



All of Me
Duet

Say I'm
the One

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SIOBHAN DAVIS



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PROLOGUE

VIVIEN - NOW

The limousine draws to a smooth stop outside the entrance to the renowned movie theater in L.A., and the crowd whoops and hollers, the raucous noise clearly audible even through the barrier of the car. The fans' excitement has reached fever pitch this week, and I have struggled to sleep most nights as the weight of expectation bears down on me. I'm grateful to my amazingly talented makeup artist for disguising the glaring dark shadows under my eyes and the pale tinge to my skin.

If I survive this night without puking or fainting, I'll consider it a win.

The usual doubts race through my terrified mind, almost crippling me with anxiety. Am I doing the right thing in ripping my chest wide-open, exposing the vulnerabilities of my heart for the entire world to see?

My breath oozes out in anguished spurts, and I place a hand over my heaving chest, rubbing the tightness there, willing my heart to calm down before I give myself a coronary.

Warm, familiar fingers intertwine in mine, and I cling to his hand like the lifeline it is. "Breathe, Viv. You've got this," he says.

I turn to face him, discovering his piercing blue eyes are already locked on mine. Squeezing my hand, he smiles, his gaze full of love and adoration. I release a shuddering breath, as my pulse slows down, comforted by the reassuring look on his gorgeous face and the firm grip of his hand in mine. Reaching out, I cup his cheek, welcoming the feel of his stubble as it grazes against my palm. "I couldn't do this without you. I would never have even gotten to this point without your support." Tears prick the backs of my eyes as I think of everything we have endured to get here.

So much pain. So much heartache. So much turmoil.

“I love you,” he murmurs, resting his hand over mine on his face. “And I will always support you. *Always*.” He pulls my hand around to his lips, placing the softest kiss against my palm. Tingles emanate from my hand, all the way down my arm, and his touch helps to soothe my frayed edges. “But you would have gotten here without me because you are so incredibly strong. I’m in awe of you.” Lowering our hands to the seat, he leans in, pressing a delicate kiss to the corner of my mouth that is at odds with the usual possessive way he kisses me. “I’m so proud to call you my wife, and no matter what anyone else thinks, I’m proud of how far you’ve come. Fuck anyone who disagrees.” His fingers gently trace the curve of my jawline, careful not to dislodge my makeup. “There will always be haters. We know that. But who cares what they think? This isn’t about them. This is about you. About us.”

The crowd screams louder outside, and I know it’s time.

“He would be so proud of you too, Vivien. Wherever he is, I know he’s watching this and cheering for you just like I am.”

I can only nod over the messy ball of emotion clogging my throat. I need to get a grip because tonight is about celebrating love and life and cherishing every single moment. Reliving the past will be painful. I have no doubt it will be emotional—not just for me—but I refuse to shed any more tears. Tonight, I will draw a line under the past. I’m determined to stop beating myself up for being happy. I know it’s what he would want. Tonight is about finally finding the last sliver of closure I need to fully move on.

I owe it to myself, to my family, and to this man waiting patiently at my side—above everyone, I owe it to him.

Flinging my arms around his neck, I inhale the musky scent of cinnamon, vanilla, and lavender as I cling to his body, permitting his warmth and solid masculinity to infuse me with renewed determination. “I love you,” I whisper in his ear. “So damn much.”

“I will never tire of hearing those words leave your gorgeous lips,” he says, waggling his brows in his usual flirtatious manner. “And you can show me just how much later, but right now, we need to get out of this car before we start a riot.”

“I can do this,” I say, holding my shoulders back and tipping my head up. It’s not like this is my first rodeo. However, it is the first time I’m attending a premiere for a movie I wrote and coproduced.

“You were born to do this,” he adds, pressing a kiss to the back of my exposed neck. A slew of shivers cascades down my spine, and an ache pulses between my thighs. His touch still lights a fire inside me, even after all this time.

“Wait for me,” he says, curling his hand around the door handle.

“Always.” I blow him a kiss as he opens his door and exits the car. The screaming elevates a few decibels, and my lips tug up at the corners. I’m not surprised his legions of fans have turned out to catch a glimpse of their idol. I’m granted a temporary reprieve as he closes the door, waving to the crowd, before rounding the back of the car. Scooting closer to the door, I smooth a hand down the front of my pretty pink and silver Dior gown, drawing a brave breath as I wait for him.

He opens my door with a flourish, extending his hand and helping me to my feet. The crowd roars their approval, and we turn around on the sidewalk, holding hands while waving to the thousands of men, women, and children lining the cordoned-off road as far as the eye can see.

My eyes lower to the charcoal-colored sidewalk before us that encompasses a part of the Hollywood Walk of Fame, instantly finding the coral-pink terrazzo five-point star rimmed with brass that houses Reeve’s name. I remember how proud he was the day he was honored with it. How proud *I* was to see the culmination of all his childhood dreams etched so permanently into history.

More well-wishers adorn the red carpet on both sides of the covered entrance as he leads me forward. Some hold signs, professing their love for Reeve. Other placards express love for Dillon. Up ahead, hanging back just inside the open doorway of Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, are my parents along with my agent, Margaret Andre; the head of Studio 27, who produced the movie; and the studio’s overworked publicist.

My husband’s hand is steady on my lower back as we walk along the red carpet, smiling and waving. Excitement prickles in the air, helping to drown out my lingering nerves.

“Murderer!”

“Slut!”

The words slam into me like bullets, pushing through skin and tissue and bone, embedding deep in my heart and twisting my soul into knots. Acid churns in my gut, and bile pools in my mouth as I grip my husband’s arm tighter. The noise of the crowd fades, and all I hear are those taunts

echoing on repeat in my brain. Panic surges through my veins, replacing the life-sustaining blood flow with liquid ice.

“Ignore those bitches,” my husband says, circling his arm around my shoulders and pulling me in close to his side. “Someone’s head is going to roll for this,” he adds through clenched teeth.

Scuffling breaks out on my right as security guards force their way through the crowd to reach the two women hurling obscenities and accusations my way. But I don’t hear anything else. I’m numb to everything going on around me, having retreated to that safe place in my head where no one can hurt me.

He hustles me through the open door, past my concerned parents and a clearly distressed studio publicist. My back hits the wall, and heat rolls off him in waves as he leans into me, his palms resting on either side of my head. Cocooning us in our own little bubble, he says, “Talk to me.” With gentle fingers, he tips my chin up, forcing my gaze to meet his worried one. We stare at one another, unspoken sentiments passing between us, and the hypnotic depths of his ocean-blue eyes reel me out of the desolate space in my head.

I clear my throat as I press my hand to his chest, the rhythmic beating of his heart grounding me in the moment. “I’m okay. It’s not like this is anything new.”

“How the fuck did they pass security clearance to get that close to you?” he seethes. “I’m going to shove that prick Rawling’s balls down his throat until he chokes.” Rawlings is the head of security at the studio, and we’ve had our fair share of run-ins with him over the past year.

“You’ll have to get to him first, and I already called dibs,” my dad says, appearing behind my husband.

“Darling, are you okay?” Mom asks, bundling me into a hug.

“I’m good. A few crazies aren’t going to ruin tonight.”

“That’s my girl.” Mom presses a kiss to my temple.

“We’re so proud of you, princess,” Dad says, tucking Mom in under his arm. At six-four he towers over her five-foot-four-inch frame, but they always look like they were made for each other. My parents just celebrated their thirty-seventh wedding anniversary, something exquisitely rare in Hollywood these days. One only needs to look at the adoring way they stare at one another to know theirs is an epic kind of love. The type that weathers any storm because the bond is far too strong to break.

After chatting with some studio heads and members of the cast and crew, we make our way into the famous theater, taking our seats in the front row as we wait for everyone to pile in.

When the large room is full and the doors have been closed, James, the head of the studio, stands in front of the curtain with a microphone in his hand.

Discreetly swiping my hands along the armrests of my chair, I give myself a silent pep talk. No one is forcing me into speaking, but it's something I feel compelled to do. My husband leans into me, planting his lips to my ear. "You're going to nail it." He kisses my cheek and squeezes my hand.

"I feel like I might pass out any second," I whisper truthfully. There is a reason I never wanted to follow Reeve or my mom into acting—I don't like attention and I hate the spotlight. I have always been more comfortable behind the scenes.

"If you do, I'll be there to catch you," he says, peering deep into my eyes. "I'll always catch you, Viv."

He has more than proven that in recent times. "I'm hoping it won't be necessary anymore."

Before he can reply, James calls me forward as applause breaks out around the room. I rise, exchanging a smile with my parents before I stride toward the head of the studio, holding my head up high, projecting confidence even if I'm a basket case on the inside. James kisses my cheek before passing me the mic. I scan the room as a reverential hush descends over the proceedings.

Exhaling deeply, I wet my lips and begin. "Thank you all so much for being here tonight." My voice trembles a little, but I'm not embarrassed to show emotion. "There were several moments in the past few years where I didn't think we would make it to this point. I don't mind admitting I had significant moments of doubt. Moments where I questioned my sanity and whether I could do this. Without the support of my husband, my parents, and my friends and the patience and understanding of the studio, I would not be standing before you right now. On my darkest days, they reminded me of why this story needed to be told."

Tears well in my eyes as I rake my gaze over my loved ones seated in the front row. Their presence gives me strength, their love fuels my courage, and their endless support makes me feel like I could climb any

mountain, overcome any challenge, because they believe in me. Just like he did.

“I have had to sit back and suffer while so many lies were told—to the point where I could barely find the will to get out of bed some days. When I started writing this story, it was for me. For my children. So they would someday know the truth. I never intended for it to see the light of day. But the world deserves to know the truth too.”

My smile is wide as I continue. “This is the story of a Hollywood prince, an Irish rock star, and the girl who loved them both. A girl who never wanted the spotlight but found herself thrust into it anyway. This is a story filled with secrets and lies, drenched in heartbreak and pain, but it’s also a lesson in forgiveness and redemption and finding the strength to go on when life seems insurmountable.”

My eyes wander to my husband. He looks so handsome, so strong, and so proud as he sits upright in his seat, giving me his undivided attention. Pride glimmers in his eyes along with powerful emotion. Tonight is as hard for him as it is for me. I hate that I’ve hurt him and that we’ll be revisiting some of the most painful moments of our history tonight. But I’m not the only one who needs full closure.

I keep my eyes fixed on my husband, hoping he feels the outpouring of love seeping from my every pore. I will never love anyone as much as I love him. “Most of all, it’s a story about true love and how love has the power to salvage a broken soul from the wreckage of life.” My eyes scan the room one final time. “This is the story of my life.”

Senior Year of High School

“Any news yet?” Audrey asks, coming up alongside me as I stare at my cell, willing it to ring.

I shake my head, chewing on the corner of my lower lip. “Not a word, and I’m starting to freak out.”

“You know how long these things take.” She opens her locker as students fill the hallway behind us. “I’m sure lover boy will call the minute he gets out of the meeting.”

After stuffing some books in my bag, I close my locker and lean my head back against it. “He wants this part so bad. He’ll be devastated if they don’t offer it to him.”

“He’ll bounce back,” Audrey says, slamming her locker shut. “Remember how upset he was last year when he didn’t get the *Riverdale* part, but he got over it pretty quick.”

Eh, yeah, no, he didn’t. Reeve was upset and plagued with self-doubt for months after getting to the final round of auditions and then being rejected. It’s been a pattern these past few years, and while my boyfriend is one of the most focused and most determined people I know, continuous rejections are starting to chip away at his confidence. I do my best to bolster his spirits. To remind him how amazingly talented he is, and when that fails, I distract him with my lips and my hands and my body.

It's a tough job, but someone has to do it.

"Don't let his laid-back attitude fool you. He beats himself up like crazy with every rejection. He's so hard on himself," I admit, tucking strands of my long dark hair behind my ears as I push off my locker, walking alongside Audrey.

We head toward the exit, and I'll be glad to see the back of Blackrock Prep today. I honestly thought this day would never end. Time seemed to drag by, slowing to the point where the world was barely turning. Checking my cell every few minutes didn't help, but I've been on tenterhooks all day, wondering how Reeve's meeting with his new agent and the studio heads went. From the feedback he has received so far, we know the casting director loves him, but the movie director has a few concerns.

"If it's meant to be, he'll get the part." Audrey loops her arm through mine and her emerald gaze pins me in place as we walk. "He's way too talented to be overlooked for long."

"Hollywood is crammed full of talented actors who never make it," I remind her. "But Reeve has the trifecta. Talent, looks, and determination, and I just know he's going to make it."

"I'm sure your parents would help too."

"Help with what?" Alex says, materializing on Audrey's right, injecting himself into the conversation, as usual.

"Reeve's career." Audrey stretches up to peck her boyfriend on the lips.

"They would be happy to help, but he wants to do it by himself, and I respect that." It would be easy for Reeve to use my mom's star power or either of our fathers' connections to get a leg up in Hollywood, but he wants to earn roles on his own merits, and I can relate. While I'm still not totally decided on whether I'll go the writing or costume design route, whatever I choose to do, I want to do it myself, without any interference or help from my parents.

"Fuck." Alex drags one hand through his sandy-blond hair, and I swear I hear a collective swoon from the girls in the vicinity. To the legions of adoring fans who worship the ground he walks on, it doesn't matter that Alex and Audrey have been dating exclusively for the past two years. As our illustrious QB, he has garnered plenty of admirers, in the same way Reeve has. Reeve and Alex are easily the two hottest guys in our private school, and hordes of drooling girls would kill to be in my, and Audrey's,

shoes. “He didn’t get the part?” Alex asks, holding the double doors open for us.

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard from him yet,” I say, stepping outside into glorious sunshine. Although L.A. in late September is generally warm and sunny, we’ve had an unusual spell of extremely hot weather this week. We’re all hoping it extends to the weekend so we can go swimming at the beach.

Alex slings his arm around Audrey’s shoulders as we descend the steps to the sidewalk. A pang of longing hits me square in the chest when he brushes her glossy red hair to one side and plants a trail of little kisses along her neck. I didn’t get to see Reeve last night after school, and I’m suffering major withdrawal symptoms. It’s the same any time we are separated for more than a day. We have been joined at the hip for so long I cannot even fathom ever living my life without him in it.

An icy shiver crawls up my spine, and I shake the hideous thought from my stupid brain. If there is one thing I’m sure about in this life, it’s that Reeve Elon Lancaster was made specifically for me and we will love one another every single day for the rest of our lives. Okay, so that’s two things, but I’m just as sure about both.

“Three o’clock,” Alex says, briefly lifting his mouth from his girlfriend’s neck.

I whip my head around, spotting Reeve parked at the curb, leaning back against his Porsche with his arms folded, looking hotter than any guy has a right to be. My gaze does a slow perusal, from the ground up, and a deep ache pulses between my legs. He dressed the part today, wearing tight, black, ripped jeans that cling to his long, lean legs and toned thighs, fitting snugly against his crotch in a way that has me licking my lips and squeezing my thighs together. His black button-down shirt is stretched tight across his muscular chest, highlighting the extra definition in his torso and biceps.

Reeve wanted this part so badly he changed his appearance to better suit the role of Camden Marshall. Cam is the hero in *Cruel Intentions*, the first book in the bestselling *Rydeville Elite* series, a firm favorite with fans of dark high school bully romance.

Reeve has been working out like a demon for this part, and his shoulders and chest are broader, he’s now sporting an impressive six-pack, and his arm porn is to die for. His hair has been dyed a darker shade of

brown to disguise his natural blond highlights. Normally, Reeve wears his hair long on top but styled back off his face. Now, the longer parts of his hair are artfully styled in messy waves and the sides have been shorn much tighter with a zig-zag line in the skin fade. He even wore brown contacts over his natural blue eyes to complete the transformation.

My man is hot, no matter what look he's rocking, but I've got to admit he is sexy as fuck right now, and I'm ready to jump his bones like a demented oversexed kangaroo.

Reeve watches me ogling him, but his expression is giving nothing away, and fear spirals through me, sprouting anxious goose bumps all over my arms.

"You waiting for an invitation?" Alex asks, grabbing my backpack. "He looks tense as shit. Go cheer him up."

I stride toward Reeve, picking up speed and flat-out running when he loses control of his emotions and an ecstatic grin spreads across his mouth. "You got it?" I shout as I approach, and he can't contain his grin as he nods. "Oh my God!" I scream, throwing myself at him and wrapping my legs around his waist. His arms automatically slide under my butt, holding me in place as I pepper kisses all over his face. "I'm so proud and so happy for you, Reeve." I slam my lips onto his, and he holds me tight against his body as we devour one another. I moan into his mouth when his tongue glides against mine. His assured strokes submerge every part of my body with fiery heat that has nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with how much my boyfriend turns me the fuck on.

"I need to be inside you," he groans into my ear, and lust coils in my belly.

"Your dad's still away, right?" I ask though there is really no need. Simon Lancaster is rarely home anymore. It's like he's forgotten his son even exists, and I want to beat the shit out of him for his neglectful treatment of his only child. But it's old news, and Reeve is used to his father's lack of regard for him by now. That's not to say it doesn't hurt him. Of course, it does, but he's gotten better at ignoring the harsh truth of his reality. The fact is, Reeve's dad checked out of his life the minute he was born, which coincided with the moment his beloved wife, Felicia Lancaster, left this world.

I don't understand how Simon can ignore the only part of Felicia that still survives. Shouldn't he want to cherish and love his son because he's all

that is left of his wife? Instead, he's married to his work, and his son is an afterthought. If my parents hadn't stepped up, Reeve's childhood would have been an isolated and lonely existence.

I press myself tighter against him, clinging to him fiercely, kissing him passionately as I funnel all the love in my heart into him.

"Jeez. Get a room," Alex says, his smug tone underscoring his words, and we reluctantly break our hungry lip-lock.

"I fully intend to," Reeve replies, while I unwind my legs from his slim waist. He snakes his arm around my back, keeping me flush against him as I rest my head on his chest.

"Does this mean you got the part?" Audrey asks. Warmth spreads across my chest at the obvious delight in her voice.

"I did." Reeve straightens up, beaming from ear to ear. "I got it."

Audrey squeals, shoving me aside so she can hug my boyfriend. She's lucky I love her like a sister and I know she has zero interest in my man. "That is awesome, Reeve. I'm glad to see all your hard work has paid off."

"Congrats, dude." Alex raises his arm, his fist clenched, and they do some elaborate manly handshake. "You deserve it."

I snuggle into Reeve's side, pressing my lips to his neck and sighing.

"Party at my place tomorrow night," Reeve says, waggling his brows. "We've got some celebrating to do." His hand slides down over my jean-clad ass as he leers. "And I intend to start the celebrations right now." He squeezes my ass before his lips melt against mine. His kiss is urgent and demanding, and I feel it all the way to the tips of my toes.

Alex snorts. Audrey laughs, and I squirm on the spot, my body tingling in delicious anticipation.

Abruptly, he rips his lips from mine, digging his hands into my hair. "If I don't stop, I won't be responsible for my actions," he rasps. His lust-filled eyes roam over my body like a sensual caress, and he's not the only one having trouble with self-control.

I'm seconds away from begging him to fuck me.

"Let's get out of here." I nip at his earlobe. "I want to reward you for being the sexiest, hottest, most-talented actor on the planet."

"What about *my* reward, babe?" Alex nuzzles his nose into Audrey's neck.

"You have to do something to earn a reward," Audrey quips, quirking a brow as she tucks her hand into the back pocket of Alex's jeans.

“I think I deserve a reward for that thing I did with my tongue in the supply closet at lunch.” He winks, and I laugh as my bestie’s cheeks flush pink.

“You got action in the supply closet at lunch? I’m jealous.” I fake pout.

“Don’t be jealous, babe. I have some tongue tricks of my own,” Reeve says before plunging his tongue into my ear.

I shriek, jumping away from him. “That’s not the kind of tongue action I was after.”

“I know exactly the kind of tongue action you want.” He grips my hips, hauling me against his hard body. “Get your delectable butt in my car, and I’ll show you that much quicker.”

My panties flood with liquid warmth, and my legs almost go out from under me. “I drove this morning, so I’ll have to follow you in my car.”

Reeve tilts his head to the side, eyeballing his best friend as they silently converse.

Alex flips his palm out. “Hand the keys over, princess. I’ll drive your car home, but you owe us.”

“Thanks, man.” Reeve raises his fist for a knuckle touch.

“I’ll call you later to make plans for tomorrow,” Audrey says, as Reeve opens the passenger door of his Porsche.

“Cool.” I give my bestie a quick hug as Reeve takes my bag from Alex. “See you guys, later.”

I climb into Reeve’s car, and he shuts the door before running around and sliding in behind the wheel. Leaning over, he kisses me again. “I still can’t believe it. It feels surreal. Like I’m dreaming.”

I pinch his arm.

“Ow!” he exclaims, but he’s smiling.

“Believe it, babe. You’re living the dream and you’re going to be a star. The world is going to go nuts for Reeve Lancaster, and I’ll be cheering for you every step of the way.”

His expression sobers a little, and his eyes flood with adoration as he cups my face. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Viv. I know I drove you insane rehearsing the audition scenes, over and over again, but you pushed me to deliver the best possible performance, and it showed.”

“I love running lines with you, and you’re wrong.” My lips glide softly over his. “Your true natural talent shone through, and that’s what won you

the part. Don't let anyone take the credit for your achievement. All I did was support you, just like you support me with my dreams."

He rubs his thumb along my cheekbone, eliciting a wave of delicious tremors across my skin. Even the slightest touch does the most amazing things to me. "Your belief in me is everything." He presses a firm kiss to my brow. "*You're everything.*"

"I will always believe in you, Reeve. I've always known you are destined for greatness. I've never had any doubt."

"I fucking love you so much, Viv." I'm surprised to see tears glistening in his eyes. "Sometimes I don't think you realize just how much." His hands land on my hips.

I press my forehead against his and clutch his ripped arms. "I know, baby, because I feel it too."

Sometimes I wonder if this is normal. If this is what it's like for most couples. Because the intensity of my feelings for Reeve are impossible to put into words. He has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember, and our souls are so entwined I can't tell where he starts and I end. He is the oxygen that fills my lungs. The blood that pumps through my veins. The energy that fuels my body. I feel incomplete when we're not together, and I am only truly whole when his essence is wrapped around mine. My skin prickles with awareness whenever he's close, and my heart swells to bursting point the instant he steps into a room.

I never thought it was possible to be so attuned to another human being, but we are connected in ways I cannot logically explain. "What we share is more than love," I whisper over his lips. "More than life. It transcends everything that humanity knows about existence."

"That is beautiful," he murmurs, brushing his lips against mine. "Just like every other part of you."

We stay like that for an indeterminable amount of time, just holding one another. Existing in our own little part of the universe, sharing everything without saying a word.

We are both smiling when we separate, and contentment settles deep in my bones. I am so happy right now I could scream.

"This is just the beginning," he says, starting the engine. "Everything we have dreamed of for our future is starting to come true." He rubs my thigh as he glides out onto the road. "Everything is going to change now, babe. Just you wait and see."

If only I'd known how prophetic his words would turn out to be, though not at all in the way Reeve had implied.

“Oh, God, Reeve. Yes! Right there.” I fist my hands in his hair as his tongue feasts on my pussy like I’m the most exquisite filet from the best Michelin-starred restaurant. Throwing my legs over his shoulders, he continues to work me over until I’m a quivering mess of cells writhing on his king-sized bed. “Holy fuck. You are getting so good at that,” I pant, pushing strands of my messy dark hair out of my hazel eyes.

“We aim to please.” He smirks as he kicks his jeans to one side before crawling over me.

“We?” I quirk a brow as I push up on my elbows.

He grips his long, hard, straining length. “My cock and I.”

“That should be a movie.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s some porn out there with that title,” he says, lining his erection up at my entrance. He holds still, hovering over me. “You okay?” he asks, like he always does, and my heart swells, like usual.

“Get in me already,” I demand, sliding my hands over the dips and curves of his abs.

“So bossy and so greedy.” He grins, driving inside me in one confident thrust.

I close my eyes, as my limbs melt into the bed, savoring the feel of him inside me. Every time we have sex, I feel like we couldn’t get any closer, and I’m always wrong, because each time gets better and better.

“Fuck, Viv,” Reeve says, slowly moving in and out of me. “How do you feel so incredible?” Leaning down, he kisses me slow and deep, and my fingers sweep over the velvety-soft hair at the nape of his neck.

“I’m glad we waited until the time was right,” I purr into his ear, bucking my hips as he rocks in and out of me. Reeve is always so careful with me. Making love to me like I’m the most precious thing in the world. I’m usually the greedy shrew begging him to go faster, thrust harder.

“It was more than worth the wait.” He plants a slew of drugging kisses along my neck.

Reeve and I have been best friends since we were little kids. His mom was my mom’s best friend, and both sets of parents were close. When Reeve’s mom, Felicia, died giving birth to him, his dad struggled to cope, so my mom stepped in, making sure Reeve was a part of our family, including him so he wouldn’t be left out or made to feel lonely on nights when his father worked late and he only had the staff and his nanny for company. Gradually, Reeve spent more and more time at our house. He even has his own bedroom, which my parents updated as he grew older.

My earliest memories all include Reeve, and he’s been an intricate part of my life. First as my best friend, and then as my boyfriend.

We made things official when we were fourteen, but we had shared some spine-tingling kisses before that. Things were hot and heavy for a long time until we decided to lose our virginity to one another a few months before my seventeenth birthday. Reeve would have taken the plunge earlier, but I was nervous, and I didn’t want to disappoint my parents who had asked us to slow things down. Legal age of consent is eighteen in Cali, but neither of us could wait any longer. I’m lucky my parents are so progressive and they trust us. Mom helped me to get on the pill, and she regularly subjects us to safe-sex lectures. While she lets me sleep over at Reeve’s house on weekends, she has a strict no-fraternization policy during the week, which we both respect.

My cell vibrates on the bedside table, but I ignore it, getting lost in the sensations my guy is conjuring from my pliable body. Reeve quickens his pace as my legs wrap around his back, and I dig my heels into his gorgeous ass. His mouth lowers to my chest, and he lavishes attention on my breasts as my cell continues to vibrate.

“You need to get that?” he asks, while sucking on my nipple.

“Nope, and don’t you dare stop.” I reach over and switch my cell off.

My hands roam his back as he pivots his hips, thrusting harder inside me, and I arch my spine, moaning as I feel another orgasm building. Sinking my teeth into his shoulder, I suck on his skin.

“Don’t mark me,” he warns, panting as he plunges inside me. “Remember I’ve got more auditions next week.”

“No fair.” I pout, wishing I could leave my mark on him so the actresses he’s testing against next week understand he is all mine.

Reeve’s cell vibrates in the pocket of his pants, and we groan.

“I’m nearly there,” he says, sitting back a little so he can thrust into me at the right angle. He rubs my clit as he rocks into me. “Let’s come together.”

I almost burst into song, but I don’t want to ruin the moment, and I’m too lost to the heavenly waves of bliss cresting all over my body to care about anything but my climax. I scream out his name as I succumb to pleasure, and he fills my pussy with his hot cum.

“Damn,” he says, collapsing on top of me. “Why can’t lover be a professional career choice because I’d love nothing more than to spend my days in bed giving you endless pleasure.”

“Don’t tease me like that.” I trail my hands up and down his arms as he slowly pulls out of my body. I miss him instantly.

“Love you,” he says, resting his head on the pillow beside me. He threads our fingers together before lifting them to his mouth and kissing my knuckles.

“Love you too.” I kiss the tip of his nose and palm his cheek. “Have I told you how proud I am of you?”

His handsome face lights up with obvious joy. “You might have told me a time or one hundred,” he admits, brushing his lips against my neck.

A shiver works its way through me, and my greedy pussy pulses with renewed need. Twisting onto my side, I press my body against his so we are skin to skin and perfectly aligned. “I think I’m addicted to sex with you.” Grabbing his ass, I thrust my pussy against his semi-hard cock. Either that or the ticking clock leading to our impending separation is looming large, demanding I take everything I can before he has to leave.

“Ditto, babe.” He fondles my breasts, softly tweaking my nipples, and they are so hard they could cut glass. “Hold that thought,” he adds, grabbing his jeans off the floor. He removes his vibrating cell, flashing me the screen. It’s my mom. “Hey, Lauren.” Reeve puts her on speaker. “Were you looking for us?”

“I don’t want to think about why it took you so long to answer your phone,” Mom replies. “Do we need to have the safe-sex conversation

again?”

“Mom!” I screech. “You have lectured us enough, and we’re always safe.”

“As much as I adore children, I’m not ready to be a grandmother yet.”

I slap my palm against my forehead. “Mom, seriously?”

Her laughter trickles down the line. “I’m calling to invite you both to dinner. Can you be here in a half hour?”

Although we are neighbors, all houses in North Beverly Park are built on at least two to three acres of land, so it still takes ten minutes to walk between our houses. Considering we are both currently naked and smelling of sex, thirty minutes to shower, redress and get home is cutting it close unless we drive.

I frown, stretching out on the mattress and stifling a yawn as I consider legitimate excuses that Mom will buy. We usually eat takeout in bed while watching movies on Friday nights unless there’s a party. I can’t remember the last time we ate dinner with my folks on a weekend night, and I’m really not in the mood to get out of this bed.

“We sure can,” Reeve says, as I prepare to open my mouth and decline her invitation.

“Great, we’ll see you then,” Mom says before hanging up.

“Ugh.” I snuggle into the pillow, pulling the sheets around me. “Why did you have to say yes? I was planning on giving you celebratory sex all night long.”

Reeve rolls his eyes. “Now she tells me.” He yanks me up onto his lap. “You can make good on your promise after dinner.”

I wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his neck. “Deal.”

“Congratulations!” Mom squeals, enveloping Reeve in a big hug. “I’m so happy for you, honey.” Her long black hair is loose, tumbling in lush thick waves down her back.

Tears stab my eyes as I take in the lavishly decorated dining room. I don’t know how Mom pulled it off so fast, but there are balloons, streamers, banners, and a giant cake that looks like it would feed forty people, not four. Dad pours Cristal Champagne into flutes, and I help him to hand them out.

“Don’t get used to it, princess,” he warns, as I take a sip of the delicious bubbly amber-colored liquid. “Only because this is a special occasion.”

“Chill, old man,” I tease. “It’s not like I haven’t been drinking champagne at movie premieres since I was fourteen.”

My parents are one of Hollywood’s golden couples, and attending industry events was the norm for Reeve and me growing up. Mom has won several Oscar nominations and awards for her acting, and Dad’s trophy collection isn’t too shabby either. Last year, he took home the Golden Globe *and* the Oscar for best director. What’s even more noteworthy is the fact they are happily married and they genuinely adore one another. They manage to have successful careers and a successful relationship, and that’s not an easy feat in Hollywood.

They are my idols, and I look up to them in so many ways.

“That had better be a joke, young lady,” Mom says, finally letting Reeve go. Her vibrant green eyes pin me in place, and I know she’s semi-serious.

It’s not a joke though. Those events can get crazy, and Reeve and I always found a way to sneak some champagne. As we’ve gotten older, my parents have let us drink on special occasions, but it’s strictly one glass. I’m sure they know we drink when we’re out with our friends, but they don’t hassle us about it too much.

My dad squeezes Reeve on the shoulder as he offers his congratulations. I give Mom a quick hug. “Thanks for doing this.”

“Has he even called him?” she whispers.

I shake my head, and she sighs. “Felicia would be so disappointed in Simon,” she adds, careful to keep her voice down so Reeve doesn’t overhear. “This is a big milestone in Reeve’s life, and his father should be here.”

“He should, but I can’t say I’m surprised. He always lets him down.”

I hate Simon Lancaster.

I really do.

Even when he is around, he’s absent. He’s cold and selfish, and Reeve is usually an afterthought to him. Simon is a few years older than my mom but a few years younger than my dad, and he’s still a very handsome man. As head of Studio 27, one of Hollywood’s most reputable production studios, Simon Lancaster is a busy man and a desirable catch. If he’s not burning the midnight oil, he’s bumping uglies with his latest fuck buddy. I haven’t mentioned it to Mom—as I’m fearful she would stop me from staying over

at Reeve's—but we have regularly run into naked women roaming the house at all hours.

It disgusts me and upsets Reeve, and anyone who upsets my love is an automatic addition to my shit list.

“A toast,” Dad says, drawing Mom and me back into the conversation.

I walk to my boyfriend, wrapping my arm around his back as his arm encircles my shoulders. My parents mirror our position, and we raise our glasses. “To Reeve. May your star shine bright and your career ascend dizzy heights.”

We all clink glasses.

“We’re so proud of you, Reeve,” Mom adds. “Not just for winning such a prestigious role but for the man you are becoming. It’s been a pleasure watching you grow up.”

A messy ball of emotion clogs my throat as my parents shower my boyfriend with love.

I definitely won the parent lottery, and I couldn’t be more grateful for all the ways they have nurtured and protected me while still giving me space to make my own choices and decisions. More than that, they have set the best example in the beautiful way they love one another. My whole life, I have aspired to a love like theirs, and I know I have found that in Reeve. It’s remarkable in any situation, but especially with the industry we’ve grown up in where constant affairs and quickie divorces are the norm.

My parents are true role models, and I love the relationship I have with them. Sure, they piss me off at times, all parents do, but I wouldn’t trade them for the world.

“Thank you so much,” Reeve says, his voice sounding choked up. He waves his hand around. “Not just for this but for everything.”

“You’re family,” Dad simply says, running a hand through his brown hair. Strands of gray have appeared lately, and I love that he’s not hiding them. It only makes him look more distinguished, and more handsome, though I could be biased. Some of the staff carry steaming plates of food into the room as we talk. “You’re as much our son as Vivien is our daughter. There will always be a place for you at this table and in our home.”

I swipe at the errant tears leaking out of my eyes, while Reeve steers me over to the table.

