communicate whenever they get that matching look in their eyes. I always thought I'd get the same abilities when I found someone to spend the rest of my life with, yet here I am, staring at Garrick wondering who the hell he is and what he's thinking.

He's a smooth talker.

A charmer.

A flirt.

I shouldn't be surprised he's somehow managing to woo my parents considering Dad hasn't threatened to get out the shot gun or bring up how he's friends with the local sheriff who lives on the outskirts of town.

If anyone would be able to win over the people who mean the world to me, it's Garrick Matthews.

And then Mom says, "Do you still use drugs?"

The man who slipped a ring on my finger turns to me subtly, one brow arched, as if to say, *told you so*. But instead of verbalizing that, he sits straighter and faces my mother. "No, ma'am. I've been clean for four years now. It's been a long journey, but one I plan to stick to."

"Do you drink?"

"Mom," I chide, cheeks flaming.

She ignores me. "Do you drink?"

"Occasionally, but not often these days."

It's my father who asks, "Are you planning on cheating on my daughter?"

"Oh my God," I whisper, sinking into the couch hoping the cushions will swallow me whole.

Garrick doesn't laugh at my expense or get defensive. Instead, he flattens his hand against my leg, just above my knee, caressing the inside of my leg with his fingertips until my heart thumps rapidly in my chest. "So

long as your daughter will have me in her life, I will remain faithful. I take my vows and promises seriously, and I would never do anything to hurt her. If she decides this isn't what she wants—" He looks at me then, softness in his eyes that replicates the way he looked at me last night in my room before we fell asleep together. "—then I will still stand by her no matter what."

It's a promise.

One that he's said before.

What will my parents think when our time is up? What will they say to me when I become another celebrity divorce statistic when the news outlets all report on it? I know their standpoints on divorce better than I know their views on marriage. It's one person for life, their happiness, their loyalty, and their love.

No exceptions.

So, I'm surprised when my father replies with a quiet, "That's all I ask."

I stare at the aging man whose hair has started to thin and beard has begun graying. His dark brown hair is why I decided to dye mine all those years ago, even though my natural honey blonde color comes from my mother. My other features are a mixture of the two, besides my short height that I inherited from my mother.

It's a few moments of silence again, the tension lessening as the seconds tick by, before my mother speaks. "I want you to be happy, Rylee, but I also want you to be careful." Before I can say anything, her eyes drift to the man sitting beside me, hand still on my leg, thumb still comforting me in short strokes, and body heat wrapping me in its warmth unknowingly. "Sometimes the people we think will never hurt us are the ones who harm us the most when we least expect it."

Her words come with a warning, much lighter than the ones given to me by Garrick's family.

But it's all the same.

And Garrick takes it as he should. "I understand, Mrs. Simmons."

It's a breath or two before my mother sighs again, picks up her tea, and sits back in her chair. "You can call me Kelly."

Garrick shoots me a secretive grin in victory while I slowly shake my head at the miracle I just witnessed.

My parents put on the TV to break up the tension, except the first thing that flashes across the screen is a video of us walking out of the airport

along the clustered crowds.

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GARRICK

I think Rylee is about to cry. Or combust if the pacing is any indication. I'm not sure which is safer, so I let her have her moment as I bring our bags up to her old childhood bedroom and set them down on the full-sized mattress. At least it's not a twin, since there's no spare room for me to sleep in like I would have figured they'd direct me to.

Her father simply said, "It's her room or the couch, and that couch will leave you with one hell of a backache."

Based on the way her eyes stare at the bed before her fingers raise to her mouth to bite her nails, I'd say she's not too happy with the idea of being bed buddies again. She never mentioned falling asleep in my room at home, or how I spent the night holding her the day before. I think she feels better forgetting she made herself comfortable around me, as if it's a bad thing.

Clearing my throat, I stand straight and examine the room. Pink, just like she said. Except the sheets and blankets on the bed are a floral white that must have replaced the princess ones she'd once mentioned having, and the frilly curtains I imagined hanging on the windows are white sun-blockers that shade the room.

"Cute," I remark, walking over to the half-empty bookcase and examining the odds and ends on it. I pick up a dusty frame of a younger version of Rylee and a tall girl with curly hair. "Who is this?"

She stops pacing enough to walk up beside me and study what I'm holding. "That's my best friend."

"Moffie, right?"

Her head jerks back slightly. "You remembered?"

“Hard name to forget,” I say casually, setting it back down. There are multiple colors splattered all over the girls in the photo like they got into a paintball war. “You two look happy. What’s on your faces?”

I look over to see her absentmindedly staring at the image from around me. “Moffie dragged me to a highlighter party. We all wore white and got sprayed with paint by the people hosting it. It turned into a rave. Well, our version of one anyway. We don’t really get a lot of them here in the boonies.”

Smirking, I examine the other knickknacks. A sad looking stuffed teddy bear is on the top shelf, missing an eye and part of its ear, next to it is a line of bear figurines in all shapes and sizes that she must collect, and a few books that don’t look like they’ve ever been read.

And... “Is that a VHS tape?” I grab it and look at the cover. “Haven’t seen one of these in a long time.”

“I used to have a VCR to watch them at my apartment,” she tells me. “My grandma gave it to me as a housewarming present to be unique. She’d said it was ‘something old’ even though Grandpa Al reminded her that was for weddings.” A frown settles on her face. “I think she knew by that point that she’d never see me get married. It wasn’t too long after I moved that she was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. It’d spread quickly from there.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ry.”

She takes a deep breath and wipes under her eye with her finger. “She also gave me these bears because they’re her favorite animal. There were hundreds of these at their house until Grandpa Al told her she had to get rid of some because they took up too much room.”

“Are they both...?” She talks about them enough where I figured they’d passed on, but I never wanted to ask to ruin the memories she always got lost in that led to her beautiful smiles.

I watch her lips press together, her eyes focused on the animal figurine closest to her. “I was really close to them, like I’ve mentioned before. Grandpa Al especially. There was something special about their love, like it couldn’t be beat. He married her after she got divorced from my bio-grandpa who’s somewhere in North Carolina I think. We don’t talk. I don’t know what happened between them, all I know is that Al is her one. And Al...he always considered me one of his own. Treated me like family and

taught me his passions. I miss them both, but I know they're together and happy."

"I can only imagine how hard that must be for you," is all I say before changing the subject. "What's there to do around here? Something quiet that we'd be able to enjoy?"

Her lip pulls into her mouth as she glances up at me through her lashes. "There's a mini golf place not far from here. Right outside of town. I'm not sure it's open right now though, they're usually seasonal for when the weather is nicer. Last I knew, they closed around Columbus Day so we're a few weeks late. They serve ice cream too and people around here used to love going in the summertime."

"Did you?"

She shrugs. "I was never very good."

"Well," I declare, "I say we find out for ourselves."

"Garrick, they're probably not—"

I hush her. "Leave it to me, Rylee. Money speaks, and I happen to have a lot of it. We can invite your parents too and extend an olive branch."

"They'll interrogate you."

"I'll take it."

"They'll ask personal questions."

"I'm an open book."

"Garrick..."

"Rylee. Deep breaths, love. Remember what we talked about? Inhale for three, exhale for three. I can take whatever they throw at me. I'm used to it."

"You're used to the parents of women you marry asking you a million questions about yourself?"

I snicker at her dry humor. "I'm used to people throwing questions at me for no reason at all, but unlike those situations, I have every justifiable reason to answer these ones now."

We stare at each other, uncertainty in her eyes and determination in mine. She knows by now that I don't give up easily, and I can tell that bothers her to some degree. Even though this is her domain, I still push her because we have a better chance at getting out of the house here than back home.

Time out together.

With her family.

Enjoying each other's company.
Finally, she relents. "My dad does love mini golfing."

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RYLEE

My parents decide to sit mini golfing out even though Dad grumbled about it. With his ankle, he wouldn't be able to get around easily, so it makes sense why they stayed behind.

The owner opened just for us after Garrick pulled out his wallet and flashed him the stacks inside. Seeing how much money he carries makes me squirm, like at any minute someone will pop out of the bushes and mug us, and it bugs me for the first three holes we play.

I finally ask, "Do you always carry that much around with you?"

He pauses from hitting the bright purple ball to stand to full height. "Not all the time. And \$100 is yours." Patting his back pocket where the leather wallet is, he says, "If you'd just accept it."

I cross my arms. "I don't need—"

"My money," he finishes for me, eyes flashing with mischief before raking over the way I clench my jacket around me for warmth. Shaking his head, he walks over, grabs the ends, and begins zipping it. Halfway up, he discovers the teeth are broken which is why it doesn't close properly. He eyes me. "It seems you do need a new jacket though."

"This one is fine."

He rolls his eyes. "It doesn't function the way it's meant to, Rylee. That isn't 'fine'. I don't have one to give you either."

All I do is shrug, even if the cold air is nipping at me uncomfortably. I have no idea how he's comfortable in the long sleeve shirt he has on considering he's been a west coaster practically his whole life.

I fidget with a loose string and look around the open area. “At least there isn’t any snow on the ground. You can never be sure what winters will be like here. Sometimes it starts in October, sometimes it doesn’t until January. Dad said the Farmer’s Almanac is predicting a light season. We haven’t had one like that in years.”

The confusion on his face makes me crack a small smile before taking a step back and tucking my hair behind my ear. “Some people swear by the predictions in the Farmer’s Almanac. They’re usually spot on with their winter guesses. It doesn’t really matter to me here because I don’t have to deal with the snow or ice unless I’m traveling.”

One of his brows quirks. “Is that why you don’t have a working jacket?”

I choose to ignore him. “Are you going to hit the ball anytime soon? I’d like to go before my fingers need to be amputated.”

It’s not *that* cold, but cold temperatures have always bothered my body. My joints stiffen and take longer to warm up, and I can’t stop shaking even hours after I’m inside again. If I were smart, I would have brought gloves with me on this trip knowing where Mom keeps a stash of hand knitted ones at home, but I hadn’t planned on playing mini golf with a Grammy winner in the middle of nowhere.

Garrick is kind enough not to point out how bad I am at this game and tries his hardest not to laugh when I tell him of my many fails playing. Like the time I broke one of the props when I swung my club a little too hard for dramatic effect, or when I smacked the ball right into an old man’s back who was at the hole ahead of me and Dad.

I think the reason Dad loves doing this with me is because he’s guaranteed to win every time. He stopped letting me win when I was ten and won’t let me forget all the times he’s made himself look like a fool trying to throw the games he’s played with me over the years.

Garrick isn’t half bad, and I wonder if he’s done this before. Every move he makes is strategic, calculated. “Have you ever played?”

He hits the ball and we both watch it go right to the hole, dropping in flawlessly. Turning, he winks at me. “A time or two. It’s much more fun drunk, but I stay away from that these days. I hope you didn’t mind me telling the guys that you don’t drink, you don’t seem like much of a drinker anyway.”

I shake my head and place my ball down before studying the layout of the course. “I’ve never liked drinking that much. Moffie and I used to steal

wine from my Mom when we were teenagers and got wasted at our joint graduation party on rum and coke.” I don’t think too much about the night of vomiting and next morning’s horrible hangover before hitting the ball, watching it bounce off the brick siding and land in the sand pit. Shoulders dropping, I ignore the soft snicker from Garrick and walk over to the neon yellow ball I chose. “Now, I can’t really drink because of my medicine anyway. It’s not good to mix it with my prescriptions.”

I don’t look up to see the seriousness probably carved into his face before trying to get the ball in the hole so we can move on. He says, “I didn’t think of that.”

“Why would you?”

He’s silent.

After a few more holes, he comes up and nudges my arm. “What about ice cream?”

I give him a funny look. “What about it?”

“Can you eat it?”

“It’s practically winter.”

“It’s November and warm.”

I eye him doubtfully. “You live in California. How can you say it’s ‘warm’ right now? I’m from here and I’m freezing.”

It’s the wrong thing to say because he points toward my jacket and says, “That’s because your coat is broken, love.”

Back to this. I don’t encourage him. “Yes, I like ice cream. Occasionally. I’ve never really had it during the winter though with the exception of ice cream cake because it’s Moffie’s favorite. She’s a January baby.”

“And what about you?”

I don’t answer right away while we walk alongside each other to the next hole. We both examine it, figuring out the best vantage point for a hole-in-one. Eventually, I place my ball on the tee which he gestures to and tell him, “April.”

“Ah. An Aries. Makes sense.”

I look over my shoulder. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He holds up his hand. “Nothing personal. My mother was into astrology. She’s an Aries too. May. I suppose that’s why she likes you. You’re compatible.”

Not sure what to say, I turn my back on him and focus on the ball. To my surprise, it goes right in on the first try. If only Dad were here to witness it, he'd be in disbelief too.

"We complement each other," he remarks at random, eyes staring at the golf balls in our hands.

My brows pinch. "What?"

He taps the yellow one I hold. "Purple and yellow are complementary colors. We complement each other."

Huh. "I was in the mood for yellow today," I explain dumbly, not really knowing what else to say.

"It's a good color for you. Warm."

I stay quiet.

"This is where you tell me that purple is a great color for me," he states confidently.

I roll my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. "Why would I do that? And what does that even mean? Purple doesn't even symbolize anything."

"Wrong." He holds up his golf ball between two fingers. "Purple is associated with royalty, nobility, power, luxury, and ambition. Why do you think it's my favorite color?"

I make a face. "I don't know. To be different?"

He smirks. "That too. But it's a symbol. Music royalty. Hard earned money. The lap of luxury. Some might even call me ambitious if they knew me well enough. See where I'm going with this?"

"And I'm...warm?" My eyes drop to the neon yellow ball in my hand attempting to connect the color to me somehow.

"You're warm, welcoming, and kind. You may not have a favorite color, but yellow suits you well. It's enthusiastic and enlightening. Open to optimism."

None of that sounds particularly like me. "I think you're making things up now."

"So be it." A shoulder lifts. "I suppose not everybody can see their worth that easily. But everyone who knows you would agree with me."

"I'm pretty sure everybody would agree with you because you're famous," I counter, walking ahead of him. "You could tell people you were abducted by aliens and they'd probably nod along. It's the accent. Makes everything sound—" I stop short of saying sexy.

His blue eyes light up. “My accent makes everything sound like what, Rylee? Enlighten me, I’d love to know.”

Internally groaning, I murmur, “Sexy. You didn’t need me to say that though.”

He snickers, dropping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me into him. Dropping a kiss on the top of my head, he says, “No, but it’s still nice to hear.”

After we finish the course, we walk back to the cabin-like building where the owner is waiting for us behind the counter. He doesn’t seem to care that he’s here on a Saturday in the off season, but then again his eyes lit up when Garrick passed him the cash, so I guess he wouldn’t mind at all.

“Ice cream?” Garrick prompts, pointing at the sign attached the side of the building. “I asked earlier if he had any left and he says they have a few options before they clear out for the year.”

Rubbing my arms down the front of my jeans for friction, I’m about to say ‘no’ when he guides me inside and calls out, “Do you have any gloves by any chance? My girl is cold.”

My eyes widen momentarily at the label, but I don’t meet his eyes because I know he’ll see the flush on my cheeks. “You don’t have to—”

“I know. Stop saying that or I’ll have to remind you of that little promise I made.”

I shut up quickly, though a part of me really wants to finish the sentence.

The owner collects our clubs and balls and sounds genuinely apologetic when he tells us he only has golfing gloves.

Garrick turns to me. “We can go.”

“You wanted ice cream.”

“Only if you do.”

I roll my eyes knowing he’s excited over the dairy treat, so I give him my shoulder and face the owner. “What do you have?”

Since Garrick is insistent that I have \$100 to spend, I tell him I’ll cover the food. He doesn’t fight it, simply hands over the money once he gets the total and tells me to sit at one of the booths across the room. I hear the heat kick on before I feel it but sink into the seat once the warm air blows on me.

It doesn’t take long before Garrick slides in beside me instead of the spot across the table, making me side eye him as he places a cup in front of me that is *not* ice cream.

“Is this...?” I breathe in the salty scent.

“Soup. Chicken noodle.” I’m about to comment when he points at the steaming cup. “I gave him ten bucks to pick out the carrots since you hate those.”

“How do you know—”

“You always pick out the carrots and peas from the soup you heat up. Haven’t you noticed the stuff I’ve made you doesn’t have any in it?”

Well...yes. But I just assumed he didn’t like vegetables either. Which is sort of stupid because I’ve *seen* him eat them in other things. I even noted how much spinach he consumes and called him Popeye once, but Chase told me not to because it’d go to his brother’s head.

He chuckles, licking the vanilla and chocolate twist cone in his hand. “I’ve always loved veggies, even as a kid. Chase on the other hand, he used to try hiding them under the rim of the plate like nobody would notice. When Mum would clear the table, there’d be a perfect circle of peas surrounding it. Little fucker would blame me for it.”

I can’t help but laugh. “That’s classic. I remember blaming my cousin once for the drawing I put on the wall. My parents didn’t buy it. Mostly because my cousin wasn’t even in town that day.”

He shakes his head, amusement on his face. “Those were the days, huh?”

Dipping the spoon into the soup, I swirl it around and blush when my stomach rumbles. “Sometimes I miss it. Do you?”

It takes him a moment to answer. He looks off to the distance like he’s giving it proper thought, before taking another lick of his ice cream and then lowering it. “Yes and no. I miss being able to go out without people harassing me. I miss not being used whenever I get close to people. But I don’t miss the way my family struggled. Having to see my mother make ends meet was tough. I even tried getting a job at a local restaurant once, but when she found out she grounded me.”

My brows raise. “For wanting a job?”

“We’d made a deal,” he explains, “that I would focus on school. Get good grades. Do whatever extracurricular I wanted. Have fun. She didn’t want me to waste my youth worrying about her and Chase. Her job paid well enough, but obviously Cali isn’t a cheap place to live and being a single mother of two growing boys had its downfalls. But she *always* made it work.”

I scoop up a piece of chicken and study it absentmindedly. His relationship with his mother is heartwarming, and I love that she wanted him to enjoy being a kid. Some families have no other option. Still, I can't help but wonder, "Do you think you would have helped me if you didn't grow up in that situation?"

This time, he doesn't pause. "I don't know. Maybe? I try not to focus on what could have been because there's no reason to get lost in theoretics. Now, eat up before it gets cold. I know how you are about cold food."

I smile to myself but hide it with the spoon. We eat in peaceful silence for a few minutes, both staring at nothing and soaking up the warm air cascading around us. I don't know where the owner is, probably in the back, but I know Garrick slipped him extra cash to keep quiet about us being here.

I don't think the older guy even knew who Garrick was, but I didn't say that to him.

I'm almost done eating when I turn and ask, "Why aren't you sitting on the bench across from me?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I wanted to sit by you."

I'm quiet.

He smirks. "How's the soup?"

"Warm. Salty. Not as good as yours."

He beams. "You should tell that to my mother, she thinks hers is better. Chase won't be a tie breaker because he's afraid of us."

I blurt, "I'd be more afraid of your mom."

Garrick laughs, bumping my shoulder. "I probably would be too. My brother has never liked picking sides. When he was little, he used to say he loved everything equally, even if it was obvious there was something he liked more."

"Like your soup?"

He only grins.

"You talk about your brother a lot, but I want to hear more about young Garrick. What are some funny and embarrassing things you did when you were little?"

"You first."

"I told you about the wall drawing."

He presses his lips together. "Not good enough. All kids do that."