“Can I adopt your parents?” he whispers, holding my chair out for me. “I don’t think I can wait until we’re married to make it official.”

I smile, kissing him softly before claiming my seat.

“I’m hearing a lot of buzz about your movie,” Mom says a few minutes later when we are all seated and diving into a gorgeous steak dinner.

“Me too,” Dad says, in between bites. “It’ll be interesting to see how the public at large engages with a darker young adult movie.”

“It’s going to push boundaries, for sure.” I take a sip of my sparkling water. “I hope they remain true to the books. They are so good.” When Reeve first auditioned for the role a couple of months ago, I bought all the books in the *Rydeville Elite* series, and I literally could not put them down.

“Me too, and from what I’ve seen so far, they seem determined to remain as authentic as possible. I’m hella excited to play this part.”

“Cam is such an asshole in *Cruel Intentions*,” I say, cutting my steak into bite-sized pieces, “and he is so different from you. It will definitely stretch you out of your comfort zone.”

“That’s one of the reasons I wanted the part so bad.”

“Is the contract for one movie only or with an option for more?” Mom asks.

“One with the option of another two,” Reeve confirms. “And the author has written more books about other couples, so if it proves popular, it could turn into a franchise and keep going for years.”

“Be careful you don’t get pigeonholed,” Dad warns. “Look at how much Robert Pattinson struggled after the *Twilight* franchise.”

“Jon.” Mom drills a look at Dad. “Don’t rain on Reeve’s parade.” She smiles across the table at my boyfriend. “That would be a great problem to have, and you are young enough and talented enough to break out of any mold.”

“If it comes down to it, I would value your advice.” Reeve places his silverware down on his empty plate.

“We are always here for you,” Mom says. “And my offer to talk to Margaret still stands.” Margaret Andre is Mom’s long-term agent, and she is well-respected and well-known in the industry. She comes from a long line of Andres who worked in the industry, and she only takes on a select number of clients. Mom had offered to speak to her on Reeve’s behalf last year when he ditched his old agent, but he wanted to find new representation himself. While I don’t like Bianca Remington—Reeve’s new agent—I can’t deny she has pulled out all the stops for him. As long as she

has his best interests at heart, I can tolerate her surgically enhanced resting bitchface.

“Thanks, Lauren, but I’m happy with Bianca right now. You should have seen her in the negotiations this morning. I can see how she has earned her rottweiler reputation.”

“Have they cast your leading lady yet?” Dad asks.

Reeve shakes his head. “They are having trouble casting Abby. They have rejected all the girls I tested with. However, there is someone they are talking to currently who they are very interested in. I’ll be filming a few scenes with her next week to see if we have chemistry.”

He mentioned he had to shoot some additional scenes next week, but he never mentioned it was only with one actress. “Who is she?”

“They haven’t said. It’s all hush-hush for now.”

“It must be someone with star power,” Mom says. “Someone the studio is desperate to sign.”

Reeve shrugs. “I don’t care as long as it’s someone I can work with, someone who will add value to the production and challenge me to deliver the best performance I can.” He turns to face me. “I was hoping you could run lines with me this weekend.”

“Of course. You know I’m always happy to run lines with you.”

He pecks my lips. “Thanks, babe. You’re the best.”

“Is she hot?” Nate inquires, waggling his brows. “And how many sex scenes do you have with her?”

Music shakes the windows, filtering out of the open door as the DJ Reeve hired for the party spins tunes in the ballroom where most of our classmates are currently drunk off their asses, or high as kites, or a mix of both.

I roll my eyes as I take a swig of my vodka cranberry. What is it with guys and sex on the brain? Though I really shouldn't be criticizing considering the marathon sex session Reeve and I engaged in last night after we left my parents' house.

“He doesn't know who she is,” Audrey replies, swatting the back of Nate's head. “Don't you ever listen?”

A loud splash is followed by giggles and screaming as someone jumps in the pool. Inside Reeve's house, the party is in full swing, but we've retreated to the covered patio to talk without shouting for a while.

“For fuck's sake.” Reeve shakes his head, glaring at the two guys and three girls cavorting in their underwear in the swimming pool.

“I'll handle it,” Alex says, standing.

Reeve made it clear there was no going in the pool tonight. It's not like it's the height of summer, even if we did get to spend a large portion of our day on Santa Monica Beach.

“So, who is she?” Nate asks again, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Come on, bro,” Zeke coaxes. “You know we're gonna find out eventually.”

“I don’t know,” Reeve protests, sliding his arm around my shoulders. I scoot in closer on the rattan couch, snuggling into his side. “And even if I did, I couldn’t say anything. I had to sign a watertight NDA, so these lips are sealed.”

“But you get to fuck her, right?” Nate asks, his eyes glimmering with mischief.

“You’re an idiot.” I shake my head. “He’s playing a part, and most sex scenes on movie sets are very clinical. Trust me, there is little that is sexy about it.” At least, that’s what my parents have always said. It’s not like I’ve had a front-row seat or anything.

“Rawr.” Nate curls his fingers at me. “Look at your claws coming out.”

I flip him the bird. “I’m confident in my relationship and my mad sexual skills. Just ask Reeve. I practically rode him to death last night.”

Reeve spits beer all over the tile floor. “Babe. Tell the whole fucking world, why don’tcha?”

I shrug, feeling brave thanks to Mr. Grey Goose flowing through my veins. “I’m not ashamed, and maybe he’ll shut up about you fucking your leading lady now.”

Truth is, I’m not loving the idea of Reeve performing some of these scenes with another woman. But it’s par for the course when you’re an actor, and I’ll just have to get used to it. The last thing I want is any of my insecurities to impact Reeve’s performance. This part is a big deal for him. This role could catapult him onto the world stage, and having a successful acting career is something he has craved for as long as I’ve known him. I won’t do anything to jeopardize his potential or do anything to add to his stress levels, so I’m trying to pull my big-girl panties on and accept it’s just part of his job.

I stride across Reeve’s father’s study in my tight-fitting black dress and stiletto heels, growling as I put my face up in his, fixing him with an angry look. “I’ve had enough of you for one day,” I snap, glaring at him. “Get lost, Cam.”

“I thought you were made of stronger stuff,” he coolly replies.

I glare at him some more, forcing my body to shake with rage.

Reeve pulls the hood of his hoodie down off his head, stepping into me. His chest brushes against mine, and his eyes glimmer with challenge. My body floods with warmth, and I'm struggling to project the anger Abby demonstrates in this scene. Reeve is so fucking hot wearing Camden's skin, and I'm already salivating.

"Viv." Reeve eyeballs me, and I try to shake all lustful thoughts from my mind.

"Sorry. I'll focus." Planting my game face on, I take a step back, per the script.

Reeve closes the gap between us immediately, running the tip of his finger across my exposed collarbone, eliciting a rake of fiery tingles that makes my toes curl. "The more you fight me, the more I enjoy this," he whispers, pressing his mouth to my ear. "So, keep fighting me, sweetheart. Nothing turns me on more."

Oh God. Nor me!

See, this is why I could never be an actress. I'd never be able to wear another character's skin and ignore my own emotions and reactions. But I'm supposed to be helping Reeve, so I work harder to dampen my desire.

"Fuck you, Cam." I shove him away, stalking to the couch and dropping down on it. In this scene, Abby gets into her car and Cam slides uninvited into the passenger seat. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I bark as Reeve sits on the couch beside me.

"Coming with you. Unless you already know the way to Lauder's place?" He looks around, as if he's admiring the car interior.

"No, and no. Get out."

"Make me." He slants me a sexy, lopsided grin that is supposed to infuriate me, but all it's doing is turning me on more.

Fishing my pepper spray out of my purse, I uncap the lid and aim it at his face. He reacts fast, pinning me to the couch with his fingers curled around my hand, trying to pry the canister out of my grip while I pretend I'm trying to press down on the button.

We wrestle for several minutes—me trying to get it to explode in his face and him trying to get a hold of it—and it's the hottest type of foreplay. I gasp when his hips press against mine and his hard length rubs against me.

Fuck me. Please.

He wraps his fingers around my wrist, and I yelp as if I'm in pain. Reeve throws the canister on the floor and straddles me. I bite back a moan

as my hips lift of their own volition. I can barely remember the script, because I'm so freaking aroused my brain has turned to mush.

"Cuss at me and try to fight me off," Reeve whispers in my ear, and I whimper. I let a string of expletives loose as I fight him, while simultaneously battling with the almost insurmountable urge to shove my hand into his boxers and grab his erection. I emit a frustrated scream.

"I can do this all night, so feel free to keep fighting me."

Oh, yes, Cam, Reeve, ugh. Keep fighting me because this is getting my juices going like you wouldn't believe.

Remembering my part, I buck against him, raising my free hand to slap him, but he grabs both my hands over my head as he presses his body down on top of me. Lust slams into me, and I'm losing the battle. My core aches, my panties are soaked, and my nipples are trying to poke a hole through my lace bra.

Reeve straightens up until he's sitting on my lap, and his hungry eyes latch on to my chest. I try to remember I'm supposed to hate him, not want to strip him naked and bounce on his cock.

When his mouth brushes the sensitive skin just under my ear, I pant and groan, writhing underneath him. Reeve rocks his groin against mine, while he keeps my wrists elevated over my head, and from the familiar lusty glint in his gaze, I can tell he's struggling to stay in the role too. That makes me feel better, if a little guilty.

I'm supposed to be helping him, not making it more difficult.

He thrusts slowly against me. "How is it I crave the thing I hate most?" he whispers, his mouth moving to my jaw. "How do you do that? Make me want you when I despise you?"

"If you discover the answer, please enlighten me," I rasp, keeping my eyes shut.

"Open your eyes, Abigail." He peppers my jawline with kisses, and I'm on the verge of spontaneous combustion. My eyes blink open, and I stare into his beautiful face. Conflict rages in his eyes, as it's supposed to. "I think you've been put on this Earth purely to torment me," he whispers, letting my wrists go so he can wind his hands into my hair. "I need you to hate me."

"Oh, trust me, I'm already there." It almost pains me to say those words to the love of my life, even if they're not true.

"Not nearly enough," he whispers, kissing the corner of my mouth.

“What do you want from me, Cam?” I whisper back.

He kisses the other corner of my mouth, and I’m hanging on by a thread here.

“*Everything*, Abigail. I’m going to take everything.” Reeve slams his mouth to mine, gripping my head in his large palms, and all bets are off.

He must think so too, because it’s like a race to see who can remove clothing faster, and in record time, he’s driving his cock inside my naked body as we fuck like wild animals on the floor of his father’s study.

“Oh my God.” Reeve wipes an arm across his sweaty brow as we sit on the floor, leaning back against the couch, after the hottest sex of our lives. “That was insane.”

“Insanely hot.” I grin at him.

“If this continues, I’m seriously screwed for rehearsals next week.”

The edge slices off my euphoric post-coital high. “If any of your rehearsals end up with hot sex on a floor, you won’t just be screwed, Reeve, you’ll be fucking dead the second I get my hands on you.”

He chuckles, leaning his head on my shoulder. “You know I was talking about us running lines.”

“Hmmm.”

“Babe?” He lifts his head, swiveling around until he’s sitting cross-legged in front of me. His brow puckers. “You know you have nothing to worry about, right?”

I crick my neck to loosen the suddenly tight muscles. “I know I’m being ridiculous, but I don’t like the thought of you doing that scene with anyone but me.”

“Then maybe you should audition?” He arches a brow.

I crank out a laugh. “Funny, but no. I would suck. I think I’ve just proven that.”

“I happen to like how you suck.” His lips curve at the corners, and my eyes automatically lower to his crotch.

“You really do like how I suck, huh?” I play along, watching his dick harden.

“Baby.” He grabs his boxers, pulling them on, chuckling as I pout. “We need to talk about this, and I can’t do that if we’re both naked.” I dress in my underwear as he continues. “I don’t want you to worry. You know I only have eyes for you. You’re the love of my life, Viv,” he adds, pulling me onto his lap.

“I know that, Reeve, but it’s not just this scene. Abby and Cam have this epic, explosive kind of love, and you’ll really need to inhabit his persona to pull it off in a way that will justify the plot and pay homage to the character. You’ll need to be passionate with her. That’s what worries me.”

“I know how to separate my personal feelings from my role. It will only be acting, babe.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about. It’s whoever they cast as Abby.” I chew on the corner of my lip. “I still want to punch Marnie Gibson for shoving her tongue down your throat during *Romeo and Juliet*,” I admit, my fists clenching as I recall how she used to paw at him during rehearsals. Everyone knew we were in love, and Reeve told her time and time again to cut it out, but she loved pushing my buttons, and we almost came to blows on several occasions. She still smirks at me whenever I pass her in the hallway, and I still want to throat punch her until I wipe the smug grin off her face.

Reeve has taken a leading role in every school play, but that was the only part that required him to kiss his leading lady. I was jealous as fuck, and it doesn’t bode well. I hate that I’m worrying, because I trust him completely and it shouldn’t be a big deal. I need to trust in him and our love and accept this is the way it will always be.

He tucks my hair behind my ears, dotting kisses along my cheeks. “Her breath smelled like rotten farts, and I almost puked every time I had to kiss her.” He grimaces, and I grin, his words helping to ease some of my tension. He cups my face, locking eyes with me. “It wouldn’t matter if they cast Gal Gadot opposite me. I’d still have zero interest. You are all I see.”

I purse my lips. “Now I know you’re lying. I’ve seen you drooling over her. Don’t deny it.”

“That was the Wonder Woman costume, and trust me when I say every red-blooded male got hard watching that movie.”

“Gross.” I place my hands on his shoulders, exhaling loudly. He looks troubled now, and I’m not doing this to him. I just need to get over myself. “It’s fine, Reeve. Don’t mind me.” I kiss him softly. “I know I can trust you. I’m just being silly.”

“You *can* trust me.” Lifting my hand, he kisses the soft skin on my wrist. “You can trust me one hundred percent.”

I do trust him, but I have a sixth sense it’s not him I’ll have to worry about.

I bury my head in my hands, tossing my cell on the couch in my living room. “Ugh. Why her? Of all the actresses in the world, why did they have to cast Saffron Roberts as Abby?”

“It sucks, babe,” Audrey says. “I hate it and Reeve isn’t even *my* boyfriend.”

Lifting my head, I exhale heavily. “I’ll just have to grin and bear it. It’s not like I can do anything about it, and I understand why they hired her.”

Saffron starred in a couple of popular Netflix movies. She’s beautiful and a decent actress. But they are a dime a dozen in L.A., and if it wasn’t for her scandalous affair with a high-profile married film director, she would not be so famous.

Usually, the woman fares unfavorably in such situations, but the director’s wife made a statement saying they had an open marriage, even alluding to a threesome with her husband and the then twenty-year-old actress. Saffron signed with a new agent and PR firm, and for a time, you couldn’t turn on the TV or scroll through social media without seeing her pretty face. Roles have been pouring in, and she’s now being touted as one of the future stars of the big screen.

“I get that she has an edgy vibe that works with the plot, but I still think it’s risky,” Audrey says, and I love how loyal she is.

I stand, stretching to loosen the kinks in my shoulders. “I hate thinking of Reeve kissing, touching, and faking sex with her, but I’ll just have to get over it. The truth is, it’s a good thing for the movie that she’s come on

board. It means more investment and more publicity. I want Reeve to succeed, and I trust him. It's her I don't trust."

Audrey kicks her shoes off, pulling her knees into her chest. "She might not be as bad as we think. You know how the media twists things."

"True," I agree, feeling a little guilty for instantly hating her. I've seen how the media has twisted things with my parents over the years. How they have made innocent hugs and kisses on the cheek seem more. How they have tried to manipulate the truth to suit their own agenda. Saffron has never publicly commented on the affair, so, for all I know, it might not have even happened. "Reeve said she was great. Friendly but professional and very excited for the project."

The door bursts open, and the guys come in, laughing and shoving each other. "Hey, babe." Reeve reels me into his arms, kissing me slowly, and I melt into his arms.

"Fuck, you're all so nauseating," Nate drawls, and we break apart the same time Alex and Audrey do.

"Then maybe you should stop hanging out with us." Audrey slants him a fake sugary-sweet smile. I know he gets on her nerves, but he's on the football team with Alex, and their families are super close, so he's always hanging around.

"Or get yourself a girlfriend," I suggest. Nate isn't my type, but he's a honed slab of muscle, and he's not ugly. I know he has his fair share of willing bed partners, but he needs a personality transplant if he expects any of them to stick around for a relationship.

"What an awesome idea." He rocks back on his heels. "I was just telling Reeve he should introduce me to his sexy co-star."

Saffron was papped entering the studio last week, so the PR people issued a press release the second she signed on the dotted line, confirming her and Reeve for the parts. Now everyone knows, and it's becoming real. The books are popular, and social media is going crazy right now with talk of the movie.

Audrey snorts with laughter, while I try to curb the jealous fluttering in my chest.

"Unless you plan to fly to the East Coast, you can forget that plan," Reeve says, rubbing a soothing hand up and down my back. "I told you we're filming in Boston and other parts of Massachusetts."

“I’m sure you can invite her to come and party with us sometime.” He waggles his brows.

Over my dead fucking body.

“I don’t think you’re her type,” Reeve says, and I frown. *How the hell would he know her type, and why does it even matter?*

“Reeve’s right,” Audrey cuts in, leaning her head back against Alex’s chest. “You’re not rich enough. Old enough. Or powerful enough. Unless you’ve got something she can gain, she won’t even give you a second glance.”

“I didn’t realize you were so judgmental,” Reeve says. “And you shouldn’t believe everything you read online. She’s a nice girl and really fucking talented.”

Audrey purses her lips, and an awkward silence engulfs the room. I don’t disagree with my bestie, even if we are being a little judgy. What bothers me is how quickly Reeve jumped to Saffron’s defense. It’s not like he knows her either.

“I’d still do her,” Nate says. “I’ve never had any complaints about Woody,” he adds, grabbing his crotch.

We all burst out laughing, and it helps to offset the growing tension.

“Butthead is throwing a party on the beach tonight,” Reeve says. “You want to go?”

“Sure.” I could use a drink or ten after the press announcement today.

“Let’s grab dinner at The Shack first,” Alex suggests, and we all nod, agreeing to meet in an hour.

“Feeling better?” Audrey asks, as we dance in front of the fire. Butthead may be a butthead, but he sure knows how to throw a proper beach party. It helps that this strip of beach is private and his palatial home is behind us. It means we have access to toilets and chilled drinks, and the line of chimineas spread out on the sand was kindly supplied by his parents so we don’t freeze our asses off.

“Much,” I agree, shimmying my hips to the pulsing beats pounding from the freestanding speakers. “I just need to get out of my head. This is

such an amazing opportunity for Reeve, and I've got to quit the jealous girlfriend routine."

"It's human to be jealous. All week, I've been imagining what it would be like if it was me and Alex, and I wouldn't like it one little bit."

We bump hips, and I throw my hands around her neck, smacking a kiss to her cheek. "I don't like it either, but this is going to be Reeve's life, and I have to deal. He's my one true love, and I'm his, and no one or nothing can ever change that."

Whoops and hollers ring out, and I whip my head around in the direction of the guys. They're sitting on fold-up chairs around a fire, drinking beers and laughing over something on Nate's cell phone.

Audrey loops her arm through mine. "C'mon. Let's find out what's so entertaining."

We amble to the guys, stumbling a little and giggling. I've lost count of how many vodka shots I've downed, but I feel carefree and happy, so I don't care, even if I will have the mother of all hangovers tomorrow. Reeve reaches his arms out, pulling me down onto his lap, and I go willingly, draping myself around him and pressing my face to his neck. I inhale deeply, comforted by the minty, citrusy scent of his cologne. Brushing my lips against his neck, I silently rejoice when he shivers and his dick hardens under my ass.

"Give me that," Audrey says, and I tilt my head, watching her swipe the cell from Zeke as I press feather-soft kisses against Reeve's neck. "What the actual fuck?" she shouts, glaring briefly at Reeve and then Alex. She throws the cell at Zeke before jabbing her finger in Alex's chest. "You better not have been looking at those photos."

Alex shrugs, sliding his arm around the back of his girlfriend's waist. Audrey shoves his arm away. "Babe, relax. It's no different than watching porn, and you already know I do that."

"It is fucking different when you're ogling naked pictures of Saffron Roberts."

Reeve's body stiffens as I lift my head. "Wait. What?"

She sends me a sympathetic look. "They are nudes that were released last year when news of her affair hit the headlines. Apparently, one of her exes took them and cashed in on her popularity."

What an asshole thing to do. For a brief second, I feel sorry for her until my jealousy rears its ugly head again. Grabbing Reeve's face, I tilt his chin

up so he's looking at me. "Did you look at those photos?"

"No." He vigorously shakes his head. "And I told them it was a bad idea."

"You would say that," Nate cuts in, his tone scoffing. "You'll get to see her goods in the flesh. You should look at the pics so you can tell us whether she looks better in real life," he adds, cupping his groin, "because I've got to tell you, my cock is dying to slide between those monster tits and fuck the shit out of them."

Audrey pours her beer over Nate's head, and I could kiss my bestie. I'm a generous C-cup, and I've never felt like I'm lacking in the boob department, but there is no way you would refer to my breasts as monster tits, and I hate how Nate's words have me feeling a little inadequate.

"What the fuck?" Nate hops up, mopping the beer on his face with the edge of his shirt as he shoots daggers at my friend.

"You deserve that and more," Audrey retorts, looking and sounding completely unapologetic.

"Viv." Reeve's fingers gently grasp my chin as he reclaims my attention. "Ignore them. They're being idiots." He brushes his lips against mine. "I didn't look at them because I've no desire to see. You're the only naked woman starring in my dreams."

But for how long?

"Baby." His breath fans across my overheated cheeks, rousing me from sleep. Reeve dusts light kisses all over my face as I yawn, rubbing sleep from my eyes as I sit up in my dark bedroom, pressing my back against the headboard. Pain flares, and cramps twist my belly into knots. I whimper, brushing matted strands of my brown hair off my sweat-slickened brow, as I bend over.

"Here," he says, lifting my tank and pressing the warm heated pad to my lower stomach.

"Why are you here?" I ask over a groan. "Has the press conference been canceled?"

He switches on my bedside lamp, and I squint as my eyes adjust to the light. "No, it's still early, but I wanted to stop by and make sure you were

okay first.” He hands me a glass of water and drops a prescription pill into my palm.

“Fuck, I love you.” I pop the pill, and swallow it with water. “Does every boyfriend keep track of his girlfriend’s cycle, or are you a god among men?” I tease.

He puffs out his chest, grinning. “Pretty sure I’m a god among men, but I try to be modest.”

I fling my arms around him, squeezing him tight. “Thank you. I love you so fucking much.”

“Love you too, babe.” He pulls back the covers, gesturing at me to lie down. “Now, go back to sleep. You have another hour before you have to get up. Get Max to drive you to school, and I’ll be back in time to collect you.” Max is my family’s driver, and he usually ferries me around if Reeve isn’t available. However, I’ve been trying to drive myself more places since getting my license last year.

Snuggling down under the comforter, I keep the heated pad against my cramping stomach. Reeve tucks me in before kissing me softly on the lips. “See you later.”

“Good luck,” I call out after him. “I’ll be watching.”

“Reeve asked me to give you this,” Alex says, setting a paper carton down on the table in front of me. Despite popping another prescription pill just before lunch, I’m doubled over with stomach cramps. It’s the same every month when I get my period. Some months, I have to actually stay in bed because the pain is so freaking bad I can’t function. Mom took me to see her ob-gyn, and she said there is nothing wrong. Unfortunately, I’m just one of the female population who struggles with chronic period pain.

I pop the lid on the carton, unable to contain my smile, as I inhale the chicken noodle soup.

“Thank you.” Alex must have gone to my favorite deli to pick up Reeve’s order, and I’m grateful.

“You’re welcome. Reeve says I’m to watch you eat every bit.” His eyes lower to the tray of uneaten food in front of me.

Normally, I love the food in the cafeteria. Our private school employs highly skilled chefs to create a variety of balanced healthy meals, and the options are diverse and always delicious. But I struggle to stomach any food the first couple of days of my period. Reeve and I usually ditch the cafeteria those days to go to the deli by ourselves. I was tempted to go alone today, just to avoid the gossip, but I don't have my car. Audrey would have come with, but I figure it's best to just get it over and done with.

Anyone that wasn't aware Reeve has landed a career-making role is now in the know, thanks to the press conference that aired a half hour ago. It's all anyone is watching on their phones, and if I have to listen to one more comment about how beautiful Saffron Roberts is and how gorgeous Reeve and Saffron look together, I *will* punch someone.

Nate opens his mouth—to spout some stupid crap, no doubt—and I slap my hand over his lips, silencing him. I cannot deal with his crap today of all days. “Nope.” I level him with a dark look. “I do not want to hear any shit from you today. Not unless you want to be bitch slapped and kneed in the balls.”

Alex chuckles, and I shriek when Nate licks my palm.

“Eww.” Whipping my hand back, I wipe it down the front of my jeans. “That was gross.”

“Is it wrong that your little threats turn me the fuck on?” Nate asks, winking as he brings a bottle of water to his lips.

I roll my eyes, biting the inside of my cheek as pain slices across my lower belly. I wince, rubbing my stomach as I look wistfully at my soup. I'm not sure I can even stomach soup today.

“Want me to rub that for you?” Nate asks, leaning in closer and pinning me with a suggestive look.

“Not if you want to keep your head on your shoulders,” Alex coolly replies. “Don't think you can hit on Viv just because Reeve will be leaving in a few months. I've already told him I've got his back.”

Audrey rolls her eyes and shakes her head. We share a “boys are ridiculous” look. I don't know whether I should be insulted or pleased. “I don't need a babysitter,” I mumble, dunking a spoon in the soup.

“And it's not like Reeve has anything to worry about,” Audrey cryptically adds, as I sip my soup contemplating the same thing.

The months fly by, and I wish I could slow them down. We both submit our applications to UCLA, Christmas comes and goes, and before we know it, it's mid-January and Reeve's eighteenth birthday. I organize an epic party for him, and he surprises me with a weekend away on our own at Big Bear Lake. We take to the slopes, go sledding, and toast s'mores in front of the large open fire in the luxury cabin Reeve rented before making love for hours, getting lost in one another, pretending like we're not going to be separated in six short weeks.

"It sucks you'll miss graduation," I say the week before Reeve is due to leave for Boston. It's Friday evening, and we're walking hand in hand through the gardens at the rear of my house.

Mom is an avid gardener, and even though we have a full-time gardener on the staff, she designed and planted our rose garden herself. There are over forty different species of roses. Large blooms and small blooms in an array of different colors. Pink, purple, peach, white, red, yellow, orange, ivory, multicolored, and she even has lavender roses. They are the prettiest shade, and they have a fresh floral fragrance with a hint of spice that I adore. I didn't even know lavender roses were a thing until Mom planted them, and now they are my absolute favorite flower.

"You know I'd be there if I could, but the schedule is too tight." His smile is wistful as we pass the large oak tree with the swing. As kids, we

loved hanging out at this tree. Our initials are even carved in the bark, alongside my parents' initials. Back then, we had this massive playground, treehouse, and obstacle course Mom had built specifically for us. I have many fond memories of summers spent outside, swimming and messing around in the pool, and countless hours spent playing on the swings, the monkey bars, slides, and the zipline.

Those were fun times.

I should have protested when Mom had it all removed. Insisted she keep it for our kids, but Mom is always remodeling the house and the gardens in between movies.

"Hey." He tugs on my hand when I don't respond. "You're not mad, are you?" His brow puckers, and I shake my head.

"Not at all. I understand, Reeve, and it's fine." He doesn't look convinced. "Honestly." I give him my biggest, most reassuring smile, and his shoulders relax. While he has done enough to graduate early, I was still hoping he could make it back for the ceremony, but he can't, and that's that. Ironically, shooting wraps four days after graduation, which is a little frustrating. "I'm so glad you got time off for prom. I couldn't attend without you." I swing our conjoined hands as we walk the cream stone path through the massive rose garden.

"There's no way I'd miss seeing you in that dress you're making." He flashes me a cheeky grin.

I slam to a halt, narrowing my eyes at him. "You'd better not have been peeking at it." I've gone to great trouble designing my own gown for prom. I am making Audrey's too, and we want to keep them a secret until then. I'm really looking forward to seeing the look on Reeve's face when he sees me in my own creation.

"Babe, I value breathing." He playfully swats my ass. "I even close my eyes and race past your studio door anytime I'm at your house."

"I've trained you well," I tease, tugging on his hand as we start walking again.

"I don't need to see it to know you're going to be the most beautiful girl there."

Be still my heart. Stretching up, I kiss the underside of his jaw. "Thank you, but you know you're probably biased."

"I'm only speaking the truth." He presses a kiss to my temple. "I hate that I can't be here for your eighteenth birthday, but I will make it up to you

this summer. I promise.”

I hate he’s missing my birthday too. It will be the first time ever that one of us has missed the other’s birthday. But I’m trying not to be selfish, so I’ve told him not to worry about it. I know Reeve would be there if he could. At least we’ll be able to make up for lost time during summer break.

Reeve’s shooting finishes at the end of May, and the movie isn’t scheduled to release until January, meaning he will have a few months off before we start college and before the promotional tour commences. I’m not sure how he’s going to juggle school with his promo duties, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. “I’m so happy we’ll have the entire summer together,” I say, drawing circles on the back of his hand with my finger.

“There may be some reshoots in August,” he warns, tightening his hand in mine. “But other than that, the summer is all ours.”

“I can’t wait.”

He stops at the lavender rose bush, removing a pair of pruning scissors from his back pocket. I beam at him as he examines the flowers, looking for the perfect rose. I study his gorgeous face, memorizing the light smattering of freckles along his strong nose, the angles of his high cheekbones, the beautiful curve of his tempting lips, and the endless depths of his stunning blue eyes. Reeve is beautiful, and he steals my breath every time I look at him. I trace my finger across the flat beauty mark over the right side of his lip. “Has Lipgate been resolved yet?” I inquire, arching a brow.

“Nope. Honestly, it’s ridiculous. They can cover it with makeup for filming, and I don’t see why it’s such a big deal.”

“I’m glad Bianca is fighting them on this.” I trace my finger back and forth across the mark I love as he continues scanning the roses. “Studios have too much say in actor’s lives as it is. So what if you have a beauty mark? It’s absolutely perfect on you, and it never did Enrique Iglesias or Cristiano Ronaldo any harm. Both have had amazing careers, and I’m sure they had asshole PR people demanding they get theirs removed too.”

He tweaks my nose, grinning. “You’ve really given this a lot of thought, huh?”

“I might have googled it after you told me they were making a big deal of it. I thought my research might help if they were still being stubborn about it.”

Turning around, he threads his fingers through my hair. “I love how you always wade into battle on my behalf. It’s sexy as hell.”

“You’re sexy as hell.” I press my lips to the small, neat mark. “And you’re perfect exactly the way you are. I don’t want any asshole director or ambitious publicist trying to force you to change.”

“I spoke with your mom, and she told me to stick to my guns. They can’t insist on it because it wasn’t part of the contract. She gave me some good advice.”

“I’m glad you have her. Even with what I know of the industry, it seems especially crazy right now.” The public interest in celebrities is extreme. They want to know every aspect of their personal lives, and privacy is a rare commodity. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about what that means for Reeve and me. I’m a private person, and I deplore the thought of anyone delving into my life just because I’m Reeve’s girlfriend, but my parents have warned me it’s going to happen.

He removes his fingers from my hair, glancing at the roses as he speaks. “Bianca wants me to hire my own publicist. She says things are going to get insane pretty fast.”

“I’d say the six million new followers you have on Insta and TikTok already attest to that fact. And that’s before you’ve even filmed this movie.”

“I know.” Sighing, he stares up at the darkening sky. “The level of interest is scaring me a little, to be honest.”

I place my palm on his chest and peer into his eyes. “In what way? Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted?”

His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. “I’ve always wanted to *act*. To perfect my art and be the best performer I can be. All this interest in me, in my personal life and my appearance, concerns me. I don’t want that to overshadow my work, you know?”

I nod, because I do. We’ve already had a few paparazzi following us around, and I know the level of interest is going to explode in the coming months. It’s not that either of us is unfamiliar with this aspect of the business. Our parents are famous, and there are always asshole photographers following us around on family outings; however, it’s rare for paps to take more than a passing interest in us when we are out alone.

Until now.

I hadn’t properly considered what Reeve’s blossoming career and notoriety would do for me, and it’s only adding to the anxiety I feel knowing he is this close to leaving for three months. “I guess it will just take some adjustment,” I say, pushing my own worries aside to reassure

him. “It’s part and parcel of the life of an actor. You’re young, hot, and talented as fuck. Of course, there will be media interest and attention from fans.”

“At least I have you to keep me grounded.” He reels me into his body.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you if you start behaving like a dick with a swollen head.” I run my fingers along his chest and stomach, tracing the dips and curves of his abs through his thin shirt. Reeve has been working out like crazy these past few months, and he has massively transformed his body. His arms and shoulders are even broader now, and his six-pack almost looks painted on it’s that perfect.

“I’m going to miss you so fucking much.” Reaching out, he cuts the stem on a rose.

“Pfft.” I stand on my tiptoes and brush my lips against his. “You’ll be having too much fun living the dream to miss me. Meanwhile, I’ll be stuck with boring classes, annoying teachers, and Nate McAndrews irritating the shit out of me every second of every day.” The guy has not let up about Saffron, and I seriously want to rip out his vocal cords so he can no longer speak.

Reeve hands me the rose, and I lift it to my nose, closing my eyes and inhaling the familiar spicy aroma.

“I don’t know how Alex puts up with that idiot,” he says, as I blink my eyes open. “He is seriously getting on my last nerve.” A muscle ticks in his jaw.

“I don’t want to talk about Nate.” I slide my free hand between our bodies, stroking my fingers along the length of his cock through his jeans, loving how quickly he hardens underneath my touch. “We have much better things to do with our time, right?”

Reeve grabs my hand, pulling me back along the path. “I like the way you think.” He shoots me a sexy grin, and his eyes flare with need as we race toward the house and the privacy of my bedroom.

“Come here, baby,” Reeve says, opening his arms, as I hastily swipe at the silent tears streaming down my face. “Please don’t cry. It’s killing me.”

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, crawling into his lap in the back seat of the car. “I swore I wasn’t going to cry, but my tear ducts obviously didn’t get the memo.”

“It’s only three months, not forever. I’ll be home for prom before you know it.”

I clasp his face in my hands. “I’m so damn proud of you, Reeve, and really excited for you.” I might be devastated at the prospect of so long without him, but it isn’t a lie.

He rests his forehead against mine. “I needed to hear that, because I’m scared shitless. What if I fuck this up?”

I ease back so I can see him. “Are you kidding me? There is no way you can fuck this up. We’ve been running lines religiously from the moment you got the part, and even I could recite Cam’s lines in my sleep. You’ve got this, babe. You are going to kill it.”

His lips crash against mine in a heated kiss that is laced with desperation and fear. I moan as his tongue plunders my mouth, rocking my pelvis against him, wishing there was time to make love to him again. We have been inseparable and insatiable these past few weeks, yet it still isn’t enough. “I love you,” he says, pulling me into a hug. “I love you so damn much. Don’t forget that.” He bands his arms around me, squeezing me tight, and I close my eyes, drinking in the feel of him against me.

“I won’t,” I promise, resting my head on his hair and clutching his shoulders tight.

“I mean it, Viv.” He lifts me off his lap and onto the seat. “Things are going to get crazy, but nothing matters to me as much as you do. You are my entire world, and that will never change.”

“Stop it.” I swat at his chest as more tears spring from my eyes. “Stop being so damn romantic. So damn perfect, because it just makes our separation even harder.”

The door opens, and Simon Lancaster pops his head in. “It’s time,” he tells his son, and I’m surprised to see his features soften when he looks at me.

“Just give us one more minute,” I plead, reaching for the wrapped package on the floor.

Simon nods, closing the door.

“Open it on the plane.” I hand the sparkly silver-foil package to Reeve. I bought him a Louis Vuitton messenger bag to hold his script and notes, his phone charger, water bottle, and whatever else he needs with him on set. And I framed a selfie of us from our weekend at Big Bear. In the photo, I’m sitting on Reeve’s lap with my arms around his neck, and we’re naked underneath the blanket wrapped around us. We are looking deep into one another’s eyes, love radiating between us in the adoring way we are staring at each other. It was as if the outside world ceased to exist. There was just us in that moment, and the photo beautifully captured that sentiment.

I framed a copy of it for myself, and it takes pride of place on my bedside table. I want Reeve to be the last thing I see before I place my head on my pillow at night and the first thought on my mind when I wake each morning. I’m hoping the photo will do the same for him.

“I left a gift for you on your bed.”

My lower lip wobbles as I struggle to keep my emotions in check. Reeve is always thoughtful, and he makes me feel so cherished. I think, no, I *know*, that is my dad’s influence, because he sure as hell didn’t pick up any romantic gestures from his own father. My dad dotes on my mom, and he spoils her rotten. I know Reeve’s noted it all, and he treats me with the same devotion, love, and respect.

We share a soft lingering kiss before we reluctantly climb out of the car. My heart aches painfully in my chest as I watch the last of Reeve’s luggage being stowed on the Studio 27 private jet. The studio producing the movie

has arranged transport to collect Reeve from Logan International Airport and take him to the hotel he'll be calling home for the next six weeks. Thereafter, they are filming on location in different parts of Massachusetts, and he'll be living between his trailer and temporary hotels.

“Good luck, son,” my dad says, pulling Reeve into a hug. “We’re rooting for you.”

“Enjoy the experience, honey,” my mom says, wresting Reeve away from my dad. She kisses both his cheeks, one at a time, while taking his hands in hers. “And I’m only a phone call away if you need me. I know from personal experience how daunting it can be, so call any time, day or night.”

It’s not Reeve’s first time on a movie set. We hung around different sets all the time as kids. Plus, he has had some small walk-on parts in a few popular TV shows over the years, and he nabbed a decent part in a Netflix movie last year. But this is the first time he’s the lead actor in a big-budget Hollywood production that has already garnered massive interest, and the pressure is real; the responsibility is intense.

“Just focus on the work,” his dad says, awkwardly shaking Reeve’s hand. “Don’t let anything distract you.”

Reeve nods, and my heart falters when he reaches out to hug his father. Simon’s hands hang at his sides, and pain rips through my chest as I watch my boyfriend with his arms around his father, knowing he’s silently pleading for him to hug him back. I almost cry out in relief when Simon lifts his arms and embraces him.

How can it be so difficult for him to love his son?

Reeve is an amazing guy, and he has never given him any trouble. He’s put up with his father’s long absences and pitiful womanizing. Plenty of other guys our age would resort to alcohol or drugs or sex to cope with the internal pain, but Reeve has channeled all his emotions into his acting, taking something negative and turning it into something positive. I’d like to think I’ve helped too, but I can’t take much credit. Reeve is strong and so determined.

I know part of his desire to succeed is the hope his father will one day look at him with pride.

Every time he tells me this, I struggle not to break down and cry.

Simon Lancaster has every reason to be proud of his son now, and I don’t know why he denies him that truth.

Mom bundles me in her arms as we watch father and son hug, and I cling to her like a limpet. This is emotional, on many different levels, and I'm barely holding it together. Their embrace is not a long embrace, but it's an embrace all the same, and I'm glad Simon could do this one thing for him.

"You've done well, Reeve," Simon says, when they break apart. "Your mother would be so proud of you."

I shuck out of Mom's arms, wrapping mine around my boyfriend, feeling his body shudder as those words sink bone-deep.

"We're *all* proud of you." Mom squeezes his shoulder.

"You need to board the plane, or it will have to leave without you." Simon shoots me an apologetic look.

"I love you," Reeve rasps, holding me so tight I can scarcely breathe.

"I love you too," I cry, uncaring that our parents are witness to this.

Grabbing my face, he plants a hard kiss on my lips. "Stay strong, babe."

I nod, sniffing.

He kisses me again before pulling away, striding toward the steps leading up to the private plane with my gift tucked under his arm.

"Be epic, babe," I call out after him. "And know I'm cheering for you every step of the way."

He turns around and blows me a kiss. I jump up, cradling it in my hand, and he smiles.

A heavy pressure sits on my chest as I watch his dark head disappear into the plane, and it feels like my heart is shattering into a thousand pieces. The steps retreat, and the door closes, taking my love away from me. An errant sob escapes my lips, and I'm struggling to breathe normally over the massive lump clogging my throat.

In a surprising move, Simon circles his arm around my shoulders, giving me a comforting squeeze. He probably thinks I'm a complete basket case, and I'm sure my parents think I'm overreacting.

But as I watch the plane take off, flying my boyfriend to the other side of the US, I can't help worrying that everything is changing, and not for the better. I *am* proud of Reeve, and excited for his career, but there's this kernel of doubt, taking up space inside my head and my heart, trying to prepare me for a future we haven't planned.

I can't explain it.

Maybe it's a sixth sense or it's paranoia, but it's enough to have me trembling with fear and twisted into knots. I sincerely hope we are strong enough to weather whatever storm is on the horizon, because I already know that things will not be the same by the time he returns.

And it's those thoughts that keep me up all night in the immediate aftermath of his leaving.

Tucking my hands under my head, I turn on my side, staring at the photo of Reeve and me with a tight pain in my chest. The pain is always there. It never goes away. It's like this dull, constant ache in my chest, serving to remind me that half of my heart is over two and a half thousand miles away in Boston.

These past five weeks have been the longest five weeks of my life. I knew this would be hard, but it's even harder than I imagined. I only get to speak to Reeve for a few minutes each day because he's usually exhausted by the time he gets back to his hotel room at night. Early morning calls are a no-no thanks to the three-hour time difference. Between the grueling twelve-hour days on set and his daily two-hour workouts with the personal trainer the studio hired for Reeve and a couple of the other male actors, he is crazy busy, and he doesn't have much downtime.

I don't complain. I wait patiently in my room with my cell in my hand every night at eight to hear his voice. Some nights, he's high on the scenes they filmed that day, and I just sit and listen to his exuberant voice. Other nights, he's too tired to even speak, so I regale him with news of my day.

He tells me he loves me and misses me, and he sends flowers every Monday morning, wishing me a great week. I sent him a care package last week filled with his favorite snacks, a Stella Adler acting book, a sketch I drew of the *Rydeville Elite* book covers, a funny "Yoda Best Actor" mug, a towel with "Future Oscar Winner" written on it, and a batch of homemade chocolate chip cookies. Mom taught Reeve and me how to bake cookies

when we were eight, using a recipe handed down in her family through the generations, but it's been years since either of us has baked cookies.

I'm feeling nostalgic and a little fragile, and maybe it is my subconscious wanting to remind Reeve of our history.

The cast has been hanging out on set and in their hotel rooms, and they post pics regularly on social media. I know it's a way of building buzz for the movie, but my stomach lurches every time a new photo is shared when I see Saffron sitting and laughing beside Reeve. She's *always* right by his side, and even though there are no obvious signs of anything between them, it still twists my stomach into knots.

Jealousy is not a new emotion for me. For years, girls at school have chased Reeve, but it never bothered me too much, because I knew he had no interest in them and I was secure in his love. It should be the same now, because he has done nothing to elicit these lingering fears in my mind. But I can't help how I feel. Saffron is beautiful and talented, and she's experiencing the start of what I know will be a wild ride with Reeve. I can't help feeling my boring stories of mundane life in L.A. are highlighting all the ways in which Reeve and I are on different paths.

My fingers curl around the diamond-encrusted silver locket hanging around my neck, and I hold it tight, needing to remind myself he loves me. I have to stop being jealous and trust in my man and our love. I pop the locket open, and tears prick my eyes as I stare at the picture of Reeve and me. It's another photo taken that weekend at Big Bear. Only this time, we're in bed, hugging and laughing, with our arms wrapped around one another. This was Reeve's going away gift, and I laughed when I realized how in sync we were with our parting gifts. I haven't taken the locket off for even a second, and it helps to have some physical proof of his love.

A knock sounds on my door, and I lift my chin as Mom pokes her head into my room. "Good morning, birthday girl," she coos, smiling as she steps into the room. Dad follows her, holding a ginormous bouquet of flowers.

"Happy birthday, princess." Dad hands the bouquet to me as I sit up in the bed.

"Thanks, Dad. These are beautiful." I bury my face in the gorgeous flowers, smiling when I spot a few lavender roses.

"I would like to take the credit, but I think Reeve might have something to say about that." He chuckles as I rip the card from the small envelope, reading the message from my boyfriend.

Happy 18th birthday, baby. I wish I could be there to smother you with birthday kisses, but I am there in spirit—can you feel my lips worshiping your mouth? Love you always. Miss you, Reeve.

I swipe at the tears that automatically pool in my eyes.

“No tears.” Mom hands me a tissue. “If anyone gets to cry today, it’s me.” She sniffles, and her eyes well up.

“Don’t cry, Mom.” I reach out and envelop her in a hug. “I’ll never stop the waterworks if you start.”

She eases back, clasping my face in her hands. “I can’t believe you are eighteen. It seems like it has happened in the blink of an eye.”

Dad sits on the other side of Mom, leaning in to kiss me on the cheek. “You have given us so much joy, Vivien. You were the miracle we prayed for, and no parent could ask for a better daughter. You are the sweetest, kindest, most beautiful girl with a big compassionate heart, and we are so very proud of you.”

“You forgot intelligent and talented,” Mom says, laughing softly as she brushes tears from her cheeks.

Emotion weaves around my heart, and it feels fit to burst. I know how much Mom and Dad wanted kids and how difficult it was for them to conceive. Then Mom had a succession of miscarriages before getting pregnant with me. They tried for more kids after I was born, but she never got pregnant again. I think, if it wasn’t for Reeve, and the fact he’s like a surrogate son, they would have adopted. Warmth spreads across my chest as I wrap an arm around each of my parents. “If I’m all that, it’s because I had the best role models. Thank you for being the best parents a girl could have.”

“Lord.” Mom waves her hands in front of her beautiful face. “It’s entirely too early for all this emotion.” She laughs again while tucking strands of her lustrous black hair behind her ears. “We thought we would take you to breakfast.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Maybe you can drive us in your new car.” Dad hands me a rectangular black box. His hazel eyes—so similar to my own—sparkle with happiness and excitement.

My heart is pounding as I open the box, squealing when I see the Mercedes-Benz keyring. “No way!” I lift excited eyes to my parents. “You didn’t get me a Mercedes AMG GT!”

Mom winks, and her green eyes are tearing up again. “We did.”

I clamp a hand over my mouth. “Oh my God. This is too much.” We have a garage full of cars and SUVs outside, but my parents know I’ve been salivating for an AMG since I got my first permit. I never thought in a million years they would get me one, because they are careful not to spoil me too much. They have instilled in me the value of money, and I know how fortunate I am to have grown up not wanting for anything. “So much for not spoiling me,” I murmur, unable to contain my grin.

“It’s a special occasion, and we figure if you enjoy driving it we’ll see more of you once you leave for UCLA.” UCLA isn’t far from my parents’ house, and even with the shitty L.A. traffic, the daily commute would be manageable. However, Reeve and I want the full student experience, including living away from home. We plan on finding accommodations close to the campus, and we’ll start actively looking as soon as Reeve is back home.

“You guys are the best.” I squeeze my parents before jumping up to get dressed.

My sadness at Reeve’s absence is relegated to the sidelines as I drive my parents to breakfast in my brand-new car.

My heart is swollen with emotion, and my hand shakes as I hold my cell, watching Reeve’s very public, very romantic, birthday message for the umpteenth time. He posted it four hours ago, and it’s already had over two million views. I have lost count of the number of times I’ve watched it, and my eyes turn watery every single time.

As well as flowers, he sent me a massive box filled with gifts, including a diamond-encrusted heart bracelet to match my locket, a stunning black and gold Chanel purse, a bunch of Victoria’s Secret lingerie that made me

blush, and a stunning Charlotte Tilbury makeup set. I nearly keeled over when I opened the box, and I'm blown away by how much thought and effort he went to for my birthday.

I would trade every gift just to have him in my arms for the night, but he has still managed to make me feel like the most treasured woman on the planet, and it goes a long way toward dispelling the jealous doubts I've been harboring.

"Man, Reeve's so pussy-whipped I'm embarrassed for him," Nate supplies from somewhere behind me.

"Shut the fuck up." Audrey flips him the bird. "I'm trying to listen."

"Babe, you're starting to give me a complex." Alex props his butt on the edge of the couch in our living room. Outside, the band is getting set up in the massive marquee Mom had erected on the grounds of our house. I had considered renting a club in downtown L.A. for my party, but I don't want any paparazzi sniffing around. Plus, if we had the party in a club, we'd be forced to drink soda all night. We have stashed a supply of beer and vodka in the garden, and the rents have promised to leave us to our own devices once the music starts, so that's when the party will really start.

"If it means you raise your game, I'm not sorry I'm obsessed with Reeve's message." Audrey winks at her boyfriend, moving the recording back to the start so we can watch it again.

Reeve is shirtless, sitting cross-legged in gray sweatpants on his hotel bed, looking so fucking gorgeous, I wish I could transport there through my cell and jump his bones. His hair is damp, and a few beads of water cling to his ripped upper torso confirming he's not long out of the shower.

Is it weird to be envious of those little water droplets? Because I am.

I can almost hear the collective drooling of females as he flashes a wide grin at the camera, showcasing his perfect set of teeth as he talks.

"Hey, guys. Today is a very special day, because on this day eighteen years ago, the most important person in my life was born." He holds up a baby picture of me, and if it wasn't so cute, I'd yell at my mom for sending him that. Audrey grips my hand as we watch and listen together. "I wouldn't be the man I am today if it wasn't for this gorgeous, smart, funny, compassionate, loving woman," he adds, replacing the baby picture with a picture of us from his birthday in January. Our arms are around one another, and we're smiling at the camera. "Have you ever loved someone so much it physically pains you to be apart from them?" he asks, rubbing a hand across

his impressive chest. “As much as I am loving bringing Camden Marshall to life, I am missing my baby so much.”

He leans in closer to the screen, and hearts are breaking all over the US. “I love you, Viv. You are the best thing to ever happen to me, and I don’t even care that the guys are going to give me shit for this.” He blows me a kiss, and I melt onto the couch. “You are my world, and I wish I could be there to hug you and kiss you. Only twenty-seven days until I see you again. I can’t wait. Till then, have the happiest of birthdays, my love.” He blows me another kiss before ending the recording, and I flop back on the couch with the biggest smug grin on my face.

“**Y**ou so need to up your game, Alex.” Audrey attempts to scowl at her boyfriend, but she’s wearing a dazed dreamy expression that I suspect isn’t much different from mine. She leans in, pressing her mouth to my ear. “I really don’t think you have anything to worry about. He just professed his love for you in front of the world, and there’s no denying the sincerity of his message. Honestly, I think I’m half in love with Reeve now myself.”

I laugh, nudging her in the ribs as I start scrolling through the comments. “That had better be a joke. Hands off my man.” I’m smiling as I read through the fan messages, but it doesn’t take too long for my smile to fade. A lot of the messages are swooning, mentioning how romantic Reeve is, and how lucky I am, but there are nasty comments too from girls who think I’m not pretty enough for Reeve, and there are a few comments stating Reeve should be with Saffron and not with me.

My good mood evaporates, and a familiar pain spreads across my chest.

“Don’t read them.” Audrey snatches my cell, slipping it in my purse. “They’re just jealous hos.”

We head out to the marquee after that, and I force myself to relax and enjoy the party. Everyone I invited from school is here, and now my parents have left us alone, the alcohol is flowing, and we’re working up a sweat on the dance floor. The band is amazing, and I’m having a great time until stupid Nate McAndrews opens his big mouth. “Hey, sexy,” he says, throwing his arm around my shoulders. “How come Reeve deleted the video?” he asks, his beer breath fanning across my face.

“What?” I shout in his ear, sure I must have misheard him.

“It’s gone from all his profiles.” He arches a brow. “You didn’t know?”

I have tried calling Reeve several times, but he’s obviously working late. I sent him a pic of me in the sexy black lace bra and thong set he sent me, as well as a picture of me in my party dress. I designed and made the black minidress with a gold and emerald trim that brings out the green flecks in my hazel eyes. The dress is short, emphasizing my long legs. I left my hair down and styled it in soft curls, just the way Reeve likes it. Mom hired her makeup artist to do our makeup, and I asked her to use the makeup Reeve bought me. It might seem silly, but it makes me feel closer to him.

I hate that I haven’t actually spoken to him yet, and my birthday will officially be over in three hours, but I know he’ll call or message me whenever he can.

“It’s true,” Audrey says, showing me her phone. Reeve’s Insta profile is displayed on her screen, and the video post is nowhere to be seen. “Maybe he spotted the nasty comments and took it down.”

That must be it, I think as my cell vibrates in the pocket of my dress. My lips pull into a smile, and a relieved breath escapes my mouth when I see it’s my boyfriend. “Hang on a sec,” I shout into the phone, rushing across the marquee. “It’s loud as fuck and I can’t even hear myself think.”

Reeve chuckles, and the sound does funny things to my insides.

“That’s better,” I say, as soon as I’m outside. The cooler air is like a balm to my hot skin, so I don’t mind the slight breeze wafting around me. “Hey, baby,” I purr. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too, and I wish I was there.”

“Thank you so much for my flowers and the gifts, and that video message was beautiful. I tear up every time I look at it.”

“I sent it to you privately since I was forced to take it down from social media,” he admits, adding, “I hope you don’t mind.”

“What do you mean you were *forced* to take it down? By who? Did Bianca make you do it?” I knew there was a reason I took an instant dislike to his agent.

His sigh trickles down the line. “It wasn’t Bianca. It was Cassidy. She’s been hired to handle PR for the movie, and she threw a massive hissy fit.”

“Why?”

There's a pregnant pause. "I guess it doesn't look good I have a girlfriend."

Unease slithers through my veins. I'm not stupid. I've been expecting this, but it still hurts. "Oh," I quietly say.

"It's probably for the best. Some of the comments were nasty. The last thing I want is you becoming a target for crazy bitches."

Loud music mixed with noisy chatter fills the line, and I frown. "What was that?"

"Someone just opened the door."

"Opened the door where? Aren't you at your hotel?"

"We're at a club. We worked late tonight, and a few of us decided to go out for drinks." Reeve is the youngest of the main acting crew with most of his costars being in their early twenties and legally able to attend clubs and drink alcohol. I am guessing the PR person pulled some strings to get Reeve in, and I'm sure his costars are sliding a few beers his way.

"Dude," a male says in the background. "We're going to head back to the hotel bar."

"Okay," Reeve says.

"Wait. Is that your girlfriend?" another guy says, and there's a few seconds of muffled talk.

"Happy birthday, Vivien," the stranger says down the line.

"Thanks. And you are?"

A deep chuckle tickles my eardrums. "I'm Rudy. Hasn't Reeve told you anything about me? I'm offended, man," he says, clearly talking to Reeve. "And here I thought we had the bromance of the century."

"Don't sweat it, Rudy," I say. "He's told me all about you, including how you enjoy pranking everyone on set." Rudy had a main role in a popular Netflix show last year, and he's garnered quite a following. With his blond hair, blue eyes, flirtatious manner, and jokey personality, he is the perfect choice to play Jackson Lauder. And just like Camden and Jackson are friends in the *Rydeville Elite* books, Reeve and Rudy have become close too.

"Did he tell you about the lube in his sneakers?" Rudy asks, clearly smothering laughter.

I giggle. "He did, and he also told me how you swapped the sugar for salt and put toothpaste in his shampoo."

"I still owe you for that," Reeve says, sounding distant. "Give me that."

“My turn,” a high-pitched clearly feminine voice says, and I gulp over the sudden lump in my throat.

“Hey, Vivien. It’s Saffron. Happy birthday! Did you like the lingerie I helped Reeve pick?”

What?!?! All the blood drains from my face, and I’m grappling for a response that doesn’t involve me screaming at her to stay away from my man.

“Viv?” she asks, and my natural instinct is to snap that she has no right to call me that.

“You went shopping with Reeve?” I finally manage to say, trying to ignore the anxious fluttering in my chest. My heart is racing so fast I can feel it thudding against my rib cage in panic.

“We did it online one night after work. That photo he has by his bed is so sweet. You make a cute couple.”

Words are spoken in the background, but she must have her hand over the phone because I can’t hear. Or maybe the sirens blaring warning signals in my head are drowning everything out.

“I’ve got to go, but I’m so looking forward to meeting you. Buh-bye,” she says, as I fight a full-body shiver and narrowly resist the urge to throw up the vodka shots I’ve consumed.

“Hey, it’s me,” Reeve says, sounding a little sheepish.

And so he should. “Why was she in your hotel room, and were you in hers?” I hiss.

“Babe, calm down.” His cool tone only pisses me off more.

“You let her choose lingerie for me?” My voice elevates a few notches as anger comeslingles with fear and hurt and a ton of other emotions.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“I’m glad you realize how bad it sounds,” I snap, pacing back and forth across the lawn.

“Don’t overreact, Viv.”

And that’s like waving a red flag in front of a bull. “Don’t tell me not to overreact! You know how I feel about her, and yet you spend time with her in a hotel room and let her pick an intimate gift for my birthday. How the fuck do you expect me to react?” I shout.

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.” He lowers his voice. “How much have you had to drink?”

“How much have you?” I retort.

“Our car is here. I have to go. We’ll talk again tomorrow when you’ve calmed down.”

The fucking nerve of him to try to turn this back around on me. I have every right to my feelings, and he should be bending over backward to apologize. “Reeve. Don’t you dare hang up on me.”

“I love you, Viv. We’ll talk soon. Go back to your party.”

There’s a click and then silence. I stare at my cell in utter shock and disbelief. Rage simmers in my veins as my brain struggles to comprehend how my boyfriend just hung up on me mid-argument.

“Hey.” Audrey tugs on my arm, her brow creasing with worry. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie, flashing her a fake smile. I can’t tell her now as I’m liable to burst into tears, and I refuse to cry at my party or give the salacious crowd any ammunition for gossip. “I need more vodka. I’m way too sober right now.” Nothing sobers a person like emotional anguish. I need to numb the pain and silent my screaming mind.

Two hours later, I’ve accomplished my mission, and I can barely stand up straight as we dance to the intoxicating beats the DJ is playing. “You need water,” Audrey says, when I stumble into her. The room spins as she grabs me and leads us off the dance floor.

“He’s probably fucking her right now,” I slur, swiping at the tears leaking from my eyes.

“You need to tell me what’s going on,” she says, guiding me toward our table.

“That fucking bitch picked my lingerie.” Anger rips through me as my brain latches on to another thought. “I bet she chose my purse and makeup too.”

“Hold up here a sec.” Audrey stops walking, turning around so she’s facing me. “Are you telling me Reeve got *Saffron Roberts* to buy your birthday gifts?”

I nod, and tears prick my eyes again. God, I’m such a basket case, and I need to get myself together.

“Oh, babe.” Her expression floods with sympathy. “I get why you’re pissed. I would be too. But I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything other than he’s a thoughtless moron.”

“I don’t want to talk about him,” I whisper. “It hurts too much.” I stumble as nausea swirls in my gut, bending over while I clutch my stomach. “I don’t feel so hot.”

“Let’s get some water into you.” She helps me into a chair, scowling at the almost empty table. Her eyes scan the heaving dance floor, looking for Alex, no doubt. “You.” She jabs her finger in Nate’s direction. He’s slumped over the table across from me, and I’m betting he feels about as good as I feel.

“Go away, Rey,” he mumbles, giving her his middle finger.

“Watch our birthday girl while I’m at the bar. I’ll grab you a bottle of water too,” she adds before pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Stay put. I’ll get some water and some food. I’ll be right back.”

I nod before closing my eyes. Everything swims, and nausea twists in my gut, so I whip my eyes open, blinking excessively to clear the spiraling dizziness from my head, and try to focus my blurry vision.

Warmth ghosts over my skin as a body presses against my thigh and an arm encircles my shoulders. “It’s okay, babe,” Nate slurs. “I’ll look after you.”

I’d snort if I wasn’t so drunk. “I don’t need anyone to look after me. I can look after myself,” I lie, struggling to keep my eyes open. The room is out of focus—the mass of bodies dancing and making out on the dance floor is a mess of wriggly shapeless forms.

“You look sad,” Nate slurs. “Why d’you look sad? No one should be sad on their birthday.”

I’m barely aware as my face is tilted around. Nate’s features are fuzzy as he stares at me. Wet lips glide against mine, and for a few seconds, I’m confused until I realize Nate fucking McAndrews is kissing me. I swat at his chest, feebly pushing him away. “Get off me!”

“What the actual fuck?” Audrey shouts, depositing stuff on the table before yanking Nate away from me. He falls to the sticky wooden floor, cussing like a sailor. “You need to crawl the fuck away like the slithery snake you are before I stomp all over your manhood with my Jimmy Choos,” Audrey threatens, looming over him.

Pain darts through my skull, and I wince, cradling my head in my hands. Nausea swims up my throat, and I gag. “Audrey,” I moan. “I’m gonna be sick.”

Ignoring the asshole on the floor, she helps me to stand, circling her arm around my back and practically dragging me out of the marquee. Alex appears, cursing when he sees the state of me. “Fuck. Reeve will have my head for this. I promised I’d look out for her.”

“Reeve can kiss my ass,” I murmur before bending over and emptying the contents of my stomach into the nearest bush. Audrey holds my hair back as I violently vomit until there’s nothing left to expel. I slump against her while pawing at my sweat-slickened overheated skin, needing to strip out of my clothes and crawl into bed until I fall into a coma. “Bed,” I mumble. “I need my bed.”

“I’ve got you,” Alex says, scooping me up into his arms. My eyes shutter, and the world turns dark.

A dull pounding in my skull rouses me from slumber the following morning, and I whimper as I turn over in the bed and my stomach twists painfully. My lips are dry, my tongue is glued to the roof of my parched mouth, and the lingering scent of puke invades my nostrils, making me gag.

“Oh God. Are you going to be sick again?” Audrey asks as the bed dips.

I force my eyes open, wincing at the bright light filtering through the open curtains. “I don’t think so,” I croak, but I really need to pee and erase this vomit taste from my mouth. Pulling myself upright in the bed takes colossal effort, and my body feels like it’s done ten rounds with Amanda Nunes in the ring. Glancing down at myself, I notice I’m in my underwear. Sight of the sexy bra and thong brings everything to the surface, and a sob rips from my mouth.

“Hey.” Audrey rubs my arm. “It’s going to be okay.”

I turn to face her with glassy eyes. “What happened? How did I get here, and why are you in my bed and not Alex’s?”

She yawns, before sitting up against the headboard. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Getting shitfaced and dancing. After that it’s a blur.”

“You were completely trashed, so Alex and I got you out of there. You puked your guts up in the garden, and I decided to stay with you. I was worried you might puke in your sleep. Alex stayed in one of the guest bedrooms.” She averts her eyes, plucking at the comforter.

“What aren’t you saying?” I ask, because I can tell she’s concealing something.

“Go freshen up, and we’ll talk when you come back.”

I have no energy to argue, so I grab some clean pajamas from my drawer before entering my en suite bathroom. I pee, brush my teeth, and rinse with mouthwash before hopping in the shower. I take my time washing away the excesses of the night while I contemplate everything that happened. Resting my forehead against the tile, I let the warm water cascade down my back as pain infiltrates every nook and cranny of my body.

I can’t believe Reeve let Saffron choose my birthday gifts. I’m convinced she had a hand in more than just the lingerie. Reeve has never bought me makeup before, and I’m sure that was her handiwork too. I feel ill thinking about the picture I sent him of me in the underwear. Ugh. I wish I could take it back. As soon as the marching band stops playing the samba in my head, I’m taking the lingerie and makeup out back and burning all of it. How could he let her choose such intimate items for me?

Tears stream down my face, mixing with the water, and my heart hurts so much I’m in immense physical pain. My tears turn into full-blown sobs, and then Audrey is there, turning off the shower and wrapping me in a towel. I slump to the floor of my bathroom, pulling my knees up to my chest as I cry. “How could he do this?”

“You need to talk to him.”

I have no idea where my cell is or if he even tried calling me back. “It’s not just the gifts,” I sob. “It’s also how he went out partying with his friends and almost missed talking to me on my birthday. I thought he hadn’t called because he was working really late, but he was out drinking and laughing with his new friends, and I was just an afterthought.”

“You don’t know that.” Audrey gently towel-dries my hair. “Reeve loves you, Viv. Look at everything he did yesterday to prove it to you.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I deadpan as my tears dry up. “He ruined everything. None of it means anything now.” I rub at my nose as I turn to face her. “He told me I was overreacting, and he hung up on me.” Tears

pool in my eyes again. “He has never done that to me. Ever.” Shock splays across her face, and it’s good to know I’m not the only one who thinks this is out of character for my boyfriend. “He’s changing,” I whisper. “He’s already changing, and I don’t like it.”

A knock at the door interrupts us. “Viv,” Alex calls out. “Is Audrey in there with you?”

“I’m here,” Audrey replies.

“You need to get out here. There’s something you need to see, and Reeve has been trying to get a hold of you, Viv. You need to call him.”

Audrey slips out of the room to talk to her boyfriend while I finish drying myself. I get dressed and drag a comb quickly through my hair before tying it into a messy bun on top of my head. It will be a mass of tangles, but I don’t care. It’s not like I have plans to do anything today except wallow in my bed, watching sad movies and eating my body weight in ice cream.

When I open the door, Alex and Audrey are arguing in hushed tones.

“What’s going on?” A new layer of anxiety settles on my chest.

Audrey’s tongue darts out, wetting her lips, in a clear nervous tell. “You need to be sitting for this, babe.”

I crawl into my bed, tucking my knees to my chest and pulling the covers up over me. “What is it?”

Audrey moves up beside me while Alex sits on the edge of the bed, wearing an odd expression.

She squeezes my hand. “You don’t remember, but that idiot Nate put the moves on you last night.”

I blink profusely, tugging at my ears, sure I must be hearing things. “What?” I fix her with an incredulous expression.

“He kissed you as I was coming back to the table. I saw it go down. You were out of it, and he was wasted, so I have no idea if it was intentional or not, but he kissed you and...you didn’t push him away immediately.”

Horror washes over me. “I would *never* kiss Nate or any other guy,” I shriek. “Never.” My eyes fly to Alex’s, understanding now why he was giving me a funny look. “I love Reeve, and I have no desire to kiss anyone else! I know Reeve and I were fighting, but I would never do something like that to hurt him. Never. You’ve got to believe me,” I plead.

“I believe you,” Alex says, his shoulders relaxing a smidgeon.

“I was drunk off my ass, and it must have taken a few seconds to register with me,” I continue, grappling to understand how I let this happen. My hands clench into balls. “I am going to kill Nate!”

“You really are,” Alex adds, holding his cell out to me. “Because someone recorded it and it’s all over social media.”

“**N**o. No, no, no, no.” I clasp a hand over my mouth as I stare at the recording in horror. When I find out who did this, they are going to wish they had never been born. It looks so bad, because it’s been edited to just show the kiss, so you can’t tell that I’m trashed and completely ignorant of what’s going on. It’s also recorded in slow motion so it looks like the kiss lasts way longer than it did. Audrey saw it go down, and she says it lasted about five seconds, max, yet this makes it look like we shared a long, lingering kiss.

What’s worse is they tagged Reeve on the post, and the barrage of angry comments and vile insults pours more salt on the ugly wound. I look up at Alex. “Please tell me he hasn’t seen this?”