I pout. "That's not fair."

He winks. "Fine. When I was about six I pissed my pants and blamed it on the dog."

"You had a dog?"

His eyes light up. "No."

Slowly, I shake my head. "What is with you and fictional dogs?"

"I've always wanted one."

I eye him skeptically. "So get one. You're Garrick Matthews, you can get anything you want."

There's something in his eyes I can't figure out as he looks over at one of my eyes, then the other, and trails down to my lips. It's a moment or two before the heat simmers in his blue gaze and he murmurs, "Not everything."

I feel it in my fingers.

The tingles.

Then the butterflies in my stomach.

The back of my neck prickles with heat.

But I don't say a word or acknowledge what's left unsaid in between the lines. So, to shift the mood, I dart toward his ice cream to steal some since he never did get me the chocolate cone I ordered before replacing it with soup.

He greedily jerks his food away, making me laugh at my weak attempt.

I jab his side. "Hey, don't be greedy. What's that saying? 'If I lick it, it's mine.'"

Instantly, I know it's the wrong thing to say when his eyes flash molten. "You can lick whatever you want of mine, Rylee."

My eyes narrow, trying to play off his innuendo. "Except your ice cream?"

He grins again.

And I know that grin is trouble.

I lock up when a cold tongue drags across my cheek until a hot breath caresses my ear and one single sultry word is whispered in it. "Mine."

GARRICK

The carpeted floor is uncomfortable, but I don't complain as I prop a pillow under my head and cover myself with the knit blanket Rylee gave me before she hurtled under the comforter on the bed like she was afraid I'd see the shorts she was wearing. Too late. The second she walked out of the bathroom down the hall and back into her bedroom, my eyes went straight to her legs.

She's been restless since the lights went out, nothing but the occasional car driving by outside to fill the quiet between us. I know she's not sleeping because she'll shift every few minutes. I debate on what to say to calm her but come up blank.

Pretty words are a specialty of mine.

Sincere ones come naturally.

But I'm not sure if Rylee wants to hear either from me.

Something has been building between us for a while now, far beyond the shameless flirting that I do to make her blush. And last night was the first time she's opened herself up to the possibility of more, and I don't want to let that go because she's second guessing her decision.

Instead of letting it nip at me, I break the thick silence. "What is your favorite childhood memory?"

Rylee stops fidgeting. "What?"

I repeat the question, divulging my own first. "My mum took Chase and I to see Bon Jovi in concert. It was the first concert I'd ever been to. Left a mark, I guess. He's her favorite singer, but we all used to sing along whenever she'd play his music. That concert was..." I smile, staring up at

the ceiling. “It was by far my favorite memory. I always try channeling the energy of that show at the ones Violet Wonders put on because I remember how much everybody in the audience loved it.”

I think she breathes out a soft “wow” but it’s too quiet to be sure. I give her time to think, listening to the solitude of small-town life and wondering if it ever bothered Rylee growing up. I prefer the noise, the chance to drown out my thoughts with whatever surrounds me. Here the silence offers too much opportunity to get lost in your head, and that’d be dangerous for me.

I’d think too much. Regret past choices. Relive pieces I’d rather not. It’s a trigger, one I don’t want to touch because I don’t know what I’d do if I felt like I couldn’t escape.

Instead of indulging me, she asks, “Did you ever meet him? Jon Bon Jovi?”

Settling into the pillow, I chuckle to myself over the thought of meeting one of my many idols. When the opportunity arose, I’d asked Mum if she wanted to come with me since she’s the reason I became a fan, and the second Jon stepped into the room, she nearly fainted.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Mum and I met him. Chase wasn’t that interested, which was his loss. He missed our mother fangirling like a teenager. I’ll never forget it.”

“Have you ever fangirled someone?”

Snorting, I shake my head. “Nah. Got the jitters? Sure. But I know what it’s like to be on the receiving end, so I try to play it cool.”

“Who gave you the jitters?”

“Tit for tat,” I bargain, sitting up on one of my elbows to see her. She’s facing me, resting on her side with her hands propped under her head as a pillow. “You tell me something, and I’ll do the same in return.”

I wait for her to tell me no, to say she’s tired suddenly, but she doesn’t. “I have too many, honestly. I lived a good life, even with the obstacles I’ve faced. Made good memories with people. I guess one of my favorite childhood memories is when Grandma Birdie taught me how to make her top-secret chili recipe. It’s my mom’s favorite, and I wanted to make her something special for Mother’s Day, so Birdie told me she’d let me in on how to make it exactly like she did growing up so Mom couldn’t tell the difference. My mom still begs me to tell her what the ingredients are, but I promised Birdie I wouldn’t. I still won’t give it up even though my grandma is gone.”

“That must drive her crazy.”

There’s amusement in her tone. “It does. But it was something me and Birdie shared just the two of us, you know? I hold onto that.”

Shifting to my side, I prop my head up onto my palm so I can see her better. “Olivia Newton-John. That’s who gave me the jitters. I was nervous when I found out I’d be at the same event as her. They placed us at the same table like some cruel joke to see what I’d do.”

“What happened?”

“Nearly sweat through my suit. My mother had to tell me to calm down and the guys all teased me mercilessly once they realized why I was getting clammy.” I think back to that day and roll my eyes to myself. Zayne and Jax started singing *You’re the One that I Want* until I threatened to kick them out of the band.

They’d all laughed. Including Mum.

We both fall to silence for a few heartbeats before she settles on her back. “Since we’ll see Moffie before we go, you should probably know that I have a thing for The Wild.”

I sit up quickly and eye her, the knit blanket falling off me in the process. “The Wild?” I repeat, scoffing at the name of my competition in the industry. “How long have you been sitting on that one?”

I swear she’s smiling. “For a while. I’ve always liked them. Loved them, actually. If you go through my top dresser drawer, you’ll see all of their albums.”

Before she even finishes, I’m up and walking over to the dresser in question. She laughs as I start opening all the top drawers until I find the one she’s referring to, looking at the stash she’s been hiding from me.

“Garrick!” She’s beside me in a heartbeat, laughing as I thumb through every single CD. Is this how Kyler and his old band felt?

“The Wild,” I grumble, picking one up and studying the group of men on the front before holding it next to my face. “Do you think they’re better looking than me?”

The mirror attached to the back of the dresser gives me a chance to see her shrug casually. “Maybe Cannon.”

I turn and look around the room again, wondering if I missed any posters. “I suppose you used to have pictures of them up too? Are those hidden in your closet?”

She swats my arm. “Don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t had pictures of them up since high school. And it was only one. It was a shirtless one of—”

“Cannon,” we say simultaneously, me with grit in my tone and nonchalance in hers.

She peels the CD out of my hand and sets it back down in the drawer before tugging me away from it and toward the bed. We stop at the side, her eyes going between the mattress and the blanket and pillow for me on the floor.

Rylee fidgets with the comforter. “I feel bad that you’re on the floor. It...” She steals a look, her tongue dipping out the side of her mouth before running along the seams. “It’d be okay if we shared for the night. I guess.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

Her shoulders drop a fraction. “It’s only for a few hours, and it’s not like we haven’t already done it before.”

I lift my hands. “I’ll keep my hands to myself. Unless—”

“Don’t say it,” she grumbles.

I refrain from smiling as she crawls in, moving to one side and leaving plenty of room for me on the other. I grab my things from the floor and put them back on the bed before laying down on top of the comforter and draping the knit blanket over me.

She doesn’t say a word.

So I don’t either.

With inches between us, it doesn’t take either of us long to fall asleep.

My fingers dance along smooth skin as I bite back my groan from the clothed ass grinding against my hard dick. Rylee’s breathing tells me she’s sleeping, but her hips moving for friction says otherwise.

One of my palms flattens against the bottom of her exposed stomach from her shirt raising at some point during the night, while the other stays by my side. Involuntarily, my hips meet her ass as she moves backward and the sharp breath escaping her only intensifies the relief I need from the erection trapped in the sweatpants I fell asleep in.

I don’t know when I moved under the comforter, but it’s the last thing on my mind when a much smaller, softer hand covers mine and guides it

down to the center of her parted thighs. I don't ask if she's sure because she cups our hands over her until I feel the damp heat pooling there.

I brush hair away from her neck and press a single, tender kiss on the back of it as my hand begins stroking between her thighs. She parts her legs further, giving me more access as she grinds against me the same way I'd done on Halloween. Using my free hand, I press her ass against me harder and begin rocking to relieve the ache in my groin, eyes rolling into the back of my head when she swivels her hips and presses against me with the need to get me off as badly as I want to.

Her breathing is choppy, needy, and the sound drives me as fucking crazy as it did before as I use a thumb to apply pressure over the bundle of nerves that I know will set her off. A gargled noise rises from her throat that makes me bury my face into the crook of her neck and pepper kisses along her heated skin as I listen to every soft, pleading sound she makes with each swipe of my hand.

I don't know how early it is, but the sun is barely up, and I have no idea when her parents normally wake up and move around. I move my hand away and lightly chuckle at the sound of protest she makes until I squeeze her thigh.

"Do you trust me?" I whisper, hovering over her. Her face is shy, vulnerable with an innocence that heightens her sexiness and leaves me ten times harder. It's only after she gives me a timid nod that I readjust us so she's on her knees, her back arched and face buried in a pillow, with me kneeling behind her that I slowly grip the waistband of her shorts and roll them down until she's bared to me.

She freezes, her head darting to me in silent question. I give her a reassuring smile and say, "I'll make you feel good, love. But you need to be quiet. Okay?"

A sharp breath escapes her as she nods again, her bottom lip sucked in by her top teeth as I glide my palms over her bare hips until I find where she's already wet for me. Bending forward, I press a kiss to her ass, first to one cheek, then the other, before my tongue finds the seam that it's been dying to taste ever since I first met the woman bent in front of me.

And the wait was worth it.

She moans into the pillow as my tongue swipes a line from her soaked entrance to her clit, then back again. I take my time with her, kneading her hips with my fingers, squeezing her ass, playing with the bundle of nerves,

and teasing her entrance with the tip of my tongue like I did with my fingers once before.

I'd be lying if I said pussy and I weren't well acquainted—we're practically best friends. I know how to make a woman writhe and come undone until she's seeing stars. And Rylee's is the best I've tasted.

Sweet.

Needy.

And when her legs begin shaking I know she's close. Her body gravitates toward my mouth as I eat her out, demanding more with every flick and stroke. When she gets louder, I reach around her to muffle her orgasm, cupping a hand over her mouth as I finish her off with my finger stroking her entrance before slowly sliding in and my thumb grazing the puckered hole of her ass until she bucks against me with a muffled cry into my palm.

When she's sated, her hips drop until she's flat on her stomach, her breathing hard and body limp in front of me.

I don't think about my hard as hell cock.

I simply readjust myself, pull her shorts back into place, and lay back down beside her. Wanting her close, I haul her body into my side and relax when she settles in.

I peck a kiss against her temple and close my eyes in hopes of getting a little more sleep.

When I wake up a while later, Rylee is already gone, and the sheets are cold.

Checking my phone before subjecting myself to whatever awaits me downstairs, I notice a sling of texts from the guys.

Manning: Do you think he's dead?

Jax: Maybe he's finally getting laid

Cal: Good then he won't be so prickly

Manning: Or maybe they took him to a pig farm. I hear that's where they get rid of bodies in rural areas

Cal: A pig farm????

Zayne: Ur all morons

Cal: Don't be jelly that he got the girl

Manning: Dude

Jax: Notice Garrick hasn't replied yet

Manning: *pig emoji*

Jax: Wait are they even farmers??

Cal: Who cares?

Jax: How would they get the pigs?

Manning: Other people could own them and they take his body there for disposal

Zayne: He's probably trying to impress the in-laws

I snort over that, not sure how impressed they'd be over me going down on their daughter in her childhood bedroom like she's my own personal feast, which I plan to go back to many times again. The thought alone makes my dick ache.

Palming myself to ease the pressure in my pants, I ignore the slew of texts from the group chat and click on the one from my brother.

Chase: A pap broke past the gate

Chase: Mom came by and talked to police with me

Chase: You there???

Chase: Bad time to not be on your phone dude. Mom called your manager and they're getting it taken care of

Chase: Call me when you see this

"Fuck." I bolt up and instantly dial his number, cursing when I see my phone only has 10% battery left.

"It's about time, asshole," is my brother's greeting. "I tried calling you like five times, and I don't want to know how many times Mom did."

I scrub a hand down my face. "I'm sorry. My phone was on silent so it wouldn't wake Rylee."

There's a moment of silence. "I want to comment on that but it's not important right now. They didn't get to the house, but one of them got into the garage and took pictures of Rylee's car and the stuff inside it."

"I thought you said there was one?"

"There was two. Knew each other."

"Arrested?"

"Yes."

I growl out, "Good."

Chase sighs. "Michael said he paid them off to get the pictures and made sure the SD cards were wiped on their cameras. But that doesn't mean they won't talk. And Mom thinks it's best if there's more security outside your gate until things clear up. She said something about Michael

mentioning party photos which is why these guys broke in to confirm something they'd heard through the grapevine."

Pinching my nose, I shake my head. "I knew that fucking party wasn't going to end well. Did anyone elaborate on what was circulating?"

If they saw her car, which she barely cleaned anything out of, then who knows what they found inside.

"No clue. Sorry."

Fuck me. "I'll get in touch with Michael and have him fill me in. I don't want this happening again so we need to handle it early. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. The house is fine. You don't have to worry about that. Just... yeah. Maybe call your manager sooner rather than later."

He sounds like he knows more than he's letting on, but I don't press him on it. I grumble but agree, already feeling a small headache form in the back of my skull when I realize how this next call will go down. There's nothing worse than having someone you dislike saying *I told you so*.

"I'm sorry," he apologizes even though it's not his fault.

"Don't worry about it. Focus on your house and your...situation. I know you've got a lot on your plate right now."

I'm about to hang up when he says, "Oh, and your dumbass friends sent something to the house this morning after the police left. It's a stuffed pig with a note that says "RIP" in bold letters. What exactly does that mean? Who died?"

Shaking my head, I brush it off. "It's nothing. They're being idiots. I'll check in with you later once I talk to Michael, yeah?"

Hanging up after we say goodbye, I go through the rest of my notifications that I missed during the night and realize it's going to be a long day of making phone calls. As much as I want to go with Rylee to meet her friend before we leave, I probably won't have time to stay. It may be nice for her to spend time one-on-one with her anyway.

I decide not to bring up what happened when I walk downstairs and see Rylee and her family eating at the table. She won't meet my eyes, but both her parents do.

I simply say, "Good morning."

They say it back.

She doesn't.

I don't regret what happened between us.

But it's obvious she does.

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RYLEE

Moffie makes a weird squealing sound that makes both me and her husband Eli cringe as she gapes at the man dropping me off at their new place. He opens the door for me and closes it once I'm out, waving at my best friend who clearly forgot to keep her cool like she promised.

Though, it's hard to contain my laughter when she blurts, "We have muffins" to the Australian who's leaning against my mother's Jeep that she's letting us borrow while we're here so we don't have to use the rental Garrick got us.

Garrick plays along, trying to contain his wavering smile. "What kind?" "Blueberry."

Eli and I exchange amused looks at Moffie as she waves her hands frantically at their cute little single family home. "I can make different ones. You once said in People magazine that chocolate chip was your favorite, but I think that was when you were younger, and tastes change all the time because I never used to like sweet potatoes but now I love them and—"

"Moff. Babe," Eli chuckles, pulling her back into his chest and wrapping his arms around her waist. "I think you need to breathe and let the man answer before you offer up the deed to our house too."

Moffie glares at her husband. "As if he'd even want to live here. It's small."

Eli frowns. "You love this house."

"But *he*," she says, jabbing her finger at Garrick, "wouldn't. I mean, he's got like four houses all over the world and like twenty cars or

something. It'd hardly work for him."

My eyes bug out over that tidbit of information that I didn't know. Who needs twenty cars and four houses? I turn to him with a lifted brow, but he simply shrugs as if to say, *you didn't ask*.

Sighing, I break up her moment. "Garrick said he has stuff to take care of, so you're stuck with me. *I happen to love blueberry muffins.*"

My best friend looks disappointed but nods begrudgingly. "I made them for you anyway," she murmurs, stretching out her hand toward me.

I look at the man watching me carefully. We haven't exchanged many words since he joined us for breakfast, and I still don't know what to say. Something like 'thanks for the orgasm' seems sort of impersonal and it's hard to sort out the feelings I have over the nights I've spent with him.

There are nerves, uncertainty. He's been with hundreds of women, has experience I never will in comparison. Not knowing what to say or how to touch him or how to even show him I'm interested makes me shy away from it all.

I'm sure he knows about my inexperience, but I doubt he realizes I've only had sex one time. And since that was over two years ago, I might as well be a virgin.

Garrick pecks my temple before rounding the Jeep to get into the driver's seat and waves us all off before pulling away. My fingers raise to the spot his lips touched, the same one they brushed this morning, before I turn to see both Moffie and her husband watching me.

"Girl," my best friend breathes, blinking slowly. "First off, that was so sweet. And second, you totally fucked him."

Eli chokes. "Jesus, Moffie."

I smack her arm. "Did you really need to say that in front of Eli? No offense," I murmur sheepishly to him. "It's just not something I like to discuss with everyone in hearing distance."

"None taken. I'll just be...not here." He disappears into the house, probably the tiny closet-like office they set up for him in the back, but not before I call out, "I didn't fuck him, though, just to be clear!"

At the same time I say that, one of my friend's neighbors walks out with a young toddler in her arms scowling at us. Moffie snorts at my embarrassment as I grab her arm and yank her inside before we can get lectured.

As soon as the door is locked, I spin on my heels toward her. “I didn’t,” I repeat firmly, face still on fire from the outburst of information her neighbor now knows.

She hangs her coat up and turns to me with her hands on her hips. “But you totally did something. Remember the first time Eli and I fooled around? You said I was glowing. Hate to break it to you, but you’ve got the O-glow.”

“The...?” *Oh my God.* “I need something to drink for this conversation, and I wish it could be alcohol.”

Rolling her eyes at my dramatics, she walks into the kitchen down the narrow hall and doesn’t bother seeing if I follow. I sit down at the kitchen table and watch her pull out my favorite homemade cherry limeade concoction that I miss her making for me.

“Spill,” she demands, putting a glass in front of me and serving herself one.

So, I do. It’s a condensed version with little detail much to her dismay, but I’m not like her when it comes to intimate stuff. She always loved giving me all the details of her experiences, things I wish I didn’t know whenever I have to see Eli, but I’ve never been that open. Ironical, considering when we were younger I was set to lose my virginity and get as much experience as possible before meeting ‘the one’. I guess as soon as I realized I wanted more, I stopped talking about my many failed experiences of the past.

My best friend leans back in her chair and grips the glass with one hand and glowers. “I can’t believe that’s all I get. I mean, it’s hot. Who better to experience your first downtown experience with?”

I blush. “He doesn’t know.”

“Of course he doesn’t.”

“What does that mean?”

“Ry, you’ve never been good at talking about stuff like that. Do you want to discuss your one and only time doing the deed? You planned it out, let some total random get between your legs, and only told him you were a virgin *after* it was done. That’s something most guys want to know before they stick it in you.”

“He didn’t need to know,” I reason, the same thing I tell her every time this comes up. Looking back, I was stupid. I looked at my virginity like it

was a burden. Maybe if there wasn't so much stigma surrounding it, I would have waited until finding someone worthy of having it.