His lips pull into a grimace, and his eyes shine with sympathy.

Oh my God. What must Reeve be thinking? My stomach heaves, and I race into the bathroom, reaching the toilet in the nick of time. I dry retch, my empty stomach contorting painfully as I try to expunge my fear.

“Come on, babe.” Audrey helps me up after I slump over the toilet bowl. “Rinse your mouth out, and come back to the bedroom. You’re going to call Reeve and fix everything.”

Like a zombie, I brush my teeth, staring at my washed-out complexion in the mirror. I look like death warmed over. My hair is a knotty, damp mess on top of my head. I have dark circles under my eyes, my lips are cracked, and my hazel eyes have lost all their sparkle. I look as hollow as I feel.

I trudge out to my bedroom, silently accepting the bottle of water from Audrey. “Do you want us to stay here while you call Reeve?” she asks, and

I notice she found my cell and has plugged it in. It vibrates with a succession of notifications.

“He probably won’t be able to take the call,” I say, noticing it’s after noon which means it’s three in Boston. “He’ll be in the middle of filming.”

She gets up to leave. “Stay.” I grab her arm.

“I’m going to see about breakfast.” Alex rocks back on his heels.

Audrey nods, and he exits my bedroom as I pull my big-girl pants on and scroll through my notifications. I have thousands of tags on social media, and I’m not even going to look at them. “Wow. You have a million new followers,” Audrey says, looking over my shoulder.

“It’s not anything good, I assure you.” I open my inbox, looking at all the missed calls from Reeve. They start from three a.m. my time, which means he must have seen the recording first thing when he woke up. I’m too chicken to listen to all the messages, but I need to know what I’m dealing with, so I open his last one, left at eight a.m. my time, putting it on speaker. I have no secrets from Audrey, and, frankly, I need her support to listen to this. She puts her arms around me, and I rest my head on her shoulder.

“For fuck’s sake, Vivien, answer your damn phone!” Reeve’s frustration bleeds into his tone. “I can’t believe you did this. You didn’t even give me a chance to explain before you sought comfort from Nate of all fucking people! Do you know how stupid you made me look?! I look like a fucking idiot pining for you, posting how much I love you, and a few hours later, everyone sees you kissing that asshole. You have made me look like a damn fool!” he yells, and I flinch. “I’m so fucking disappointed in you.” There’s a pregnant pause, and his rapid breathing is the only sound. It’s unlike Reeve to curse so much, and it’s an indication of how angry and upset he is. I hate that I’ve done this to him, but he’s not entirely blameless either. “Do I even know you at all?” His voice cracks a little, and while it’s a relief, I’m also consumed with guilt that I’ve made a bad situation worse. I shouldn’t have gotten drunk and lost control like that. I should have waited until today and called Reeve to talk about what he did. Now, it’s a million times worse, and not only have I made him look foolish, I’ve just garnered a whole army of angry Reeve fans. “I’ve got to get back, and I don’t have another break. Call me tonight.” Air whooshes out of his mouth. “Or don’t. I...I...I can’t deal with this right now.”

The message ends abruptly, and I toss my cell aside, folding my arms around Audrey, needing her comfort.

“He’s angry.”

“No shit, Captain Obvious,” I deadpan. “I’m angry too. At him. At Nate. At me.”

“Nope.” She grabs my arms, and I straighten up. “You have done nothing wrong. *Nothing*. You hear me?”

“I shouldn’t have gotten trashed.”

She cocks her head to one side. “It didn’t help, but he hurt you. I get wanting to drown your sorrows, and if you hadn’t been drunk, Nate’s lips wouldn’t have come even close to yours. But it’s not your fault that he took advantage of you. And it’s not your fault some asshole recorded it and tried to stir shit. Just like it’s not your fault Reeve got that bitch to choose your birthday gifts or hung up on you.”

“This is such a mess.” I wrap my arms around my middle. “What am I going to do?”

“We’re going to get dressed, have breakfast, send Alex over to beat the shit out of Nate, and then we’re going to make calls and find out what little idiot posted that recording and get them to take it down.”

“I have a better idea,” I say, standing. “I’m going to talk to Mom. Her publicist has a guy they use to remove stuff from the internet. I bet he can help, and it’ll be quicker than us playing Holmes and Watson.”

“Okay. You go talk to your mom and I’ll find Alex and get breakfast on the table.”

“I’m sorry this has happened to you, honey, and of course I’ll help, but you’ll need to toughen up.” Mom wipes at the moisture on my cheeks. “I don’t mean that to sound cold. I know you feel things deeply. Reeve does too. But you must develop a thicker skin, because it’s only going to get worse. There will be haters and people who would love nothing more than to take you down and break you two up. You can’t give them that power.”

“How do you do it?” I ask.

“I don’t look at the nasty comments or read any of the rumors on those horrid gossip sites. When I’m confronted with it face to face, I kill the

person with kindness. It usually throws them off sufficiently to silence them. But most importantly, I trust your father and let our love build a protective wall around me that no one can tear down. I know we've been doing this a lot longer, and we're rock solid now, but we have been where you are now, and it's not easy." She clasps my hands in hers. "Open communication is key. You need to get a hold of Reeve as soon as you can and talk to him about it. Get it all off your chests, and you'll both feel better."

"Thanks, Mom." I let her envelop me in her arms.

"I hate seeing you so upset, and do we need to have a talk about alcohol consumption?"

I shake my head. "Trust me, I learned that lesson the hard way."

"Go and eat breakfast with your friends while I make a few phone calls. I'll have that recording removed within a few hours and details of the culprit."

"I love you, Mom." I squeeze her tighter.

"I love you too."

A few hours later, Mom finds us in the sunroom, listening to music and chatting. I left a tearful message for Reeve promising to call him later once he's finished filming, and Alex went over to Nate's house and roughed him up a little. He's been blowing up my phone too, but I blocked him. According to Alex, the kiss was his pathetic attempt at cheering me up because I looked sad.

"It's gone," Mom says, depositing a tray with iced tea and cookies on the coffee table. "And the person who posted it has been sent legal correspondence. He'll be shitting his pants for months," she adds with a knowing smile.

Alex barks out a laugh. "Remind me to never get on your bad side, Mrs. Mills."

"Don't hurt my daughter, or Audrey, and you don't have anything to worry about, Alexander."

"Who was it?" I ask, and she falters.

"I think it's best you don't know. It's been dealt with."

I rise, facing her. "Mom. Have you forgotten what high school is like? This is all anyone is going to be talking about next week in school. I need to know who's behind it; otherwise, I look like an even bigger fool."

“If I tell you, you have to promise you won’t do anything.” Her eyes roam over my head to Alex and Audrey. “That goes for you two as well.”

I don’t like lying to my mom, but I need to know who did this, and I can’t make promises I’m unsure I can keep. Right now, I want to throttle whoever did this with my bare hands. “We won’t do anything,” I lie, looking her dead straight in the eye.

“It was Randy Jennings,” she confirms, and Audrey and I share a puzzled look as I wrack my brains to visualize the guy she’s talking about.

“Shit.”

Audrey and I whip our heads around to Alex.

“You know him?” Audrey asks.

Alex nods. “He’s Tyson’s twin brother.” Tyson plays on the football team with Alex.

“Why would he want to stir shit?” It’s not like anyone that goes to our illustrious private school would need to do it for money. I was expecting it to be someone who hates me and wants to split me and Reeve up, so this makes no sense.

Alex purses his lips, and frowns, as he considers it. His eyes darken a few seconds later before they find mine. “He’s dating Marnie Gibson. She’s behind this.”

“Who is Marnie Gibson?” Mom asks.

“She played Juliet against Reeve’s Romeo,” I remind her.

“Ah, now it makes sense.” She’s aware of how badly Marnie was crushing on Reeve. How she kept shoving her tongue into his mouth during the kissing scenes, and how she waged a campaign of war against me for a solid year, until Reeve reported her for harassment to the principal and she was given a warning.

“Can we use this to get her poisonous ass expelled this time?” Audrey asks, looking as angry as I feel.

“I doubt it. It was a private party, and it’s not like she forced Nate into kissing me.” I turn my head toward Alex as an unwelcome thought lodges in my mind. “Does she have anything on Nate? Was this a setup?”

He shakes his head. “I really don’t think he was put up to this. Everyone knows he has the biggest hard-on for you.”

Mom clears her throat, sending Alex a pointed look.

Red heat creeps up Alex’s neck and onto his cheeks. “Apologies, Mrs. Mills. I kind of forgot you were in the room.”

“I think that’s my cue to leave.” Mom kisses my cheek. “Don’t do anything about this. You only have a few weeks until you graduate. Don’t let that little bitch ruin it for you. The best revenge you can get is to fix things with Reeve and present a united front. Ignore her at school, which will annoy her to no end.” It is good advice and, hopefully, once this burning desire to rip her limb from limb subsides, it is advice I can take.

I'm shaking with fear as I press the button to call Reeve later that night. He doesn't answer, and I'm fearful he's avoiding me. Curling into a ball on my bed, I clutch my cell in my hand, trying to talk myself off a ledge. He's probably just running late, and he'll call me back as soon as he can. Ten minutes later, my cell vibrates, and I quell the urge to hurl my dinner when I see his gorgeous face flashing across the ringing screen. Rubbing a hand over my queasy tummy, I answer his FaceTime call.

"I'm sorry," we both say in unison, and it helps to alleviate the tension gnawing at my insides.

"Viv," he whispers, and my heart hurts when his tortured blue eyes turn glassy and his handsome features contort with pain.

"I didn't kiss him!" I plead, sitting upright on my bed. "I would never do that, not even when we've been fighting. I was drunk. Audrey had gone to get me some water and Nate was the only one at the table. He was drunk too and he thought I looked sad so he kissed me."

Alex has spoken to his friend numerous times today, and he is convinced Nate didn't mean it maliciously. He was just acting his usual stupid self.

"I am going to punch that slimy bastard in the face until he no longer resembles himself," Reeve says, a muscle clenching in his jaw.

"I think Alex already beat you to it."

"Remind me to thank him."

"Nate is an idiot. You know I have zero interest in him, and he'd kiss any female with a pulse."

“Don’t try to lighten this,” Reeve snaps, rubbing at his temples. “Nate has the hots for you, babe. Everyone can see it but you.”

“Whether he does or not doesn’t matter. I don’t have the hots for him, so you don’t need to worry.”

“And that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell *you*.” He lies down on his side, and I wish I was there so I could snuggle into his chest and feel the warmth of his strong arms around me. “You have nothing to worry about with Saffron. *Nothing*. Even if she did have feelings for me, which she doesn’t, I have zero interest in her.”

I don’t think it’s the same thing, but saying that will only prolong the argument, and I really need to make things right with my boyfriend. However, I do need to tell him this. “I think you’re wrong. I think she has set her sights on you, and let’s not forget she has a history of stealing other women’s men.”

“Baby, please, believe me when I say you couldn’t be more wrong.” He sits up, looking earnest as he comes closer to the screen. “I have told her point-blank how much I love you. She knows you’re *the one*, and she’s happy for me because she’s my friend, in the same way all of my costars are my friends. Honestly, I couldn’t have asked for a better crew. We all get along famously, and there are no airs or graces, especially with Saffron. If we weren’t in this situation, I think you would really like her and you two would be good friends.”

I bark out a bitter laugh. I can’t help it. Are all men this blind? “I can safely say that will never happen.”

He closes his eyes briefly. “Viv, I need you to listen to me and listen good. She’s twenty-one, and I’m eighteen. I’m like her little brother.”

A little brother she kisses, touches, and fakes sex with on-screen.

I instantly think of “Drivers License” by Olivia Rodrigo. She apparently wrote the song about her messy breakup with her boyfriend who left her for an older woman. As the lyrics bounce around my head, they couldn’t be more apt.

“I know she’s not interested in me like that because she’s told me,” Reeve continues, when I don’t comment, “and she’s fucking the thirty-year-old assistant director.”

I get what he’s implying—that she’s only into older dudes. But Reeve refuses to see what I see. It’s not their age. It’s their status and influence in Hollywood. Frankly, I would’ve thought an assistant director was beneath

her, but he must be serving some purpose. I could continue pressing my point, but it's not going to get us anywhere, so I focus on the crux of the matter.

"It hurt knowing she picked my gifts," I quietly say, lying down on my side and tucking my knees into my chest. "It really hurt, Reeve. How could you do that?"

His face contorts in a fresh wave of pain, and his eyes glimmer with remorse. "I didn't stop to think about it. I wanted to buy you lingerie, but I was bombarded by all the choices, and I was struggling to pick things you would like. She offered to help, and I accepted without thinking it through."

"You know me better than anyone, Reeve. Whatever you would've chosen for me would've been perfect." Pain rattles around my chest. "And girls know that helping someone's boyfriend with a gift is a no-no. Especially something so intimate. Unless it's the girl's bestie and there's an established friendship between friend and boyfriend like with you and Audrey." If Reeve needed help, why didn't he call my best friend?

"It wasn't intentional, babe, and the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you. I swear."

"I believe you. It's her motives I don't trust."

He exhales heavily, and silence fills the distance between us in more ways than one.

"I was going to burn the underwear," I admit after I can't take the heavy silence any longer. "But I couldn't bear to destroy such beautiful garments. However, I can't wear them either. I'm going to return the unworn items to you so you can get a refund."

"Babe, please, don't, I—"

"I can't wear things some other woman picked out for me, Reeve," I hiss, rubbing at my temples. "How would you feel if I got Nate to help me choose gifts for you? Would you ever be able to look at them without seeing his face?"

Silence engulfs us again, and my heart is so tormented it feels like it's cracking apart.

"That was low, Viv, but I get the point. Send it back to me, and I'll return it." He worries his lower lip between his teeth. "You had better send the makeup back too," he adds, and at least he has the decency to look ashamed.

He won't be able to get a refund on the makeup after it's been used, so I'll just toss it or see if Audrey wants it. "Not the purse or the bracelet?" I inquire, because I have to be sure.

He shakes his head. "She wasn't involved at all in those purchases."

I nod, averting my eyes, because I'm not sure I won't cry. While he deserves to know how much he has hurt me, I'm aware of the stress he's under, and I never want to add to it. I want to draw a line under this and try to put it behind us. Yet it's easier said than done. I thought talking to him would make me feel better, but I'm just feeling sadder.

"Vivien. Look at me, babe."

I lift my troubled eyes to the screen.

"I'm sorry, Viv. I just wanted to make your birthday special, and instead I ruined it. If I hadn't upset you, you wouldn't have gotten drunk and that degenerate wouldn't have put his toxic lips on you."

"Why were you like that on the phone last night?" I ask, because he needs to know the way he spoke to me was also upsetting. "If you had just talked to me, this could've been avoided. And how could you hang up on me knowing I was upset?"

"I didn't have the privacy to talk to you properly about it, and the guys were leaving and calling for me. The few beers I had probably didn't help either. I don't know what else to say except I'm sorry and it won't happen again."

As apologies go, it's lukewarm, at best, but I'm done talking about this. I'm emotionally exhausted from thinking about it all day, and I want to move forward and pretend like it never happened. "We have both made mistakes," I say, reaching out to touch the screen. "But this won't define us. Let's agree to put it behind us and not let anything like this happen again."

"I love you, baby. So, so much, and it's killing me being away from you. Especially now. If I was there, I would hold you in my arms all night, kissing you and making love to you until I'd banished every single doubt and every molecule of pain I have caused."

I needed that reassurance, and a layer of stress lifts from my shoulders. "I miss you like crazy, Reeve. It's so much harder than I thought it'd be." Tears spill down my cheeks as I can no longer keep my emotions trapped inside.

"I know, babe. I know. But we are nearly at the halfway point, and I'm going to see you in less than a month for prom."

“I can’t wait.” I manage a smile through my tears. “Just promise me one thing, Reeve.”

“Anything, my love.”

“I don’t want her in your room with you alone or you in hers. The thought of it makes me ill.”

He places his hand over his heart. “I promise she won’t be in here unless the guys are with her. Same goes for her room. If that’s what you need to feel reassured, I can give you that.”

“Thank you.”

“I love you, Vivien Grace Mills. You are my heart. My soul. My world.” He blows me a kiss. “Please never doubt my love. It will always only be you.”

His words soothe the remaining frayed edges of my soul, and I sink into the bed, feeling lighter than I have all day. “I love you too, Reeve, in all the same ways. Let’s never fight like this again.”

“Amen to that.” He smiles, and his entire face lights up, heating me from the inside out. We chat for a few minutes about normal stuff before ending our call, and I fall asleep dreaming of him, grateful it’s all blown over and that everything is going to be all right.

My cell rings, waking me from slumber, and I’m instantly awake the second I see his face light across my screen.

“Are you on the plane?” I ask, forgoing a greeting.

“Viv. About that.”

The edge to his tone has me on instant alert, and I jerk upright in bed, smoothing a hand over the tight pain spreading across my chest. “No, Reeve. Please don’t say what I think you’re going to say.”

It’s the morning of prom, and he had a flight booked for noon eastern time, which is around now. It’s due to land just after three, and I was planning on surprising him at the airport.

“I’m so sorry, baby, but I’m not going to be able to make it after all.”

“Why?” I rasp, swallowing painfully over the messy ball of emotion clogging my throat.

“Something weird happened overnight. The last few shots we filmed yesterday were corrupted, so the director called us in this morning to reshoot them. I tried to get out of it, but it’s not possible. We’re on a really tight schedule, and there are no other gaps to reshoot them. I’m so sorry, baby. I’m as devastated by this as you are.”

I can tell he’s upset, and it’s not like this is his fault. If he could get out of it, I know he would because he’s been looking forward to prom as much as I have. “I hate this. It’s so unfair,” I say.

“I know. The guys were giving me crap because I was on the verge of tears, but I’m really upset. I don’t want to miss tonight, and I would happily trade a limb if it meant I could be there. For years, I have dreamed of holding you in my arms all night at prom. I had booked a suite at Chateau Marmont as a surprise, and I was looking forward to ravishing your body all night long. I’m so sorry, Vivien, more than I can even say.”

“I don’t want to go without you, and I hate that prom is ruined for us, but this isn’t your fault, Reeve. There isn’t anything you can do, so don’t feel guilty.” I shrug, even though he can’t see me. “It is what it is.” My voice is dead, devoid of the excitement I woke up feeling.

The truth is, it’s not just about prom. I really need to see Reeve. To feel his arms around me. To have his mouth worship mine. To join our bodies and relive our connection in the most intimate of ways. I need to prove to myself that we truly are okay because the last few weeks have been hell on Earth.

Not only have trolls been targeting me online, spreading nasty lies and leaving disgusting comments on everything I post to the point where I have stopped posting anything, I’ve also been subjected to ongoing rumors, popping up daily on gossip sites, about Saffron and Reeve. Insiders on the set are allegedly reporting how their explosive on-screen chemistry has spilled over into their personal lives and they are hot for one another. Other reports claim he’s a free agent having dumped me after I cheated on him with one of his friends.

Reeve continues to tell me to ignore it. That it’s all par for the course, and that none of it is true, but it’s hard when I’m confronted with it all the time. Bitchy girls in school love taunting me with the rumors, stuffing copies of articles into my locker and leaving them pinned to the windshield of my car. But the pretend do-gooders are worse; those girls profess sympathy and offer their help while not so subtly sliding their digs in. And

Marnie Gibson has been getting on my very last nerve, but I'm taking Mom's advice and pretending she doesn't exist, even though I'd love to take a baseball bat to her head.

I've tried not to labor the point during the brief daily calls with Reeve, because I don't want to come across like the needy, clingy, scared girlfriend I'm turning into. If you had told me two months ago this is who I would become, I would have laughed in your face. I'm terrified because I know the worst is yet to come, and it already feels like I'm losing myself and like I'm losing Reeve.

"Viv. Baby, are you still there?"

"Yes. Sorry. I'm here," I quietly confirm.

"I want you to go to prom. Please don't stay at home alone. You know you can go with Alex and Audrey, and they will ensure you have a good time. And I need to see photos. I've been imagining seeing you in, and out of, that dress for months."

I know he's putting on a front for me, and I want to reassure him, but it's challenging when I feel so empty inside. I genuinely don't know if I have the strength to wear a mask and look like I'm having a great time when my heart is torn to shreds, and I'm missing the other half of my soul so badly it feels like I'm slipping into a dark abyss. I know how melodramatic I sound, but it's the truth.

Reeve and I have always done everything together.

I don't know how to exist without him.

I'm sure shrinks the world over would have a field day with that statement, but I'm not going to deny I feel helpless and directionless without him by my side. I didn't realize I had become so dependent on him or that I would flounder so deeply without his guiding light. I know it's not a healthy thing. That I need to exist separately from my relationship and assume my own identity and my own path in life.

Suddenly, I'm embarrassed by my own thoughts. I'm a talented, smart, independent, beautiful woman, and I don't need my boyfriend to survive. Yes, I will miss him to the very depths of my soul tonight, but I can't let his absence destroy another special night. I owe it to myself to go to prom and have the best possible night.

"I'll send you pictures, and I'll try my best to enjoy prom even if I'll be missing you every second of every minute of the night."

I plant a wide smile on my face as I pose beside Audrey while Alex snaps a few pics. Mom already took some at the house, which I sent to Reeve, and he replied with a quick message telling me I looked gorgeous and he was proud of me. I almost broke down in tears when the stunning corsage he ordered was delivered. He chose white roses decorated with pretty diamante stones encased with red ribbon. Little swatches of greenery add an extra bit of color, and it looks elegant on my wrist.

“You two are, hands down, the hottest babes in the room,” Alex says, sliding his cell in the pocket of his dress pants. “I’m no expert, but you did a fucking amazing job with the dresses, Viv. You are very talented.”

“Thanks, Alex.” I am really pleased with how both dresses turned out. I’m wearing a high-necked, sleeveless, figure-hugging, floor-length red dress. It’s a pretty classic design except for the few sequined strips—around my neck, edging my breasts, and running from the curve of my hips to the floor—and the open back which showcases my skin and a subtle hint of side boob. Audrey opted for a halter-neck gown in deep purple with a fitted top and full skirt. Alex is wearing a tie in the same color, and he and Audrey make a striking couple.

“I know you’ve decided to major in English rather than costume design, but I totally think you should set up a side business designing dresses,” Audrey suggests, taking a sip of the spiked punch.

I’m sticking to nonalcoholic cocktails because I want to avoid another drink-fueled disaster. “I’m considering doing a costume design course after I graduate with my degree,” I confess, but nothing is set in stone. I’m

passionate about writing *and* dress designing, and while it makes sense that I'll build a career in the movie industry, I'm still exploring all my options.

"Do you think they did all this for Reeve?" Alex waves his hands around the extravagant ballroom.

"Probably," Audrey agrees.

Prom is being held in a top five-star hotel, and the prom committee spared no expense transforming the ballroom into a Hollywood-themed backdrop. It's so cliché, and the irony isn't lost on me either. Walking the red carpet, getting accosted by "paparazzi" as we arrived, being surrounded by movie props, a large golden Oscar trophy, and the myriad of classic movie posters framed around the walls all serve to remind me of *my enemy*. Because that's who Hollywood represents to me tonight.

Hollywood has stolen my Prince Charming, and I'm like a lost Cinderella wandering aimlessly around the room while everyone around me parties hard. I'm trying to put a brave face on, but I'm struggling. Watching couples sway on the dance floor is especially difficult, because that should be Reeve and me. "You two should dance," I say, swiping Audrey's drink. I push her toward Alex. They open their mouths to protest, but I don't give them the opportunity. "Go on. I don't need you to chaperone me all night." I flash them my brightest smile, only letting it go once they have hit the dance floor and they are satisfied I'm not going to fall apart.

I glance at my cell, grateful it's almost eleven. I'm hoping I can make my escape in an hour or so and retreat to the sanctity of my bedroom. Removing my locket from underneath the top of my dress, I rub my fingers over it, wishing it was a genie's lamp and I could summon Reeve as one of my three wishes.

A guy from the football team approaches and asks me to dance, but I decline, like I've declined the other couple of guys who asked me. While most everyone came with a date, a lot are just friends, and it's clear there are plenty of single guys on the prowl. Even if it was innocent, there is no way I'm dancing at prom with anyone but Reeve.

I danced with Alex earlier when he stepped in for Reeve after we won prom king and queen, only because it was expected. I honestly couldn't care less about the award. It's meaningless without my boyfriend. However, I am still wearing my crown so I don't come across as a total Debbie Downer. While I promised Reeve I would try to have a good time, sticking to that

promise is challenging. It's hard to enjoy myself when he's not here and I'm missing him so much.

"Hey, Viv. Want to dance?" Nate asks, approaching me with a cocky smile.

"Go away," I snap, not even looking at him.

"C'mon, Viv. I've said I'm sorry. Are you going to avoid me forever?"

Sighing, I turn to look at him. "I've told you I forgive you, but we can't be seen together. You know I have a spotlight on my head right now, and I won't do anything to cause issues for Reeve or give the trolls another reason to hate me. Even talking to you is freaking me out," I admit, scanning the room to ensure no one is recording us. My paranoia has reached new levels in the past few weeks.

"That's no way to live your life," Nate says, and I don't disagree.

"It's the way things are."

"I hope he appreciates all you sacrifice for him." There's an edge to his tone I don't like. Nate has always been jealous of Reeve, but I didn't realize part of it was connected to me.

"I love him, and I'd do anything for him," I say, grabbing my purse from the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to use the bathroom."

I exit the ballroom into the swanky hallway and make my way to the ladies' restroom. After attending to business, I touch up my makeup and wash my hands before heading back out. Only another hour and I can make my escape.

Hands wrap around my eyes from behind, and I shriek as a hard body presses up against me.

"Don't scream," he says, in that husky voice of his. "It's only me."

My heart is jackhammering against my rib cage as he releases his hands, and I spin around in his arms. Butterflies roam free in my chest as we come face to face for the first time in two months. Happy tears leak from my eyes as I fling my arms around Reeve's neck, squeezing the living daylights out of him. His large hand lands on my lower bare back as he holds me close. Familiar citrusy notes wrap around me as we cling to one another, and I close my eyes, savoring the feel of him against me, letting his warmth sink bone-deep, eradicating all the heartache.

Sweeping my hair to one side, he buries his face in my neck. "I've missed you so much, baby," he murmurs while planting feather-soft kisses in that sensitive spot just under my ear.

“Reeve.” My tone is breathy as I angle my head, granting him better access, while my hands roam his back through his suit jacket. “I have missed you so damn much. It’s been the worst pain.”

“I need to taste you,” he says, lifting his head. Emotion seeps from the hidden depths of his ocean-blue eyes before he clasps my face in his firm hands and his lips collide with mine. Grabbing his jacket, I tug him close as he makes love to my mouth in a desperate marriage full of longing and lust and pain. I willingly open my mouth when his tongue prods against the seam of my lips, demanding entry. He presses his erection against my stomach, and I moan into his mouth when his tongue tangles with mine in an erotic dance I feel all the way to the tips of my toes.

We fall back against the wall, grinding against one another as we kiss like we’ll never get to kiss again. Desire floods every corner of my body, and my panties are wet with need for him. My heart is swollen with love, and everything feels right in my world again.

This is what I’ve needed.

What we’ve *both* needed.

Reeve’s touch and his scent and the comforting solidity of his hard body moving against mine remind me we belong together and I should never doubt this connection we share.

“I don’t have much time,” he rasps against my mouth.

“How long?” I inquire, briefly ripping my lips from his.

“My car will return in ninety minutes.”

“Then let’s make every second count,” I say, grabbing his hand and pulling him into the wheelchair accessible bathroom.

Reeve locks the door, and when he turns around, I’m on my knees, reaching for his zipper. “Jesus, Viv.”

“I need to taste you too.” I peer up at him while I lower his zipper and pull his dress pants down.

“Fuck. You look beautiful, Viv.” Yanking his boxers down to his knees, I lick the crown of his cock, soaking up the precum on offer. Reeve hisses as his back slams against the door, and he spreads his thighs a little wider. “I’m dying for you, baby,” he adds. “You have no idea how much.”

I lick a line up each side of his hard cock, lapping and nibbling on his velvety-soft flesh before I take him into my mouth and suck hard. His hands are gentle in my hair as he holds me to him while I show him how much

I'm dying for him too. "Viv. I'm not going to last long, and I need to be inside you."

He helps me to my feet, and I lean back against the sink as I bunch my dress up to my waist. I don't care if it wrinkles. I need him inside me more than I need air to breathe. Removing his pants and boxers, he stalks toward me as he strokes his straining length. "I love you," he says, wrapping one of my legs around his waist and pushing my lace panties to one side. He lines his cock up at my entrance. "And I wish I had all night to show you how much."

"You're here, Reeve." I run my fingers through the stylish layer of stubble on his cheeks. "That's all the proof I need."

He slams into me in one powerful thrust, and I cry out as he fills me with his love. Our kisses are passionately frantic as we fuck with an edge that's new. I sit up on the counter, so Reeve can pound into me harder, placing both my legs around his trim waist, rocking my hips forward to meet his thrusts. "Oh God, Reeve," I pant, in between kisses, "you feel so freaking good." My orgasm is building fast, my neglected body rejoicing in our reunion.

"Fuck, Viv. I want to stay buried inside you forever. This feels incredible." Reeve holds my hips steady as he drives his cock into my pussy, plowing into me like he's trying to embed himself so deep I never forget the feel of him as he lays claim to me in all the ways that count.

My climax consumes me without warning. I hit my peak and fall over the ledge, shaking and crying as I cling to him while wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me. Reeve grunts, shouting my name when he finds his own release, spilling his hot seed inside me.

"Wow," I whisper, holding him tight as his head drops to my shoulder. "I think we needed that," I add, grinning. Sex with Reeve has always been amazing, but that was something else.

"I love you," he says before welding his lips to mine. This kiss is softer, sweeter, and I'm drowning in sensation as he worships my mouth, reassuring me of our love with every glide of his lips. Slowly, he pulls out of me, reluctantly breaking our kiss. "I would love nothing more than to spend my time balls deep inside you, but it's prom, and I believe I promised you some dancing." He stares adoringly at me, and my heart does cartwheels behind my rib cage.

“You did.” I’m smiling as I fix my panties and my dress while Reeve tucks himself back into his pants. “You look gorgeous,” I say, watching him through the mirror as I smooth my hair into place and tidy my makeup. His broad shoulders fit snugly in the tailored black Armani suit, and the red tie looks vibrant against his crisp white dress shirt.

“Stop stealing my lines,” he purrs, circling his arms around me from behind. “You are stunning, Vivien Grace. More beautiful than any mere mortal. You are a goddess among women.”

Reaching back, I run my fingers through the longer strands of his hair. “Thank you.” My eyes glisten with emotion as I twist around in his arms. “Thank you for being here. I can’t express how happy I am to see you.”

“I’m sorry our plans were ruined.” Lifting my hand to his mouth, he kisses my knuckles. “And I wish I could stay all night, but I had to beg the director to give me a few hours off.”

“I don’t care.” I place my hand on his chest, right over his heart. “I’ll take whatever time I can get with you.”

He dots kisses all over my face before his lips brush against mine. “I hate being separated from you.” He bundles me into his arms. “It’s the worst form of torture.”

“I know,” I admit against his chest. “It’s been killing me too.”

He rubs his nose against mine. “You’re my home, Viv,” he whispers.

“I know what you mean.” I softly cup his handsome face. “Everything feels right when you’re with me.”

He eases back, smiling as he takes my hand. “Then let’s make the most of our time, because it’s got to last us another month before I’m back home.” His gaze treks up and down my body. “Damn, Viv. You’re breathtaking, and that dress is exquisite.”

His words and his loving gaze paper over the cracks in my heart, and I’m dancing on air as we make our way into the ballroom and out onto the dance floor. Our classmates call out and reach for Reeve, but he has single-minded determination, and he stops for no one. Alex plonks Reeve’s crown on his head, and we grin at one another like lovesick fools as we dance. Reeve lavishes me with his undivided attention, twirling and spinning me around as we dance and laugh and revel in being back together. His lips don’t stray far from mine, and we cling to one another through the more romantic songs. It’s everything I had hoped prom would be and more.

All too fast, our time is up and Reeve needs to leave.

I go with him in the car, because it gives us more precious minutes together, and we make out like demons on the back seat, enjoying every second.

His father's private jet is ready and waiting on the runway when we arrive at the airport, and we hold tight to one another until time has run out. I swipe at the silent tears streaming down my face as he walks away from me and I wonder if I'll ever get used to the long separations.

“Congratulations, honey,” Mom says, enveloping me in her arms. My graduation cap tilts sideways on my head, but Dad fixes it.

“I want a photo of the two of you.” He gestures for us to pose. “Say cheese, princess.”

I laugh, snaking my arm around Mom’s shoulders as she holds on to my waist. We smile for a few pics, and then Dad swaps with Mom. Audrey approaches with her parents and her two younger sisters, and my bestie takes some shots of the three of us before I return the favor. Then Mom takes some solo shots of me, as well as some with my friends.

We made plans to enjoy a celebratory meal with Audrey’s family and Alex’s family, but we separate to travel to the restaurant in our own cars. En route to the steakhouse, I post a group pic with our friends on social media, tagging Reeve and mentioning how much we miss him today.

“Have you heard from Reeve?” Audrey asks, as we settle into our chairs at the restaurant.

I shake my head, and waves of my long dark hair tumble over my shoulders. “I had a message when I woke up, and he sent me flowers, but I haven’t spoken with him yet.” The time difference and his early starts are a real pain.

“Only four more days and it’ll all be over,” my bestie says, hugging me. “We’re going to have the best summer.”

“We are, and I can’t wait.”

I laugh as Nate lets out a loud battle cry before jumping from the large speaker resting on the temporary stage, hurling himself into the packed crowd. He is such an idiot, and I wonder if he'll ever grow up.

Butthead is hosting our graduation party, but this time the action is largely taking place indoors because his parents have moved to Greece for the summer, giving him free rein of his palatial home. Some people spill out onto the beach, drinking and skinny-dipping, but the DJ has been set up inside, and that is where most of my classmates have gravitated.

I drink my vodka cranberry while I take a breather from the dance floor. I chuckle to myself as I watch Audrey and Alex dirty dancing in the middle of the packed crowd. Alcohol sloshes through my veins, and I'm nicely buzzed yet still in control of my faculties. I keep an eye on the time and my cell, hoping Reeve isn't too late calling me tonight. I'm desperate to speak to him, having really missed him at graduation today. I don't like thinking about all the milestones Reeve is missing, because it just gets me depressed. Instead, I'm trying to focus on the fact he'll be home in four days, we have all summer together, and then we'll be starting UCLA. Finally, things are falling into place, and I'm excited for this next phase of our lives.

Extracting my cell, I open my Insta, to check my graduation post, because I'm clearly a glutton for punishment. "What the fuck?" I blurt, squinting at my screen in confusion.

"What's wrong?" Alex plonks his butt on the stool beside me.

"My graduation post is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" He arches a brow while swigging warm beer from a red cup.

"I mean it's disappeared. Gone poof." I rub a tense spot between my brows.

"How does a post just disappear?" he asks, smiling as Audrey makes her way toward us.

"That's what I'd like to know," I murmur, as a sense of unease slithers over my skin.

"Do you know anything about my missing graduation post?" I ask Reeve when he calls twenty minutes later. I've been mulling over ideas and quietly stewing since I discovered my post was gone.

"I didn't know anything until after the fact," he says, immediately on the defensive, which instantly pisses me off.

“What did Cassidy do?” I bark, because I’ve no doubt the stuck-up hyper-ambitious publicist hired by the studio is behind this.

Tension oozes between us down the line.

“I’m disgusted, Viv. I just want to put that out there first, and I’ve already ripped her a new one. It’s not going to happen again.”

“Spit it out, Reeve.” I flee the house and walk around the corner in search of somewhere more private to have this argument, because I sense one brewing.

“She had someone hack into your account and remove it.”

“She *what?!?*” I screech. “She has no right to do that! I’m going to sue her fucking ass. The studio too. Who the hell do these people think they are?” My free hand is clenching and unclenching at my side, and I have an almost insurmountable urge to punch something.

“I get you’re pissed. I am too. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to wanting to hit a woman, but we can’t do anything about it.”

“You can’t, but I can!” I pace back and forth on the stone path that runs alongside Butthead’s house. No one is back here, and the noise from the party is muted.

“Babe. You can’t. Not without it affecting me.”

“You’re almost finished filming,” I remind him.

“There are still reshoots, promo, the premiere, and the potential of more movies. You know this, Viv.” I do, but I’ve been languishing in denial, trying to avoid that possibility because I know what it means for our plans, and I can’t deal with more disappointment. “I can’t do anything to rock the boat, and that means you can’t either.”

I lean my head back against the wall, close my eyes, and sigh.

I hate these people.

I hate this side of the industry.

And I hate that I have no choice, because I won’t do anything to jeopardize Reeve’s future career even if there is a part of me that prays the movie tanks so he doesn’t get offered more films with Saffron Roberts.

Yes, I know I’m a selfish, jealous bitch and Reeve would be so hurt if he was privy to my inner thoughts and feelings. I suffer enormous guilt every time it enters my mind, but the thought of Reeve spending more time with that woman sends me spiraling into a pit of anxiety. Honestly, if it happens, I’m not sure we’d survive.

“What was her objection this time?” I ask, in a resigned tone. “You weren’t even in the photo with me.”

He sounds tired when he speaks. “You tagged me.”

“So, are you saying I can’t tag my boyfriend in posts now?” I stuff my clenched fist in my mouth to stifle the scream begging to be set free.

“No. You can’t.” He lowers his voice. “They don’t want any ties linking us together. They need me to appear to be single.”

My stomach drops to my feet, and a heavy pressure settles on my chest. “I think they’d put a bullet through my skull if they thought they’d get away with it.”

“Don’t say that! Of course, they wouldn’t. It’s just semantics.”

“It’s not just semantics, Reeve. Don’t insult my intelligence.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say here, Viv.” I visualize him throwing his hands in the air. “This is my career, and we both know this bullshit is the norm in the industry.”

“I know all that, but you can’t let these people manipulate every aspect of your life, Reeve! Are you really sure this role is worth it?”

He sucks in a gasp, and I instantly know I’ve said the wrong thing. “You know how much this part means to me, Viv. This is one of the biggest studios in the biz. This role will make or break my career. I thought you supported me, but I’m beginning to wonder if that’s really the truth.”

“Now you’re being unfair. Of course, I support you, but I didn’t realize I’d have to become your dirty little secret!” My voice raises a few levels as anger rears its ugly head.

“Babe, c’mon. You know it’s not like that. Who cares what anyone else thinks? You know I’m yours and you’re mine. As long as we’re solid, it doesn’t matter what the press says.”

“It matters to *me*, Reeve.” I slap a hand over my aching chest. “Do you think this is easy for me? To have people say I’m not good enough for you? That *she*’s more deserving of you? Now, I can’t post about us, or talk about us, because I have to pretend like I’m not your girlfriend? In what realm do you ever think I’d be okay with that?”

“It’s not going to be forever, and we know the truth, as do our friends and the people who matter. Everything else is industry bullshit, but it’s a necessary evil.”

“What happened to the guy who spoke so eloquently about wanting to be known for his acting ability not his celebrity status? What asshole has

been whispering shit in your ear, hmm, Reeve?”

“I was naïve to think one existed without the other,” he says, in a clipped tone. “I have a role to play on-screen and off of it.”

“God, Reeve. Do you even hear yourself? You’re already indoctrinated.” I shake my head, disgusted that he can’t see my point of view at all.

“I’m doing what I need to do to establish my career!” he shouts, and I’m taken aback by the venom in his voice. Reeve has rarely raised his voice to me, and we don’t fight very often. These past three months, I estimate we have fought more than we’ve fought in years. It’s draining. More than that, we are drifting apart, and I don’t think he even feels it. Or he’s pretending like it isn’t happening, or maybe he just doesn’t care.

“Well then, you continue doing that. Continue putting yourself first Reeve, because you’re so good at it.” Then I do something I swore I’d never do—I hang up on him and switch off my cell. Fuck him and his selfishness.

Dragging myself out of bed the following morning, I try to think of a plausible excuse to get me out of meeting Audrey at the yoga studio for our regular class, but I know she’s not going to let me get away with it. I drank way too much after I hung up on Reeve last night, and I’m paying for it now. Big-time. As much as it’ll be torture attending class with a monster hangover, it should help to sweat the last of the alcohol from my system, so I grab a quick shower, change into my workout gear, and race out the door to meet my bestie.

“Man, that sucked balls,” I admit, as we sit in the café across from the yoga studio after our class has ended. “I honestly thought I was going to vomit during the revolved downward-facing dog.”

“You did look a little green,” Audrey agrees, smothering a smile.

“I feel better now, so it was worth the pain and suffering.” I smile at the waitress as she drops our salads and smoothies on the table. “Thank you.”

“Have you heard from Reeve yet?” Audrey asks, picking up her silverware.

I shake my head. “Nope, but he never calls early. Besides, I should probably call him first. I shouldn’t have hung up on him.”

“Are you sure you want to deal with all this shit, Viv? It’s already gotten complicated and the movie hasn’t even released yet. It’s going to get nuts next year, and, honestly, I’m concerned about you. I’ve seen the comments online, and you don’t deserve that shit. I’m pissed Reeve isn’t doing more to protect you.”

“I’m going to talk to him about it this summer. Arguing over the phone is getting us nowhere.”

“What will you do if he gets offered the other two movies?” she tentatively inquires in between mouthfuls of chicken.

“Cry, most likely,” I admit, carefully cutting up my chicken. “But ultimately adapt. Attending UCLA with Reeve has been my dream for years, but if I have to go it alone, I’ll survive.” I reach across the table, patting her hand. “At least, we can be UCLA widows together.” Alex wasn’t offered a place to play ball at UCLA, like he had hoped. Competition is fierce, and it was close, but they passed on him. So, he’s moving to Boston College to play for the Eagles.

“Isn’t it coincidental that our boyfriends may both end up in Boston while we’re still in L.A.”

“They couldn’t have planned it better, even if they’ll have little time to catch up with their busy schedules.”

“I have something to tell you.” Audrey wipes the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

I take a sip of my green smoothie while I wait for her to tell me her news.

“Alex and I have decided to break up at the end of the summer.”

She could’ve told me she murdered someone in cold blood, and I wouldn’t be any more surprised. “Why?” Those two are rock solid and so good together.

“Neither of us wants to spend our four years at college pining for one another. We have seen how hard it’s been on you and Reeve, and we don’t think we can cope with the long-distance thing.”

My mouth opens and closes as I grapple for the right words. “I don’t know what to say, except I hope our situation hasn’t forced you both into making this decision.”

“We were already discussing it. What you’ve gone through just reinforced our thought process.”

“I don’t know how you can be so...blasé about it.”

She sets her silverware down, gulping. “Trust me, I’m not. I’m trying to put a brave face on and accept it. Every time I think about him not being there, I tear up, and every time I think about him being with other girls, I want to throw up. But I don’t want to spend my time at college worrying about my boyfriend. I trust Alex. I really do, but he’s going to play for the Eagles, and women will be throwing themselves at him. I don’t know how you deal with the girls already fawning over Reeve. I couldn’t do it, and while I know Alex isn’t going to be dealing with it at the same level, I worry it’ll end up breaking us up anyway. At least this way, we can part as friends, enjoy college, and when it’s over, if we are meant to be, we’ll find our way back to one another.”

“It feels like the end of an era,” I truthfully admit. “It’s always been the four of us, and now we’re all separated.”

“I know, but I prefer to look at it like the start of a new era.” She stabs a piece of chicken with her fork, popping it in her mouth.

“Do you think Reeve and I should break up if he gets offered the other two movies?”

Audrey almost chokes on her food, and I pour her a glass of water from the jug on our table, handing it to her. She gulps back a few mouthfuls and composes herself. “Jesus, Viv. Don’t do that to me while I’m eating!”

“Sorry.”

“I can’t answer that. Only you and Reeve can decide what to do about your relationship, and we don’t want to influence you guys. Your relationship is different. You’ve been in each other’s lives forever, and you have this unshakeable bond. If anyone can weather a few stormy years, it’s you two.”

I squeeze her hand. “Thank you for saying that, but it really doesn’t feel like that right now. To be honest, I’m upset at how quickly we seem to be drifting apart.”

“No one said love was easy, and I bet everything will be okay the minute he gets home.”

I’m mulling over Audrey’s words when she goes to the bathroom, so I don’t see the woman with the pink-tipped hair approaching until she’s slid into the booth, occupying my best friend’s seat.

I jerk my head up, shock splaying across my face. “Bianca! What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought we could have a little chat.”

Bullshit. She obviously tracked me down. I purse my lips and fold my arms across my chest, already knowing I’m not going to like this little chat. “Say what you came here to say.”

She offers me a tight grin, and her skin is stretched so taut it’s a wonder her face doesn’t split in two. Gossip sites put her at mid-forties, but I’m betting she’s older. It’s hard to tell under all the cosmetic surgery and thick makeup. Not that it’s uncommon in L.A. My mom is the anomaly, while someone like Bianca Remington is more the norm. In a city full of fake women, my mom truly stands out. Lauren Mills has chosen to grow old gracefully, and the surgeon’s knife has never touched her flawless porcelain skin. It’s just another reason to admire Mom.

Reeve’s hard-ass agent is wearing one of her signature power suits in black with a rich red silk blouse. A string of pearls rests around her smooth neck, and I briefly imagine choking her with them. If she gives me shit, I might very well be tempted.

“You’re a smart girl, Vivien. You’ve grown up in the industry, and I’ve no doubt your mother has told you how things work. To put it bluntly, you’re holding Reeve back. He’s spending too much time worrying about upsetting you and not enough time focusing on his career. If you truly love him, you will let him go.”

“Loving Reeve means I will be there to support and encourage him every step of the way. I will ensure he isn’t manipulated by people who profess to have his best interests at heart, when all they care about is lining their own pockets on the back of his success.” Take that and shove it up your bleached asshole.

Her haughty smile aggravates the hell out of me, and I’m having a hard time containing my anger. “I don’t care what you think of me. You’re insignificant.” She flicks a piece of lint off the sleeve of her jacket before standing. “I came here as a courtesy, but I couldn’t care less if you get your little lovesick heart broken.” She leans down, and the overpowering scent of Chanel almost knocks me out. “Reeve is going to be a huge star, and he has no room for a girlfriend.” Her gaze rakes over my bare face, my tight ponytail, colorful workout clothes, and sneakers. “At least, not one like you.” She straightens up before delivering her closing shot. “Act like a

stage-five clinger if you want, but mark my words, by this time next year, you will be nothing but a distant memory.”

“Well, what did she say?” I ask when Reeve rejoins us at the pool. His dad is away again, so we’ve spent the first week of summer break hanging out at Reeve’s house. Reeve is recharging his batteries after an intense three months of nonstop work, and I’m enjoying chilling out after exams and graduation and just being with Reeve. Waking up every morning wrapped in his strong arms is the best remedy, and gradually, all the frustrations of the past few months are slipping away.

Audrey and Alex are presently frolicking in the pool, while I’m stretched out on a lounge, sipping the homemade lemonade Mrs. Thompson, the housekeeper, left in the refrigerator for us.

“She admitted it but won’t apologize.” Bending down, he pecks my lips before collapsing on the lounge alongside me.

I snort. “That sounds about right. Bianca is a piece of work.” I didn’t want to accost Reeve with the details of his agent’s nasty little chat with me the instant he came home, so I left it a few days before finally mentioning it last night. He was fuming, and he left her a heated voice message, demanding she return his call, yet he’s only just managed to speak with her. Either that demonstrates where he fits on her priority list or she was giving him time to cool down.

“I’ve told her if she pulls a stunt like that again I’m terminating my contract.” He swipes his beer bottle off the ground and brings it to his lips.

Sitting upright, I remove my sunglasses so I can look him in the eyes. “I thought you were going to terminate it now.” At least, that’s what he said

last night when he lost it after I told him every horrid word she'd said to me.

He grimaces before swinging his legs to the side and reaching out for my hands. "I can't, babe."

I mirror his position, and our knees touch. "You can. You know Mom already spoke to Margaret and she's interested in signing you. She is the best in the industry, and your career will be in safe hands with her."

"I can't walk away from Bianca now, Viv." His eyes blaze with excitement, and my stomach dips.

"What don't I know?"

"They've just offered me a contract for the next two movies!" Flames of delight dance in his eyes while that uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach churns faster. "Bianca is negotiating terms, but it's looking like a done deal. I'm sorry, babe. I know you don't like her, and I'm not happy she was rude to you, but I can't change representation in the middle of all this."

"They've decided to make more movies in the series already?" I ask, struggling to share his excitement amid the pain eviscerating me from all angles. "The first movie has only just wrapped, and it's not premiering until January."

"The studio commissioned reports from industry analysts who predict outcomes, and all the indicators point to this movie being a massive success. The buzz has been steadily building since the news first broke of the adaptation and it's showing no sign of slowing down." He can't contain his grin, and I hate that I can't be happy for him because I know what this means for us.

"When does filming start?"

"November, and then we'll be taking a break to promote the release before shooting restarts again next May."

"So, it's definitely going ahead?" I try to mask my distress, but his smile fades, confirming I'm hiding nothing.

He rubs circles on the back of my hand with his thumb. "The second movie definitely is. While I'll sign a new contract, which includes both films, there is an opt-out clause with part payment if the first movie doesn't perform as expected at the box office."

"And when would the third film begin production?"

"Provisionally November of next year with a break for promotion of the second film, and then it will resume in April of the following year."

That would be the end of the spring semester of our sophomore year. Between promotion and filming, Reeve is going to be extremely busy in the next two years. “What about UCLA?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“Babe.” He pulls me over onto his lap, snaking his arms around me. “I’m not going to UCLA.” He tilts my chin up with his finger. His features soften when he spots the upset on my face. “I know we had it planned, and I hate that I’m disappointing you, but this opportunity is too big to turn down. We both knew this was a possibility. Please say you understand?” he pleads.

My chest heaves as I struggle to phrase this in a way that doesn’t come across as selfish. “I know it’s a massive opportunity for you, Reeve, and I *am* proud of you. You clearly impressed them, not that it’s a surprise. You’re destined for greatness. I still stand by that, but I can’t help feeling disappointed because thinking about college was basically the only thing that got me through these past three months.” I hook my arms around his neck. “You’ve already missed out on so much, and now you’re going to be gone for the next two years, and I’m scared.” Tears cloud my eyes, but I don’t disguise them. I want him to see how difficult this is for me. “I’m scared what this means for us. We will barely see one another.”

Taking my wrist, he presses a soft kiss on my delicate flesh. “Do you love me, Viv?”

My brow puckers. “What kind of stupid question is that? Of course, I love you!”

“And I love you.” He laces our fingers together. “I know it’s been rough, but we’ll get better at it. It’s been a big adjustment is all. Besides, you’ll probably be having too much fun to miss me.”

“Like you?” I snap, as my emotions get the better of me.

A muscle clenches in his jaw, and he drops my hand. “Don’t be mean, Viv. You know I missed you like fucking crazy. If you think I’m out partying every night and hardly thinking about you, you are sorely mistaken. It’s a lot of hard work. I’m up at six every day, and I fall into bed exhausted at midnight. The schedule is punishing, and we had little downtime. It’s not as glamorous as it might seem.”

I slide off his lap and sit beside him, worrying my lip between my teeth. Bile fills my mouth as I prepare to speak my mind. I don’t want to even think about this, let alone put a voice to it, but it needs to be said. “Would it be easier if we weren’t together?” Swallowing over the painful lump in my

throat, I peer deep into his baby blues. “Is Bianca right? Are Audrey and Alex? Should I let you go so you can focus on your career?”

“No, Viv. Jesus, no.” He lies down, tugging me on top of him. “That is the last thing I want.” Clasp my nape, he pulls my face to his. “I can’t do this without you,” he whispers, brushing his lips across mine. “I don’t want to be without you. I know it will be hard, but not having you in my life would be infinitely harder.” Tears swim in his eyes. “I hate that you think I’d want that. You’re the love of my life, Viv. You’re my soul mate and the only woman I want by my side until the day I die. That hasn’t changed, and it’s never going to.” Banding his arms around me, he rests my head on his hot, bare chest. “Please don’t leave me,” he whispers. “You’re the one true constant in my life. The only one who fully understands me. The only one who loves me unconditionally. I can’t lose you, Viv. I couldn’t exist without you.”

I lift my head, brushing his tears away. “You’re all that for me too, Reeve, but I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything, babe.” He traces his fingers up and down my spine.

“If that changes, I need you to be honest with me.”

“Always, Viv, but I know my heart, and nothing will change.”

I place my hands on his chest, looking him straight in the eye. “This is going to be a true test of our love, Reeve, and let’s not pretend like the last three months have been smooth sailing. We both know it’s been anything but. We won’t survive unless there is total transparency between us, especially if I have to pretend I’m not your girlfriend.” I almost choke on the words. “I don’t like it, and I still think you should stand your ground, but it’s your career, your decision, and I’ll do my best to support you, but you need to be truthful with me.”

“I will. I promise.” He kisses me softly. “It’s going to be okay, Viv.”

I wish I shared his optimism.

The rest of the summer passes in blissful peace, and it’s just like old times. We spend most days at the beach or hanging out by the pool. At night, we go to the movies or head out for dinner, and there are always several parties to attend. Some paparazzi show up, on occasion, but, for the most part, they

seem to have forgotten about Reeve for now. I know it won't last. I know as soon as the promo starts, things are going to ramp up overnight, but I'm trying not to think about it. To just enjoy being with Reeve and our friends. We have slotted seamlessly back into our easygoing relationship, as if the pain of our separation was a figment of our imaginations.

In the end, Audrey and I decide to take a dorm on campus, and I'm grateful I'll get to share the college experience with my bestie. It helps to soften the blow of Reeve's absence.

Most of the undergraduate dorms are in the northwest part of UCLA, called the Hill, and we manage to secure a two-bedroom suite with a private bathroom and living space. It's not huge, by any stretch of the imagination, but it's got everything we need. Reeve and Alex came shopping with us, and we picked up lots of things that will help to make the space homey. Reeve will be gone filming reshoots—starting from next Monday—but he'll be back in time to help us move into our dorm in three weeks.

The guys surprised us this week with a mini vacay to Laguna Beach, renting a fabulous five-bedroom house that is right on the beach. The four of us arrived four days ago, and we've spent our days exploring the different beaches, coves, and tidal pools and filling our days with sunbathing, swimming, snorkeling, and surfing. At night, we've dined out and returned to our place to enjoy some drinks on the gorgeous deck facing the beach, sipping cocktails under the stars while the gentle ebb and flow of the ocean provides a soothing backdrop to our conversation. It's hella romantic and just what the doctor ordered.

Reeve and I have taken midnight walks on the gorgeous sandy shore each night, holding hands and stealing kisses, and it's exactly what we need to remind us of what we have before we are forced to go our separate ways again.

It's Thursday night, and the guys are grilling steaks and chicken out on the deck while Audrey and I prepare salads in the large fully-equipped kitchen. "What's this Rudy guy like?" Audrey asks, while we slice tomatoes and dice onions side by side at the counter.

"He seems like a good guy, but I've only spoken to him a few times. I know Reeve hit it off with him almost immediately and he's his closest friend on the set." Rudy is due to arrive soon along with Nate, and he said he might bring a couple of others from school. Reeve wasn't keen on Nate joining us, but his parents just announced they are getting a divorce, and

Alex says he's really messed up and he could use a few days away. It sounds like a recipe for disaster, if you ask me, but he has been on his best behavior since the night of my eighteenth birthday, and like it or not, he's Alex's friend.

The doorbell chimes, and I set my knife down, padding to the front door in my silver flip-flops. I quickly check my reflection in the hallway mirror, to ensure I'm presentable.

Unlike the nights we glammed up for dinner on the town, I haven't made much of an effort with my appearance tonight. There didn't seem much point since we're just entertaining at home, but I still want to look nice. So, I'm wearing a short white summery dress with thin straps, my hair is wavy and running loose down my back, and I'm only wearing a touch of lip gloss and mascara. Satisfied I'll do, I march to the door and swing it open.

I'm immediately swept up into a set of strong arms and twirled around. "Hello, beautiful," Rudy says, swinging me around once more before planting my feet on the ground. "Wow. Reeve wasn't exaggerating. You're gorgeous." He dazzles me with a stunning smile as he rakes his gaze over me.

Warmth spreads up my neck as I return his smile. "And you're every bit as charming as Reeve told me you would be."

"Don't believe everything those two tell you," an unwelcome female says. "They are thick as thieves on set and always up to mischief." I work hard to keep the smile plastered to my face when Saffron—carrying two large suitcases—appears behind Rudy, but it's difficult when your arch-nemesis shows up without warning.

What the fuck is she doing here? If Reeve knew about this and purposely didn't tell me, there will be hell to pay.

I hate to admit it, but Saffron is even more beautiful in real life, even if she's heavily made up and wearing the tackiest designer dress with matching wedge heels. Her long jet-black hair is thick, glossy, and smooth, her complexion is flawless, her big, blue eyes draw you in, and she has enviable curves in all the right places. I'm taller than her, even in my flip-flops, but what she lacks in height she makes up for with confidence. Her tight-fitting red minidress leaves little to the imagination, and her large boobs are almost spilling out of the top.

I understand some of the vitriol I've seen directed at her online by fans of the series. While she has Abby's dark good looks, she doesn't have the lithe, small-chested, dancer's body as described in the books. It's clear the studio decided to take a gamble on displeasing the die-hard *Rydeville Elite* series fans in the hopes Saffron's notoriety and sex appeal will endear her to the wider audience. She also has a loyal, core following of her own who defend her to the nth degree anytime anyone accuses her of being miscast.

Holding her head up high, she flashes me a toothy smile, and I have a sudden urge to rip every strand of hair out of her head. Without warning, she digs her elbow into Rudy's side. "Thanks for leaving me with the luggage, doofus."

"Dude, you never..." Reeve's voice trails off as he strides down the tiled hallway toward us. His eyes widen as he whips his head to look at me. Panic is etched across his face, and I'm glad he knows this is a problem. "Saff, what are you doing here?" he asks, rubbing the back of his neck.

Saff? Are you fucking kidding me?! Anger mixes with hurt at the obvious familiarity between them.

“Surprise!” Rudy says, his eyes bouncing between me and Reeve as he suddenly realizes he might have made a boo-boo.

Dropping the cases on the floor, Saffron flings her arms around Reeve’s neck, and I dig my nails into my palms while grinding my teeth to the molars. “Aw, don’t pretend like you didn’t miss me,” she says, as Reeve quickly shucks out of her embrace.

I move over to him, slinging my arm around his waist. Reeve’s arm automatically encircles my shoulders, and I suction myself to his side while trying to restrain from snarling at the bitch who is still standing way too close to my man.

“You two are so cute; bucking the trend for childhood sweethearts,” she says, grinning.

“What trend is that?” I ask, tightening my hold around Reeve.

“Most high school sweethearts split up by the time they graduate.” She keeps the fake smile glued to her face while she stares at me.

“I think you’ll find that’s bullshit, and couples who get together in high school are less likely to divorce than couples who meet under other circumstances.” According to the report I read online, less than two percent of couples who marry are high school sweethearts, but they stand a higher chance of success than couples who didn’t meet in high school. Not that I’m admitting I googled this shit during dark moments a few months ago when I was beginning to doubt if Reeve and I would last the distance.

“Sounds like someone has done their research.” She plants her hands on her hips, licks her lips, and smiles at Reeve. “What about you, movie star? Have you done your homework?”

Movie star. Blech.

“Knock it off, Saff,” Rudy says.

She laughs, tilting her head to the side and bracing me with a wide smile. “Relax, Rudes. Viv knows I’m just teasing.”

“My name is Vivien. Only my close friends call me Viv,” I say through gritted teeth, digging my nails into Reeve’s side.

“My bad.” She pats my arm in a condescending fashion before looping her arm through Rudy’s. “Let’s get this party started. I’m in dire need of a drink.”

They wander off toward the kitchen while I drag Reeve into the nearest room, which happens to be the study, and shut the door.

“What the fuck is she doing here?” I hiss, pacing the hardwood floor while blood boils in my veins.

Reeve throws up his hands. “I didn’t invite her. I swear. This is all Rudy’s doing.”

“I want her to leave,” I say, fisting handfuls of my hair. “I already cannot stand her, and there’s no way she’s ruining the last three days of our vacation.”

“Viv.” Reeve stalks toward me, reeling me into his arms. “I know you don’t like her, and I understand why, but maybe this is a good thing.”

I arch a brow, because surely, he’s not that stupid?

“I can’t kick her out, babe. She’s my costar, and it would cause tension between us on set. I know she’s a big flirt, but she flirts with everyone. She’s not interested in me, I promise.” He clasps both sides of my face. “She’s fun, and if you give her a chance, you’ll see that.”

“I very much doubt it.” I know her sort, and whether Reeve wants to believe it or not, she wouldn’t think twice about screwing him, girlfriend or no girlfriend. “And it’s not just whether she wants you. She spent months kissing and making out with you on set.” Even the thought of her hands or her lips anywhere near Reeve sends me into a blind rage. I don’t know how I’m going to sit through the premiere and not want to hurl.

“Viv, you seriously can’t hold that against me? It’s my job, and it meant nothing to either of us.” He cocks his head to the side, examining my face.

I know I’m being irrational. I know actors and actresses have to act intimate with costars to play parts. I’ve seen my mom in sex scenes on the big screen and while it always makes me squirm, I know it’s not real. But this is Reeve, and the reality of him doing this is very different than the idea of it. “I know you were acting, Reeve, and I know I’ll have to get used to it, but I can’t help how I feel.” My eyes fill up. “I hate thinking of her with you like that. It makes me sick, and I really don’t need my nose rubbed in it.”

“Do you think I like being around Nate knowing his lips have touched yours and he most likely jacks off to visions of you on your knees?”

“Reeve!” I swat his chest. “Firstly, eww.” A full-body shudder works its way through me. “And secondly, it’s not the same thing.”

“I don’t like that he’s here, but I put my feelings aside because Alex is worried about him.”

Now, I feel selfish. Which I’m sure is the point.

“Baby.” He bundles me against his chest, holding me tight. “You have nothing to worry about. *I love you*. I don’t know what else to say or do to show you she means nothing more to me than a friend.” He tilts my face up to his. “Do you honestly think I would jeopardize our love for anyone or anything?”

“No, but she doesn’t care about our history. She just wants to fuck you.”

“Viv. She’s got a boyfriend. She doesn’t want me like that, and even if she did, it wouldn’t matter when I don’t want her. I only want you.”

He’s saying all the right things, so why am I struggling to believe it? I sigh, resting my forehead on his chest. Am I overthinking this? Am I reading more into it and tying myself into knots for no reason?

“Look at it like this,” Reeve continues, dotting kisses into my hair. “Let her see us together. Let her see how much we are in love. Let her see how I can’t keep my hands off you and how I have eyes for no one but my sexy girlfriend.”

“Okay,” I reluctantly concede. “But if she’s rude to me, she’s out of here.”

“Scout’s honor, babe.” Reeve lowers his mouth to kiss me. “Your happiness is my sole focus, Viv, but it would be good if you could find a way to make your peace with her because I’m going to be working closely with her for the next couple of years, and having my costar and my girlfriend at odds will really stress me out.”

I know I’m never going to warm to Saffron Roberts, but I vow to try to get along with her. Or at least to pretend—like she’s clearly doing—for Reeve’s sake.

Reeve stays true to his word, and he’s an attentive boyfriend the entire weekend. He barely leaves my side, and he ensures he’s close to me whenever Saffron is around so she has little opportunity to deliver any sly digs. Saffron loves the sound of her own voice, and she enjoys regaling us with stories of her escapades. Her voice grates on my nerves, and every

second in her company only confirms my initial opinion of her. Nate has been hanging off her every word and following her around like a little lost puppy, but I'm actually glad he's here, because he's helping to keep her distracted.

It's Saturday night, our last night at Laguna Beach, and we decide to enjoy some drinks at the house before hitting a club later. Audrey and I went all out with our outfits and our makeup, and we're both wearing little black dresses with high heels. I've consumed a few vodka cocktails, and I'm nicely buzzed, sitting on top of Reeve's lap as we chat outside on the deck.

"So, *Vivien*," Saffron says, enunciating my name like she has been since Thursday night when I ripped into her for calling me Viv. "I didn't have you down as a screamer, but judging by the sounds coming from your room last night, I'm guessing movie star has learned a few moves."

She winks at Reeve, and he smirks. I barely resist the urge to thump him. I detest how she calls him movie star, and I'm not fond of her insinuation that Reeve has somehow picked up new skills. I will admit I've been fucking Reeve into a virtual coma these past two nights, purposely screaming and moaning louder than normal to ensure she hears. It's juvenile but satisfying.

Tossing my hair over my shoulder, I fix her with a smug grin as I run my fingers through Reeve's hair. He's had to leave it longer on top and shorter at the sides for his role, and I enjoy having more hair to tug on when we're having sex. "My Reeve has always had mad skills in the bedroom. He knows how to keep me happy. Isn't that right, baby?" I purr before pressing my lips to his.

"But you've only ever slept with each other, right?" she says, snuggling under Nate's arm. I hope to fuck that's an educated guess—that Reeve didn't confide in her how we lost our virginity to one another. Nate stares at Saffron like he's just won the lottery. Idiot. Still, if he keeps her occupied tonight, I might start having nicer thoughts about him.

"And your point is?" I ask, running my fingers up and down Reeve's arm.

"Variety is the spice of life, and you don't know what you're missing until you've tried it." She rubs Nate's thigh, and the growing bulge in his shorts makes me gag. "I never thought I'd enjoy fucking a woman, but it was an enlightening experience."

Rudy laughs, Reeve spits his beer out, Alex's eyes pop wide, and Nate's mouth hangs open.

"Is this the wife of the director you were having an affair with or a different woman?" Audrey asks, her voice carrying an edge.

"You shouldn't believe everything you read online," Saffron replies, smirking a little. "Our three-way relationship was entirely consensual, as was the information we leaked to the press when it came to a natural end."

"You leaked details of the affair?" I blurt, disbelief evident in my tone. Considering how she's already shown herself to be a media-hungry whore, I don't know why I'm surprised.

"Of course." She moves her hand up higher on Nate's thigh. "It put my name on the map, strengthened my brand, and led to tons of new roles. There is nothing like a bit of salacious gossip to get everyone talking about you."

"I'm more interested in you getting it on with this chick," Rudy says, waggling his brows. "I want deets." He makes a rude hand gesture, and the guys all laugh.

"We never got it on alone. It was always when her husband was there. She liked watching him fuck me, and he liked watching us fuck each other with our fingers and our tongues. I fucked her with a strap-on once while he watched. Another time he fucked my ass while she ate me out. Then this one time, she fucked him with the strap-on while he fucked me. It was hot while it lasted, but I'm not really into pussy. I'm all about the D."

She says this while eyeballing me, and I'm uncomfortable with her attention, her obvious experience, and complete lack of shame. If I didn't dislike her so much, I might admire her sexual confidence. I think I'm adventurous if I ride Reeve reverse cowgirl style or he takes me from behind.

"Aw, you're blushing. It's so cute." She laughs at my discomfort.

"Saff. Don't be mean," Reeve says, and I'm glad he called her on it.