The man I found to get the job done had freaked out when he saw the blood, which was a lot less than I expected, and practically tripped over his pants trying to leave. Something about not wanting me to get attached, which is ridiculous.

I see her point, but that doesn't change anything from the past and won't change anything now either. "I know you said I could get experience with Garrick, but it's... I don't know. Don't you think that'll be messy?"

"Is this because of what that jackass told you about getting attached? Not everybody who fools around with people get clingy. That's just something people say as an excuse not to stick around or be more."

Tipping my head back, I stare at the ceiling. There's a water stain in the corner and bugs caught in the light fixture. "If I mess around with Garrick, things could get complicated. I don't know what I'm doing, and even though he'd happily teach me—"

"*Please* let him teach you," she cuts in, in a dreamy tone.

I glare at her. "—I'm bound to catch feelings eventually. Then it'll make a divorce ten times harder when the time comes. You'll have to watch me eat tubs of ice cream and those pickle flavored potato chips you think are gross."

"They *are* gross."

"Not the point. I'd be depressed."

"That's only if you catch feels."

How could somebody constantly sleeping with another person not feel something for them in some capacity? We've only fooled around twice, and I already feel something for the Australian.

"You're totally thinking about his dick," she remarks casually, sipping her drink.

I blush. "Stop. Eli can probably hear you and I don't want people knowing about this."

"Knowing that you're thinking about your husband's dick? Yes, Rylee. How *dare* you. You're definitely going to hell."

She and Garrick will get along perfectly.

Leaning forward, she rests her elbow on the table with a palm propping her chin up to look at me. "You're overthinking this. Take it a day at a time and see where it goes. He's faced your parents with you, promised to help

with all your medical bills, went down on you—” She laughs at me. “Quit making that face! Some guys don’t like doing that and not only did he not think twice, but he also didn’t expect anything in return.”

I pale. “Do you think he wanted me to return the favor?”

“From what you said, no. I mean I’m sure he would have loved you paying special attention to little Garrick, but it isn’t like he *asked* you to suck his dick or make a move to do anything else. See? You’re overthinking.”

“You would too in my situation,” I accuse, all but groaning. “You’re lucky that you have Elijah. I thought I’d at least be dating someone by now. Getting serious. Talking engagement. Considering kids, even. I’m stressed.”

“And horny,” she adds, grinning. I don’t bother expressing my irritation over her blatant, but not untrue, statement. “Think of it this way, Ry. You skipped all the real stressful stuff and got a gorgeous ring and simple wedding. I mean, that’s what you wanted anyway. Nothing big or glamorous or showy. You used to hate thinking about all the money people spend on one day of their lives. In a way, you got your dream wedding.”

“My parents weren’t there.” *Grandpa Al. Grandma Birdie.*

“So throw a reception.”

My mother brought that up at breakfast, trying to guilt trip me into saying yes. If Garrick hadn’t walked downstairs, I would have caved. I know I’m not off the hook yet. She’ll bring it up until I eventually agree, and Dad won’t bother trying to help because he knows Mom will get her way no matter what.

Moffie nudges my foot with hers. “Just have fun. Enjoy what time you do have with Garrick and ignore everyone else. Except me. You need to keep me in the loop. Maybe give me something signed by him.”

“Moffie!”

“You’re right. I can just ask him when he comes to pick you up,” she theorizes. “Do you think I made a fool of myself in front of him earlier?”

I want to lie, but I know Eli will have that handled. So, I say, “Big time.”

She groans.

I smile.

She flips me off.

Then we gossip about town news like the most exciting thing that happened in our lives is Mrs. Inger leaving her husband for the mayor’s

much younger wife.

Eli looks ashen when he walks into the kitchen a few hours later, grim eyes directed at me. The laughter between me and Moffie fades quickly as I grip my empty glass.

Moffie asks, “What is it, babe?”

“You’re not going to like it.” He stretches out his hand, phone in his palm with an article pulled up. As soon as I wrap my fingers around the Android and pull it to me, my stomach drops.

Moffie instantly comes up behind me, reading over my shoulder with a hand on my back for comfort. “Oh, hell no.”

Former Boss of Rylee Simmons Speaks Out Against Newlywed

Whatever Sarina could have said can’t be good if Eli, a total germaphobe, looks like he wants to hug me.

It’s Moffie who reads out, “‘Sarina Cunningham of the L.A. Free Press breaks silence on former tabloid writer Rylee Simmons, now Rylee Matthews,’—” I frown at the last name like it still hasn’t hit me. “—‘regarding the writer’s conflict of interest following her marriage to Grammy award-winning Australian singer Garrick Matthews.’”

“Conflict of interest?” I repeat in confusion, shaking my head slowly as my friend continues reading.

“‘Cunningham states that Simmons was assigned to Matthews after Violet Wonders made news following reports of a possible breakup, where she involved herself with the singer to get money from the Free Press. In a statement given to Hollywood Exposed, Cunningham states, ‘If Rylee Simmons has any sense, she’ll return the money given to her by the Free Press before she quit. She withheld information by personally involving herself in her work, and this isn’t the first time. I should have fired her years ago when she was sleeping with Zayne Gray from the same band.’”

Oh my God. Feeling like I’m going to get sick, I scrape back the chair and dart toward the little half bath off the main hallway. Slamming the door shut, I sink onto my knees and gag into the open toilet.

A knock sounds at the door. “Ry? I’m coming in.” The door cracks open and a moment later Moffie closes it behind her, walking over until she’s kneeling beside me. “Hey. People probably won’t even believe her. Who is

she in the grand scheme of things? She's always told you to forget about your morals and go after a good story and you did."

When I realize nothing is going to come up, I sit and drag my bent knees to my chest. "It doesn't matter if people believe her, it's out there in the world for everyone to dissect. This is karma, isn't it? It's because of all the things I wrote for money."

My forehead slams against the tops of my knees as Moffie rubs my back. "You made mistakes, but this isn't karma for them. This is just your boss being a bitch. I never liked her. She's a snake."

I groan. "There are pictures." I may not have gone out with Zayne often, but enough for people to take photos when we weren't looking. I told myself not to pay attention, to pretend I didn't care. And most of the time that was easy because Zayne would keep my attention by telling me fun stories and the things he wanted to accomplish for himself. It wasn't hard to ignore the people around us when I was with him.

Then again, he was never as big as Garrick. The whole band has a massive following, but only the lead really has a crowd of loyal followers gathered on all platforms and crowds form no matter where he is.

The people and press loved Zayne, and it wasn't until *me* and the horrible photos I had published when the media turned on him.

"This is definitely karma whether Sarina is a snake or not." I shake my head and clench my eyes closed. "And now the world is going to think I slept with Zayne *and* Garrick and probably call me a groupie."

"So what?"

Looking up, I eye Moffie. "What do you mean 'so what'? I don't want to be a groupie! I'm *not* one. The world is going to look at me like I'm some sort of gold digger who's obsessed with Violet Wonders and pried my way into their inner circle by marrying Garrick."

Clearly my reaction doesn't mirror hers, because she sighs and settles on the floor across from me. Our legs are pressed together because of the limited space in the tiny room. "Don't be mad when I say this, but you technically *are* the definition of a gold digger in this case. But, like, an honest one. Garrick offered you his money and you accepted. It's an arrangement. And as long as you guys know the truth, and Zayne knows the truth, and probably the rest of the band, then who cares?"

"I do." It doesn't matter that the band knows the truth because hundreds of thousands of others think something else.

“You shouldn’t.”

Just because I shouldn’t doesn’t mean I can turn off what the press is bound to dig up about me—all the things I wore to fit in, the articles I published, the bad things I’ve done for money. I never told my parents about them out of shame, not wanting them to see me as that girl.

I guess I have no option now.

“Sarina wants fifteen minutes of fame,” my best friend reasons, eyes firm to drill it into my head. “That’s all. She’s using you and the position you’re in to gain some traction. She runs a tabloid that only exists to tear other people down, and people won’t let that go unnoticed. Especially those who are in your corner. Like me and Eli. *And* Garrick.”

Knowing she’ll try to get vengeance for me, I quickly shoot her a warning gaze. “Don’t do anything that feeds this fire. I know you. Garrick and his team have told us multiple times now that we need to let this type of stuff fade.”

“You’re no fun.”

“You know I’m right.”

She grumbles, “Doesn’t mean ‘right’ can’t be a little fun.” I roll my eyes as she leans back against the opposite wall. “If you’re really worried about the world thinking you’re obsessed with Violet Wonders, we could totally dig up some old photos and videos of us in your bedroom in front of those pictures of The Wild.”

Blood drains from my face over the idea that has her cackling. “That’s not even funny.”

Don’t get me started on the awful videos of Moffie and I singing to The Wild’s songs that journalists could probably find if they looked hard enough. We used to dress up and sing along to their biggest hits in high school, pretending we were at one of their concerts. We never got to go to one, and I’m sure if we ever did now the media would make it seem like I was after one of them next.

“People have done far worse things than get together with a couple of sexy men. And considering you didn’t *actually* get together with them you have nothing to worry about.”

Her reassurance does little for me, so we fall to silence.

It isn’t until a few minutes later when Eli knocks on the door, clearing his throat. “Rylee? Your phone was going off and it was Garrick. I hope it’s okay that I answered. He’s on his way back.”

Closing my eyes, I blow out a breath. "I appreciate it, Eli."

Moffie and I exchange a look, hers sympathetic. I never liked it when people felt bad for me. Ever since I started feeling sick it was always the same from her and my family, and it became tenfold when the doctor's figured out what was wrong.

"Please stop looking at me like that," I whisper, glancing down at the tile floors. They're a mixture of mint green and white, something Eli says he wants to change. My dad mentioned he'd help since he's done tile work before, so the men plan to start this summer.

"I'm just looking at my badass friend who's going to get through this because she's strong," Moffie remarks.

I roll my eyes. "That's not what you were thinking, but I appreciate the lie."

The corners of her lips tilt upward. "If it's any consolation, it's the second thing I thought. The first was me hoping you'd at least get some dick action from that fine ass man you married so people have something *really good* to talk about. You have an entire fall season of cobwebs to clean out, and he's perfect for the job."

"Er..." Eli knocks again and only after the door creaks open do I see his red face, followed by the amused expression painted on the much taller, much toner man beside him. "I just wanted to let you know Garrick's here."

Slowly, my eyes go to Moffie, who bites her bottom lip and shrugs, not looking like she feels bad at all that Garrick overheard her little rant.

The man in question stares down at me, lips wavering, but end in a neutral, endearing smile. "Want to head out? We can go back to your parents' house while I call some people about the bullshit circulating."

We both know it's not really bullshit.

But I accept the hand he holds out for me anyway and let him haul me up. Eli does the same for Moffie until we're all back in the kitchen where I grab my phone, slide it into my pocket and turn to see Garrick holding up an unfamiliar black jacket with fur coating the hood.

"What is that?" I ask as he holds it open for me to put on.

"What does it look like?" he muses.

"It looks like someone else's coat."

"I bought it for you." He eyes the zipper and shakes it, gesturing for me to come over. "It actually works. No need to thank me."

I wasn't planning on it.

Moffie's eyes light up as I turn around and let Garrick help me slide my arms into the sleeves, then slowly spin me to face him. When I meet his eyes, the blue in them are warm as he puts the two ends together and lifts the tab to pull up the zipper, our eyes never breaking contact. When his knuckles graze one of my boobs, I involuntarily shiver and feel a spark go straight to my core.

He doesn't remark on it.

But Moffie murmurs, "I think the tension in the room just got me pregnant."

Eli chokes.

Garrick winks at me.

I blush.

Moffie sighs. "If only I could be Rylee for a day. The things I would do..."

Eli looks at his wife, not surprised by her comment as he pulls her into his side and presses a kiss on the top of her head like Garrick always does with me. "You'd miss me too much."

She doesn't confirm or deny, but we all know it's true.

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GARRICK

The sound of a nail cracking under the pressure of teeth pulls my attention away from the road to the woman curled up in the passenger seat beside me. Her eyes are trained on her phone screen, her brows pinched, and her knee bouncing anxiously as the thumb not in her mouth scrolls through whatever is being posted online.

“You shouldn’t do that to yourself,” I tell her, flipping off the radio since neither of us are listening to the alternative rock station.

She doesn’t even pause. “Chase said you used to watch gossip shows to stay up to date on what’s being said about you.”

I sigh, wanting to strangle the dick for telling her that. “Yeah, I *used* to. I realized how degrading it was and stopped setting myself up for failure a long time ago. My brother shouldn’t have told you that.”

“He has a point.”

“Don’t tell him that,” I grumble, grip tightening on the steering wheel. “And, for the record, he doesn’t. Even he knows it can get bad if you focus too much on the headlines.”

We’ve been back in California for a few days, and it’s been a whirlwind of phone calls and meetings with Michael and the team. After we landed at LAX, the paparazzi made it nearly impossible to find Chase’s car. We got slammed with question after question that I kept refusing to answer, shoving my hand in front of the cameras pointed at Rylee.

“Garrick, is it true you stole Rylee from Zayne and caused the band’s breakup?”

“Can you comment on the state of Violet Wonders with the new reports that Zayne is stepping back?”

“Is it true the L.A. Free Press is suing for repayment of wrongly paid dues from the article Rylee published about your marriage?”

I’d gently pushed her along so she wouldn’t be tempted to stop and give them an ounce of her attention, but I could tell the assholes were getting to her.

When we’d slid into the backseat of my little brother’s car, I’d told Chase to drive and turned to Rylee. The second I saw those beautiful eyes dim with defeat, I knew I needed to tell her everything would be okay even if it didn’t seem like it. And I was glad, surprised even, when Chase had added, *“We’ve got your back, Rylee.”*

After meeting with Michael and the rest of my PR team downtown, I’d convinced the woman curled up in the passenger seat to get coffee with me in a little brick and mortar not known by many. It was an easy in and out without any hassle beside the barista asking me to sign a to-go cup for her, and I’d held Rylee’s hand from the second we walked in together to the second we left.

But not even the hot chocolate that’s sitting untouched in the cupholder between us seems to pull her from her thoughts.

“I deserve this,” she whispers.

Jaw clenching, I make sure nobody is behind us before jerking the car over to the side of the street and put it into park. I don’t realize it until I tip her chin up to meet my eyes that she’s crying. I swipe at her damp cheeks and feel the pain radiating from her, letting it soak into me like it’s my own. My chest feels tight as I peel the phone from her and scan the screen before cursing under my breath.

She’s nothing but a band slut.

He’s probably already cheating.

No wonder Zayne dropped her.

I turn the screen off, stuff the cell into my jacket pocket, and turn my body to her. “Look at me, Rylee.” When she doesn’t, I make her, my eyes hard with the determination to make her see my point of view. “Those people are *not* worth your tears. They have nothing better to do than troll the comments of news articles and let the world know how unhappy they are by trying to make everybody else feel the same way. They. Don’t. Matter. Nothing good can come from you going through and reading what

these people's opinions are. The public is always going to have something to say, and you know that. It's not your job to listen or give them the reaction they want."

She closes her eyes and squeezes her eyelids as if she hopes it'll stop more tears from escaping. "I knew it would be hard, so I don't know why I'm so upset over people hating me."

"Plenty of people hate me, love." I stroke a finger gently over her cheek until she cracks her eyes open. "Not everyone is going to like you. That's life. Did you read the comments of the articles you wrote?"

She hesitates. "No."

"Then don't read these." She's about to speak when I press my finger to her lips to quiet her. "I had a friend, a real good girl, who went down this rabbit hole. She had the whole world in front of her until she let the haters win. Starved herself because she believed what they said about her being too fat to survive in this industry. Did drugs to lose weight. Hid away and let everything she worked her ass off for go. And for what? With every hater comes a group of loyal followers, and we forget that because we always focus on the bad first. I'm telling you, Ry, that you're going to get through this, but you need to trust me. You trust me, right?"

Thinking about the way Amber tortured herself still kills a part of me. I couldn't help her no matter how hard I tried. She wouldn't listen to reason—not from me, her friends, or her team.

Sniffing back tears, Rylee gives me terse nod, so I lower my finger. It's a moment before she asks, "What happened to your friend?"

Darkness shadows my heart, circling the beating organ and vice gripping it. "I guess she didn't trust me enough to help her the way I hope to help you. It didn't end well."

It's hard to swallow as the grief enters my pinched expression. Pushing it away, I shift back into my seat and put the car into drive.

She doesn't think twice before reaching over and putting her hand over mine where it's white knuckling the gear shift between us. She doesn't try to hold it, or squeeze in comfort, like she doesn't think it'll help.

Like it's just there in case I need it. Her.

She seems startled when I flip her hand over and capture her fingers, dragging her palm over to my thigh and resting our interwoven hands there on my worn denim.

We don't speak.

Don't listen to the radio.

We watch the scenery go by in silence, her giving me the same curtesy I did when words were the last thing she wanted, but company was what she needed.

Maybe she's finally seeing that we may be two very different people, but we're cut from the same cloth.

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GARRICK

The owner of the Lazy Croc may be a jackass, but he keeps tight reigns on the paps that try entering his club. As soon as I told Roderick we were coming, extra security was out and meeting us by the door. A few vultures were outside snapping photos as Rylee and I walked side by side to the door, and as much as I want to enjoy the way she's sticking so close to me and clenching my hand, I wish it were under better circumstances.

One of the asses jumps in front of Rylee and shoves a recording device in her face before I can stop him. "What is it like being married to a playboy? Is it an open marriage? Are you both remaining faithful? Do you have anything to say about the accusations made against you by your former boss?"

Having no patience, I forcefully move his arm away and shield her with my body. "Back off, mate. That's uncalled for."

"I'm just doing my job," the man states with a slimy smile on his face. "Just like your wife used to do if I recall. Only give interviews with people you want to fuck, is that it?"

My fists clench and flex open again before they can see the reaction.

"Rylee just has the magic touch," a different person says, a slightly shorter, less dickish yet preppy looking guy steps forward with a camera strap over his shoulder. Rylee stiffens next to me, causing the arm I have around her shoulders to tighten. "Sarina sends her best, by the way. Thanks for all of this, I've been needing more leads and with you gone it's like they're being handed right to me."

My eye twitches. “You know this douche hole?” I ask her quietly. She nods a few times but doesn’t contribute to how, not that she needs to elaborate. “Come on,” I coax softly, turning her away from the people waiting for us to talk and toward the building.

Her former coworker doesn’t appreciate the cold shoulder. “How much money are you getting for fucking him? I’d love to get this story printed for Sarina and the Free Press. I could use a new car.”

Rylee grips my arm and shakes her head at me as I begin turning to the fucker who has a death wish. She simply murmurs, “He isn’t worth it, remember?”

The fact she’s using my words against me has me scowling, but I nod in reluctance. “I can’t promise I won’t try breaking his nose if he ever says something like that to you again.”

“Then you’d be back at square one with the media,” she points out. “It’s what they want.”

I hold the door to the Lazy Croc open for her and shake hands with one of my favorite bouncers. It isn’t until we’re being escorted to the VIP lounge upstairs when I say, “I think we both know by now that this was never about the press I was getting, love.”

She pauses on the first step to look at me, her eyes wary, her lips pressed in a straight line. I don’t think she’s going to say anything before her breath hitches. “I think I realized that a little while ago.”