"Maybe you need to learn a few new skills, movie star," she replies, winking at Reeve before knocking back a few mouthfuls of beer.

"I don't understand why any couple in their situation would want to leak the details to the press. What did they get out of it?" Audrey asks, and I could kiss her for redirecting the conversation.

"More willing bed partners," Saffron replies. "And it didn't harm Bryan's directorial career either. Sex sells," she adds, like we haven't heard

that one before. “Reeve understands that. Don’t you, movie star?” She licks her lips while her hand moves to cover Nate’s crotch. Nate groans, nuzzling into her neck as he pulls her in tight to his side.

Reeve almost chokes on his beer, and his eyes pop wide in alarm.

Saffron smiles sweetly at me, but she’s like a viper waiting to deliver the fatal strike. “It’s why he readily signed his new contract agreeing to fake a relationship with me.”

Jumping off Reeve's lap, I storm into the house, even though I know I'm playing right into that bitch's hand. But I can't stay outside because I'm liable to either break down in tears, strangle Saffron Roberts, or murder Reeve. She carefully timed that reveal to cause maximum damage, just as Reeve has to leave to film reshoots with her. I hate that woman like I have never hated anyone before in my life.

"Vivien!" Reeve races after me, and I ignore him, striding toward our bedroom as murderous rage infiltrates my veins. "Viv. Baby, stop." Reeve grabs my arm and pushes me up against the wall, crowding me with his body.

"Let me go, you fucking asshole. I hate you!" I shout. I don't need to ask if it's true, because I was witness to the panicked look on his face before his costar spilled the beans.

"No. We need to talk about this. Look at me, Viv." He grips my chin, forcing my angry gaze to meet his worried one.

"You lied! You already fucking lied after just promising me you would always be open and honest!" I shriek.

"I was going to tell you tomorrow when we got home, I swear."

"Your words are empty, Reeve. The same as your promises."

"I knew this would piss you off, so I was trying to find a way of breaking it to you that would cause the least amount of pain."

I bark out a laugh. "Don't pretend you care about my feelings. You're more worried about upsetting that ho than you are about hurting me."

“That is not fucking fair or true.” He slams his hand into the wall, and I’m glad I’m not the only one who is angry. “It was a condition of the contract, Viv! I told Bianca I wouldn’t sign it unless that clause was removed, but the studio refused.”

“That’s bullshit, Reeve, and you know it. You’re the star of this movie. The fans are already going crazy for you. If this movie is going to be as big as predicted, there’s no way they can recast Camden Marshall. You have leverage, Reeve. You’re the one with the power in this situation. All you had to do was tell them that clause was a deal breaker, and they would’ve conceded. I bet that bitch Bianca has been filling your head with crap because this feeds into her agenda too,” I fume.

“This is bigger than me, Viv. Fans of the series aren’t happy that Saffron has been cast as Abby.”

“I don’t disagree,” I snap.

He continues, ignoring my little outburst. “It’s an issue if they don’t get on board. While Saff has her own loyal following, the series fans could make or break this movie.”

“More bullshit,” I hiss. “This isn’t a PG-13 movie. The main target audience will be adults, and most adults don’t give a crap about stuff that’s said online. And what does some fans objecting to Saffron’s casting have to do with you agreeing to a fake relationship?”

“The studio believes the fans will come around if they think we’re in a real relationship. That it’ll cement us as Abby and Cam. Ultimately, it’s for the greater good of the movie. That’s why I agreed, and I got it modified so we only need to hint at a relationship in public. It won’t go beyond a few fake dates, some holding hands, and suggestive looks. I won’t have to kiss her. I made them take that out.”

“Well, that makes it all okay then!” I yell. I shove at his chest, but he’s a solid wall of muscle. “Get the fuck away from me. I can’t even look at you right now.” I shove him again, and I’m seconds away from beating him with my fists.

“I’m not budging until we fix this.”

I snort, balling my hands into fists at my sides. “The only way you can fix this is to get that fucking contract modified.”

“You know I can’t do that. Please, Viv.” He rests his forehead against mine. “Please don’t make a big deal out of this.”

“Are you for fucking real—”

“Oops, sorry.” Saffron tugs on Nate’s hand as she pulls him past us in the hallway. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” I scoff.

“Leave us the fuck alone, Saffron,” Reeve snaps, and I’m glad he’s not hiding his anger from her. Maybe all hope isn’t lost after all.

“We’ll just be on our way,” she says, ignoring me and mouthing “sorry” at Reeve.

I stare numbly after her and Nate, watching them walk up the stairs, groping and laughing like my world isn’t crumbling around me in shattered piles. “I thought she was fucking the assistant director?” I say to Reeve.

“We broke up. He was too old and boring. Younger guys have much more stamina!” she shouts down the stairs, and I flip her the bird, even though she can’t see me.

“You mean he served his purpose and you’re chasing the next victim who can help your brand?!” I roar up the stairs at her.

Reeve can deny it all he wants, but I know she has her sights set on him. Pity he’s too fucking blind to see she’s already laying the groundwork, and I hate how much she’s coming between us. I’m so frustrated I could scream, and I’m mad at my boyfriend for sucking me into all this drama. I shove his shoulders again. “Get off me. I mean it, Reeve. If you don’t step back, I will not be responsible for my actions. Right now, I hate you. I hate you with the heat of a thousand suns.” My anger gives way to pain. “How could you agree to this?” I cry. “You didn’t even consult me about it. We used to discuss everything, and you never made decisions that impact me without my input.” I shake my head as tears stream down my face. “What happened to me grounding you, huh?”

“What happened to you supporting me?!” he shouts, eventually pulling away from me.

“I have always supported you, Reeve.”

He harrumphs, flattening his back against the wall across the hallway. “All you have done since I got this role is bitch and whine. I have never given you any reason to doubt my loyalty, yet you hurl accusations at me all the time. I can’t handle your insecurities, Viv. Do you have any idea of the stress I’m under? I don’t need this shit from you. You know it’s not real. It’s part of the industry.” He pushes off the wall. “For fuck’s sake, more than half the so-called relationships in Hollywood are fake. It means nothing, Viv. It’s part of the role, and I am getting sick of repeating myself.”

“If I’m that unsupportive, you know what to do,” I challenge, rubbing my tears away and straightening my shoulders. We stare at one another across the hallway, and there may as well be an ocean between us.

“I don’t want to break up, Viv,” he eventually says, walking toward me. He takes my hand and links our fingers together. “I love you, but you’ve got to find a way to deal with this.”

“And if I can’t?” I don’t know how to reconcile this new development with my own wants and needs.

He shrugs, looking sad, and we don’t need to articulate it.

I wrench my hands from his, briefly closing my eyes as pain lances me on all sides. “I’m calling a car to take me home,” I say after a few tense minutes of silence.

“No, Viv. Please don’t do that.”

“I can’t be around that bitch another second.”

“I’ll come with you,” he offers.

“I don’t want you to.” I eyeball him, letting him see the full extent of my devastation. “I need some space to think.”

“Don’t do this, baby. I don’t want to leave for reshoots when we’re arguing.”

“You should’ve thought of that before you lied to me again.”

I walk off, and this time, he doesn’t follow me.

“Hey.” Audrey steps into my home studio the following day, and I stop my sewing machine, setting the piece of multicolored fabric down on the table.

“You’re back.” I swivel around in my chair.

Audrey props her butt against the edge of the table. “How are you feeling today?”

I shrug. “Hurt. Scared. Confused.”

“He gave Saffron hell this morning at breakfast before we all went our separate ways.”

“It’s too little, too late. I never thought Reeve would be such a pushover, but he’s letting all these horrible people manipulate him.”

“He explained a little on the car ride home, and he’s as upset as you are over everything.”

My anger flares again, and I dig my nails into my thigh. “That’s just not good enough, and I’m not buying it. If this movie is going to be as big as predicted, there’s no way they would go ahead with the other films without their leading man. Reeve holds all the cards, not the other way around. He didn’t have to agree to this. He *chose* to.” Leaning back, I kick my bare feet up on the table. “It was that bitch, Bianca. She was the one who pushed this. All Reeve had to do was talk to my mom or talk to Margaret Andre, and they would have given him good advice.”

“Reeve wants to do things by himself. He doesn’t want to run to your mom and be accused of nepotism, and I really think getting his dad to notice him is the driving force behind a lot of this.”

“He told you that?” I know how desperate Reeve is to be a success in the hopes his father will sit up and take notice of him.

“He got really drunk last night after you left, and before you ask, no, he didn’t seek her out or spend any time with her when you were gone. She fucked Nate, or at least that’s what Nate said this morning. Anyway, the three of us stayed out on the deck drinking until the early hours. Reeve spilled his guts to me and Alex. He was a mess, babe. He’s terrified of losing you, and he was crying his heart out. It was hard to witness and not feel some compassion.”

Slamming my feet to the ground, I jump up. “So, it’s like that. You’ve switched teams now?”

“Jesus, dramatic much?” She pins me with a stern look, planting her hands on her hips. “Do not ever accuse me of that shit. I am always, *always*, on Team Vivien. One hundred fucking percent, no matter if you turn into the world’s biggest bitch.”

My shoulders relax as I exhale heavily. “Sorry. I’m a mess too,” I admit, plopping back into my chair. I rest my elbows on my knees and prop my head in my hands. “I don’t want to lose him, but how do I hide in the shadows while he pretends that bitch is his girlfriend?” I sniffle, fighting tears. I am so sick of crying because of that ho’s interference. “I can’t do it, Rey. I just don’t think I can do that.”

Kneeling in front of me, she takes my hands in hers. “I don’t envy you this decision, but I will support you no matter what you choose to do.”

“What would you do?”

“I can’t answer that, Viv, because we’re different people and I don’t have a Reeve in my life. He’s more than just your boyfriend. He’s your best

friend. Your family. He's a part of every happy memory you have, and I know that won't be easy to walk away from, even if that's what you decide to do for your sanity."

"I love him so much," I cry. "I really do, but he's changing, and I don't know if I like the person he's becoming."

"He's still the same Reeve underneath it all. You're not the only one struggling to adjust. I don't think he's doing this deliberately to hurt you, but he has been cowardly and secretive, and that shit's definitely not cool."

"I can't bear the thought of the entire world believing they are in this epic romance. I think the media coverage will break my heart, but if I let him go, then what's to stop him from starting something real with her?" This is the crux of my dilemma. "If I walk away, I'm handing Reeve to her on a silver platter, and I might lose him forever."

"I'd love to refute that, but I can't," she says, reclaiming her seat. "I saw her watching him all weekend. She's a good actress, I'll give her that, but a woman knows."

"I know she wants him. I'm just not sure if it's because she would get a kick out of stealing him from me, whether she genuinely has feelings for him, or she just sees him as a means of elevating her star power higher."

"I doubt she feels anything for him. It's about what he can do for her career, and I've no doubt she would love to stick the knife in your back. You two traded barbed insults all weekend, and you've definitely laid down the gauntlet now." Audrey tucks her lustrous red hair behind one ear. "If there is anything positive to come from the weekend, it's that Reeve did see what you've been saying. He was not one bit happy with her when she left for the airport with Rudy."

"Maybe her plane will crash, and problem solved," I deadpan.

Audrey laughs. "Maybe you shouldn't say stuff like that. You don't want the bad karma."

"Fuck karma. If it existed, that manipulative bitch would've already gotten what's coming to her."

Reeve doesn't call or make an appearance, and that only adds to my foul mood. I'm being unfair, because I told him I need space and he's not a mind

reader.

Or maybe he is.

“Knock, knock,” he says in my ear, as I’m hunched over my sewing machine later that night.

“Oh my freaking God!” I shriek, slamming a hand over my chest, willing my pounding heart to slow down. “Don’t creep up on me like that. You nearly gave me a coronary.”

“I did knock, but you clearly couldn’t hear me.” He tugs on my earbuds.

I turn around, and his doleful expression mirrors my own. His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat as we stare at one another. “I know you probably still hate me, but I’m flying out tomorrow for two weeks, and I can’t leave without trying to make things right.”

“I don’t hate you,” I say, in a quiet voice. “Sometimes, I wish I could. It might make things easier.”

“I couldn’t bear it if you hated me, Viv. I hate that you’re hurting and it’s my fault. I’m hurting too,” he adds, taking my hand and pulling me to my feet. “I don’t want any of this, and it’s killing me inside.”

Sighing, I wrap my arms around him, closing my eyes as I rest my head on his chest. The steady thrumming of his heart is comforting. “I just don’t see how we can make this work, Reeve.”

“Walk with me?” he asks, and I find myself nodding.

We don’t talk as he leads me out of the house and down to the rose garden. It’s clearly much later than I thought, as it’s pitch-dark out, and we only have the garden lamps to light our path.

I suck in a gasp as we near our tree, spotting the large tent that wasn’t there this morning. A myriad of twinkling lights is hanging from the inside of the tent, which has been erected over a temporary wooden floor. The roof of the tent is clear, offering a perfect view of the nighttime sky. Scented candles mix with the perfume of roses wafting in the air as we step inside. A comfortable bed has been set up, adorned with tons of soft cushions, behind a small table and two chairs. A bottle of champagne is chilling on ice, and my tummy rumbles appreciatively as the aroma of hot pizza hits my nostrils. “What’s all this?”

“I thought we could sleep under the stars, in one of our favorite places, and remember everything we mean to each other.” His eyes fill up with tears. “I can’t lose you, Viv. If that’s where your mind is at, I’ll pull out of

the production. They can sue me for breach of contract. I don't care anymore. None of it will matter anyway if I lose you."

"Reeve." I fling my arms around him and we hug each other tight. "You can't do that. Your career would be over before it's begun."

"You matter more than my career, and maybe I had begun to lose sight of that, but not anymore. I'll give it all up for you, if that's what you want."

One part of me screams yes, but I know I can't ask him to do that. I can't ask him to give up everything for me. That would drill the final nail in our coffin some day when he came to resent me for forcing him into a life that is less than what he desired. "I would never ask you to give up your dreams for me, Reeve, but I am asking you to consider my feelings before you make decisions that impact me. Don't shut me out. Let me be involved. No more secrets."

I press my mouth to his, and he readily opens for me. So many emotions are swirling through my veins as we kiss, but for the first time in twenty-four hours, I have some clarity. I can't lose Reeve. He is the other half of my soul, which is why the pain cuts so deep.

Reeve deepens our kiss, holding my body flush against his, as he reassures me with his lips and his tongue. I don't know if I'm strong enough to do this, but I'm not giving up without at least trying, and I'm not going down without a fight.

Audrey and I have settled into our dorm, and we're making new friends and coming to grips with our classes and assignments, so I don't have too much time to pine for Reeve. He spent most of September and October auditioning for other roles, and buzz is definitely building for him in Hollywood. November sees the start of filming the second *Rydeville Elite* movie, but they begin heavy promotion for the first movie in early December. You can't turn on the TV or open social media without something popping up about the impending release.

"Have you seen this?" Audrey looks at her phone as we're gathering our stuff to head home for Christmas break.

"You know I shut down all my social media accounts, so no." Since stuff started appearing online about Reeve and Saffron potentially "dating," the level of hatred toward me from the Saffhards—Saffron's die-hard fans—escalated to such an extent I had to remove myself altogether from social media. While some of Reeve's fans came out in support of me, most were shipping Reeve with his costar and trolling me like crazy. All that shit is depressing, and I'm taking what steps I can to protect my mental health and my sanity.

"*Reeveron*," Audrey says, in a scathing tone, and I stop folding my sweaters to stare at her. "That's what the fandom is calling Reeve and Saffron."

"Great, they have a ship name. Totally awesome." Sarcasm drips from my tone.

"This sucks." She slings a comforting arm around me.

I rest my head on her shoulder. “It does, especially when I barely get to speak to him these days.” Reeve is on an international tour at the moment, so between our busy schedules and the time difference, it’s virtually impossible to find time to talk. We’re communicating mainly via messages, but he’s coming home for three days over Christmas, and I can’t wait to see him.

“Are you holding up okay? Will you see Alex at Christmas?”

“It’s harder than I thought it would be, and I don’t know.” She chews on her lip as pain flares in her eyes.

“What’s happened?”

Tears flood her eyes. “I think he’s already found a new girlfriend.”

“No way.” I shake my head. “I can’t see Alex in a new relationship already. I saw his face the day you two said goodbye. He was devastated.”

Her fingers fly over her screen. “Look.” She thrusts her cell in my face. “See that blonde? She’s in a few of his photos, and she’s hanging off him in every single one.”

I scroll through the photos, examining them closely. “All this proves is Alex has groupies. See how she’s draped over him?” I point to the image on the screen before flicking to the next one. “Sure, he’s smiling at the camera, but he’s not touching her. She’s touching him.” She’s a fuck buddy, most likely, but I’m not saying that out loud because I don’t want to upset my bestie, and Audrey has been a rock for me this past year.

“It doesn’t matter anyway.” She wipes her tears with the sleeve of her sweater. “We broke up, so he’s free to date, and I can’t get pissy about it. I just didn’t think it would hurt this much.”

I bundle her into a hug, and she sobs into my shoulder. “We’re a sorry pair,” I admit when we break apart. “And I know exactly what we need. Movie night at my place with ice cream. Your parents aren’t home until tomorrow anyway, right?”

She bobs her head, and I loop my arm through hers. “It’s settled then. We’re heading to Chez Mills.”

Christmas comes and goes, and I didn’t get to spend much quality time with Reeve since he was so exhausted and sleeping all the time, thanks to Mr. Jet Lag. However, at least I got to sleep beside him and derive what little comfort I could.

The past three weeks have flown by, and now it’s the night of the premiere. I hate that I’m dreading it, but it’s nothing like how I imagined it

would be. In all my dreams, I was on Reeve's arm as we greeted his fans on the red carpet, just like I've seen my parents work the crowd at Mom's premieres. My reality couldn't be any further removed from that fantasy.

"Oh, Vivien," Mom exclaims entering my room, her eyes popping wide as I turn to face her in my dress. It's a strapless lemon chiffon gown with intricate silver diamante- beading over the corset top and dotted around the full skirt. The hem is longer at the back while it's shorter at the front to highlight my lower legs and the gorgeous silver sandals on my feet.

I designed and made the dress myself, aiming for understated elegance. For two seconds, I'd considered creating a spectacular gown that would ensure I was the talk of the night, just to rub Saffron's nose in it, but that's like something she'd do to try to steal my thunder, and I won't sink to her level. Besides, drawing attention to myself would only backfire on Reeve, and he went to huge efforts to get me into the premiere. Bianca and the studio were hell-bent on excluding me, but everyone knows Reeve and I grew up together and our families are super close, so it's not inconceivable that I'd be there, even if we are supposedly broken up.

"I'm really wondering if you should have gone the design route in college because your talent is incredible." Mom examines the intricate beading.

"I couldn't agree more," Marlena says, standing back to admire the job she did on my hair and makeup. Again, I opted for simple. My hair is gently pulled away from my face with a few carefully placed diamond clips, and it flows in soft waves down my back. Marlena focused mainly on my eyes, creating a sultry smoky look, and she finished it off with nude lips and a light blush on my cheeks. "You look stunning, Vivien. Like a bona fide Hollywood princess."

"Thank you." I squeeze her hands. "If I look stunning, it's because you worked your magic, as usual."

Marlena spins around to Mom. "And this is why you two are my favorite clients. You must be so proud of your daughter. It's rare to meet such genuine people in this business."

"You're a sweetheart," Mom tells her, giving her a quick hug. "Just like my daughter and that wife of yours."

"Where is my better half?" Marlena asks.

"Carole went to load up the car. She said she'd meet you outside."

“Have a great night,” Marlena says, waving as she strides toward my door. “And tell Reeve I said congratulations.”

“I will, if I see him,” I mumble under my breath.

“Aw, honey.” Mom threads her fingers in mine. “I hate that we have to enter through the back like thieves in the night, but Reeve knows we are there, and it’s our support he needs.”

“I’m trying to be less selfish, but it’s hard. I hate that I can’t walk the red carpet with my boyfriend on his big night. Even worse, I hate that *she* will be hanging off his every word, fueling the rumors and getting one over on me at the same time.”

“You have his heart,” Mom reminds me. “Something she will never have.” Her expression softens. “And Reeve will die when he sees you in this creation. It’s perfect, Vivien. Truly perfect. Regal and sophisticated, yet not too ostentatious. No one can accuse you of trying to upstage that attention-seeking madam.”

I grin despite my anxiety. Mom always knows the perfect thing to say to settle my frayed nerves. “You look incredible, Mom,” I say, admiring the white silk Ralph Lauren gown. It’s a classic figure-hugging design, and the material clings to Mom’s enviable curves. It dips low at the front, showcasing her cleavage, but it’s still classy and elegant. Mom has paired it with diamond studs in her ears and a matching bracelet and necklace.

“Wow. I’m going to be the envy of every man at this premiere tonight,” Dad says, entering the room. “You both look beautiful.” He kisses us gently on the cheeks, careful not to mess up our makeup. “This is for you from Reeve.” Dad hands me a small black velvet box.

“No crying,” Mom warns, spotting the emotion building in my eyes.

I pop the lid on the box, gasping at the gorgeous diamond earrings. My chest swells as my heart soars at the physical confirmation of his love. While I don’t need or want expensive gifts, it is the thought that counts. I know that sounds cliché, but it’s the truth. Just knowing he was thinking about me on his special night warms all the frozen parts of me. This is the Reeve I know, and I cling to that sentiment as we make our way to the limo and travel to the theater, because I know I’m going to need that reminder to survive this ordeal.

“Don’t make a scene, Mom.” I grab her arm to halt her forward trajectory. “I’m fine to sit here,” I lie, struggling to maintain my composure. I knew I wouldn’t be seated at the front, but shoving me into a seat by myself in the very back row of the theater over in the corner was not anticipated. If Bianca wanted to remind me of my place in Reeve’s life, she’s found a good way of driving the point home. My heart hurts. I’m in actual physical pain, and I don’t know if I’m strong enough to do this. Maybe it would’ve been better for everyone if I had bowed out, but I want to be here to support him. Even if he won’t see me hidden away like I’m an embarrassment.

I know Reeve would have requested I be seated with my parents, but no one in this town would dare relegate Lauren and Jonathon Mills to the shadows. They have no issue in disrespecting their daughter though.

“Absolutely not,” Dad says, scrubbing a hand over his chin. “Take my seat for now while I find someone to fix this.”

Mom extends her hand, and I clasp it as we walk down the center aisle to my parents’ seats, which are about ten rows from the front. “This isn’t good enough,” Mom says, as we sit down. “Reeve should’ve ensured you were looked after.”

“I’m sure he trusted it to someone else and they let him down.”

Mom opens and closes her mouth in fast succession.

“What?” I can tell something is on her mind.

She shakes her head. “It can wait. Let’s just try and enjoy the night.”

I spot Simon Lancaster, Reeve’s dad, talking to a couple of men in suits a few rows in front of us, and I’m glad he showed his face. All week, Reeve has been terrified he was going to pull out of attending. Noticing my attention, Simon waves to Mom and me, and we nod our heads in his direction.

Seats fill up fast, and there’s still no sign of Dad or the main cast members. A large crowd turned up to greet them, and I’m betting they are still outside on the red carpet giving interviews, signing autographs, and posing for photos with the fans. I’ve deliberately avoided checking the coverage on my phone, because I don’t want to witness Reeve and Saffron faking it for the public. I feel sick enough as it is.

“Hey.” Dad materializes at the end of our row, crouching down. “There’s nothing that can be done. They are at full capacity. I could make a scene, but that would force someone else to be moved, and I didn’t think you’d want that, honey,” he says to me.

“I wouldn’t.” I stand. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about me.” I’ll just go lick my wounds in the corner.

“Sit back down, Vivien. I’ll take your seat. You stay with your mom.”

“But Dad—”

“No buts, honey. No one puts my baby in the corner.”

I bark out a laugh despite the pain slicing through my chest. “So cheesy.”

“But so true. And it removed that sad look from your face.” Leaning in, he kisses me on the cheek. “I’ll be having words with that young man of yours later. This is not acceptable.”

I shake my head. “No, Dad.”

“I agree, Vivien. I’m disappointed in Reeve,” Mom says.

“Don’t say anything to him tonight, either of you. Please,” I beg. “This is his big night, and I don’t want to ruin it by upsetting him or arguing with him.”

“As you wish,” Mom says. “But this isn’t right. I haven’t said anything before now, because I didn’t want to interfere, but Reeve isn’t treating you right, and that isn’t okay with me or your father. Frankly, we expect more from him.”

“This isn’t the time, Lauren,” Dad says, as the main cast members appear at the entrance doors. “Enjoy the movie,” he adds before turning around to walk back up the steps.

My heart thuds painfully behind my rib cage as Reeve and Saffron approach. She has her arm linked through his, and she’s whispering animatedly in his ear. He’s laughing at something she says, and I swear I feel the rupture splitting my heart into two. Reeve looks so handsome in his custom-made Armani suit. Saffron looks like a slut in a monstrous red silk and lace dress that leaves little to the imagination. If the top was any lower, you’d see her nipples.

“Hey, Viv.” Rudy stops, leaning down to kiss my cheek. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Rudy. This is my mom, Lauren.”

Rudy kisses Mom’s hand. “I’m a big fan, and it’s an honor to meet you.”

“Thank you. This is an exciting night for all of you. We’re looking forward to seeing the movie,” Mom diplomatically replies.

“Lauren, Viv.” Reeve stops to say hi with the clinger suctioned to his arm like she’s a bloodsucking leech. Her glowing smile falters a little when she sees me beside Mom, but she recovers fast.

That bitch. She must have had something to do with the seating arrangements.

“Oh my God, it’s so amazing to meet you, Lauren. You’re my biggest inspiration, and I just adore you,” Saffron gushes.

Mom gives her a tight smile but doesn’t reply, glancing away, and that’s as good a snub as anything she wishes she could say. I have never loved my mom more than I do in this moment. She always has my back, unlike some I could mention.

Saffron’s eyes glint with malice as she leans into Reeve, placing her hand on his chest and peering up at him like he hung the moon.

I want to rip her hands away and pummel my fists into her face until I reveal the ugly monster hiding behind that beautiful exterior. I swear she must have been put on this Earth to test my self-control. Gripping my armrests tightly, I latch on to my anger, because it’s better than letting the hurt take control.

The smile drops off Reeve’s face when he sees my expression. “You go on,” he tells Saffron.

“Okay, baby,” she croons, pulling his head down and moving her lips toward his. Mom clamps her hand down on my arm to hold me in place. If she kisses him, all bets are off. I don’t give a flying fuck how much trouble I’d land Reeve in.

Reeve turns his head, and her lips caress his cheek instead. Giggling, she shoots me a victory smile. “Don’t be too long. It’s just about to start. I can’t wait for everyone to see what amazing chemistry we have.” She walks off, grinning like she’s the master of the universe. In her fucked-up brain, she probably thinks she is.

So much for no kissing and offering the public only hints of a relationship. It seems to have gone from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye.

Intense pain settles on my chest, as if someone has taken a baseball bat to my heart. My insides are tied into knots, and acid churns in my gut. I’m glad I couldn’t stomach any dinner, because I’m pretty sure I’d have puked it back up. I wish I hadn’t come now, and I’m tempted to leave, but I won’t give that bitch the satisfaction.

“All that girl is missing is a scarlet A strapped to her chest,” Mom says, drilling Reeve with a harsh look I would not like to be on the receiving end of.

“I’m sorry about that. I know she’s a lot to handle.”

“I hope you know what you’ve gotten yourself into, Reeve, and I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.”

Reeve quickly glances around before mouthing “I’m sorry.”

I can barely look at him, let alone speak. Reaching into my purse, I hand him the card I made for him. Our fingers brush in the exchange, and his touch sends tremors shooting up my arm, like always. However, it offers none of the usual comfort. His hand twitches, and while it’s only a subtle gesture, it’s enough to tell me he still feels our connection too.

I wonder if she ignites sparks in him, or if her touch makes his skin crawl like one look at her does to me.

“You look beautiful,” he whispers, glancing around to ensure no one is paying too much attention. “Do you like the earrings?” he adds in another whisper.

I nod. “Thank you. You look hot,” I croak, barely managing to get the words out.

An awkward silence descends, and I hate this. Even strangers would have some polite words to say, but I’ve got nothing. There’s a distance between us for the first time ever, and I have no clue how I can close it. The lump in my throat is so painful I’m almost choking on air.

Cassidy, the studio’s obnoxious PR person, rushes up to Reeve, whispering in his ear.

“I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you at the after-party,” Reeve says, shooting me another apologetic look. I nod tersely, watching him walk away with a horrid ache in my chest.

Mom takes my hand, holding it tight. “You don’t have to deal with this. Just say the word, and we’ll leave.”

I squeeze her hand back. “Thanks, Mom, but I came here for Reeve, and I’m staying to support him.” Whether he deserves it is another matter entirely.

I grab another flute when a waiter passes by, depositing my empty glass on the table beside us. “At least there’s free champagne,” I deadpan, taking a healthy glug of the expensive amber-colored liquid as my eyes scan the packed hotel ballroom. My parents are doing the rounds, leaving me and Audrey to our own devices. While Reeve wasn’t able to secure a ticket for my bestie to the premiere, he scored her an invite to the after-party. Thank god, because there’s no way I would have attended without her. “Maybe if I drink enough, I can erase the image of Reeve with that bitch from my mind.” I should probably lower my voice, but I’m beyond the point of caring.

The movie was good, but it’s blatantly obvious Reeve is the star. His performance was utterly magnetic, and I am so proud of him. He nailed it completely, enough to become the latest hot commodity in Hollywood. Directors will be hammering his door down after tonight. Reeve’s performance was so masterful I forgot who he was a lot of the time because he wore Camden Marshall’s skin with effortless ease. However, I couldn’t forget it was Reeve during the sex scenes. I had to close my eyes and not look after the first one almost killed me.

“She truly is shameless.” Audrey glares daggers into Saffron’s back. The bitch hasn’t left Reeve’s side, and my patience is in short supply. We’ve been at the after-party for over an hour, and Reeve hasn’t come near us, apart from a fleeting hello when the main cast members arrived. He’s the man of the moment, and everyone wants to speak to him, but it’s like he’s completely forgotten I’m here, and I’m getting sick of being an

afterthought. If you had asked me a year ago if Reeve would ever treat me like this, I'd have laughed in your face.

My loving, attentive, protective boyfriend exists now only in my memory.

And I'm sad.

So sad and lonely.

"Fuck her," Audrey says, spotting the forlorn expression on my face. "When karma comes for her, we'll celebrate."

"Are you going to talk to Alex?" I inquire, needing to stop thinking and talking about Saffron fucking Roberts. Subtly, I jerk my head to the side where Alex is congregated with a couple of guys from our old high school. I've watched him sneak longing glances at Audrey when he thinks no one is looking, so I don't understand why he hasn't approached her yet.

"Probably not. Our last conversation at Christmas didn't go too well."

Alex and Audrey had met for coffee over the Christmas break, and they ended up having a massive argument when Alex confirmed he was sleeping with the blonde. They're not dating, just fucking, but the distinction doesn't matter to Audrey. It still hurts that he could move on so fast when they parted out of necessity, not because they had fallen out of love.

For a while, I wondered if Reeve and I should adopt Alex and Audrey's strategy, but it's clear it doesn't matter how you play it when feelings are involved. My bestie thought she could cut ties amicably and maturely and it wouldn't hurt. Technically, Alex hasn't done anything wrong, and apparently, guys find it easier to engage in no-strings-attached sex. But I honestly don't understand how you can switch off your feelings so quickly. You couldn't convince me Alex no longer loves Audrey. From the way he can't take his eyes off her tonight, it's clear she still owns his heart. Yet he wasted little time climbing into bed with another woman.

Men are such confusing bastards.

After a half an hour, and another glass of champagne, I have reached my limit, and I need to get out of here before I do something I regret. "Want to ditch?" I ask my bestie, and she eagerly nods.

"I was ready to ditch the second we got to the hotel."

"I'm just going to the bathroom. Can you find my parents and tell them we're leaving?"

She agrees, and I exit the ballroom, heading toward the ladies' restroom.

After attending to business, I step out of my stall to discover Saffron Roberts waiting for me. “I’m surprised you managed to peel yourself off Reeve. Clinging to his coattails makes you look desperate and pathetic,” I say, my tongue much looser, thanks to the alcohol sluicing through my veins. I know she staged this little meet and greet, and I want to get the first shot in. “It’s clear to everyone he’s the star of the show, and you’re destined to linger in his shadow.”

She laughs, and it’s a haughty, shrill sound that grates on my nerves. I wash my hands in the sink to keep them occupied so I don’t do something reckless—like strangle her.

“The only person slinking into the shadows is *you*.” She pins me with a smug look I instantly want to wipe off her face.

“I hate to disappoint you, *Saff*, but I’m going nowhere.”

“It won’t be up to you,” she retorts.

“It sure as fuck won’t be up to you.” I wipe my hands on a paper towel before we face off. Even in her skyscraper heels, I am still taller, and I derive immense satisfaction in towering over her diminutive frame.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to underestimate your enemies?”

“I’m glad you’re openly admitting the truth, and I’m not threatened by you.” That latter part is a semi-lie, but I’ll never admit it to her. I’m not threatened by Saffron, per se. It’s what she represents and how easily she has injected herself between Reeve and me. I’ve begun questioning how strong our relationship really is, if it’s crumbling this fast at the first sign of trouble.

She steps closer, prodding her finger into my chest. “You should be.”

I shove her finger away. “Reeve loves me. He has loved me his entire life. You will never compete with that.”

“He might think he loves you, but it’s only because he’s known no different. I mean, look at me and look at you.” Her scathing gaze roams me from head to toe, obliterating the last of my patience.

“Exactly. Reeve would never choose a skank like you over me, but continue to daydream, you delusional bitch.” I move to sidestep her, because I’m done breathing the same toxic air as her, but she grabs my wrist, halting me.

“I’m going to enjoy taking him from you, and I’m going to rub it in your face in the most public way.” Her nails dig painfully into my skin as she twists my wrist, and I attempt to wrench my arm back, but she’s got

hidden strength I can't shake off. "You're such a stuck-up prissy princess. I bet you've been handed everything on a silver platter. Reeve included. Consider this my gift to you. It's time for a wake-up call, and I'll get enormous pleasure delivering it."

I stomp on her foot, digging my stiletto heel into her flesh, enjoying the murderous scream she emits as she finally drops my hand. My wrist is throbbing, and I cradle it against my chest. "You don't know me, and you don't know Reeve."

Her eyes narrow, her jaw tenses, and she glares at me with such unrestrained loathing, I take an automatic step back when she advances on me. Prickles of awareness dance over my skin, and I rein my anger in, because she's unpredictable right now. She looks like one hell of a scary bitch, and I wonder if I haven't underestimated her, in part. The evil glint in her eyes sends a spike of fear shooting through me. She is shaking with visible rage, and I wonder if she isn't more than a little unstable. "I know he was hard during every single sex scene. I know the moans we both made when he thrust his giant cock against my pussy during filming was real."

Her words poke holes in my fragile heart, and she continues digging in the knife.

"Reeve is *mine*." She shoves at my shoulders, and I stumble a little. "He might not have accepted it yet, but he wants me as much as I want him. He is mine. Not yours. *Mine*. You don't fucking deserve him. I do!" she yells. Her eyes dart wildly around the place, and something is definitely off. Scrutinizing her more closely, I can tell she's on something, because this mania isn't like her. She's been nothing but cold, calculated disdain in all our previous encounters.

Saffron paces the tile floor, and I bite my tongue, some inner voice of self-preservation warning me not to push her any further. "I will be the one wearing his ring and having his babies. *Me*, not you!" She jabs her finger in the air, waving it at me. "It will take minimal effort to dispose of you, so either back off or prepare to be defeated." She laughs as I edge toward the door. "You'd do well to be afraid of me, bitch," she threatens. "You don't know where I've come from. The people I know."

Feeling braver now I've reached the door, I level a parting shot. "I know your crazy is showing, and if you think I'm keeping this conversation a secret from Reeve, you are truly delusional."

She lunges for me, and I open the door, racing out into the corridor, slamming headfirst into a familiar warm solid chest. Reeve's citrusy scent wafts around me, and I grab him, grateful he's here. "Oh my God, Reeve. Thank God."

Saffron comes barreling out of the bathroom, slamming to a halt and crumpling to the floor the instant she sees him. "She attacked me!" she shrieks, clutching her foot and sobbing.

"You have got to be kidding me." I shake my head in disgust. "You really are a piece of work."

"Viv. What the hell is going on?" Reeve asks, his blue eyes turning stormy as his gaze bounces between us. Sighing, he pries my hands off his chest and takes a step back, glancing anxiously over his shoulder, fearful of an audience.

My heart dips to my toes when I realize he's more concerned about being seen than my feelings. Exhaustion washes over me, mixing with emotional lethargy, and I speak quietly, just wanting to get out of here. I don't have the strength or stamina to deal with this anymore. "I can explain, but she hurt me first."

"Dude, what's going on?" Rudy asks, materializing behind us.

"Can you get Saff out of here?" Reeve asks, glancing over my head at his friend. "I need to talk to Viv in private."

Rudy walks around us and helps Saffron to her feet. She lets out a pained sob, clinging to him like a legit damsel in distress. "I don't know if I can walk," she cries.

Anger resurfaces, waking me the fuck up. "You had no trouble chasing me out of the bathroom," I hiss.

"That's enough!" Reeve snaps, rubbing a spot between his brows.

"Baby." Saffron reaches for Reeve, but he moves back.

"Go with Rudy," he barks, glaring at her. "And I don't care how fucking sore your foot is. If you go out there and make this into *anything*, I'll walk."

A muscle clenches in his jaw, and her lower lip wobbles, as tears leak freely from her eyes.

Man, I've got to give it to her. She can turn on the waterworks at will. Pity she didn't invoke some of those acting skills on the screen. She was a lukewarm Abby at best, and I can't imagine the die-hard series fans will be happy at all with her lackluster performance.

“Please, Reeve. This wasn’t my fault,” she pleads, reaching for him again. “I did nothing wrong. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Fuck off, Saff,” Reeve snaps, and I’m silently fist-pumping the air. Maybe he’s finally seeing the light where his costar is concerned. It’s about damn time.

Rudy half-carries Saffron down the hallway, and I release a relieved breath the second she’s out of sight.

“Ow,” I cry, as Reeve grabs my sore wrist, pulling me into the nearest room, which is a small office of some sort. “You’re hurting me.”

He loosens his tight grip, turning my wrist over and examining the raised, red nail imprints on my skin.

“She did that, and I only stabbed her with my heel because she wouldn’t let go of me.”

“What the fuck is going on, Viv?” Reeve drops my hand, dragging his fingers through his hair as he steps away from me.

I quickly explain what happened, telling him everything she said, word for word.

He shakes his head. “I know you two don’t like one another, but lying about it doesn’t help.”

What the actual fuck? “I’m not lying,” I yell. “Why would I do that?”

“Maybe because you want to ruin things for me? God knows you’re trying hard to suck all the enjoyment out of this experience.” He slams his fists down on the desk, and I jump, unused to seeing Reeve so angry and wound up. “You couldn’t just give me one night without all this shit? You didn’t even congratulate me! I am so sick of the two of you in my ear, and it’s got to stop!” he shouts.

Forcing my pain aside at his hurtful words, I latch on to my anger instead. “What the fuck do you think I’ve been doing all night? I was sidelined so you could have your moment in the spotlight with her. You haven’t even spent five minutes with me, so when the fuck was I supposed to congratulate you?! When Reeve?” I throw my hands in the air. “She’s been clinging to your side all night, and I’ve put up with it even though my heart feels like it’s being ripped apart. Do you have any idea how hard tonight has been for me, you selfish self-absorbed prick?”

“*I’m selfish?*” he roars, putting his face all up in mine. “That is fucking rich, coming from you. Your selfishness is ruining my career!” His eyes roll back in his head, and I step back, horrified as realization dawns.

“You’re on something. You did drugs with her!” I clamp a hand over my mouth. “My God, Reeve. What is she doing to you? What are you doing to yourself?” Reeve is notoriously anti-drugs, having seen how it’s destroyed the careers of many people in Hollywood. I just can’t believe how quickly he has let go of all his beliefs and his morals. How easily he has let himself be manipulated by the lifestyle and the people around him who profess to care for him but only care for themselves.

“So, what if I did?” He shrugs. “We all did a line after the premiere. It’s not a big deal.”

“Maybe not to you. But it is to me.” I move toward the door. “I don’t even know who you are anymore, Reeve.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

“Then I guess we both know what to do.” Without saying another word, I exit the room, feeling like someone has taken a machete to my heart.

I wake the following morning, after a sleepless night crying into my pillow, determined to end things with Reeve permanently. Pain eviscerates every part of me even thinking the thought, but I don't see how we can continue with the way things are.

Reeve shows up that night, with flowers and apologies, promising me he'll do better. He swears he'll stop taking drugs and make more time for me. When he begs me not to break up with him, to give him a chance to make things right, I concede. I still love him so much, and I can't bear the thought of losing him, but I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit that bitch played a part in my decision-making process. If I break up with Reeve, I'll be making things easier for Saffron. She'll be waiting in the wings to console him, and he'll get sucked even deeper into her orbit.

I don't want that for him, because she's poison and she'll only bring him down.

But I'm also not going to let her steal him from me. We have invested years in one another, and I'm not letting some psycho bitch trample over our history and destroy our plans for the future. I need to trust Reeve loves me and believe our love is strong enough to withstand the next couple of years and come out stronger for it.

The months pass, and I throw myself into college life to avoid confronting the gaping hole Reeve's absence leaves in my heart. He is crazy busy between auditions, promotion, and filming, and we barely talk more than a couple of times a week. I haven't seen him since January, and we weren't together for our birthdays again, which sucked. Pictures of Reeve,

with Saffron, blowing out candles on his birthday cake made the front page of almost every magazine and newspaper, forcing me to confront the fact the world believes they are dating and that he and I are no more.

It sickens me, and my heart physically aches all the damn time. Yet, I don't voice my fears to Reeve anymore, because I'm sick of sounding like a broken record.

Freshman year of college ends, and I vacation in Europe with Audrey for the entire summer break. Reeve's career is on the up and up, and he has landed another couple of high-profile roles. He's filming a new movie with established actors all summer in Australia with no break, which means I won't get to see him.

At least he's not with that conniving bitch. Saffron is occupied filming in the US, so I am able to relax a little. Speculation about the state of their relationship is rampant online, along with anticipation for the next *Rydeville Elite* movie. Reeve now has forty million followers on social media, according to Audrey. I avoid looking at any posts or media commentary. I prefer to languish in ignorant bliss, even if my overactive imagination loves torturing me on a near constant basis.

I return to my parents' house in August for a week, before college resumes, and Reeve makes a surprise appearance, much to my delight. We stay holed up in his house for the week, catching up. Paparazzi follow his every move these days, and fans turn up in the most obscure places, so hiding out is our only option. We can't be seen together, but I'm not complaining. Having Reeve to myself is something I've desperately craved.

I'd like to say it helps, but there's a massive void between us, and even sex can't bridge the gap. For the first time ever, there's a disconnect in our relationship, and it's breaking my heart. Everything I believed I had mapped out for my future is in flux, and I'm drowning in a sea of uncertainty. I should talk to Reeve about it. The old Vivien would've had no qualms in broaching the topic, but I can't form the words to open such a conversation, and I think Reeve is the same. We avoid talking about the elephant in the room, but I wonder how long it will be before one of us cracks.

"What're you going to do?" Audrey asks when we meet up at our new apartment a few days before classes resume. Neither of us could bear to return to the dorms, so we found a plush, spacious, two-bedroom penthouse that is only a ten-minute walk from campus.

“I don’t know.” I sigh, flopping down on our new leather couch. “I’m in limbo, and it feels like my life is on hold.”

Audrey sinks onto the multicolored rug on the floor, sitting cross-legged as she faces me. “It does get easier. You know I struggled at first without Alex, but I’m over it, and we’ve managed to resume our friendship.”

“Do you still love him?”

She drums her fingers on her chin as she stares into space. “I don’t know. There are definitely still feelings there, but I’m reluctant to dig too deep because what’s the point?” She shrugs. “I’ve accepted we can’t be together, and I’m having fun hooking up with random guys. I’m not ready for anything heavy with Alex or anyone else.”

Audrey had a few casual romances this summer, and while I have no genuine desire to kiss anyone but Reeve, I’ll admit I was envious. I’m starved for human touch, and I’m not just talking about sex. I miss Reeve’s arms around me and the adoring way he used to pepper my face with kisses, and I absolutely hate sleeping alone. It’s worse now I’ve just had a week’s reminder, and I’m missing him as much as I did at the start.

“Do you think I should end it with Reeve?”

She shrugs. “I think you should do whatever it takes to be happy.” She scoots closer, taking my hands. “I don’t want to see you moping again this year. These are the best years of our lives and you should be enjoying college more than you are. I hate seeing you so unhappy.”

“I still love him, Audrey,” I quietly admit. “Sometimes, I wish I didn’t, because it would make the decision easier.”

“I know.” She nods, squeezing my hands tighter.

“The thought of letting him go kills me.” I wrench my hand from hers, rubbing it across the sudden tight pain in my chest. “But it feels like I’m slowly dying inside. We might be technically together, but we’re not really. It feels like I’ve already lost my boyfriend, because I hardly ever get to see him, and our phone calls are tense and filled with all the things we aren’t saying. I think we’re both clinging on by our fingernails.”

“I’m sorry, babe. I wish I had a crystal ball and I could tell you what to do, but it’s got to be your decision.”

“I know.” Leaning on my side on the couch, I slide my hands under my face. “I can’t imagine my life without Reeve in it, and I’m counting down the days until he’s finished with these wretched films.”

“The last movie doesn’t premiere for a year and a half. That’s a long time to hang on when you’re miserable.”

“He’ll finish filming with her by next summer, so it’s only a year. I feel I owe it to my relationship to go the distance.”

She tosses her long red hair behind her shoulders. “Don’t hate me for saying this, but are you sure you’re hanging on for the right reasons?”

I purse my lips, urging her to continue with a nod, though I’m sure I know what she’s going to say.

“Are you sure this is about love and not about one-upping that bitch?”

“You mean would I cling to Reeve if I didn’t love him anymore purely to spite that slut?”

She nods.

“If I didn’t love him, I would let him go. But I do love him, Rey. I’ve thought of nothing else for months, and he’s the love of my life. That hasn’t changed, even if I’m so mad at him sometimes I could scream. And yes, you’re right, I’m also afraid to cut him loose and send him running straight into her arms.”

“It’s a valid concern, but you’ve got to put yourself first, Viv. That’s what Reeve is doing. Just promise me you’re making the right decisions for you.”

“I’m trying to, but honestly, I think I’m a little depressed. I’m not sure I’m in the right frame of mind to be making the best decisions for me.”

Audrey climbs onto the couch and hugs me. “You’re going to get through this, and I’ve got your back.”

“Love you.” I hold my friend tight. “I couldn’t have gotten through this past year without you.”

“You supported me too. That’s what friends do.”

“You need to call Reeve,” Audrey says, plonking into the seat beside me in the cafeteria, wearing a furious expression. It’s mid-November, and our sophomore year is well underway by now. I was the first to arrive at our usual lunch table, and our other friends are still standing in line at the counter.

“What now?” I ask, sighing in resignation. I know the angry look she’s sporting doesn’t mean anything good.

“I know you don’t want to be shown these things, but I’m keeping an eye on them for a reason.” She hands me her phone, and I almost vomit up my salad as I read the bold headline.

ARE REEVERON ENGAGED?

“It’s bullshit,” I reply in a dead tone, handing her cell back to her. I have zero interest in reading what supposed insiders on the set have to say. It’s ridiculous how easily the public has believed all the lies despite not a single photo existing where Reeve and Saffron are kissing off-screen. I know, because Audrey checks daily, and it would make front page news if such a photo existed.

“I know that,” she whispers, clicking out of the article and glancing around to ensure no one is listening. She moves her lips close to my ear. “But is it *fake* bullshit? Is this what they’re forcing him to do now?”

I bury my head in my hands as my train of thought catches up to hers. “Fuck.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Audrey suggests, smoothing a hand up my back.

I lift my head, willing the sudden throbbing pain in my skull to disappear. “If it is orchestrated, and Reeve has agreed to this, it’s game over. There is only so much pain a heart can endure.”

“If Reeve has agreed to this insanity, he can kiss my friendship goodbye,” she agrees.

I can’t even bear the thought of him going along with this. Hasn’t he humiliated me enough?

With a heavy heart and equally heavy feet, I drag myself out of the cafeteria and return to our place to call Reeve.

“Fuck this shit,” I say six hours later when Reeve still hasn’t returned any of my calls or texts. He must’ve seen the gossip online by now, or someone has at least told him. It’s blowing up all over the internet, and I’m at my wit’s end. “I need to get drunk. Let’s go to a party.” The great thing

about college is there's always a party somewhere. "I'll call Danny. He'll find us one to go to."

Danny is an English major like me, and we met during our first month of freshman year and became instant friends. When we met, we just clicked. Danny's that kind of friend. I held back a little at the start, fearful he was looking for something more than friendship. Until I found him kissing a guy, he confirmed he was gay, and I knew there was nothing to worry about. Reeve knows about him, but they have never spoken or met, because as far as Danny is concerned, I'm single. He knows about my past with Reeve, and I've played on my broken heart to extract myself every time he tries to set me up on a blind date. I hate lying to all my friends but especially Danny since we're the closest.

It's just another example of how Reeve's career has impacted my life and forced me to become someone I'm not sure I even know these days.

Audrey and I meet Danny and his latest boyfriend, Lawrence, at one of the frat houses a few hours later. I've been knocking back vodka at our place, and I'm already drunk, but I couldn't care less. Reeve is clearly avoiding me, and I'm done with that selfish prick.

The party is already rocking, and we waste no time entering into the spirit of things. Usually, I hate warm beer out of red cups, but tonight, I'm draining them like they're lemonade. I desperately need to numb the destructive thoughts screaming in my head.

Audrey and I dance, flirting up a storm. Normally, I shove guys away when they approach me at parties, but tonight, I let them feel me up a little. Yet it does nothing to stem the flow of pain coursing through my veins. I draw a line at kissing any of them or doing anything else, wishing I could be like Audrey and take a hottie upstairs to bump uglies. I guess it's a good thing I haven't completely lost my moral compass, even if I have compromised my soul all in the name of supporting my boyfriend.

"Hey, babe." Danny appears, extracting me from the arms of a guy with dangerous wandering hands. The room is spinning, and my vision is blurry as I slump into my friend's arms. "Time-out." Danny circles his arm around me, walking us over to an empty couch in a quieter corner. "Sit down, drink some water, and tell me what's wrong."

I throw back my head, laughing bitterly. "Fuck, Danny. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"At the beginning, babe. Start at the beginning."

His concerned expression touches me, and I'm just so tired. Of all the drama. The unnecessary heartache and pain. Of keeping everything locked up inside because I need to protect all of Reeve's secrets. My inebriated state has loosened my tongue, but I still know what I'm doing when I drop my walls, tear through all the lies, and tell him everything that's been going on with Reeve and me. Including how his so-called relationship with the bitch is fake and how she attacked me and I retaliated the night of the premiere.

Tears are streaming down my face, and I'm hiccupping my way through part of my explanation, drawing inquisitive glances from several people, but I've gone beyond the point of caring. Danny holds me tight, ushering reassurances in my ear as I spill my guts. I break down in his arms as almost two years' worth of pain seeps out of me like poison. I hear how pitiful it sounds. How pathetic it makes me seem to have put up with this shit and to still love him. But there's a certain freedom in telling my friend. Briefly, I wonder if I should have seen a therapist, because letting the words fall from my tongue is cathartic, even if I'm sure I'll regret it tomorrow.

After locating Audrey, Danny walks us both home, tucks me into bed, and leaves water and two pain meds by my bed before saying his goodbyes. I'm barely coherent at this point, and my eyes are closed, but I've a sense that he lingers, watching me from my doorway before making his exit.

“**B**abe. Wake up.” Audrey shakes my shoulders, and I pull a pillow over my face in a feeble attempt to drown out the drums playing a furious rhythm in my head.

“Go away.” I swat at my bestie. “There’s a death march hammering in my head, and I need to sleep for eternity.” I’m not ready to face this day yet, and I want to wallow in ignorance for a little longer.

“It’s after twelve, and I can’t keep this to myself any longer. Your phone is going crazy, and your mom called me. She’s threatening to come over here.”

“What?” That claims my attention. Whipping the pillow off my head, I whimper as pain rattles through my skull. My tired limbs protest when I pull myself up against the headboard. Pushing strands of knotty hair from my eyes, I work hard to focus my vision until Audrey appears less blurry. “She can’t see me like this. She’ll freak!” Mom knows I drink alcohol, but she’s always cautioning me to drink sensibly. She would be utterly ashamed if she saw the state of me right now.

“I think that ship has sailed,” she cryptically replies, handing me a mug of steaming coffee. “Drink this though you’ll probably need something stronger.”

“If it’s more bad news, I don’t want to know.” I blow on my coffee before taking a sip. “I can’t handle anything else right now.”

“This can’t wait, because I’m pretty sure the instant we step foot out of this apartment we’ll be accosted by paparazzi.”

All the blood drains from my face, and I clasp my hands around the mug, trying to siphon some of the warmth. Cold infiltrates every nook and cranny of my body, and I shiver, drawing the obvious conclusion. “It’s true? He actually got fake engaged to that bitch?”

“No, babe.” Audrey crawls up beside me, mirroring my position. “I spoke to Reeve earlier when he called for you, and he vehemently denies there is any engagement. Real or fake. Seems it was just tabloid speculation.”

“You spoke to him? He called?” He never calls in the mornings when he’s on set since they have super early starts. Filming on *Sweet Retribution*, the third *Rydeville Elite* movie, began a couple of weeks ago, but the filming won’t be complete until next spring, because they’ll have to stop to do promo for *Twisted Betrayal*, the second movie, which is releasing in January.

She gives a terse nod of her head, and an ominous sense of dread washes over me.

“What is going on?” I ask. I might as well get this over and done with.

“There is no easy way to say this, so I’m just ripping the Band-Aid off.” She slides her arm around my shoulders. “Danny sold you out, Viv. He recorded everything you told him last night on his cell, and it was posted online a few hours ago. Clearly, someone doctored it to make it sound like you’re a bitter ex mouthing off because the love of your life just got engaged to someone else.”

I throw up all over my bed as the mug slides from my hands, splashing the already destroyed comforter and drenching the hardwood floor. Audrey is still speaking, but I don’t hear the words. I’m too busy losing my goddamn mind as my world comes crashing down around me.

Somehow, Viv manages to get me into the shower, and I tilt my head up, letting warm water stream down my face while I shiver from a coldness that emanates from my soul. I don’t cry, and that’s a first. Either I used up all my tears last night or I’m numb to it at this stage. I lather my body with shower gel and shampoo and condition my hair, as if on autopilot.

Audrey turns off the water, holding a large towel out for me. “Your parents are on their way. I couldn’t hold them off any longer,” she explains, as I tuck the soft towel around my body.

“It’s okay.” Tucking a towel around my head, I stare at my pale reflection in the mirror wondering when exactly I turned into this vampire-

like version of myself. My collarbones jut out, confirming I've lost weight without even noticing. Bruising shadows attest to many sleepless nights, and my eyes have lost all their spark.

I look like I'm as dead on the outside as I am inside.

I could blame Reeve for this.

I *do* blame him for this.

But I blame myself more.

I've let myself get beaten down. Made excuses for him time and time again, and yet I'm the only one suffering the consequences.

Audrey watches with concern in her eyes as I brush my teeth, cleanse my skin, and comb my damp hair. "I need to call Reeve," I say.

"Don't." She hands me my underwear, a pair of jeans, and a T-shirt. "He was pissed earlier when I spoke to him. You should let him calm down."

"It won't matter." I get dressed and head back out to my bedroom. Fresh sheets adorn my king bed, and the window is open, clearing the noxious smells from the room. Audrey is such a good friend, and I'd be even more lost without her.

"He's so fucking selfish, and he deserves to stew. I'm not sorry I ripped him a new one earlier, and I'm not sorry for interfering. I realize now I should've staged an intervention months ago." Audrey grabs my shoulders. "Viv, are you listening to me?"

I nod, but I'm strangely devoid of feeling inside. It's a welcome change, and I cling to the numbness like it's a second skin.

"Dump him," she continues. "He's changed—and not for the better. He's so selfish, and he even had the nerve to accuse you of cheating. He's lucky he's hundreds of miles away because I could happily kick his ass."

I cock my head to one side. "Why would he accuse me of cheating?"

"That asshole Danny took photos of you dancing with guys last night, and he posted them along with the video."

"He really did a number on me. Why? Why would he do that to me?" I ask, sitting down on my bed while I plug my cell in to charge.

"I'd like some answers too, but his cell has been deactivated. I managed to get a hold of Lawrence, and he swears he knows nothing. He went over to Danny's dorm this morning, but he's disappeared. Looks like for good. All his clothes are gone apparently."

"He was paid to do this," I surmise, logging on to one of the main gossip sites.

“Don’t look at that,” Viv pleads, attempting to snatch my cell.

“I need to see how bad it is.” I watch the video without flinching or passing comment. Like I’m a bystander and the drunk broken girl sobbing her heart out on the screen is some stranger and not me. The photos are pretty damning, and they don’t show me in a positive light, so I can kind of see where Reeve is coming from. Except he should know better. No matter how broken I am, I would never cheat on him.

I scroll through the nasty comments until Audrey grabs my phone and shoves it in her pocket. “You’re not reading any more of that poison. People are assholes. Especially those bitchy Saffhards.”

“They want me dead,” I say, in a monotone voice. “One girl said I should slit my wrists.” I peer off into space.

A sob rips from Audrey’s mouth and she leans down, hugging me. “Viv. You’re scaring the shit out of me right now, babe. Those people are scum of the Earth, and you’re not to read any more of that crap.”

My cell rings, and I grab it out of her pocket before she can stop me. Reeve’s face lights up the screen, and I press the button to accept his call. Audrey cusses, shaking her head.

“Viv?”

“It’s me.”

“What the actual fuck is going on with you? I can’t believe that video.” He wastes no time laying into me. “I have never seen you like that! If you wanted to hurt me, you’ve definitely succeeded. Did you cheat on me last night?”

I laugh at the irony, and once I start, I can’t stop.

“Vivien, what the hell? Stop laughing. This is fucking serious. You’ve landed me in a world of shit today. This will damage my brand and my rep.” He goes on in a similar vein, but I tune him out, watching Audrey whisper into her cell while sparing me troubled glances as she paces the floor in my room.

“Viv. Are you still there?” Reeve snaps.

“Are you done?” I ask, in a flat tone, lying prostrate on my bed and staring at the ceiling.

“No, I—”

“I’m not in the mood to argue today,” I say, cutting across whatever he was going to say. “And I give zero fucks how this impacts you. That bitch of a costar or that bitch of a PR person or that bitch of an agent orchestrated

this whole situation, and I'm done pandering to all of you. I am done being the punching bag." My lower lip wobbles, and my voice quakes as all the emotion I've been fighting resurfaces. "I am done coming last all the time." I exhale heavily. "I am just fucking *done*," I shout. "Do you hear me? I'm done, Reeve. Fuck you. Fuck Saffron. Fuck Cassidy, and fuck Bianca. Fuck you all." Tears spill down my cheeks, and I'm openly crying now. "Don't call me again," I say before hanging up.

"Oh, Vivien." Mom rushes into my bedroom, and I fall apart in her arms. "I'm so sorry, honey. Shush. It's okay. You're okay." She presses kisses into my hair, while rubbing my back. "We're here, and we're going to make it all go away. I have people working on getting the photos and the video removed. Your father is talking with Douglas Simmonds about security for you on campus, and he called in a favor with the LAPD, and all the paparazzi have been cleared from the front of your apartment building."

"Thank you," I sob against her chest. I'm so grateful she is here and my parents are stepping in to help because I badly need it.

"Maybe you should come home for a while."

I shake my head, brushing the tears off my face. "No. I'm done hiding myself away. I've done nothing wrong, except get drunk and trust the wrong person."

"You were clearly set up." Her jaw pulls tight. "And I'm going to find proof and hang them out to dry."

"We already know who it is, Mom, and I doubt they left tracks. Let it go. I just want to get on with my life and put it behind me."

Mom and Audrey trade a worried look. Mom kisses my temple, while holding me close. "At least come home for the weekend. Let us look after you, and if you want to come back to campus next week, we won't stop you."

I take Mom's advice and return home with them. I end up staying for the weekend and the following week, letting my parents fuss over me while I try to pick up the shattered pieces of my life. Reeve has been regularly calling my cell and the house, but Mom told him, in no uncertain terms, that I need space, putting a halt to all communication.

I insist on returning to UCLA on Sunday night. I have exams approaching, and I meant what I said about not letting anyone force me into hiding. I've taken some time out to begin the healing process, even meeting with a therapist, and now it's time to resume my life.

I know I'll be under a spotlight when I return to campus, and I'm not looking forward to it. I'm sure I'm the butt of many jokes—the pitiful ex-girlfriend crying over the movie star who has moved on—but it will die down in time. Especially now the recording and photos have been removed from the internet. I don't know exactly what my parents have done, but whatever it is has ensured there is no more press coverage of me. Mom's IT contact was able to confirm the origin of the recording, and there's a warrant out for Danny's arrest because it's illegal to record and share a private conversation without consent in California.

No wonder he fled. He must've known this would happen. Which begs the question—Why did he do it? I know he was at UCLA on a scholarship and his family isn't wealthy, so I can only guess that he needed money badly. Why else would you throw away your future?

I exchange heated words with my father when he tries to force a full-time bodyguard on me before I leave for my apartment on Sunday night. I know my parents are worried sick because of the hatred and bullying online. Tons of abusive letters and a few death threats have been sent, but Mom intercepted my mail, and her assistant, Moira, has been going through it, sending anything suspicious or concerning directly to the police. “Dad, I know you mean well, but I'm not returning to campus with a bodyguard shadowing my every move. This is already going to be hard enough without drawing extra attention to myself.”

“Your safety is our only concern, Vivien.”

“Didn't you say campus security has tightened procedures and they'll be keeping a closer watch on me?” Dad is an alumnus, and he's close friends with Douglas Simmonds, the current UCLA president. Dad went straight to him the day all the shit went down, and I know these new security measures are because of his timely intervention. Normally, I hate using my parents' connections to my advantage. But on this occasion, I'm not complaining.

“That's not enough. It's—”

“Perfectly adequate, Dad.” I stretch up and kiss his cheek. “I promise if I feel threatened or anything serious happens I will let you assign a bodyguard to me then. Remember, most students on campus are not keyboard warriors. Those nasty bitches online are fans of the series and idiots who ship Reeve with Saffron. Lots are teens with nothing better to do. I doubt I'll have much trouble on campus, but if I'm wrong, I promise I'll tell you.”

They reluctantly agree, and I return to our apartment sans bodyguard.

The first week back is a little rough, but I keep my head down and try to ignore the attention. Whispering and finger-pointing are the norm, along with a few taunting comments, but it quickly dies down, like I predicted. A few girls try to befriend me, purely to get information about Reeve, but I'm on to them immediately. Something I hadn't predicted is guys hitting on the crazy broken girl, yet it happens. Most of them think it'll raise their profile to be seen with me, and others want to be able to say they've dated Reeve Lancaster's childhood sweetheart.

We live in crazy times, that's for sure.

Exams start next Monday, so I throw myself into studying, and it helps to distract me from the mess in my head. Reeve sends me daily texts telling me he's sorry and he loves me, but I don't respond, even though it's hard to ignore him knowing he's in pain too. My head and my heart hurt too much, and I'm not ready to talk to him yet. I need to try and figure out what it is I want. I still love him. I think I probably always will, but I don't know if love is enough anymore. For now, I'm focusing on my exams, and there'll be plenty of time to talk to Reeve when he's home at Christmas.

I return to my parents' house on the weekend, because being home comforts me right now. Which is a bit weird, because home also reminds me of Reeve. Reliving cherished memories hinders as much as it helps. Maybe I'm one of those girls who gets off on the whole pleasure-pain thing. Or I just like torturing myself with all the what-ifs. I don't know. I imagine my head is a therapist's worst nightmare right now—or maybe a wet dream

—so don't expect me to figure out the inner workings of my mind or my heart any time soon.

Everywhere I turn, I'm accosted with memories of the boy I have loved since I was a little girl—it soothes the ache *and* adds fuel to the fire.

Audrey has a hot date with this new guy she's seeing, and I wanted to give her the apartment to herself, so coming home this weekend killed two birds. God knows my bestie has earned it, putting up with me and my mood swings these past few months. She seems to like this guy, and I hope it works out for her.

At least one of us should be happy.

I rise early on Saturday morning and have breakfast with Mom before locking myself away in our home library to study. Needing to work out the tension wracking my body, I attend an evening yoga class at our usual studio in downtown L.A. After the class ends, I hang back to shower and change, having already decided to pick up food from Mom's favorite restaurant on my way home.

My parents have been so good to me lately, and I want to do something nice for them. I'm planning to surprise them with a romantic candlelight dinner tonight. I already told them not to eat, and I set the table in the small dining room before I left, locking the door and taking the key so they don't peek. Rose petals are scattered across the table, and an abundance of scented candles—which I intend to light when I return home with the food—fill the room. Chilled champagne is already hidden in the back of the refrigerator.

I'm smiling to myself, imagining my parents' faces, as I step outside the studio. Darkness has descended, and it's pitch-black as I walk through the narrow alleyway toward the parking lot where I left my car.

I haven't gone far when someone shoves me forcefully from behind. Startled, I scream, arms flailing as I lose my balance and face-plant the ground. My head slams off the asphalt, and I almost black out. Stars swim behind my bleary eyes as pain ricochets through my aching skull. Bits of debris cling to my sore cheek, and I whimper. Something heavy presses down on my lower back, and alarm bells ring in my ears as adrenaline courses through my body. I attempt to use my hands to force myself upright, but the pressure on my back is solid and my limbs are weak and uncooperative.

“Stay the fuck down, whore,” an unfamiliar female says, her voice bristling with malice. All the fine hairs on the nape of my neck stand at attention, and blood thrums in my ears as I struggle to clear my mind and think of a way out of this situation.

Savage pain shoots through my fingers and up my left arm as someone stands on my hand. A scream rips from my throat, and tears leak involuntarily from my eyes as pain slams into me.

“Shit. Shut her the fuck up before someone hears,” a different female says.

Several pairs of hands flip me over, and something coarse is shoved into my mouth. Blinking my eyes open, I stare up at the girls looming over me with mounting panic. This can't be happening. There are five of them and they're young. No older than sixteen, maybe seventeen. They are all wearing jeans and boots, and their sweaters are official merchandise I recognize, confirming my worst fears.

These girls are Saffhards, and they clearly hate my guts. I have no idea how they found me, but something tells me this wasn't a coincidence, because they were obviously lying in wait for me.

A big girl with long black hair sets her booted foot on my chest, pressing down in a way that constricts my breathing. My heart is racing superfast as fear spreads through me like quicksand. “Leave Reeve on alone!” she hisses, pressing the full weight of her foot down on my body. Although I'm in pain, instinct kicks in and I thrash about, trying to use my legs to get at her, but it's a feeble effort at best. Throbbing pain rattles around my skull and the back of my eyes, my hand aches, and I can scarcely breathe with the pressure on my chest.