Zayne is sitting in our usual booth, the only difference being that the rest of the lounge is empty. When I talked to Rick the Dick earlier, he said he’d keep the space open for us for a while—for a price, of course. One I was willing to pay for a semblance of peace for this conversation.

My hand gestures toward the booth, free hand pressing to the small of Rylee’s back until she slides in. Her body is tight, her eyes not lingering to look around like they did the first time she was here. Not much has changed over the years, so she isn’t missing much.

Despite the space, I press the side of my body against Rylee’s and am glad she doesn’t object. Instead, she seeks the comfort I offer and lets me drop an arm around her shoulders to pull her closer. Neither one of us seems to care that Zayne is staring between us with a raised brow.

“So, this is happening, huh?” he says casually, no judgement in his tone as he grabs the drink in front of him and takes a long sip.

It’s me who says, “It’s been happening.”

Nobody says a word, but Rylee shifts beside me—not away but not closer either.

“I’m sorry,” my best friend says, eyes focused on the squirming blonde to my right.

The discomfort radiating from her makes me want to hold her tighter, but I don’t. Giving her space, I look to Zayne. “Nobody has anything to apologize about. We’ve been through this before and we’ll get through it.”

“You know that’s not true,” the wary woman beside me says, and I know Rylee isn’t talking about our ability to make it past the hard shit.

Ice clinking in the glass of who knows what, my drummer loosens a sigh. “Don’t say it, okay? It’s in the past. Apologies aren’t going to do anything at this point. We’ve all clearly moved on.”

Have we? I don’t voice the doubtful question. I know that Zayne isn’t pining over Rylee, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t hurt over what happened.

A waitress comes by and asks us if we want drinks. I eye Zayne when he shakes his glass for a refill but press my lips together to stop myself from saying anything. He’s a stress drinker, and always has been. The night of our Halloween party, I didn’t see him open his beer once or slip away behind closed doors to do something he shouldn’t. He kept to himself, hidden away, mostly outside staring at the flowers Rylee planted. But something’s triggered him, and I have a feeling I’m part of it.

Rylee and I skip on the offer to join him, but I ask for two waters despite this conversation needing something stronger.

I decide to start the conversation as soon as the busty waitress walks away. “Grace and Michael have been fielding all our social media posts to make sure they’re weeding out the comments on our pages.” When Grace joined our last meeting, I could tell Rylee was drained. But there was something that loosened as soon as Grace, our best social media specialist who runs all of Violet Wonders pages, started explaining our plan of attack.

As much as it pained me to agree, she proposed Rylee shut down her private social media accounts for a while because it was hard to control all the messages, comments, and other derogatory things being posted once her name was found. And as hard as Grace tried clearing her email, that ended up being shut down too.

“They still want us to do a few sit-down interviews because Michael doesn’t know what the word ‘no’ means,” I continue, rubbing Rylee’s arm.

Zayne snorts. “You do realize he’s going to schedule them anyway hoping the pressure will make it impossible for you to back out of, right?”

It didn’t work for him before when I cancelled on Penny Gomez. “Considering he’s still trying to mend his relationship with Hot in Hollywood, I’d say he’d be smart to stay cautious and actually listen to me for once.”

“Violet Wonders needs to start planning for the first single drop,” my drummer counters, sitting back in his spot and dragging his glass along the table with him. “They’re on all of us to start posting.”

“We just finished recording.”

“New bands come out of the woodwork every single day,” he points out. “Thanks to social media, more and more people are rising to the top with massive followings without a label attached. I hate to agree with the shit people have been saying, but we’re not new news anymore. We’re a band with a big following but we’re not getting the same attention we were just by dropping an album date and nothing else. There’s a lot more competition out there now.”

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I shake my head and lean forward. “That’s not what we should be talking about right now.”

“No?” he doubts. “You say you bought a ring and put it on a girl so you could draw attention away from the press coming at the band. But look where that got us.”

Teeth grinding, I reply, “I was helping *you*. Do you know how many times I was asked by everyone on the team what happened between us to make you quit again? *Again*, mate. I had to find out from fucking TMZ that you got drunk and started rambling to some stranger about Violet Wonders. I didn’t get angry. I asked you where your head was at, and you told me it was all bullshit. You said not to worry, so I didn’t.”

“I didn’t ask for your help, Garrick.”

Rylee shifts uncomfortably from the rising tension.

Sighing, I accept the water the waitress passes me and slide it in front of Rylee, then take the second for myself. “You never do. I’ve tried giving you space, but I’m worried. Your head isn’t in it. I don’t think it has been since we came back and started touring again.”

The worst thing he could do is stay silent and offer no reassurance. That’s what he does.

“Look,” I reason, eyeing the waitstaff on standby before turning back to him. “We’ve had our issues. We go about things our own way and don’t consult each other first. So, I’ll ask you one more time, Zayne. Where is your head at with the band? Is this really what you want to do? Because the more you refuse my help dispersing the media coming after you, the more I’m starting to question if you wanted them paying attention to begin with.”

He scuffs in offense. “You think I honestly want them talking about me all the time? I liked my life before Violet Wonders happened, Garrick. Before the five of us met at that fucking concert all those years ago, I was just a guy nobody gave a second glance at. Content with being obsolete. I never pictured us seeing each other again, much less exchanging numbers. I figured we’d talk once in a while about music and different bands, but not about starting one. I was left the fuck alone to do whatever the hell I wanted without anyone dissecting my every move before I agreed to meet up with everyone in Los Angeles. Is that what you want to hear? Christ. The only thing I like more than my privacy is money, so here we are. Years after being idiotic enough to move across the country to start a band with you guys without any knowledge of what would come out of it. I could have stayed in Massachusetts and avoided this whole goddam mess.”

Staring at him, I grip the glass of water a little too tightly and hear it crack. “If you’re only in it for the money, then why did you even agree to come back? If you were that unhappy, why bother saying yes for a second time instead of staying on the east coast? You invested enough money to live off of for a long time. You have plenty of—”

“Because this is what *you wanted*. Me and the guys didn’t care either way when you decided to get back together. Jax, Cal, and Manning all love living here. They don’t think about New York or Mass or what they left behind because they don’t have that much to focus on back home. You know damn well that I do. But they all do whatever the hell they want without giving a shit what people have to say about it. The reason they bent so easily when you reached out was because you’ve always been the glue to this group, always pushing us to be and do better. You’ve always wanted more and were happier when you had shit to work toward. And when you went to rehab, it was obvious that we’d breakup if you didn’t recover. We needed you to survive. But when all was said and done, it was easy to see we would’ve been fine if we all chose to let it go for good.”

Rylee clears her throat. “Maybe we should—”

“No.” Zayne cuts her a look. “I’m not trying to be an asshole, but I need you both to hear this. For too long, me and the guys have done whatever you wanted because we knew how much this meant to you. The money is nice, hearing people love our music is rewarding, but that’s it. Nothing else about this lifestyle is something we wanted. Me especially. We were relieved when it was called. We did our own things and lived in a way we couldn’t before.”

How the hell am I just hearing about this now? It’s been years of hard work building us back up to where we were. “What happened to us, mate?”

The table is quiet. Too quiet.

Eventually, Zayne’s shoulders lift. “I don’t know. We grew up, I guess.”

Staring down at the cracked glass, I push it away and try figuring out how we got here. “I suppose the recordings in the press were right, then?” I ask him, brows arched in wait for his response.

He evades my eyes. “What people were saying wasn’t wrong.”

I swear under my breath and feel Rylee’s hand rest on my thigh, right above my knee. I drop mine on top of hers and keep it there, needing the contact. “Were you ever going to tell me, or were you going to let the tabloids do that for you?”

Rylee’s fingers tighten on my leg.

My best mate says, “You’re not being fair, and you know it.”

Maybe I’m not, but I simply say, “Neither are you.”

We’re at a stalemate that I’m not sure how to get out of. I look to Rylee. “We should go. I promised Chase I’d help him finish packing the rest of this things.”

“So that’s it?” Zayne asks as I slide out of the booth. “You’re just going to walk away even though we’ve accomplished nothing here?”

Eye twitching, I give him a terse nod. “I had to watch you walk away the first time, maybe it’s my turn.” Turning on my heels, I reach out for Rylee’s hand and reply, “I don’t know where this is going to take us. That’s up to you, I guess. Until then, I’d like to leave with my wife.”

It’s a low blow, one that he takes exactly as its meant. I’ll feel bad about it later, but all that erases itself from my mind when Rylee slips her fingers around my hand and stands beside me.

Zayne calls out, “Right before we called it, we’d silently agreed not to talk about the reason. Maybe that doomed us from the start. You struggling with your addiction and me battling mine was tension that should have

never stayed bottled up. We broke up because we weren't fucking into it anymore. The music. The people. The attention. The control everybody had on us. Let's face it, Garrick. We all knew then that this would happen eventually, I just made the decision sooner before it completely destroyed us. Everybody has their limit. What's yours?"

I don't grace him with an answer. The fallout was a heated argument that led to us not speaking for way too long, and I thought getting back together was an olive branch that he'd accepted because he knew he was wrong. Clearly, that wasn't his thought process at all.

Rylee and I take the back way out to avoid the people I'd undoubtedly fight with if they approached us because my patience is thin.

"I'm sorry," Rylee tells me quietly.

"Don't be." I raise our hands to my mouth and press a kiss against the back of hers. "Are you ready to go home?"

My chest lightens when she says, "Yes."

RYLEE

My purple Snuggie is wrapped around me as I watch a movie on the couch, the house a little too quiet except for the pitter-patter of light rain coming from outside. I normally like the solitude, but recently it's been lonely.

With Chase in his own place now, it's almost too quiet during the days when Garrick is out doing whatever his band needs him to. He hasn't spoken about his conversation with Zayne, and I'm afraid to press on how things are going because he comes home tense and only willing to talk about my day. But considering my days are full of routine nothingness—gardening, cooking, checking in with Moffie and my parents, and searching the internet for potential writing gigs that won't look like a conflict of interest to the public eye—there's never much to report on that's different from the day before.

November came and went with cold snaps that left my joints sore and plants sad, and Thanksgiving was spent with Garrick, Chase, and their mother because my parents had their very first cruise planned that they've been talking about since forever. It's the first holiday we didn't spend together, but the Matthews clan put me to work in the kitchen where Elaine taught me new recipes and the boys cleaned up after us.

With the new year approaching fast, Garrick has been nonstop with helping Chase get settled into his house, the band prepare for their album drop in the spring, all while fending what remains of the tabloids against me. Things have quieted down considerably, and from what Moffie says, the things still lingering in the media are barely anything worth being upset

over. Although we have different interpretations, so I don't know if I fully believe her.

Once in a while Mrs. Matthews will pop in, and it's always when I'm alone. I used to think she was keeping an eye on me to make sure I wasn't doing something I shouldn't when her sons were away, but quickly learned she wanted to make sure I was okay. One time she came over with a freshly made cobbler that she said she'd teach me how to make, and another time she'd brought over crochet materials after I'd mentioned wanting to learn in past conversations.

She told me Garrick knows how to knit, crochet, and sew if I ever needed help, and I banked that information to smile over when I have days like today when I'm feeling off.

Laying on the couch aimlessly listening to some old black and white classic movie, I turn onto my back and stare up at the high ceilings. They're plain with little personality, but everything else in the house makes up for it—the pops of purple and blue and black and yellow throughout the huge estate, the random photographs of Garrick with his friends and family, the mixture of fake and real plants scattered in the house that Yasmin showed me in case the real ones needed water and she wasn't around. He even has a few awards on his shelves and walls that I've been caught staring at one too many times. But when else am I going to be *that* close to a Grammy or Billboard Music Award?

When Garrick found me staring at a few one time, he'd told me that he liked the reminder of all the hard work he'd put in that's led him right where we are.

He let me look.

Linger.

Snoop.

"*What's mine is yours,*" he's told me countless times. It doesn't make me feel any better about accepting the money for my medicine or being put on his insurance. The money I got from my last article ran out a few days ago when I paid for groceries and got Chase a housewarming gift. The youngest Matthews blushed when I handed it to him. All I could afford was a small care package that had a box of Captain Crunch, an Elsa coffee mug, and a set of hand towels that say *I like it nerdy*.

Exchanging presents and laughs that day made me feel like part of their family for real, and when I decided to leave Chase's house to give them

time together just the three of them, nobody had fought me on it. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed that Garrick didn't even try convincing me to stay with the allure of junk food or movies, but I don't blame him.

We still haven't had sex, and only fooled around a handful of times since he admitted he wanted to make this relationship work. And while I enjoyed every earth shattering, limb tingling orgasm he's given me by fingers and tongue, I haven't given him any indication that I want to do more. On a spontaneous whim one night when we were watching late night infomercials when neither of us could sleep, I'd given him a fumbled hand job that was mediocre at best even if hot spurts of cum shot from him after he'd guided my hand to squeeze him harder and pump him faster. Beyond the few times that followed, we haven't done more even though I know where he goes and what he does in the bathroom the mornings he wakes up in bed with me and I don't make a move to relieve him like part of me always wants to.

At some point during my movie marathon, I fall asleep cuddled into the warm fleece material. It isn't until I feel the couch dip that my lids flutter open, and I smell the faintest scent of wild cherry wafting around me.

"Are you feeling all right?" *Garrick*.

I offer him a tired nod. "Sleepy." He helps me untangle myself from the Snuggie to reposition and face him. "How'd recording go?"

The smile he offers is full of contentment and relief. "We're officially done. Good thing, too. My mates were about to kill me. But I think everyone will be happy with it."

I know Moffie will. "I'm glad to hear."

He's about to say something when my phone's alarm goes off. Reaching over, I turn it off and lay back onto the couch and stifle a sigh.

He guesses, "Medicine?"

I frown. "Injection."

His eyes soften. "Would you like my help? Sad to say I know my way around needles."

Garrick doesn't often bring up his past drug use, so I don't either. The last thing I want to do is remind him of it, so I always make sure I'm in my room whenever I need to administer my methotrexate.

"I can handle it," I tell him, sitting up. The rain has stopped, and the sun is out, so I'm tempted to try enjoying it before my body demands rest.

“I know you can, but I’d like to help if you’ll let me.” I’m about to ask if that’s a good idea when he says, “If it makes any difference, it isn’t going to set me off. The first time I saw you...”

We both make faces at the memory of him kicking me out, but I don’t let him finish his thought. “I would have done the same thing.”

He brushes hair out of my face and looks at my eyes, studying them with great interest. I’ve noticed how much he’ll stare and play with the fallen strands of hair like they’re taunting him, and I may even leave them out of my updos from time to time hoping he’ll reach over and move them away.

“I worry about Zayne,” he tells me quietly, resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward to rub his neck. “He used to overcompensate to make sure he didn’t trigger me, and he meant well, but it made things worse sometimes. Like him trying to hide what he was doing only made me ten times more aware of him doing it.”

“He says he’s clean.”

A singular nod is what he gives me. “If he is, he’s using alcohol to compensate. I saw it in rehab. Heard the stories. People turn to new addictions to cope.” His head dips, one hand combing through his hair before he hefts out a sigh. “My counselor told me it was better not to surround myself with addictive things, but I kept drinking until I relapsed a second time.”

“Have you ever thought of...?” Not sure how to finish the sentence, if I have a right to, I let my words fade until he figures out my question.

“Yes.”

The answer causes my heart to drop.

“All addicts think about using again from time to time,” he adds, lifting his shoulders. “Doesn’t mean we go back even if we want to. But, yes, Rylee, I’ve considered it. I have nights where I’ll wake up in an anxiety attack thinking about what will ease my mind enough to loosen me up. Sometimes there are days when I’ve got a million things on my schedule and I want something to wire me up so I can get it all done.”

“Addiction isn’t temporary. It’s a disease that I’ll battle for life, one that I’ve seen far too many people in this industry lose. It may be nothing like your condition, but it’s something that helps me resonate with your position. That’s why I want to help if you’ll allow me. Let me be the person who gets you, even if it’ll never be on the same level.”

For a long moment, I struggle to come up with the proper response. There are a million things fighting to escape my brain and slide off the tip of my tongue, but I hold back.

We stare at each other.

Sincerity and need blasting in his eyes.

A sense of understanding in mine.

He needs to be needed, so I say, "Yes."

And there has never been a more intimate moment in my life like when Garrick gathered what he needed from my room, came back downstairs, and listened to my direction to prep the needle before lifting up my shirt and administering the shot.

He keeps the piece of clothing tucked underneath my bra, bends down, and kisses the needle site once he's done.

My body shivers.

My thighs tighten.

And when Garrick notices, he simply straightens out my shirt back into place, kisses my cheek, and goes to start dinner.

GARRICK

“**T**hat’s “300 Miles to Heartbreak” by Violet Wonders, the first single from their upcoming album *Late Nights*. What do you think, Chrissy?”

I’m tempted to turn the station to something else, but I opt to listen instead as I weave through traffic on the 405. I promised Rylee I’d be back before five so we could get dinner, but it’s looking more and more like that’ll have to wait based on the heavy lines of cars surrounding me.

The female cohost says, “It’s a good song, but it looks like it hasn’t even broken the top 10 on most streaming services yet. Usually, the band flies to the number one spot in the first two days. We’re almost done with day one and it’s not looking great for them.”

“Well fuck you, Chrissy,” I grumble, tightening my hold on the wheel and easing into the seat. It isn’t anything I haven’t heard in the first five hours of the single airing. The streams came in hot in heavy in the first two hours, then tapered off.

Back when Violet Wonders first started, we would have been happy just to be in the top 25, where we are right now. But years of experience and promotional tactics tell me that the song isn’t cutting it like we thought when we all agreed on it being the first to share from the selection of sixteen on the album.

“After they cancelled their spot on Hot in Hollywood to clear up any rumors circulating in the media, people have questioned the stability of the band,” a new radio host intervenes. “It’s hard to keep the fans trust if the band isn’t willing to talk.”

“Christ.” Shaking my head, I let out a harsh sigh and slow down among the long line of vehicles around me.

It isn’t like any of us committed a crime or did something unforgiveable. People forget too often that public figures are allowed to say no and change their minds. The second we give too much of ourselves, a pattern is set. That’s when expectations become too high, and society thinks we owe them every piece of ourselves on a silver platter.

I understand why Zayne and the others felt content with the decision to end Violet Wonders the first time. Maybe I thought getting back together would somehow heal old wounds by bonding like we used to, but it’s obvious since we started touring and working on new music again that we’ve all wanted different things.

My solo career was doing fine, better than ever even, before I decided to focus on the band again. Zayne was happy working on cars and saving for his own garage, Jax was off traveling to the few countries we’d never been able to go to like he’d always wanted to do, and Manning and Cal did whatever the hell they wanted. Those two never kept any of us up to date, rarely posting anything online or answering group messages if one of us reached out except to confirm they were alive.

We were all living our lives before I disrupted them. Again.

Zayne was right.

I’m a selfish friend.

Clicking off the radio and driving with only the sounds of city life wrapping around each of my thoughts, I pull into my neighborhood and wave at a few neighbors who’ve always been friendly with me. A few in the industry, but mostly retired actors and actresses with their families. It’s a peaceful area unless people like me cause a scene in the media. I’ve apologized to a couple close neighbors who’ve been in the crossfire that I doubt will be inviting me over in the future considering they barely give me a second look whenever we pass one another now.

I roll up to my gate and smile at Raymond who Mum hired a few months ago after the break in. “Everything okay while I was gone?”

The dark-skinned man nods once. “Yes, sir. Only one person came by, but he didn’t stay long. An hour max. And your wife has company that showed up only half an hour ago.”

Company?

Punching in the gate code, I park in front of the closed garage and smile at the red Volkswagen beside me. There's a Violet Wonders bumper sticker that Mum's had on the outdated car since she first purchased it from us. She was our first customer to buy merchandise and a CD and has the pictures to prove it.

When I walk inside, I'm not sure what I'll find. But what I do has me cracking the biggest smile as I keep my distance and watch Mum listen attentively to Rylee as she shows her how to pot a plant. There's plastic covering the floor with a large ceramic pot that I bought per my wife's request sitting in the center of it, along with dirt and the remanence of an old plastic pot that I imagine the green plant came from that's being tended to by the two women kneeling beside it.

Mum used to garden way back, but her job didn't let her keep it up because she was always busy. Yasmin would always hound her about letting the plants die, but Mum's green thumb is as about as vibrant as mine in its lack of existence. Her priorities were Chase, me, and keeping her boss happy with the extra hours she always put in.

Leaning my shoulder against the wall, I cross my arms over my chest and say, "Looks like you two have been busy."

They both look up at me, Mum smiling, Rylee startled. My wife says, "I didn't hear you come in."

I push off the wall and set my things down on the couch before crouching beside her and pressing a kiss to her temple. "Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a bitch."

Mum says, "I heard there was an accident near Gables that backed everything up. It took Yasmin an extra 45 minutes to get home."

Rylee frowns. "Wasn't her daughter's ballet recital today?" The nod Mum gives her in reply deepens her frown. "I hope she got there on time. She was excited."

I rub her back. "I'm sure it worked out, love. Shauna's recitals usually don't start until six and her school isn't far from their home."

Relief floods her eyes.

I turn to the plant. "What is this anyway?"

"It's a peace lily," Rylee explains, touching the large white petal. "They're easy to maintain, so I thought it might be fun to give to your mom since she's been wanting to try keeping houseplants again."

My brows go up in doubt, but Mum cuts in with, “Rylee said that they’re hard to kill, so it’s the perfect plant for me.”

I roll my eyes. “Remember what happened to that succulent Yasmin gave you years ago when you told her you wanted to start collecting houseplants?”

Mum sighs. “She never told me I had to water it every two weeks. I thought they didn’t need to be watered that often. And the only reason she gave me that was because it was called an Old Lady Cactus.”

I snort. “I just wanted to hear you say it.”

She smacks my arm. “Be nice to your mother. I birthed your big ten-pound body naturally. You owe me.”

Rylee makes a choking sound. “*Ten* pounds?”

Mum’s nod is grave. “Afraid so. I’d be prepared for when you two decide to have some of your own. His father’s side has been known to produce large babies.”

I try to ignore the ashen look on Rylee’s face as I pat her hand. “Try not to scare my wife, yeah?”

The shrug I get doesn’t tell me she won’t be bringing it up again anytime soon. But she relents with a subject change. “Speaking of the Australian devil, have you heard from him?”

Her nickname for my father still makes me laugh. “Not since the other day. He mentioned possibly coming here to visit.”

That gets a reaction. “Did he now?”

I know they still check in with each other every so often, but there’s definitely no love lost between them. The day the divorce papers were finalized, we’d packed our things and caught a flight to sunny California. At the time, I’d been reluctant to leave Dad behind, but he promised to stay in touch. He’s kept his word, even if Mum would get heated whenever the time difference impacted our sleep schedules.

“It’s not set in stone,” I add, knowing what she must think of even the possibility. He was dead set against coming to California to live, and not once has he visited. We’d done video calls and I’d taken flights to see him during summers when I was still in school. But all that changed when Violet Wonders made it. We saw each other less and less, heard from each other even fewer times, and when we did connect it was never for long because I was always being pushed and prodded somewhere else.

Dad's pride has always been his biggest downfall, and the only reason he's been against flying here is because it's the very reason our family is split. Owning up to that is something he's never fully done, even if he's apologized to me in the past.

I'm not the one who really deserves his apology though, and I think he knows it.

Rylee clears her throat. "We're all set here, so I can get this all cleaned up and we can grab dinner. Manning and Cal stopped in earlier and asked if you'd be down to meet up somewhere tonight."

"As a group?"

A shoulder lifts. "He said he'd catch you later. I thought he probably would have called you to make plans, so you'd let me know what's up."

I shake my head in exasperation. "You'll learn soon enough that's not how they roll."

Mum agrees. "Those boys need a better head on their shoulders. They need schedules."

While I agree, I still defend them the best I can out of understanding. "They're enjoying time off a schedule since we're usually tied to one with touring and promotion."

That doesn't appease my mother. "I still think there's a lot of growing up to be done there. You know I love those boys but..." She shakes her head. "And when on earth are they going to stop pretending they're not playing house together? I swear, I've been waiting for them to come clean for years."

I choke on nothing but air the same time Rylee asks, "*What?*"

Pausing the cleanup, Mum stares at both of us with a hand on her hip. "How many adult men live together for this long? Those two have been inseparable since the band got together, and it's not because they're best friends. They travel together, they do everything together. The fact that you —" Her eyes dart to me in narrowed slits. "—don't even see that makes me wonder how observant you are about other things."

Her implication still rattles me. "What other things do you think I'm missing?"

Rylee grabs a broom from the cleaning closet and walks over, carefully watching me and Mum as my mother sighs at my obvious confusion.

Mum's eyes go to Rylee, then back at me with a secretive smile. "Sweet boy, I think I'll let you figure it all out on your own. It'll certainly be more

entertaining for me.”

She goes back to helping fold the plastic that contains a majority of the mess while I stare dumbfounded at the accusation.

How the hell didn't I see something so obvious all these years?

Rylee walks over and puts her hand on my arm, offering me a small smile. “It doesn't change anything,” she tells me quietly.

I nod slowly, mindlessly. “Doesn't mean I don't wish I'd realized sooner. If Cal and Manning are...” Why is it hard to say? I love those guys like they're my brothers. It doesn't matter what they are to each other because they're still like family to me regardless. “Do you think Zayne and Jax know?”

She shrugs. “I don't know. But you've had a lot going on. It's not the end of the world if you didn't know, especially if they didn't outright say anything. Maybe they don't want anybody to know until they're comfortable.”

“But *why*?” I ask aloud, more to myself than to Rylee or Mum. If it's because they didn't trust me with the truth then I'd feel like a bigger piece of shit than I already do. “It has to be because of what Zayne said.”

“What about what Zayne said?”

“I'm selfish.”

“Garrick—”

“I was always a selfish friend,” I state, no point in denying it. “I may not be as bad now, but Zayne was right. Cal and Manning probably didn't want to tell me because they didn't think I'd care. Or they think I'd react badly.”

“But you won't. You *wouldn't*.”

I shake my head. “No, I wouldn't. I want them to be happy, Ry. No matter how they get to be. That's all I want for any of the guys. They're important to me.”

She smiles. “Then maybe you should tell them that sometime. It'll probably mean a lot to them if they knew.”

I know she's right.

But Christ, what else have I missed?

I look at Rylee.

Then my mother.

A lot, apparently.

I'm sitting in the backyard listening to music coming from the speakers attached to the side of the house when the door slides open. Eyes moving over my shoulder, I smile as Rylee approaches in another one of my t-shirts and a pair of leggings.

"I'm starting to think you don't have enough shirts of your own," I muse, tugging on the cotton when she's close enough. "Your husband should really take better care of you. Buy you clothing. Things that make you happy."

She gasps when I tug her down until her body falls on mine. I readjust us so she's sitting between my legs with her back against my chest, my arms wrapped around her front as I use the top of her head as a chinrest.

Once we're settled, she says, "Maybe I like stealing your clothes to wear."

"Do you, now?"

She hums.

Smiling, I peck her head. "It's every guy's fantasy seeing their girl wearing their clothes."

Sitting back, she looks up at me. "I thought guys preferred seeing us out of them?"

Instantly, my cock responds to her words, and there's no doubt she can feel it prod her. "It's fifty-fifty. I'd definitely love seeing you without a stitch on, love. But I'm in no hurry."

Her eyes ghost over my face, lids fluttering before she straightens and uses my shoulder to rest her head. "Do you miss being with women who go after what they want without hesitating? Because I don't think that'll ever be me."

It doesn't take a brainiac to know she's insecure, so I squash it then and there. "You seemed to know what you wanted when you pulled off my sweatpants the other night and used your mouth to—"

"You know what I mean," she cuts me off, and I know the high pitch of her tone means her face is probably red.

My arms squeeze her to me. "Those girls made it too easy, Ry. There was no challenge. It was all too predictable day in and day out. You may not believe it, but I don't miss that at all. In fact, I never liked it all that much."

"You sure seemed to," she grumbles under her breath.

I chuckle to myself. "Yeah, well I wasn't always that way. I liked to get in, get off, and get the hell out as soon as I could. I was selfish."

“And now?”

My lips find her temple, then trail down to her ear where I whisper, “Oh, I still love to get in and get off. I just enjoy exploring the landscape thoroughly first.”

She shivers when I nip her ear.

My fingers dance along her stomach and stop at her lower waist, just above the waistband of her leggings. “Are you wet for me, Rylee?”

A sharp breath escapes her. “I always am when I’m around you.”

Internally, I groan. If she knows what she does to me on a regular basis, then we’re even.

I pepper kisses along her neck and murmur, “Interesting.”

“You love that word.”

I love you, I nearly say, swallowing them before the moment breaks.

Shaking it off, I hiss when she wiggles and rubs against my erection.

“We could do something about that,” I propose, nipping above her pulse and dipping my tongue out where my teeth pressed into her skin.

Her breath shutters. “We could...”

One of my hands rise until it’s cupping her breast, feeling the absence of a bra, and leaving me thanking whatever Holy spirit is listening. Her nipple is already pebbled, and she breathes heavily when I begin playing with the sensitive bud while continuing my slow ministrations on her neck. I know well by now what makes her wet, what makes her moan the loudest, and what gets her writhing in a matter of seconds.

And when I dip my hand into her leggings, I smile against her neck when I feel how soaked her pussy is for me. I trail her arousal to the button of nerves that I know will detonate her if I apply just the right amount of pressure, then tease her entrance again with featherlight circles before adding another digit.

Spreading her thighs wider to give me better access and watching where my hand moves inside her, I lean forward and whisper, “That’s right, baby girl, watch me finger fuck you.”

She obeys, watching my hand work it’s magic under her leggings, the slick sound of her arousal making the moment that much hotter, until she tilts her head back and gasps out my name before I capture it with a kiss. With the lift of her ass, she orgasms until she shakes and only comes down a few long moments later with my fingers still toying with her sated body.

“Now,” she rasps, gripping her leggings and tugging them down.
“Please, Garrick.”

For a moment, my brain shuts off.

Then she says, “I need you.”

I need you.

Three words.

That’s all it takes before she’s suddenly underneath me, her leggings gone, her shirt pulled up to expose her beautiful pink nipples, and my jeans and shirt absent within seconds. In nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, I kiss her long and hard before pulling back. “We can move inside...?”

She shakes her head. “Here. Now.”

Her inability to speak full sentences makes me examine the cushioned lounge we’re on for a few seconds before nodding and taking her mouth a little more gently than before and helping her free me of the last layer of clothing between us.

I brush hair out of her face and behind her ear, caressing her cheek with my thumb before stroking myself, licking my fingers to dampen the head of my cock, and lining myself up to her entrance. The heat radiating from her consumes me as I start to push in.

When her body locks, a gargled noise escapes her mouth. I move my fingers to her clit and begin stroking. “Relax, Rylee. I’ll take care of you.”

Her shaky arms go around my neck, her eyes fluttering and cheeks darkening as she looks down where the tip of my cock is still partially planted inside her. “I have something embarrassing that I need to tell you.”

My brows go up, my movements stalling completely. “You’re a virgin.” It’s not a question, but a sure statement—one I’ve wondered for a while but didn’t want to ask so she wasn’t embarrassed.

“No!” Her answer is full of offense before she drops her head back and closes her eyes. “But I might as well be. I’ve only done this one other time.”

Kissing her once, twice, a third time, I nuzzle our noses together before replying, “I sort of guessed as much, Ry. If you need me to stop—”

“No, no. It’s... I’m just nervous.” One of her hands goes to my chest, feeling the steady beat of my heart. “I want this. I want *you*. But I’m embarrassed.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed of.”

“But you—”

“Have never done this with someone I genuinely care about,” I finish for her. “Don’t be embarrassed, love. I want this as long as you do.”

I watch her for a few moments before giving her a single nod when she doesn’t stop me, lowering my forearms on either side of her head. There’s little space to work with considering where we are, but it makes the moment ten times more intimate. “Breathe for me, baby girl. In for three, out for three. I need you to relax so I don’t hurt you.”

Her throat bobs as she swallows, before following my instructions. After a few deep breaths, I can feel her legs spread wider before she wraps them around my waist with a little guidance from my hands.

“Good.” I kiss her the same moment I roll my hips forward, inching in little by little and swallowing the noises she makes. Our neighbors are far enough away that I doubt they’d hear us, but I’m sure Rylee wouldn’t like knowing they could potentially understand what’s going on when she starts panting as I bottom out inside of her with one last slick thrust.

Fuck. She’s so tight I know this won’t last long, so I take my time and make sure she feels as good as she can, going slow and kissing her with a purpose I’ve never given any other woman who’s been underneath me. One hand on her upper thigh, I keep a steady hold of her as I push in and pull out to a calculated rhythm that has her whispering my name is a raspy breath. Her fingertips dig into my shoulders as I move faster, the lounge squeaking with every thrust inside her vice-gripping pussy until I can’t hold back anymore.

At the last second, I pull out and grab the top of the lounge chair for support, pumping my dick until I shoot spurts of cum onto her stomach.

Dropping my head down, I lower myself enough to kiss her flushed face. “Are you okay?”

Slowly, she nods, kissing me back. “Sore, but...” Burying her head into my neck, and wraps her arms around my back. “Good. I’m good.”

I pull away, grabbing my shirt from the ground and wiping her off. “I wasn’t sure if you were on birth control...”

She watches as I throw the tee back onto the pavement, biting her bottom lip for a few seconds before shaking her head. “I should probably get on it.”

I kiss her. “It’s up to you. If you don’t want to, I’ll just get more condoms. We have plenty of experimenting left to do.”

Her eyes widen. “We do?”

I grin. "Practice makes perfect." My fingers tangle into her hair, brushing out the tangles and knots. "And we both know how much I love to practice."

The flush on her face disappears, turning into two pink dots. Her embarrassment is cute, endearing even, and only makes me want to see what else I can do to make her turn that shade.

"I'll get on the pill as soon as I can," she decides, letting me readjust us. I pull the tee she's wearing down, so she's covered before tugging her into my side.

"If you're sure."

She lets out a content sigh. "I don't know what I did to deserve this," she whispers out of nowhere. "But I'm glad."

I hug her as close as I can, my way of agreeing with every word she said.

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RYLEE

The crisp December weather dips below fifty degrees the week of Christmas. By the time the holiday comes, the heat is at full blast despite Garrick being in athletic shorts and a tank top from sweating to death while I'm wrapped in a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and Snuggie to keep warm.

"My parents said they're going to arrive in about twenty minutes," I tell the man currently helping his mother pull the turkey out of the oven. He looks up from where his mother checks the bird, eyeing the outfit I changed into.

I flatten my hands against the dress, one that his mother gifted me after an outing we'd had together a few weeks ago. She'd seen me looking at it through a store window before pulling me into the store and asking one of the women working to let me try it on.

No matter how many times I told her I didn't need anything new, she'd brush it off. And when I walked out of the dressing room in the black batwing, V-neck knitted dress that hit just above my knees, her eyes lit up as she covered her mouth and slowly shook her head. One of the store's employees wrapped a satin black ribbon around my waist and tied it into a bow before they all stepped back and stared.

"Isn't my daughter beautiful?" Elaine had asked them all.

And the way Garrick was looking at me in this very instant, I truly feel it.

Garrick walks over, holding my hands out to study me from closer up. The way his eyes rake down my body makes me draw my bottom lip into

my mouth. He's studied my body like it's his career over the past two weeks, giving me time before teaching me his favorite positions and letting me figure out mine.

The inexperience I'd been embarrassed about melted away whenever he'd strip me of my clothes and use his hands, fingers, mouth, and tongue—among other things—to tell me he thought it was sexy to be the person guiding me on how to be in touch with my body.

"Beautiful," he whispers, kissing me lightly and resting his forehead against mine. "I have no words."

"You seem to be doing just fine." I tug on his tank top. "Though, you may want to change. I'll turn the heat down so you're not sweating."

He shakes his head. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable. I'll deal with it. I should go up and get ready before they get here."

With another kiss and a squeeze of our hands, he lets go and walks upstairs leaving me alone with his mother.

I ask, "Where's Chase?"

She washes her hands and dries them before turning to face me. "He's running a bit late. Things have been..." Her words fade as she loses her train of thought. "Well, he's had a lot going on. But he promised he'd be here for the family lunch."

I wasn't worried about it, though I have been worried about him. Garrick hasn't said much about the situation, and I've never asked. I know it's between them and I shouldn't butt into business that my nose doesn't belong in. Even though Chase and I aren't particularly friends, I want to see him happy and know something has been preventing him from that.

Elaine waves me over. "Do you mind fluffing the stuffing and stirring the potatoes? I need to make sure everything else is ready so we can put the dinner rolls in to toast."

She's been frantically rushing around the kitchen all morning, instructing Garrick and I on what to do and when. I have some knowledge from the years helping my parents during the holidays but let her guide me on her recipes since some are different than what I'm used to making.

When I hear tires roll up outside, nerves shoot through my body. I check myself over for the tenth time since walking downstairs and feel a hand on my shoulder.

Elaine says, "You look fine, dear."

“Is it weird I’m nervous?” They’re my parents, hardly anyone to be scared of. But this is only the third time they’ve been to California, and the first time they’re meeting my husband’s family. It seems...

Shaking my head, I blow out breath.

One—the hard part with my parents is over, so we can all enjoy Christmas together.

Two—they were willing to fly here even though they could have stayed in New York or asked us to come to them, which means they’re willing to try with Garrick.

Three—Elaine is impossible not to like. And even though Chase sometimes gives me a hard time, he’s like the brother I never wanted.

It’ll be fine.

I nod after repeating that to myself and walk over to the door, standing on my tiptoes to peak out the windows on the top and see two familiar faces walking toward the front of the house.

When I open the door and walk out, Mom and Dad each give me a once over before studying the huge house behind me.

It’s Dad who says, “This is quite the place, kiddo.”

Ushering them inside, I take their coats and hang them up as Garrick comes downstairs in the same outfit we married in. It takes me a few moments of admiring the way he fills out his clothes perfectly before Mom clears her throat.

Blushing, I walk over to the extended arm Garrick opens for me and settle into his side. “I’m sure you guys remember Garrick.”

Dad simply nods at him as he scopes out the inside of the house, as if trying to find faults with it. The first time they visited me was after I’d moved into my old apartment, and Dad went through each room wiggling furniture, testing lights, and making sure all the appliances were working and safe before giving me his approval.

Elaine walks out of the kitchen with a big smile as she sees my parents. “You must be Rylee’s parents.” She reaches out and shakes my father’s hand first, then my mother’s. “We’re so glad you could come.”

When Garrick asked how I wanted to spend Christmas, there was no pressure. He told me it was up to me whether I wanted to spend it here or back in New York. But with news spreading of my marriage, things in Liberty have been...interesting. And even though Garrick wouldn’t be the first celebrity from there, we’d definitely cause a scene with how popular he

is. No amount of money could buy us a quiet holiday, so I decided it'd be better to invite people here where we're better equipped.

Mom looks between me and Garrick before her eyes go to the interior. "It was nice to be invited. You two look lovely, and this house is...nothing like I pictured."

Garrick laughs. "I get that a lot."

"Was the flight okay?" I ask.

Elaine guides us all into the den where Mom and Dad take the love seat and explain their bumpy ride. I cringe when they grumble about a finicky baby on board, and how packed LAX was when they landed. I can tell their experience wasn't exactly five stars, but they refused to let us bump them to first class or help beyond setting them up with a car and driver to take them where they need to go. They're not even staying in this mansion of a house, but in the city at a Hilton hotel that they booked once they agreed to spend the holiday with us. They're only staying overnight before getting a flight back to New York to spend the New Year with other family and friends on the east coast.

Garrick pats my thigh before escaping to the kitchen with his mother to finish lunch preparations, giving me time with my family.

Dad gives me the smile I always loved seeing on his face. "You seem happy, Ry. I'm glad to see that. Can't say I'm surprised after seeing what I have of this place."

I blush. "It's a nice area."

"And the house," Mom remarks, staring at a few photos hanging on the walls. "I watched that *MTV Cribs* show to prepare myself for what I might walk into."

Gaping at her, I slowly blink. "I can't believe you watched that. That ended years ago, it's completely out of date." She used to watch HGTV religiously when I was growing up, always wanting to flip a house or renovate theirs based on whatever the people in the shows were doing. Poor Dad had a honey-do list a mile long that ended up being split in half when budget became an issue. She would have been better off studying those shows before coming here if she was that worried.

"And what are your thoughts?" I inquire, refraining from biting my nail like I want to when she gives the room we're in a once-over.

"It's very homey," she decides. "But I wouldn't mind a tour to see the rest."

I'm glad Garrick suggested moving my things into his room for appearance's sake since we weren't sure where they'd want to stay. The last thing I want is to explain why all my stuff is in a spare room far from the man I married.

It didn't take long to show them things, skipping the room I temporarily share with Garrick for privacy purposes. It feels too intimate showing them where I go to sleep with a hard, naked body pressed against me, or where I wake up with a face between my legs.

We've been switching between his bed and mine every night, so I suppose it doesn't really matter that all our stuff is in one room now. But there's something unspoken about that—like it's a big step we're taking by him giving me closet space even though his walk-in closet is bigger than the bedroom I had at my old apartment.

When we're back downstairs, Mom squeezes my hand to hold me back as Dad gawks at some records framed on the wall. "You're happy, right?"

I frown at the question. "Yes. Why?"

Her eyes are cautious. "I just never thought you'd like a place like this. Don't get me wrong, it's nice. Safe. Spacious. But it's not...you."

Biting my lip, I contemplate my answer carefully. Considering Garrick bought this long before I was in the picture, it's not surprising that the house is solely him. And it isn't like I have anything to contribute to it since everything we need is here. "I have something to show you, but we'll need our jackets."

A few minutes later, my parents follow me outside to the flower garden protected by the frost shield covers that Yasmin and Garrick helped me install when I saw the weather forecast for the next few weeks.

The array of purples, yellows, pinks, and whites are all still visible through the see-through material. No longer is the backyard an open area of boring green but scattered with bright colors that liven up the space. The back corner is strictly for the vegetables we'll grow when the warmer weather hits because Yasmin said that gets the most sunlight in the summertime.

Mom asks, "You did all this?"

"With some help," I answer quietly. "But yeah. I remembered everything Grandma taught me and made this space mine."

It felt odd to say, but I remember the words that are practically chanted to me by the man who's undoubtedly watching me through the large kitchen

window that faces the backyard.

What's mine is yours.

Staring at the flower beds and plants that are growing beautifully, I start to believe he's right. And for once, I don't think about what's to come in the future.

Mom wraps our arms together and Dad comes over and kisses my head before dropping an arm around Mom's shoulder. "You made something of yourself here just like you said you would. We're proud of you."

Guilt crashes into me, pulling me away from the moment I'm having.

It's only when Elaine calls out, "Lunch is ready, everyone. And Chase arrived just in time!" that I paint on a smile to mask everything I'm feeling inside as I turn to my parents.

I give them a quiet, "Let's eat."

The blindfold covering my eyes feels like silk, probably one of the many ties Garrick has hanging in his closet that I'm almost positive he's never worn unless there's a formal event. Though, I found out from Michael that he has stylists who provide him with clothes for award shows. He'd called asking to make time for a fitting because Garrick is presenting something at the Golden Globes and needs a tux for the occasion. But my husband said he'd only do it if I was there sitting at one of the tables with him.

Michael never got back to him about that, something Garrick hasn't forgotten about.

"Where are we?" I ask for the fifth time since he told me to trust him. I've been off ever since my parents left. Dad gave me a big hug, Mom did the same, and I'd held back my tears long enough for their car to pull away before letting them loose into Garrick's dress shirt until a hideous water stain was left behind.

I hear him snicker as we stop walking, his hands on my hips as he turns me toward something. My nerves are firing a mile a minute until I hear something...meow?

"Garrick?"

"One more second, love."

There's shuffling, then a bell ringing that sounds awfully like the one on the door at our favorite eating spot where rarely anybody bothers us.

Suddenly, there's a hand in mine, callused from the time they've spent tuning and strumming guitars and scaling piano keys, and rough from the work they've done helping me build flowerbeds.

He guides us inside somewhere, the warmth quickly heating me from the chilly breeze outside.

Then I hear it.

Animals.

Dogs barking.

Cats meowing.

Metal rattling.

When I was younger, I used to go by the pet store and play with the animals hoping my parents would let me choose one. I even saved up the money I'd gotten from the veggie stand my grandparents let me help run in hopes that I could pick out something of my own. In hindsight, it's better that they said no even if I threw a big tantrum and told them I hated them approximately ten times. It would have been nearly impossible moving across the country with a pet and finding a place that'd take them.

"I'm going to take us into the back, so walk carefully. There's a narrow hallway ahead." I do as he says, one foot in front of the other as my hand reaches out and rests on his shoulder as he walks us somewhere far enough away to drown out the noises.

I fidget when he stops me again. "I'm getting nervous. What's going on?"

A door opens and another set of footsteps comes in. I hear more rattling, shifting, metal clinking like the old cage we used to keep my childhood dog in during his potty training.

Are we...?

"You can take your blindfold off," he instructs, giddiness in his voice.

I probably break a world record with how quickly I pull it down until it drapes on my neck. My eyes instantly find a small cage on top of a table with a small, multi-colored cat inside it.

Oh my God.

My eyes snap to the man who's grinning ear to ear at me. "What is going on?"

He walks over to the cage and opens it up. There's an older woman in the corner wearing a t-shirt with a logo I vaguely recognize from animal

shelter commercials on TV. “Remember how I told you that I always wanted a dog but never had one?”

Slowly, I nod.

He’s patient as he reaches into the cage, letting the small brown, black, and white cat slowly creep toward him to sniff his fingers. “I was thinking about what you told me back in New York. I’m Garrick Matthews. I can have anything I want.”

I watch as the cat brushes its head against his fingers, letting him scratch the back of its neck before the purring starts. When Garrick gently pulls the cat from the cage and holds it in his arms, all while the happy feline nudges his chin for attention, I melt.

Garrick Matthews is holding a cat.

This would break the internet.

I stare at them and point out the obvious as if he’s confused. “That’s not a dog.”

He grins. “Correct. This is a one-and-a-half-year-old Tortoiseshell cat named Kit-Kat.”

I blink, not registering anything other than the name. “Kit-Kat? Like the snack?”

He nods. “That was his name when he got here.” Readjusting *Kit-Kat* in his arms, he strokes its back. “Since you always come up with good ideas, the guys and I volunteered at an animal shelter for some good press. Bonding, since they seemed to miss me so damn much for some reason. Turns out, Jax is highly allergic to cats. It was pretty funny.”

Poor Jax. “And that made you decide to get a cat?”

“Not just any cat,” he counters. “*This* one. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was mine. The plus side is, Jax won’t likely throw anymore parties at the house now that we have a new addition.”

Reality slams into me. “You’re getting a cat?” It’s a dumb question considering he’d already said as much. “I didn’t even know you liked cats. And cats are...they’re a lot of work. We never talked about it. We don’t even have anything it’ll need—”

“Can I have a moment with my wife?” Garrick asks the woman in the corner. The woman nods and slips out the door to give us privacy. He turns to me, still fussing over the cat in his arms. “Why are you freaking out? You’ve told me before that you’ve wanted a pet. Cats are low maintenance and independent once we show them where the things are.”

My eyes go to Kit-Kat. "It's not that I don't want one, but pets are commitments. That's..."

He nods slowly. "Ah. You're afraid."

"I'm not—" He gives me a look that stops the words about to escape me. "Okay, yes. I have no idea what's going on here. I'm confused."

"About what? A cat?"

"Us, Garrick!" I hiss the words at him, nervously looking at the door. "We're...getting to know each other in ways that's foreign to me. And while that's, er, nice—"

"We both know it's more than nice based on the way you call out my name, love. But since we're in public, I'll let it slide for now."

Face heating, I push away his casual statement. "The point is, having a pet is a big deal. Just because we both want one doesn't mean it's a good idea."

"Tell me why."

"Because."

"Tell. Me. Why."

I close my eyes and palm them with the heels of my hands knowing I'll have to say what's been bothering me for a while now. "I don't want to do this right now."

"Well, we are," he informs me. "Because I need to know where your pretty little head is at. So tell me why it's wrong. Give me your reasons and I'll tell you why they're stupid."

I deadpan. "Wow. Thanks."

He simply shrugs.

Eyes going to the door, I drop my voice so nobody can hear. "We're not really together. Maybe in an intimate sense, but that's it. What happens when two years are up, and Michael is shoving divorce papers into my hand? I'd have to walk away from you and Kit-Kat, and I'll be..." Voice hitching, I clear it. "It doesn't matter what I'll be. The point is, it'd be difficult to form any type of attachment to an animal and then have to leave it behind."

His face shadows with anger. "Michael would never do that because I wouldn't let him."

"Be reasonable here."

"I am! Christ." He puts Kit-Kat back into his cage but doesn't close the door. Turning to me, he crosses his arms on his chest. "Did you ever think

that I want more than two years with you? That sharing a room with you makes me feel content for the first time ever? That watching you garden makes me happy because *you're* happy? That hearing you talk about your family brings me peace? That staying up late with you and watching stupid commercials until we nearly buy something we don't need makes me laugh more than I've laughed in a long time?

"You expect the worst in me, Rylee. How about taking a step back and *really* looking at what's in front of you. If I thought for even a second that I didn't want to keep this going for the long term, I wouldn't have brought you here. I'm not daft, I know what a responsibility a pet is, and I know what that means. You're afraid that I'll break our commitment and you'll be left with nothing. But guess what, love?"

I say nothing, unable to answer his rhetorical question as he stares me down.

"Maybe *I'm* afraid of being left with nothing because you're too scared to give me a real shot at proving to you that I am in this. You. Me. Kit-Kat. You've met my mum. You get along with my brother. My mates think you're cool. Our families spent the holidays together. You haven't moved any of your things out of our room, which tells me that you want to sleep with me every night and wake up next to me every morning. I know what makes you tick, inside and out. I know your pleasures, your pains, the things that nobody else does because you *trust me* with that knowledge. I am asking you for one thing and one thing only."

Heart thumping with adrenaline, I ask, "And what is that?"

Stepping up to me, he cups my face and brushes my bottom lip with his thumb. "Give me a chance to love you fully. I'm already well over halfway there."

I shudder a breath. "You love me?"

His smile is warm, not cocky. "You make it easy." I stare at him, our eyes never moving away from each other as I absorb every word. "I don't want or expect you to say anything right now. Think about it. We're already married, might as well take our time."

Brushing his fingers through my hair, he bends down for a chaste kiss and inhales the wild cherry scent I'm sure to be radiating from the Lifesavers I stole from his stash on the way here.

"Garrick," I whisper when he pulls me in for a hug.

"Hmm?"

“Can we take Kit-Kat home?”

I hear the smile in his voice the second he says, “I thought you’d never ask.”

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GARRICK

January passes by with radio interviews, photoshoots, and album promotions leading up to its drop in the beginning of March. Two more songs released, one that hit the number one spot for three weeks in a row on the Billboard charts, and another that barely scraped into the top ten.

Michael has been on my ass about the upcoming Golden Globes that I'm supposed to appear at to give one award. And considering he hasn't addressed my ultimatum about scheduling Rylee in to see the same renown designer who styles me for bullshit like this, it's looking more and more like the award ceremony is going to need a backup.

My manager has been especially nippy because of the limitations Violet Wonders set for interviews. There's a script to follow, questions we get in advance and prepare for so there's no surprises about the shit still lingering in the background about our lives. Our last interview ended with me storming out after the host boldly said, *"People have been seeing old photos resurface of your bride and best friend looking awfully cozy. It must make working together difficult at times if there's still feelings there."*

I'd given one look at the beer-gutted, red-faced asshole asking me and the guys' questions before answering, *"Not that it's anybody's business, but there's no hard feelings regarding the past. Rylee and I are quite happy. Zayne and I are doing fine. This interview is over."*

I'd slid the headphones off, stood up, and walked out not knowing or caring what would happen after my departure. The guys all followed close

behind, with a slew of people calling after us as we left the building and got into the car that'd brought us there.

None of us spoke all the way to my house, where we all gathered inside to watch Rylee play with Kit-Kat. It took five minutes for Jax to bow out after sneezing and cursing my name, with Manning and Cal leaving close behind him. I tried not to study them too closely, how they were never far from each other, always whispering to one another, and how their plans always coincided.

Mum was right. I'm an idiot.

With old pictures of Zayne and Rylee making their way around the media, there's been a rise in conversations about our marriage. And considering I've asked Michael to take care of the tabloids that have blatantly slandered our names, little has been done.

Garrick Matthews in Open Marriage

It's Not Over Yet, Ladies!

Wife of Garrick Matthews Having Affair with Zayne Gray

The Woman Behind the Breakup of Violet Wonders

Which Man Will She Choose?

I close myself in my room that now smells like sugar and spice and is littered with Rylee's belongings that look oddly good spread across the space and dial the number I've been dreading dialing all day since I get nowhere with the man who's managed me for years.

"You promised," I tell Michael, venom in my tone after his long-winded rant about them not being able to take control of the free press.

"We can spin a story on you and the band, but anything else is—"

"She's not just anybody else," I cut him off for the hundredth time. "I seem to recall telling you that before, yet you don't hear me. Who pays you?"

He pauses.

"Who. Pays. You?"

"You do."

"So who should you listen to?"

He sighs. "Garrick, I'm trying to be reasonable here. You know that people are going to come after her no matter what since you both have refused to sit down and talk with any reputable source. That's the best I can get you. Maybe Hot in Hollywood or one of the morning talk shows will

allow you to come on, but you can't pull the same stunt you did with Penny Gomez or they'll never ask you back."

Good.

Rylee doesn't want to go on live TV, and I won't force her too. There's a lot of prepping for interviews that she'd need to go through, and she's told me countless times she doesn't want to be a public figure. Unfortunately for her, she doesn't have much of a choice since signing her name next to mine on the marriage certificate.

"They're defaming her," I point out.

"She wouldn't be the first one."

"She doesn't deserve it."

"For Christ's sakes, Garrick. Most of the people who've gotten dragged through the mud don't, especially not the women who attach themselves to people like you. Maybe if you'd spoken to your goddam team before putting a ring on it, we could have talked her out of going through with it at all."

My nostrils flare at his condescending tone, as if the man only a decade older than me knows enough to talk down to me like I'm a fucking child.

"Careful, Michael. You're on thin ice."

"I'm pointing out the obvious. It's not my fault you've lost one too many braincells from the shit you've snorted. There's plenty of pussy out there to choose from that's better trained to handle this, you could have done better than her."

Pure rage blasts through my body, every vein bubbling as my fists clench so tight that I hear the phone crack. "You're done."

His sigh makes it obvious he doesn't think I'm serious. "We haven't even talked about what you're going to wear at—"

"Let me clarify, Michael. You're fired. I no longer plan on paying you, working with you, or hearing you give me an opinion I didn't ask for. You can belittle me for the things I've done in the past, but you've disrespected Rylee for the last time. I warned you before."

Silence greets me, and I decide it's better to leave it that way. Hanging up, I toss the phone on the bed and squeeze the sides of my neck while I pace.

Michael works with the entire band because Violet Wonders employed one of the best management companies to deal with us from the beginning. He was the one specifically assigned to me when I started releasing solo

music after the breakup because they felt his connections could get me farther.

But I've long since built a following that could get me even further without him because of their loyalty if I decide to work on solo music again.

Walking over to the discarded cell phone, I type out a text.

Garrick: Your manager still accepting new clients since you took a break with your woman?

I'm heading for the door of the room when I get a reply.

Kyler B: I'm starting to think you only like talking to me when you need something

Garrick: Is that a yes?

Kyler B: Yes. Need his contact?

Garrick: Please

Garrick: And if it makes you feel any better, I enjoy talking to you any day if it gets a rise out of you. Today's just not that day

Kyler B: I've seen the articles. If Rylee needs a friend, you have Lenny's contact information you could give her

I don't tell him I appreciate it even though I should. The only constant contact Rylee has consists of video calling Maffie and her friend's husband, and phoning her parents. Chase comes over and watches movies with us once in a while, and Mum still joins us for our traditional movie nights, even letting Rylee pick a few and making her smile over the small sentiment. We go out to eat, occasionally see one of the guys at one of their places, or take drives to get out of the house, but Rylee has no friends of her own here that she can talk to if she wants to.

Garrick: I'll pass that along

Kyler B: Here's Gordon's number

Garrick: You wouldn't happen to know a stylist who has time to dress two people for the GGs do you?

Kyler B: I'm sure Mia does

Garrick: I'll call her

Garrick: Owe you one

Kyler B: I'll remember that

Oh, I'm sure you will.

The red carpet rollout started thirty minutes ago, and I'm glad that I didn't get an invite to prance around in front of the cameras and strike a pose in the Tom Ford suit I'm fitted in. As nice as the gray threads are, they're nothing in comparison to the black Armani number Rylee is wearing. The woman who took it off the rack at her studio said the two-tone ebony floor length gown would complement her eyes beautifully, and I thank the maker for the plunging neckline that Rylee was uncertain about.

Since this is our first public outing together, we still capture plenty of attention from people who want us to stop and talk to them as we follow people inside to find our seats.

"Keep an eye out for Zayne," I tell her over the loud conversations around us.

She's got a firm grip on my arm as we walk side by side, her other hand picking up the skirt of her dress to walk easier. The stylist tried putting her in heels that looked like they could double as a weapon, but she could barely walk in them. The ones she ended up with are chunky little things that she still wobbles in if she isn't gripping me as she walks.

Once we find our table, I pull out her chair and help her sit down so her dress is tucked in and out of the aisle. "Did I tell you how beautiful you look?"

Her hair is braided in a clean updo, something I reluctantly accepted when I realized there'd be nothing for me to brush away. The woman doing her hair had tried hiding a smile when I attempted to convince her to leave something down so I had something to play with when I got bored.

Rylee had come back with, "*How can you get bored at the Golden Globes?*"

She'd see soon enough though.

Once I'm seated, tugging the suit jacket so it's free of wrinkles, my wife turns to me and replies, "You tell me that every day."

"Because it's true."

Her eyes roll, but that smile I love seeing graces her painted lips. "Even when I was wearing a pair of stained sweatpants and wrapped in a Snuggie all day? That's hardly beautiful."

The fact she doesn't see what I do says a lot, but I don't bother convincing her otherwise because she won't believe me. "Do you see Zayne?"

Her eyes move around the room where other A-listers are roaming and talking amongst themselves. When her eyes turn about as wide as the favors on the table, I trace them back to the tall, tattooed man a few feet away.

Christ.

“It’s Cannon Rhodes,” she whisper-hisses, face turning bright red. “What is he doing here? I never heard about any performance. Do people even perform at these kinds of shows?”

Snickering at her quick words, I shake my head. “Not here. I think I heard he’s presenting an award too. Would you like an introduction?”

“No!” she chokes out, shaking her head adamantly. “Nope. Then I’ll turn into Moffie when she met you. I’ll get all red and squeaky and then people will know me as Mouse Girl or something.”

Grinning, I nudge her leg with mine. “I suppose that’s one way to get the press off other topics surrounding you. Mouse Girl doesn’t have a bad ring to it.”

She glares. “Not funny.”

“Hate to break it to you, love—” I brush my knuckles along her cheek. “—but you’re already red. Redder than your lipstick, in fact.”

Rylee groans, her eyes darting back to where The Wild band member is talking with a few other people I vaguely recognize.

I lean close to her. “Deep breaths. In for three, out for three. Remember? Don’t turn into me when I met Olivia Newton-John.”

“At least people sang to you to lighten the mood. I’m about to sweat myself to death.” She squirms in her chair, flattening her hands down her dress. “Am I allowed to sweat in something this expensive? I’m terrified to move or do anything. Eating? Forget about it. You know I always get something on myself.”

I laugh lightly. “What are you going to do, sit there and look pretty all night? There is such thing as dry clean, Ry. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

She’s about to speak when a well-known actress and her plus one stops at our table and examines the name cards across from us. I only know her from one of Mum’s favorite rom coms that she watches on repeat, so I offer a smile in greeting as they sit down.

The woman, Sienna Cross, looks between Rylee and me. “I’m glad to see we’re in good company. Last year we were put next to Luke Clark and his now-estranged wife and we all know how that turned out.”

Rylee cringes, probably remembering all the breaking news articles that went viral online after the couple was escorted from the premises after one too many drinks led to a huge public fight at the award show. Not many people noticed their absence in between filmed commercial breaks during the broadcast, but they definitely did after the news came out.

Sienna notices the empty chairs left. "Do we know who else is joining us?"

"Si," the man beside her murmurs.

She brushes him off. "I'm just wondering, Russel."

I nod toward the spot beside me. "My mate Zayne is supposed to be here. Not sure about a plus one." When he told me he was invited, he'd never said who was coming with him, if anyone.

Things have been...odd between us. We still talk but avoid the large elephant in the room which seems to be making the tension worse. Every time I try bringing it up, Zayne makes an excuse to leave without saying a word about what he admitted.

Before I can think too much about it, I see the man in question walking toward us. He bumps into somebody and stumbles to the side, apologizing a little too loudly before stopping behind the empty chair next to me.

It's obvious the second he looks at me that he's tanked. After he sits down, I lean over and whisper, "You reek, mate. You're pissed, aren't you?"

He gives me a lopsided grin, before jabbing my shoulder with one of his fingers. "No, I'm *drunk*. Might have pre-gamed a little before the event to loosen up."

Cussing under my breath, I pour him a glass of water and shove it into his hand. "Drink."

Scowling at the glass in his hand, he grumbles, "What are you my mother?"

Sienna clears her throat. "I heard you're presenting tonight." She directs the statement toward me, then trails her eyes over to my mate who's guzzling the water down all at once.

"Yes. I don't go on until the end."

She gestures toward Zayne, an unimpressed look pinching her face. "Probably a good thing."

Her comment makes my jaw tick, but I brush it off. Looking over at Rylee, I see worry sketched into her expression that's pointed at my best

friend and know none of us are going to have a good night like I'd promised when she agreed to be my date.

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GARRICK

Running a hand through my hair, I help lean Zayne against the side of the building as we wait for our car. It's been a grueling night of babysitting, and whatever he had before coming here is quickly leaving his system.

"Is he okay?" Rylee whispers, eyes wide as people pass the three of us with curious stares.

I murmur, "He's crashing." He starts to slide down the wall, but I quickly correct him. Rylee stands beside him, putting one of his arms around her shoulders to keep him steady.

There's no doubt people have gotten some interesting photos of the three of us tonight. It's something I'll have to deal with after I get us out of here because it isn't just alcohol Zayne has been indulging in as a pre-game based on how much he fidgeted during the entire program.

"Come on, mate," I direct once our car pulls over to the curb. I help Rylee walk him forward, sliding him in first and getting him positioned to lean against the car door.

Not wanting Rylee near him, I slide in after and gesture for her to get in last. The man driving us closes the door behind her and walks around the front while I turn to my drummer.

"What did you take?" I ask, shaking his arm. He shoves my hand away and grumbles unintelligibly under his breath. "Zayne. Tell me what the fuck you're on right now so I can help you."

His face shifts toward me, a mixture of anger and annoyance plastered on his glazed features. The redness to his eyes and paleness of his skin

makes me half-tempted to tell the driver to take us to the nearest hospital.
“I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

I start patting down the pockets of his jacket and pants. He tries shoving me away when I reach the right one, which means he’s definitely hiding something he shouldn’t have. I quickly dart to pull whatever it is out, going rigid when I see the dime bag of white powder in my hands.

Rylee’s sharp breath barely registers as I stare at the drugs I’m holding. She softly says, “I think you should give those to me.”

But I don’t. “No.”

“Garrrick—”

I shake the bag in front of my friend. “I thought you said you were clean. Hmm?” When he doesn’t comment, looks out the window instead, I about lose my shit. “You said you were sober, mate. Do the guys know?”

He says nothing.

“Fuck.” I grip the bag in my palm and clench it in my fists.

Rylee puts her hand on my leg. “Maybe they’re not hi—”

I laugh bitterly. “Oldest bullshit in the book, love. *They’re not mine. I’m holding them for someone else. I was never going to use it.* I’ve said it all before, and I’m sure he does too. We’re all a bunch of fucking liars.”

She shrinks back, and I don’t have time to feel bad about my tone before paying attention to the man whose leg has begun bouncing. “I want to know how long.”

Nothing.

“For Christ’s sakes, man!” My voice startles both the people in the back with me, Zayne’s eyes cutting to me cautiously. “If you don’t start talking, I swear to God I’ll open this bag and take what’s in it. Is that what you want? Me to throw away years of sobriety?”

He pales even more. “No.”

“Then tell me.”

“I—” Stopping himself, he tries reaching for my hand and taking it back, but I fight him on it. Between the two of us playing tug-of-war, the bag breaks and white powder goes everywhere.

On me.

On Rylee.

On Zayne.

Rylee gasps, Zayne gapes, and I stare at the powder coating my hands and floating in the air, taunting my nose. I breathe in heavily, jaw tight, head turned away from the mess, and stare at the ashen expression on my wife's face.

"G-Garrick?" Her breath is barely audible as her eyes go to the drugs. Taking action, she uses the skirt of her dress to wipe off my skin and clothes frantically while Zayne sits there and does nothing.

Doesn't help.

Doesn't say a word.

I feel it.

The anger.

The rage.

The restlessness deep in my bones.

Rylee takes my face in her hands, keeping me from looking back down. "You're okay," she says, nodding quickly. "We'll be home soon, and you can change and wash up. Okay? You're good."

My nostrils twitch.

My lungs sting.

I suddenly remember with great clarity the night at the Lazy Croc when I saw Rylee for the first time with Zayne.

I'd wanted her—wanted to take her from him. Wanted to appreciate what he clearly couldn't. It all comes flooding back. The nervousness on her face. The way her hands would fidget by her sides or in her lap. How she wouldn't drink whatever he'd put in front of her so I'd help get rid of it.

I watched as she followed him to the bathroom, phone in hand. I knew, deep down, what she was planning to do. And I let it happen.

Supplied the drugs.

Watched the outcome.

"We're okay," she whispers, rubbing her fingers over my skin while her eyes water with anxious, adrenaline-filled tears.

Zayne did that to her.

In a grim, no room for argument tone, I say, "It's time the band called it."

It's not directed at Rylee, but the man sitting on the other side of me witnessing the panic attack he caused in the woman trying to keep me from making a bad choice.

“I’m done,” I add, leaning my forehead against hers and closing my eyes.

It’s only then Zayne speaks. “Okay.”

The breaking point peaked.

And we’ll all go down if I don’t stop it.

I look at Rylee’s ruined dress and frown knowing her worries the second she slid on the pristine material. “Like I said,” I tell her quietly, “at least it can be dry cleaned.”

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RYLEE

“After pictures of Violet Wonders frontrunner Garrick Matthews and drummer Zayne Gray surfaced with Matthews’ wife Rylee Simmons outside The Beverly Hilton Hotel where the Golden Globes were held, speculation began circulating the internet regarding the sobriety of Matthews and Gray. Videos taken by bystanders show the famous band members being hauled into their vehicle shortly after the final award of the night. This comes four years after Matthews’ second stint in rehab.”

Fire burns in the pit of my belly as I fumble with the remote control until the show is turned off. There’s no way people who saw any video from that night believe Garrick is the one using. Not when Zayne could barely stand on his own two feet.

It’s been a week since me and Garrick helped Zayne inside and settled into a spare room. The Australian singer set his friend in the walk-in shower clothes and all, turned the cold water on, and blocked the door so he couldn’t get out until he sobered up. Only after did he call his friends and demand they all come over for an emergency meeting.

And it didn’t end well based on the yelling coming from downstairs.

I’d hid in our room, body by the cracked door gripping the wood while the five Violet Wonders members hashed it out. Not once did I hear Zayne speak up as accusations and arguments flew through the air, cutting and slicing in every direction until a door slammed sometime later while others cursed.

The only thing I'd heard loud and clear from where I eavesdropped was Garrick's firm statement that left little to be argued with. "This band is tearing us apart. Because of my choices. Because of Zayne's decisions. We can't handle it anymore. I'll make sure a statement is made after the album comes out, but this is it."

And that was that.

Everyone stopped arguing.

It was a few hours later when Garrick came upstairs and slipped into the room, still covered in his dirty suit to make a point I wish he didn't have to, when he looked at me cross-legged on the bed with my phone. I don't know what passed between us, but I stood up, slid off my shirt and leggings leaving me in nothing but skin, and pulled him into the bathroom to strip him of his clothes too.

We took our first shower together where he'd pressed me against the wall and showed me what shower sex was like.

And then I lathered my hands in soap and washed him while he watched with an intensity that still curls my toes whenever I think about it.

The headlines that sputtered out after new, more interesting things came to light from other celebrities were now going full force again because of the night at the Beverly Hilton. I can only imagine what the papers would have said if they knew what happened once we were all inside that car.

Still, Garrick's new manager, who I've met twice now and already like twenty times more than his old one, keeps us up to date on what's being said and how to handle it. Unlike Michael, Gordon Fuller has already shut down two different articles that made me sound like I was playing house with both Garrick and Zayne.

Rylee Simmons in Relationship with Two Violet Wonders Musicians

Two for One Deal! Newly married Simmons Allegedly Moves Zayne Gray into New Home

Not to mention the interview Sarina had done had come to light when follow-ups were made to the L.A. Free Press about legal actions they were supposedly going to take about the payout I'd taken for my last article. But the second Gordon fired back with threats of lawyers, not one more peep was made from anyone there because they knew they had "no case" according to the new manager.

He's even given me options to make money while still writing, suggesting a lifestyle blog of everyday life that I could get paid for by

advertisers sponsoring me. I've given it a lot of thought since he initially brought it up, realizing it was the perfect way to introduce the world to the version of Garrick I know and have fallen for.

Walking into the kitchen, I plug in my Ninja air fryer and get out the ingredients I need for homemade chicken tenders. Since Garrick doesn't eat food like this, I usually indulge on the days he's out. According to the note he left me this morning, he's got a day full of interviews with people about the news that they plan on sharing after their album releases.

It's twenty minutes later when I hear the sound of the door opening that I turn down the music I have blasting as I cook and watch Chase walk in with a confused look on his face.

"That's not my brother's music," he remarks, dropping his keys onto the counter and staring at the mess I made. He looks tired—dark bags are under his eyes and his shoulders look weighed down. "Are you making chicken tenders?"

He sounds hopeful, so I smile. "Want some?" Nodding, he pulls out the stool and drops onto it with a heavy sigh. I can't help but say, "I know it's none of my business, but are you okay?"

Staring at the counter for a few moments, he gives me a loose shrug. I grab a second plate, pull the tray out that contains the crispy chicken, and split the food. Since this isn't the first time I've made fried food for the two of us, I know what condiment to grab him from the fridge.

"Forget I asked," I offer lightly, sitting across from him with my own plate.

"It's too surreal to even admit." His voice sounds beat, defeated. "Telling my family was one thing, but the world?"

I make a face. "I'm hardly the world."

He grumbles, "Tell that to my brother."

Blushing, I break apart the chicken and watch steam billow from the halves. "I was listening to The Wild." The topic change causes him to look up from his food. "That's what I had on when you got in here. It drives your brother nuts, but I saw him mouthing along to the lyrics when he didn't think I was paying attention, so I don't think he minds that much."

Chase's lips tilt upward at the corners. "I think I've heard of a few of their songs. They're not bad."

"You should tell Garrick that."

He snorts. "I'm glad he has you," he says after a time passes. "I know I haven't been that warm or welcoming, but for what it's worth I think this is good for him. For both of you."

I drag the tip of my tongue across my bottom lip. "Has he told you about what's going on with him and the band?"

Chase's face twists. "Yeah. And I know where you're going with this. It's not your fault. Honestly, they've been rocky since getting back together."

That's what Zayne had said.

"I feel like I can't make anything better," I admit quietly, playing with my food. "Garrick has been going nonstop trying to figure out the logistics of how this will all go down while all of them try helping Zayne. But he doesn't seem to want to be helped and I can tell that bothers your brother a lot."

Chase nods. "Garrick would give the shirt off his back for anyone, even if they don't deserve it. But he finds this situation personal. I think because he went through it, he wants to be the one to get Zayne to the other side. He just needs to remember that it took him awhile to quit for good. In my opinion, he's being too hard on Zayne and that could ruin their friendship in the long run."

"Have you told him that?"

Hesitation, then another nod. "He didn't like that very much. Said some not-so-nice things. It's why I'm here, actually. Figured I'd wait until he got back to talk to him and apologize for butting into his business."

I'm not sure if he's worried that his brother is upset, so I offer a small reassurance based on Garrick's mood lately. "You meant well. I'm sure he knows that. He doesn't hold grudges. He hasn't said anything to me about it."

Chase presses his lips together and remains quiet. We keep the silence as we eat, nothing but the crunchy coating on the cooked poultry filling the kitchen as we empty our plates.

Eventually, after he helps me clean the dishes and then the mess on the counters, he murmurs, "I hope Zayne is okay."

"Me too."

There's a pause, a look of contemplation, before the youngest Matthews pins me with a look and says, "He better be. I want him to be my son's godfather, and I can't ask a dead man that sort of thing."

My eyes widen.
Oh my God.
Chase is going to be a father?

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RYLEE

I hold my breath when Garrick walks on the small makeshift stage and up to the podium where he's greeted by flashes of cameras. He didn't dress up for this press conference but looks exactly as he should. Blue jeans fitted to his legs. Rip in the knee. Stain on his thigh. It's not artfully done but well worn—his favorite pair, he once told me. He has two whole drawers of denim, but he always goes to this pair because he says they're his "lucky" pair.

The t-shirt he's in isn't of Violet Wonders, but a plain black one that's slightly loose on his trimmed body, not showing off what muscles lie beneath. Muscle I've gotten bold in exploring over the past few months. A red and black plaid shirt is left unbuttoned over that, sleeves rolled up, and a leather bracelet that Chase gave him a long time ago on his wrist above his Smartwatch. What most people don't know is that stitched on the inside of that bracelet is a sobriety token he keeps with him and switches out when new ones are sent to him the longer he's accomplished staying clean.

His boots make me smile. When I first saw that the bottom of his closet had more pairs of boots than I could count, I'd given him a skeptical look and he's simply said, *"My mum raised a shoe whore."*

The pair he's wearing are black ones that I bought him for Christmas with the help of his brother. He told me where Garrick liked getting them, and I'd about gone bug-eyed when I saw the number attached to the Italian leather Samuel Hubbard's currently on his feet. But his face lit up when he'd opened the box, and it made the reality of my situation sweeter, even if I'd never want to spend that much money on one thing again.

Adjusting the microphone, Garrick clears his throat and instantly ends the murmuring among the reporters in the crowd. "I'll try keeping this as short and sweet as possible since I'm sure we all have better things to do today," he begins, looking over to me and smirking. "I know I do."

He winks when everyone laughs, not seeming to care that I'm glaring as I turn red from the insinuation.

Gripping the sides of the podium, he leans into it and sighs. "Look, I know there's been a lot in the media that me and my band haven't taken time to address. We decided that we wanted our privacy to work on our album, work through some personal things, and for me, spend time with me beautiful wife." Once again, his eyes find mine, but this time a warm smile is on his face instead of a cocky one. He looks back to the crowd. "It's true that when Violet Wonders got back together, there were things left untouched that we should have talked about from the start. And while the things reported about us haven't been entirely accurate, they haven't been inaccurate either."

"The guys and I have spent the last few weeks talking about where we see ourselves in the next five years, and it was obvious that we all have different goals in life. For that reason, I'm officially announcing that *Late Nights* and our Illusion World Tour will be the last events the public will get from Violet Wonders."

The room instantly fills with rapid questions being tossed at the man behind the podium, so many that I can't quite understand what any of them are asking. Garrick looks indifferent as he waits for the room to quiet enough for a few people to speak up.

"What does this mean for the individual members of Violet Wonders?" a man asks, shoving a voice recorder forward.

Garrick lifts his shoulders. "That isn't really my place to talk about. What my friends do with their lives from here on out is their business and their business only."

A woman asks, "What about Zayne Gray? Is it true he's planning on going solo?"

I'm not sure many people notice the small tick in his jaw, but I do. Even from where I'm standing off to the side and away from the people still trying to get information from him. "No. Zayne has never been interested in doing a solo album. Though, I'm sure it'd do well if he ever changed his mind."

“Regarding Mr. Gray,” another woman in the back asks. “Is it true he was under the influence during the Golden Globes? And were you also engaging in the events that led to the photos that’s concerned the public from that night?”

From beside me, I see Gordon nod once when Garrick looks in our direction. He pushes off the podium and stands tall. “Here’s the thing. My sobriety has been a battle every single day for many years, but it’s one I proudly face because I am determined to stay clean knowing it’s what’s best. I made it past the 27 Club when few people thought I would, and I certainly made a lot of bad decisions along the way, but I’ve been making it up to people the best I can. Especially to myself. I have not used since I left rehab. I will not use again no matter the temptation, and there are a lot of temptations in this industry. And for anyone else who’s facing the battle, it’s going to last for life. I failed more than once before I decided enough was enough. It takes effort, determination, and a support system to be successful at remaining clean and moving forward with life.”

It’s not a confirmation regarding Zayne’s sobriety, or lack thereof, but not a denial either. He knew he’d be asked about those photos of us all looking a little too cozy and unstable, and he was undecided about how to address it knowing that his best friend didn’t need anything out in the world while he tried to recover.

“Garrick, what was the cause of the first breakup with Violet Wonders, and do you think there could be a third comeback if something similar occurred this time?”

He shakes his head. “We’re older now, we want things we didn’t when we first started our careers in this industry together. We’ll always be in touch, always be a family, but we won’t be rejoining as a band for a third time. I’m sure some of you are grateful to hear that.” Garrick eyes the group of older men who all smirk and chuckle to some degree. “As for the past, there’s no point in bringing it up. I know the world wants to know what could have ended something that was at the height of its success, but maybe it’s as simple as life. Subconsciously, we all knew what was bound to happen and we ended things prematurely because of feelings getting hurt and other admirations getting in the way. It doesn’t have to be anybody’s fault. There doesn’t have to be some big reason. It’s the press, the tabloids and media that always make it bigger than it has to be.

“And before I’m asked, I’m well aware that my wife was part of that press problem in the past. But unlike most people, she was willing to own up to it. Rylee, like the rest of us, has faults that makes her human. It’s what I love most about her. She’s unapologetically herself, and because of that there’s no hard feelings between her, Zayne, or any of my mates. The rumors of any involvement between she and him are false, as most of the bullshit—” Gordon winces at the choice of language. “—circulated by the free presses. All the world needs to know is that we’re happy, we plan on living our lives in as much privacy as we’re allowed, and that things are good.”

“Garrick, what about—”

“Can you comment on—”

“Is it safe to say that—”

On and on and on it goes, but Garrick chooses not to stay and give them any more than what he already has. He walks away from the stage, jumping off the side as people throw questions out, and ignoring everyone behind him as he stalks toward me.

He takes my face in his hands, plants a very public kiss on my lips that lasts a little too long and works me up a little too much, until Gordon clears his throat next to us.

Blushing, I pull away first as Garrick pulls me into his chest and wraps his arms around me. My husband, probably grinning, says to his new manager, “Sorry, mate. Don’t fancy you enough to show you the same appreciation.”

Gordon snorts. “That’s fine by me. Are you ready to leave?”

Garrick repositions us so his arm is draped over my shoulders as the three of us walk toward the side exit that’s near our parked car.

I look up at him and whisper, “You know I love you too, right? I know we have stuff to work through still, but it’s true.”

His eyes heat as he bends down and kisses me again, keeping pace with his manager as we exit the building. Breaking away only to hold the back door open for me to slide into the car, he slides in next and takes my hand. His finger runs over the ring that’s been there since the day we went to see my parents. I only take it off to shower. “I was waiting for you to say it. Hoped.”

Nibbling my lip, I stare at our joined hands. “Better late than never, I guess.”

His smile is enamoring. “Is it too soon to talk about kids?”
I choke on my air.
Gordon chuckles.
Garrick winks.
Somehow, the thought isn’t *that* scary.

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EPILOGUE

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RYLEE

“Ry?” Garrick calls from the front of the house. Once the door closes, footsteps come toward the kitchen where I’m standing at the counter.

He walks over and pecks my cheek, examining the mess of cheese sticks and Panko crumbs littering the countertop, then the tablet resting against the wall with a video pulled up.

I turn and smile at him. “Remember that girl I found on YouTube who does healthier recipe videos that don’t taste like cardboard?”

His face pinches in contemplation. “The one that’s married to that American football player?”

Nodding enthusiastically, I point the knife toward the screen where the video is paused. “Yes! Ivy Griffith. Her husband is the tight end for the New York Giants. Anyway, she uploaded this new recipe for air fried mozzarella sticks, and I wanted to try it. All the other stuff we’ve made from her videos have been a huge hit. Even your mom liked them.”

Garrick snickers, pecking my lips and pushing away to get water from the fridge. “I’m not so sure Mum loved those pizza chickpea things you made.”

I turn to him. “But she loved the chocolate ones.”

He simply shakes his head, leaving me to wonder if Elaine was just being nice and pretending to like them for my sake. It’s like when I stupidly suggested we go to Outback Steakhouse together for dinner and she scoffed every five minutes at the menu options.

Mental note: Don’t bring Australians to Outback Steakhouse.

Sighing, I set down the knife and continue on with preheating the fryer. “I reached out to her,” I tell him.

“Mum?”

I roll my eyes. “No, Ivy Griffith.” Lining the mozzarella sticks into the basket, I glance over my shoulder at him. Garrick’s eyes are plastered to my ass, and when he realizes he’s been caught all he does is give me a cocky smirk before taking a sip of his drink. “She’s going to be on my blog. We’re doing an interview and a question-and-answer type thing. It’ll boost both of our blog’s audiences, which Gordon says will be great for more advertiser interest. Something about how cross posting will be mutually beneficial. Remember how I told you a while ago that her cooking blog Every Cook and Cranny has, like, a billion viewers monthly?”

He hums again.

“Well, imagine what that can do for The Real Matthews,” I conclude, popping the basket into the air fryer and hitting a few buttons to start cooking the contents.

Ever since Gordon helped me set up a lifestyle blog, the posts have gained traction. It was one post in particular that made the blog go viral overnight.

“Introducing the Real Garrick Matthews.”

Since, we’ve had loyal followers keep in touch, interact on the posts—mostly in positive ways—and comment on how refreshing it is to see me and Garrick in a light that hasn’t been blasted by mainstream media in a negative way.

After the interview announcing the official split of Violet Wonders hit headlines everywhere almost five months ago, the public went into a buying frenzy to get their hands on the last album they’d ever have from the band. Even though it wasn’t anybody’s intent, the album sold more than almost all of their older ones, and their songs are still sitting at the top in the charts. There were a few tabloids and online bloggers who said the breakup was a ploy to get more sales, but the people who follow Violet Wonders religiously know better than to believe that.

Especially because Zayne entered rehab shortly after the interview hit the media. He stayed for a month before getting released and stayed clean for two months following that before relapsing again. Garrick still has trouble talking about it since he wasn’t the one his best friend called about getting help. It was Manning that called my husband in the middle of the

night saying Zayne overdosed and was rushed to the hospital after being administered Narcan.

The former drummer of the band is still at the same high end rehabilitation center since being discharged from the hospital, but his interactions with his friends, Garrick included, has been limited.

The biggest reason why The Real Matthews blog does so well is because Garrick and I decided not to shy away from the topics that most people would try censoring. Whenever commenters ask about Zayne or the others, I always ask Garrick and Gordon before answering truthfully. The posts don't ignore what's going on since the breakup which is why there are people who subscribe to the lifestyle site and stay in tune with what's *really* happening versus what the tabloids report on.

"That's great you're interviewing her," Garrick says with a smile. "I know you're a fan. Although I'm not sure anything will top Cannon Rhodes being a guest. You're welcome for that, by the way."

Blushing, I remember the birthday surprise that he'd given me back in April that involved my all-time favorite celebrity. Even though he grumbled the entire time I squeaked through a conversation with Cannon, Garrick was more amused than anything. I got to interview him for my blog which had gotten a lot of attention, especially when The Wild's media team shared it on all their social pages.

The man watching as I prepare my latest dish has helped me get guests on the blog at least once a month, sometimes more. It's become something I deemed "Feature Fridays" that subscribers always look forward to. And along with them, the sponsors who send me things to feature in the videos and Q&A interviews.

I didn't think it was possible to make money doing something I loved until Gordon proved otherwise. I didn't think he was serious when he said people would pay me to use their things or namedrop companies or even get paid based on how many people tuned in to my posts.

It started off slow, but ever since a few posts have gone viral and the overall viewership has increased into the steady millions, it's helped me contribute to things I never could before—my medicine and bills, especially.

And even though Garrick has never said it, I've sensed his worry about me being able to pay for the things I needed him for before. All it took was a soft, lingering kiss while sitting on his lap and wrapping my arms around

his neck one night to convince him I'd still need him regardless of what my blog was earning me.

That and the quiet "I love you" I'd whispered between kisses, which had caused his heart to thump wildly from where our chests were pressed together. He'd drawn back, eyes dark, and said, "*I love you too.*"

Now those words have become a staple in our house. Something to say when we wake up, when one of us leaves, and before we go to sleep. They're words of comfort and promises, something that reassures we'll never get tired of the routine we've built together.

Walking over to him, I wrap my arms around Garrick's middle and let out a gentle sigh as he winds one of his arms around my waist.

"What was the sigh for?" he asks.

"Just thinking."

"Well, don't leave me hanging, love."

I grin against his chest. "This is nice, that's all. You, me, Kit-Kat wherever he's hiding right now. I always look forward to you coming home and watching me make a mess of the kitchen."

He chuckles. "I enjoy it as well."

Tilting my chin up, I give him a smile.

"We should get married," he states.

My brows pinch. "Haven't we already accomplished that? Or is this where you tell me that it was never a legal done-deal thing and all this time we've been *really* lying to people."

"Oh, it was very legal," he muses, bending down and kissing me. "However, I know our families are still hoping to have a ceremony to celebrate. Maybe now would be a good time. The weather is decent, my schedule has opened up. We can do it here, New York, wherever you want."

I consider it, tightening my hold on him. "I think that's a great idea. But would everyone we'd want to come be able to make it?"

He knows who I'm talking about.

"He's going through a lot right now," he comments, raising his shoulders in a loose shrug. "But Zayne's always there when it matters."

"And you don't think it'd upset him?"

He shakes his head. "I really don't."

"And Cannon can come too?" I bat my lashes, making him laugh.

"Should have known you'd pull that." He tugs on my ponytail to tilt my head further back and kiss me again, this one lasting longer than our others.

“We can make it as big or as intimate as you’d like. But I want to celebrate this. *Us*.”

A shiver rolls down my spine. “I like the sound of that.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, gripping his shirt and pulling him toward me again. He backs us up until I’m pressed against the counter with him blocking me in with his body. “What are you doing?”

His hands grip my hips and lift me to sit on the edge of the counter, ignoring the mess I made and focusing only on me. “We have some time to kill before the food is done.”

“And what do you want to do with it?” I smile innocently while his hands go to the hem of my leggings and begin tugging them down. I lift my hips enough for him to pull them past my knees before spreading my thighs and settling himself between them.

With a wicked grin and a gleam lighting up his baby blues, he purrs, “Keep your legs open and let me show you, baby girl.”

And like all the other times, he does exactly as he promises. With one flick of the finger, the button of his jeans pops open quickly followed by the sound of his zipper gliding down. It only takes a few strokes of his fingers dancing along my inner thigh to get me squirming, and a few sensual passes to part me and circle my aching clit until I’m more than ready for him to be inside me fully.

We’ve done this plenty of places in plenty of positions, most that I’ve loved, but the spontaneous need that radiates from him as he lines himself up and enters me in one full thrust is a favorite of mine.

There’s nothing soft or slow about the way he jackknifes into me with urgency, holding onto my hips while I grip the edges of the counter so I don’t fall. It almost matches the time he came home from a meeting with Gordon and bent me over the island after seeing me in the white dress we’d gotten married in. He’d lifted the skirt, pulled down my panties, and told me to hold on while he appreciated every inch of me.

I still think about that day.

Often.

But *this*. The noises he makes only makes me wetter as he pulls me into him and fucks me harder. One of my arms goes from the counter to his neck, winding around him and pressing our bodies as close together as they can get. Looking down, I watch him enter me and withdraw until he buries

his face in my neck and bites down the same moment he goes hilt-deep and lets out a long drawn-out groan as he empties himself.

“I love you,” he whispers against my clammy skin, peppering kisses upward until he meets my lips. “How about we take off the rest of our clothes and go for round two? I promise I’ll go slower this time and pay extra attention to that pretty pussy of yours.”

I smile against his lips. “The food is almost done.”

His tongue drags across my bottom lip as he arches into me where he’s still planted, causing me to clench around him. “We can eat after. Replenish our calories.”

“Garrick,” I giggle, playfully swatting his shoulder.

He relents, pulling out and cleaning both of us up. And after my leggings are back on, and the food is out of the fryer, he doesn’t even let me try a piece before he kneels on the floor and makes sure I come twice with his head between my thighs before we’re sprawled across the tile completely naked and making noises that I wouldn’t be surprised if the neighbors can hear.

“Marry me, love?” he asks again after laying beside me where we’re lounging sweaty on the floor. He pulls me into his side. “For real this time. No conditions. No two years. I’ll need far more than that.”

I smile.

Feel my heart pull toward him.

And say, “Yes.”

BONUS SCENE

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RYLEE

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Age 22

The club is ear piercingly loud and packed so tightly that it's hard to breathe past the mixture of perfume, cologne, alcohol, and sweat all lingering in the air as people dance. I wish I'd accepted the drink at the bar for some liquid courage but know better than to take things from strangers, which is ironic considering I'm practically here with one.

The text I'd sent earlier to my best friend is plastered in the back of my mind.

Rylee: Tonight is the night.

I put on my best dress, a little black number that shows off my semi-slim legs, the slightest curves of my hips and the small incline of my chest while still leaving something to the imagination.

When Zayne saw me in it, he'd gotten that look—the same one that other guys are giving me right now since the Violet Wonders drummer disappeared to the bathroom with a promise to be back.

That was ten minutes ago.

Elbowing my way through the crowd, I migrate to toward the RESTROOM signs and see a long line near the woman's room, unsurprised that the men's line is nothing in comparison.

Looking around, I wipe my clammy hands against my hips. Moffie told me we could brainstorm other ideas, and I almost took her up on that offer until my rent check bounced, and Claudio told me he could only give me two weeks to pay him. With a late fee, of course.

And since I'm almost out of my medication, the time for brainstorming is over.

Desperation has sunk its claws into me, leading me here to meet the man who insisted he wouldn't let me out of his sight.

Someone bumps into me, knocking me into a group of girls who all scowl as their drinks slosh over the sides of their cups. I apologize despite them all turning away from me before I can even finish what I'm saying, not that they probably could hear me anyway over the techno music blaring.

A headache forms in the back of my skull and I can't decide if it's stress, the music, side effects from my medicine, or all of the above. I fumble my way toward a clearing by the men's room when Zayne suddenly appears through the swinging door.

As soon as he sees me, he straightens and glances at his phone. "Shit. Was I gone that long?" I don't comment, letting him drop an arm over my shoulders and yank me into his side a little too forcefully. "I think we'll be more comfortable upstairs. My buddies are there. You'll like them."

He doesn't give me an option before guiding us in the direction of the spiral staircase that's guarded by two huge guys who have muscles on their arms larger than my head. They instantly let Zayne pass, not sparing me a second glance. I wonder how often this happens.

It doesn't matter, I remind myself.

And it doesn't.

It's hardly jealousy that spreads through my veins as we make it to the landing that leads to a huge open space that has booths along the edges and waitresses serving the well-off people in even tighter and shorter outfits than the one I'm wearing.

"Welcome to the perks," he says in my ear, his lips trailing a little too long until I shiver in discomfort.

I pull back, offering him a timid smile. "I can honestly say I've never seen anything like it."

He tips his chin toward the right, flicking his nose a few times and walking us toward the big booth in the corner. "Stick with me and you'll see more than this. You haven't been to my place yet, but I know you'll love it."

His voice is off and his grip on my side is a little too tight as we stop at the edge of the table where a few different guys sit with women on their laps. There's only one who isn't indulging in the same attention.

I know those eyes. That face. And I'm surprised they're on me.

"Rylee, this is the band." He names each member with a point of his finger, skipping the women who are too busy paying a little too much attention to the various men. When he stops on the man sitting alone, he laughs. "Scare off the blonde already?"

"She annoyed me," Garrick Matthews states with a shrug. His eyes only last on Zayne for a moment before trailing to me again. Locking. Studying.

I have no clue what he sees. Looking away, I shift my gaze to the man who invited me along. He's scratching his nose and watching something over the railing that looks out over the dancefloor. "Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, yeah."

I'm not convinced but take a seat at the end of the booth when he gestures toward the open spot next to the lead singer of his band. Zayne

slides in beside me, sandwiching me in between them. I keep my hands on my lap, interwoven together with a stiff spine because I don't want to touch either, especially not the Australian whose eyes are burning into the side of my head.

I'm about to say something when one of the guys across the table says, "Who's the new chick? She with you, Gray?"

"Yeah," the man next to me states. "So back off, huh?"

I blush, keeping my eyes trained on the table and keeping to myself.

A drink is pushed in front of me that I definitely didn't order and when I glance over at Zayne, he smiles. "It's safe, don't worry."

I told him earlier I don't drink, but I feel bad repeating myself. Wrapping my fingers around the glass, I keep it in my hold but don't make a move to sip any.

It's a few minutes of back and forth between most of the guys before a different voice quietly asks, "You going to drink that?"

The accent gives away the speaker, so I peek to the right of me and see blue eyes staring back intently. All I do is shake my head.

His eyes move from me for a few seconds to look around the table before he reaches over, takes the glass from my hands, and tosses the contents out in the plant behind the booth. When he passes it back, he shoots me a wink that sends my heart into overdrive and looks back to one of his bandmates as if nothing happened.

Someone tries pulling me into the conversation, but my tongue feels like lead in my mouth. I know I don't belong here and so do they.

It's the man to my left, the one who keeps fidgeting and bumping our legs together, who draws my attention. "Want to leave?"

Knowing what that implicates, two vastly different outcomes based on the lust in his eyes and the shame I bury behind mine, I hesitate.

Tonight is the night.

Tight smile, I nod. "Let's go."

Someone cat calls.

A girl lets out a high-pitch giggle.

And I swear I hear a small growl.

But I accept the hand offered to me as I slide out of the booth, readjust my dress's hem, and let Zayne take me away from his friends as they all call out things behind us as we disappear.

He says, "Need to head to bathroom quick."

I simply nod and stand by the door to the men's room while he disappears behind it. And when I look through my lashes at the VIP lounge above me, I notice that Garrick Matthews is watching me back.

I knock on the men's door after another few minutes pass without a trace of Zayne.

When I hear nothing from the other side, I crack it open and stare at the sight before me.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

Tonight is the night.

Tonight is the night.

Tonight is the night.

If I didn't know that my bank account had a negative balance in it right now, maybe I would have backed up and left without looking back at the man bent over the counter covered in powder.

But that's not what I did at all.

And when I dig out my phone from my bag and raise it to the scene in front of me, I wonder if the Australian with lingering eyes will magically appear and stop me.

When he doesn't, I take it as a sign.

...and take the picture.

Hey, everyone! I'd love, love, love if you dropped a review on Amazon for TELL ME WHY IT'S WRONG! Reviews help authors so much, even if it's just a couple lines of your honest thoughts.

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And if you want to stay in touch, I have a reader group where I love interacting with people. Join [The Celestials](#) on Facebook!

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xx B

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with forbidden novels enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is The Truth about Heartbreak.

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