She laughs as she spits in my face. Before I can wipe her saliva off, another girl grabs both my hands, binding them roughly with rope. A fresh wave of pain spreads up my arm as she tightens the rope around my wrists. My screams are muffled against whatever they shoved in my mouth, and I'm struggling to breathe as the bitch with her foot on my chest digs in deeper.

Pain sears through my right side as another girl kicks me in the ribs. “You're a pathetic bitch clinging to Reeve like that. He doesn't want you.”

“He loves Saffron,” a girl with stringy blonde hair says, kicking my other side.

“As if Reeve would ever love an ugly bitch like you,” a skinny girl with dark curly hair says. Crouching over me, she drags her nails down my right cheek.

“We need to hurry up,” the bitch with her foot on my chest says. “I’m not going to jail for this slut.”

Pain covers my upper torso in a blanket of agony as they all kick me. The skinny bitch yanks on my hair, and it feels like my scalp is on fire. They laugh as my muted screams echo faintly in the eerie quiet of the vacant alley. Tears stream from my eyes, and I try to stay awake, to not succumb to the darkness, but as they continue to kick me, I lose the fight and pass out.

My chest burns, and searing pain hammers at my skull, as I slowly regain consciousness, immediately wishing I could return to my previous pain-free ignorant slumber. Blinking my eyes open, I cry out, wincing at the brash glare of the overhead fluorescent light in the strange room. The rhythmic beeping of a machine elevates in intensity, sending a fresh wave of piercing pain through my head. I whimper as urgent footsteps come closer. “Ms. Mills? I’m Nurse Watts,” a woman says as cool fingers press against my wrist. “Stay with me for a few minutes, and then you can go back to sleep.”

“We’re here, Vivien,” Mom says.

I force my eyes to remain open, avoiding looking directly at the harsh overhead light. “Mom,” I croak. “Everything hurts.”

Her worried face hovers over mine. “I know, honey, but it’s going to be okay.”

Dad pops up beside her. “You gave us quite a scare, princess.” Tears fill his eyes, and I want to reach up and hug him, but it feels like I’m superglued to the hospital bed.

“I know you’re anxious to talk to your daughter, but she still needs rest,” the nurse says.

I angle my head to look at her, moaning as intense pain batters my skull and the backs of my eyes.

“You have a concussion, Vivien, so any sudden movements should be avoided.” Her warm brown eyes are kind as she leans over me. “Your vitals

look good, so I'm going to give you some more morphine." She gently pats my hand. "Sleep. Your parents will be here when you wake up."

I don't remember falling asleep, but I do. When I wake, Mom is asleep in a chair by my bed, and Dad is holding my right hand.

"How are you feeling?" he whispers, not wanting to wake Mom.

"Thirsty," I rasp.

With huge tenderness, he props the pillows behind my head and elevates the bed before dropping some ice chips in my mouth.

"You're awake," Mom says. Her voice is drenched with sleep as she rubs her eyes.

"What happened?" I ask, opening my mouth for more ice chips.

"What do you remember?" Mom stifles a yawn while she dabs a damp cloth against my sweaty brow.

"Being shoved from behind and hitting my head hard. Then these girls, high school age, took turns kicking me. They were Saffhards, and they enjoyed hurling insults while beating the shit out of me. I guess I blacked out after that."

"God, Vivien." Mom's cries bounce off the walls in the semi-dark room, and I flinch, groaning as the sound sends stabby pains shooting through my skull. Thank fuck someone dimmed the lights. "Sorry, honey." Mom sniffles and wipes the moisture from under her eyes. "We thought it was a random mugging, but this is so much worse." Her anguished eyes move to my father. "This was a targeted attack, Jon! She could've been killed."

"Why wasn't I? Did someone interrupt them?" I ask, praying they are locked up in police custody. I want to see them imprisoned for assaulting me. I'm not one of these do-gooder types who forgives them because they're young and impressionable. Fuck that shit. They are old enough to know right from wrong, and they should be made to pay. Otherwise, how will they learn not to do this again? Giving girls like that a get out of jail free card will not serve them or society well. They need to learn there are consequences for beating up innocent women and that you can't believe everything you read online.

"Unfortunately not," Dad confirms. "The owner of the yoga studio found you when she was heading to her car."

"They just left you beaten, bloody, and unconscious in the alley," Mom sobs, more quietly this time.

“I’m okay, Mom.” I try to reassure her, because I hate seeing her so upset, but, obviously, I’m not okay. I’m the very furthest from okay a person can be.

“You have a concussion, three broken fingers, a broken wrist, and several fractured ribs, Vivien. They scratched your face and pulled out clumps of your hair. That is not my definition of okay.”

“Lauren.” Dad cautions her with a soft look. “Vivien is alive, and she’ll heal. We’ll leave no stone unturned until we find who did this.” Dad presses a light kiss to my brow. “Could you identify them?”

“It’s a bit of a blur, but I think so. I can definitely identify the girl who stood on me. I think her face will be imprinted in my nightmares for a long time to come.”

“She stood on you?” Mom gasps, pressing a shaky hand to her mouth.

“Yes. She held me down so the others could kick me.”

Mom buries her head in her hands, openly sobbing, and it’s killing me. Physically and emotionally. Using my eyes, I gesture to Dad to comfort her. He rounds the bed, holding Mom as she softly cries into his shirt.

The dull pounding in my head is not as bad as the pain I felt when I woke the last time, and the fiery pain in my chest is dialed down to where it’s manageable, but it still feels like there’s a dead weight resting on my upper torso, making my breathing labored. Glancing down, I notice the cast on my left hand and wrist for the first time, grateful it’s not my writing hand.

“Wait,” I say, panic bubbling to the surface. “What day is it? How long have I been out? What about my exams?” I blurt.

“It’s Sunday night,” Dad confirms, and my mouth opens in horror. “Stop freaking out. I spoke with Doug, and he’s arranged it so you can take your exams online later this month or in early January, whenever you feel up to it. You just need to complete them before you return for the spring semester.”

Air expels from my lungs in grateful relief. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Just focus on getting better,” he replies.

“Does Reeve know?” I quietly ask.

Mom’s eyes narrow. “He knows, and I’ll be having a stern conversation with him when I see him.”

“This isn’t his fault, Mom.”

“The hell it isn’t,” she hisses. “His behavior has led directly to this. He never should’ve agreed to that bullshit contract. His actions have placed you directly in harm’s way, and I’m done biting my tongue. I don’t know what’s gotten into that boy, but this is not the Reeve Lancaster I helped to raise. I am so disappointed in him.”

“He’s beside himself with worry,” Dad adds. “And he’d be here if he could.”

I close my eyes, unable to deal with the usual emotional turmoil thoughts of Reeve invoke when I’m in so much physical pain. “Does the media know?” I ask, even if I’m not sure I want to know the answer.

“Yes. Unfortunately. News of your attack has been widely reported.”

“Well, that’s swell,” I drawl, forcing my eyes open. “What about Audrey?”

“Audrey was here earlier, but we sent her home to get some sleep. She’ll be back tomorrow after her exams,” Mom confirms.

“You should go back to sleep, princess. It’s late.”

As if on cue, I yawn, and the instant I close my eyes, I fall back asleep.

When I wake the next morning, faint beams of light are filtering into the room through gaps in the blinds, causing me to wince.

“Viv. I’m here.” Reeve’s voice is low, laced with pain and a tinge of remorse. My good fingers twitch, and the touch of his hand is warm in mine.

Gulping over the messy ball of emotion clogging my throat, I turn to face my boyfriend, whimpering as a fresh wave of pain pounds in my skull. Fuck. This hurts like a bitch.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” He plants his lips on the back of my hand as tears fall silently down his face. “Sorry this happened to you, and sorry I wasn’t here immediately. I got here as soon as I could. The plane ride was the most excruciating journey because I was terrified, Viv.” He lifts our conjoined hands to his cheek, nuzzling into me. “You were still unconscious when I got on the plane, and I didn’t know what I’d find when I arrived.”

His sobs fill the quiet room, and it appears Mom and Dad have made themselves scarce.

“I was so scared you were dead, Viv. Scared I would never get to hold you again or tell you how much I love you. Scared I wouldn’t get the chance to apologize for all the ways I have let you down. Scared I wouldn’t get an opportunity to make up for all the wrongs.”

My chest heaves painfully, and I'm struggling to breathe over my injuries and the emotional cocktail sloshing inside me. I don't have the mental capacity to deal with this right now, but I am glad he is here. "Your fans hate me, Reeve. They want you with her, and it seems they'll stop at nothing to make that happen." Tears stream down my face, and I'm in so much pain, on so many different levels, and I just want it to stop.

Loving someone should not hurt this much.

"Your parents filled me in," he explains, as his tears dry up, replaced with anger. "I know this is my fault. I haven't prioritized you or your needs, and I've been a selfish asshole, but it stops now." Determination glimmers in his eyes. "I'm going to make this up to you." With deliberate tenderness, he briefly touches my injured cheek. "They will pay for what they did to you, and I'm going to make sure no one ever touches you again."

That sounds like a tall order, and while I want to believe his pretty words are sincere, in recent times Reeve has a habit of promising me things he fails to deliver.

"Oh my God," I hiss, ducking my head into my chest and squeezing my eyes shut to avoid the glare of the camera flashes as Reeve wheels me out of the hospital in a wheelchair. Pain accosts me on several fronts, and I grip the arms of the wheelchair tight while gritting my teeth. Mom and Dad flank me on either side as we head toward the waiting Lincoln Navigator. Reporters shout questions at me, and pain rattles around my skull, protesting the noise elevation. There must be at least one hundred reporters here, and TV station vans line both sides of the road outside the hospital. Thousands of Reeve's adoring fans are being herded behind temporary barriers, and several police officers are doing crowd control. It's complete chaos, and it's playing havoc with my sore head.

"This is insane," Mom says, shooting daggers at Reeve. "I think your presence here is doing more harm than good."

I want to tell Mom to stop, because Reeve is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't in her eyes at the moment, but I'm in too much pain to form words.

“I’m going to fix it,” he reassures her, scooping me out of the chair and carrying me into the back seat.

“See that you do,” Mom warns, while Reeve buckles me into my seat belt.

He claims the seat beside me, and I lean my head against his shoulder, closing my eyes as the driver cautiously edges out of the hospital and onto the main road. I drift off to sleep almost immediately, and when I wake, Reeve is carrying me into my bedroom.

Mom helps me into clean pajamas while Reeve makes himself scarce. I’m yawning as I crawl under my comforter, grateful to be back in my own bed. I was only in the hospital for three days in total, but it felt like longer, and there is no place like home. “Do you want me to ask him to leave?” Mom inquires, perching on the edge of my bed.

“He’s come all this way for me, and he has to leave tomorrow to get back to the set, so no. It’s not worth the fight. Besides, I want him here.” I’m not going to question the right or wrong of it, but I need Reeve, and I’m glad he came home for me.

Her lips pull into a tight line, but she nods, holding back her real thoughts. I’m sure I’ll hear them at some point, but I’m glad it’s not now. “Reeve is getting you something to eat, and then you should try to sleep. The LAPD will be here in the morning to take your statement. They wanted you to come downtown, but after the fiasco leaving the hospital, your dad managed to convince the detectives it would be better to conduct your interview here.”

“Thanks, Mom. For everything.”

She pats my arm. “You’re our daughter, Vivien. We’d do anything to keep you safe.” Her expression turns more somber. “Changes will need to be made. A bodyguard is nonnegotiable now. It’s the one thing Reeve and I wholeheartedly agree on.”

I nod, because I’m not going to turn down protection after what happened. Those Saffhards are crazy bitches, and I don’t want to be on the receiving end of their hatred again. I will make whatever changes are necessary to keep myself safe.

She points to a pill bottle and a glass of water by my bed. “Don’t forget to take your pain meds after you eat. You have to take them three times a day for the next week, and then we can start weaning you off them.”

“Okay,” I say, as Dad and Reeve appear in the room.

Mom helps me to sit upright, as Reeve places a tray table over my lap.

“It’s good to have you home, princess.” Dad drops my hospital bag on the floor by the wall.

“It’s good to be home, Dad.”

My parents leave, after sending Reeve blatant warning looks, gently closing the door behind them. I sip my chicken noodle soup while Reeve watches me, stretched out beside me on my bed. There is so much we need to say, but I can’t go there. Not when the pain of my concussion is still so debilitating and all I want to do is rest. For now, I’ll accept the comfort his presence brings without beating myself up over it.

After finishing my soup and bread, I snuggle under the covers as Reeve sets the tray to one side, lying down beside me. He laces his fingers in mine, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to my lips. He scoots closer, and I rest my head on his chest, welcoming the familiar steady thrumming of his heart. His fingers gently touch my hair, and when he is holding me like this, everything feels right in my world again.

I know it’s an illusion.

A fantasy bubble.

At some point, I’ll need to return to reality, but not yet.

My eyes fight to stay open as soothing darkness beckons to me like a tempting lover. “I love you, Viv,” Reeve whispers, pressing a feather-soft kiss to my damaged cheek. “I know I’ve done a piss-poor job of showing you recently, but I’m going to do better. Almost losing you has put everything into perspective. I can’t lose you, Viv. I won’t. You’re the other half of my soul, and nothing matters more to me than you.”

I drift to sleep with his words lingering in my ears.

When I wake, it’s the middle of the night and Reeve is crouched over me, softly sweeping hair back off my face. “I’ve got to leave, baby,” he whispers. “But I meant everything I said. I know we need to talk too, and I promise we’ll do that when I come home for Christmas.” He leans in, kissing me tenderly. “Don’t give up on me yet. Let me make this right, and everything will go back to the way it was. I promise.”

I don’t see how things can go back to the way it was, but I’d like to think we can find a way to move forward and put the recent past behind us. “How?” I ask, needing to know how he intends to make this right.

“I’ve hired my own publicist, and I’m issuing a video statement later today. When I return to the set, I’m telling the studio I’m publicly ‘breaking

up' with Saffron." He makes little air quotes with his fingers. "And I'm setting her straight too. I know she harbors ideas of us, but I'll tell her again that it'll never happen."

"That will only make her more determined," I mumble. Saffron is the type to thrive on the chase. I have no doubt, if she ever managed to win Reeve's heart, she'd tire of him fast.

"It doesn't matter. I love you. I know I've let her come between us, and it ends now."

I want to believe him so badly, but the truth is, I'm struggling to accept his pretty words as gospel. I'll need to see it to believe he is sincere this time.

“Hey, babe.” Audrey strolls into my bedroom the next evening, looking gorgeous in skinny jeans and an off-the-shoulder black-and-silver-striped sweater. Her gorgeous red hair is tied up in a ponytail, and a light camouflage of makeup covers her flawless skin.

“You are glowing. I take it the date went well?”

She beams. “It did. I really like Troy.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“That’s not why I came though.” She carefully crawls up beside me. “I wanted to check up on you, and you need to watch the video statement Reeve put out earlier.” She hands me her cell. “I think your boy has finally pulled his head out of his ass.”

Lowering the volume a little, I press play on the recording and settle back to watch it. Reeve is in his bedroom at home, so he clearly recorded this before he left for the airport earlier today.

“Hey, guys. I know you have all seen the reports of what happened to Vivien Mills, and I want to officially comment.” His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, and he looks tired as he drags a hand through his hair. “Girls who profess to be fans of mine, of Saffron’s, and the *Rydeville Elite* series were responsible for the assault on Viv, and that’s not cool. Not cool at all.” Tears well in his eyes. “These girls scratched her face, pulled out clumps of her hair, and left her with broken bones, and that is not fucking acceptable.” His chest heaves as he pauses for a second. “Viv has done nothing to deserve the kind of hatred that has been leveled her way, and I should have spoken out sooner.”

He rubs a hand across his chest, staring at the camera with pain evident in his eyes. “Vivien Mills is the love of my life, and if you hurt her, you hurt *me*.” He slaps a hand over his chest. “So please stop. Stop with all the hatred. Leave my girl alone. And if you are one of the girls who attacked her, please come forward and turn yourselves in, because I promise you will be apprehended and brought to justice. Make it easier on yourselves and fess up now.”

His features soften as he blows a kiss to the screen. “That’s for you, babe. I love you, Viv. Feel better soon.”

The recording ends, and I silently hand the cell back to my friend.

“He’ll get in trouble for that,” she surmises, as we stare at the ceiling.

“He will. He’s broken the terms of his contract, but they won’t fire him. He’s the star. They’ll just hit him in the pocket.”

She stares at me curiously. “I thought you’d be happier about it. He has finally put those rumors about him and the bitch to rest.”

I turn my head to face her, ignoring the stabbing pain the motion induces. “I *am* happy he’s done that but...” I trail off, unable to articulate the turmoil waging a battle inside me.

She squeezes my hand. “You’re confused.”

I nod. “I am. I love Reeve. I really do, but I’m so sick of it all. I’m exhausted, and I’m in pain, and I’m struggling to feel anything...concrete. Maybe his statement will help, and the shit will die down, or maybe it will only enhance the interest in me.” I shrug. “The fact remains he will still have dealings with her until the last movie premieres, and I know she won’t go away easily. I’m not sure I’m strong enough to handle more of it, yet the thought of permanently ending things with Reeve makes me ill. I don’t want to lose him, but I’m not sure us being together is healthy for me either. I’m a mess, Rey.”

“I think anyone would be after everything you’ve endured. You don’t need to decide anything now, and maybe things will be clearer when you spend time with him at Christmas.”

“Maybe.” I exhale heavily, feeling the weight of everything pressing down on me.

“How did it go with the police?”

“I made my statement, and a police artist drew a few sketches. I told them I believe they are all under eighteen, and once I thought about it, I realized they’re not from Cali either. They had accents I couldn’t place.

Anyway, the police can't issue the sketches because of their age, but they will put them into their system and see if anything comes up. Everything points to it being a setup, so I'm not holding out much hope they'll find them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean someone knew where I was. It wasn't my usual yoga class, yet those girls were waiting for me. The police informed me someone hacked into the cameras outside the studio and across the street and wiped the footage from Saturday before they could access it."

"Holy shit." Audrey's eyes pop wide.

"I told them I believed it was Bianca, Cassidy, or Saffron who orchestrated this either with or without the studio's permission, and they looked at me like I was crazy. As if something like this is outside the realm of what Hollywood would do to ensure the success of a franchise."

"Did you tell Reeve about your suspicions?" she asks, idly plucking at the comforter.

"No. I know he appears to have seen the light, but I'm not sure he'd buy into my theory, and things will already be difficult enough for him on set in light of his statement. Plus, if I'm correct, he's going to feel huge guilt for not believing me. I didn't want to put that on him until, or *if*, I get proof."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Mom says, appearing in the room with a dinner tray. "Sorry, I wasn't eavesdropping. Your door was open." She sets the tray on my lap.

"It's fine. I wasn't saying anything you didn't hear earlier."

"Can I get you some dinner?" Mom asks Audrey, and she shakes her head.

"I ate in the cafeteria, so I'm good." She tilts her head to the side, eyeballing Mom. "You think they've covered their tracks too well to be caught?"

Mom nods. "We're not dealing with amateurs. Our best bet is finding those girls, but I'm guessing they have made them disappear and made it worth their while to keep quiet. We've hired a PI to try to locate them, and that's our best chance at finding justice for Viv."

Two weeks later—eight days before Christmas—Audrey shows up, clutching a crumpled letter in her hand. “It’s from Danny,” she excitedly says, thrusting it into my chest. “The student who took over his dorm found it under the bed when he moved in.”

I trace my finger over my name, scrawled in Danny’s messy handwriting, before ripping open the envelope and reading his words.

“What does it say?” Audrey asks, impatience peppering her tone.

“That he’s sorry. He didn’t want to betray me, but his dad is ill with cancer, they don’t have medical insurance, and when someone showed up on campus offering him two hundred K to spy on me, he couldn’t turn them down.”

“That rat bastard.”

“Did you know his dad was sick?” I lift my head briefly from the letter.

She shakes her head. “He never said a word to me.”

“Nor me.” A veil of sadness washes over me. “If he had just told me, I could’ve given him the money. One of the charities my parents spearhead is for this very thing. They distribute millions every year to people with illnesses who have no insurance.”

“Does he say who paid him?”

I shake my head as I finish reading the rest of the letter. “He signed an NDA, and he can’t disclose any of the details because he doesn’t have the money to give back anymore.”

“I can’t believe he was such an idiot! You were a really good friend to him, and he must’ve known if he’d told you the truth you would have done everything in your power to help his dad.”

I carefully fold the letter, placing it back in the envelope. I’ll get Dad to deliver it to the cops. “All of it is connected to those damn movies. I wish Reeve had never gotten the part.”

“I can’t believe the lengths they have gone to. All to try and split you two up? It’s disgusting. They can’t get away with it.” She paces the room, clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides.

“Well, unless we can find Danny or any of those girls, they will.”

“At least you can show Reeve that letter. Maybe then he’ll start coming around to your way of thinking.”

Reeve returns home three days before Christmas, but I'm busy completing my exams online, so we don't get to spend time together until Christmas Eve, when he surprises me with a romantic candlelit meal at his house. After a gorgeous lobster and steak dinner and some expensive champagne, we retreat to my bedroom. Mom refuses to let me out of her sight at night, even though I'm feeling a lot better in the weeks since the attack. My concussion is more like a niggly occasional headache now, and the scratches and bruising have completely healed. My ribs still ache like a bitch, and I have another two weeks in my cast before it's removed, but the doctors are pleased with my progress, and I should be fully recovered by the time I return to UCLA. I'll need physical therapy for my wrist and fingers, but other than that, I should be fine.

Reeve makes love to me for the first time in months, and the careful way he cherishes and worships me, ensuring I'm not in any pain, brings tears to my eyes. I've missed this closeness between us. The way he clings to me like I'm his entire world has been missing from our intimate moments this past year. Although we still have a lot to discuss and things to work through, I feel like we might have turned a corner, and we might be through the worst of it.

How very wrong I end up being.

"You look beautiful," Reeve says, appearing in my doorway the following morning. He returned home earlier to shower and change before coming back with his dad for Christmas lunch. Spending Christmas Day with the Lancasters has been our tradition for as long as I can remember. Yet, this was the first year Mom asked if I wanted to rescind Reeve's and Simon's invitation. Although my parents are pleased Reeve is trying to make amends, they are still in overprotective mode, and any potential risk to my recovery is approached with caution.

Unfortunately, Reeve falls into that category.

Now I'm feeling better physically, I am better prepared to tackle my emotional needs, and I'm determined to enjoy the holidays and get things back on track with my boyfriend. The new year is a fresh start. A clean slate. And an opportunity to reset things with Reeve.

"Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself." My gaze appreciatively roams his delectable form, approving of his ripped dark jeans and blue button-down shirt. His smooth jawline is devoid of the stylish stubble he

wears to play his role, and he looks more like my Reeve. That helps to reassure me.

Striding across my bedroom, he quickly closes the gap between us. Careful not to hurt my injured hand, he reels me into his arms. My black, gold, and red dress swirls around my thighs as he holds me close, leaning in to kiss me. The urgency of his kiss surprises me, because he's been extra gentle with me since the attack, and there's an undercurrent of desperation that concerns me. I ease back a little, frowning. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." He smiles, but it seems off.

The edge slides off my euphoria. "Just tell me."

"It's nothing."

I pin him with a warning look. Has he forgotten how well I know him? "Don't lie to me, Reeve. I don't want to get into all our shit on Christmas morning, but I don't want you keeping more secrets from me. Something is obviously on your mind, so spill."

"Saffron keeps messaging me," he admits, sighing. "I've told her nothing will happen between us, and I can't hang out with her anymore, but she's not giving up without a fight." He kisses the tip of my nose. "She's going to be difficult. I'm sorry."

Acid crawls up my throat. "I'd like to say I'm surprised, but I'm really not. She's a scheming bitch, and she's not going to let you go easily."

Reeve winds his fingers through my hair. "You know I love you, Viv, right? No matter what she says, you know you're the only one I love."

Raw fear shimmers in his eyes, sprouting goose bumps all over my arms. "Are you telling me everything?"

His Adam's apple jumps in his throat as he nods, not making eye contact, and my stomach lurches painfully.

He's lying.

I'm about to call him on it when Dad pops his head in the door, telling me it's time to leave for church. We're not a very religious family, but we attend mass at our local church every Christmas Day.

After church, we return to the house, and I help Mom with the dinner. Christmas and Easter are the only times of the year when Mom sends the staff home for the holidays and we have to fend for ourselves. I actually love it. Cooking a Christmas feast with Mom is one of my favorite things, and we always drink mimosas and chat while we're getting everything ready. The men enjoy some drinks in Dad's study while we are slaving

away, but they know they're on cleanup duty. We are all about equality in this house.

Conversation is flowing freely around the table as we eat our sumptuous dinner, but I notice Reeve is hardly eating anything, toying with his food and looking distracted. I place my hand on his thigh under the table and whisper in his ear. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you," he whispers. His knee taps on the floor as his cell vibrates in his pocket.

"We're in the middle of dinner, Reeve. It'll have to wait," I whisper back. Butterflies run amok in my chest as I take in his pale complexion and the tiny beads of sweat forming on his brow. "What did you do?"

"Not here." He wipes his damp brow. "Please, can we go to your room to talk?"

"Turn on the TV," Mom suddenly shouts, surprising us all. Her eyes drill into Reeve as she clutches her cell to her chest. "Turn on E-News, Jonathon," she commands, in a voice that tells him not to question or challenge her.

"It meant nothing," Reeve whispers, clutching my hand. "Just let me explain." The panicked expression on his face matches the mounting hysteria in his tone.

Dad looks between Mom and me as he holds the remote out in front of him.

"Turn it on, Daddy." I know this is going to hurt, but I won't shy away from the truth.

"No!" Reeve jumps up, holding on to my hand. "Don't look at that. Please, Viv. Come with me and I'll explain." He already knew this was going to happen, and yet he said nothing. Looking at him, I wonder if I know him at all anymore.

I wrench my hand from Reeve's, turning around so I'm facing the TV mounted on the wall behind us, just as Dad turns on E-News.

The headline bores a hole in my skull, and my heart instantly cracks into a million broken shards.

**REEVERON HOT KISS! WE'VE GOT THE EXCLUSIVE VIDEO
THAT PROVES THEIR LOVE IS REAL!**

“**B**aby, please. Don’t look at that,” Reeve pleads again, dropping to his knees in front of me. “It looks worse than it is.”

I don’t know how that is even possible.

Ignoring him, I stare in a state of numbed shock as the hideous recording plays. It’s at some club, in Boston, I’m assuming, and while it’s dark, you can clearly make out Reeve’s and Saffron’s features. I spot Rudy and a few of the other cast members drinking and dancing in the background. Christmas decorations hang from the ceiling and adorn the walls, confirming it was a recent night out. Most likely, just before he left Boston for the Christmas break.

Silent tears stream down my face as I watch them kissing. It’s no chaste kiss either. Their arms are wrapped around one another as they lock lips, and they are devouring one another like it’s a new Olympic sport.

Pain races through every part of me, and I’m struggling to breathe. I sway on my feet when I stand, clutching a hand to my mouth as I rush out of the room. Reeve calls after me, chasing me down the hallway. “Vivien! Stop, please! Let me explain! I love you!”

I slam to a halt at those three little words and spin around to face him. “Stop fucking lying!” I scream, my entire body shaking as rage takes control. “Stop saying you love me when your actions prove you don’t! How could you do this to me?” A sob rips from my chest, and my upper torso aches. While the pain from my concussion has subsided and my broken ribs are healing, I’m still in physical pain, and the additional heartache is most unwelcome. “Haven’t you humiliated me enough?”

“I was high,” he blurts. “It was stupid. I never should’ve taken molly, but everyone was doing it. Filming was over. I was coming home to you, and I was happy.” The words tumble from his mouth in desperation.

I bark out a bitter laugh. “Yeah. I saw how happy you were.” I slam my unbroken hand into his chest, shoving him. “How long has it been going on, and have you fucked her?” I bend over, clutching my stomach as my half-eaten dinner threatens to make a reappearance. “Oh God. We had sex last night.” We never use condoms because I’m on the pill, and I never thought Reeve would cheat on me. “That slut is probably riddled,” I shout. “Now I’ll have to get tested!” The thought of that additional humiliation ignites a fresh layer of pain.

“I didn’t fuck her, and that was the only time I’ve kissed her. I swear.”

I throw my hands in the air, swallowing bile. “Like I believe a single fucking word coming out of your lying mouth!” I scream.

“Baby. I know you’re upset. I’m upset too. I’d never taken molly before. It made me horny as hell, and she pounced on me when I was wasted. I didn’t push her away at first, because I was confused. I thought she was you!” He puts his hands on my shoulders, beseeching me with his eyes.

He’s upset? He has the fucking nerve to say that to me after what he’s done?! Shoving his hands away, I swipe at the hot tears running down my cheeks, vowing this is the last time I’m crying over Reeve Lancaster.

“As soon as I realized who I was kissing, I pushed her away.”

“A likely fucking story.” In the distance, I spot our parents holding back but listening to every word.

Reeve pulls out his cell, handing it to me. “Call Rudy if you don’t believe me. He’ll confirm it.”

As if his best friend on set wouldn’t cover for him! He really must think I’m an idiot if I’d believe that. I thrust his hand away. “I don’t care if he does. I don’t care if you were high. You promised me you were done with drugs, but that was obviously another lie, and it’s not an excuse.” I rest my head on the wall, and my body shakes as I flounder.

I’m drowning in soul-splitting pain.

Suffocating under an avalanche of hurt.

Torn between rage and gut-wrenching heartache.

“I’ll quit the movie,” Reeve quietly says, cautiously approaching me again. “They can sue me. I don’t care.”

“What about your career?” I hiss, lifting my head and staring straight at the wall. I can’t look at Reeve. It physically pains me to look at him now.

“I don’t care about my career!” he cries. He puts his hand on my back. “I only care about you.”

Shucking out of his hold, I carefully wrap my one good arm around myself, as if that will keep the shattered pieces of my psyche together. “You don’t care about me. If you did, you would’ve pulled out a long time ago. You only care you got caught.”

“That is not true.”

I harrumph, turning to face him. “It seems you need a little history lesson, so let me enlighten you. From the very start, you have refused to see what is blatantly obvious. That bitch, Bianca, and Cassidy have conspired to make my life miserable. They’re behind it all, I’m sure of it, but you still don’t believe it. That”—I point back toward the dining room, where the TV is probably still playing—“was carefully timed to inflict the worst pain on a day that should be special. A day that will now be forever tarnished for me. But I’m sure you’ll find some way of defending that bitch and blaming the press. Or better yet,” I say, gnashing my teeth. “Why not turn it around on me? Because you’re so good at that!” I scream.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot my dad physically restraining my mom. I love how readily she wades into battle on my behalf, but this is one fight I need to finish myself.

“Go on!” I roar. “Tell me how selfish I am for not supporting you! How much I’m adding to your stress because I won’t get with the program and endorse your so-called fake relationship!” I’m really hitting my stride now, and months of pent-up frustration pours out of my mouth. “I am the only one who has suffered for your dreams. *Me!* Not you!” I place a hand over my heart. “I have been humiliated and vilified at every turn. I was attacked, and I know that bitch orchestrated it, and there you go kissing her in public without any regard for my feelings! You did that days after professing undying love for me and promising to fix everything! I have tried to love and support you, but you continuously shut me out. You refused to accept Mom’s help. You refused to believe me. *Me!* The person you profess to have loved for nineteen years. Instead, you believe that conniving slut. You —”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t believe you, Viv,” Reeve pleads, cutting across me. He grabs fistfuls of his hair. “You were so irrational when it came to her

that it made it difficult for me to believe it wasn't jealousy driving your behavior, but I see it now."

"Well, that makes it all fucking right then, doesn't it?!" I screech, poking my finger in his chest again. "Tell me one time I was irrational!? One time I said something that hasn't turned out to be true?" I plant my hands on my hips, daring him to challenge me.

"Rehashing that shit won't do either of us any good."

A derisory laugh escapes my mouth. "Bullshit. You can't think of even one thing because you know I'm right!"

"I'm not disagreeing with you!" he yells, and I see red.

"Don't you dare shout at me, you two-timing bastard! You have no right! I'm entitled to my anger! *I'm* the one who looks like a goddamn fool in front of the entire world. Not you or that man-stealing whore! So don't you fucking shout at me." I slam my fist into the wall, beyond angry at this point. "Ugh." Dad releases Mom, letting her run toward me. I hold out my hand. "Stay back, Mom. I'm getting this all off my chest, and then Reeve is leaving."

She stops running, leaning against the wall, concern etched upon her face.

"This isn't on me," I continue, in a more even tone. "This is all on you. You've messed up everything, *movie star*. Your selfish pursuit of your dreams at all cost has destroyed what we once shared."

"No, Viv. Please don't say that. We can get through this. I will do whatever you want to make this right. Anything. I'll do anything, but I can't lose you. Please, Viv, I'm begging you." He drops to his knees, clutching my legs and clinging to me.

God, how did we end up here? Both of us destroyed and hurting.

I shake my head, as a wave of sadness washes over me. "You've already lost me, Reeve. I might as well be single, because I never see you. I'm lonely, and I'm heartsick, and I can't do it anymore."

"Vivien. I love you. I know I've fucked up, but please give me another chance." Easing back, he lifts one knee and removes a box from his pocket. He pops the lid, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry. "I was planning to ask you to marry me tonight. It's always been you, Viv. Deep down, you know that. Don't let her come between us anymore than she already has. I'm begging you. Please forgive me, and say you'll be my wife."

This is crazy. Even if things hadn't blown up today, how could he feel we were in a place where it was right to propose? Our relationship has never been so broken. Hurt infiltrates every nook and cranny of my body, and I wonder if your heart can physically break? Because it feels like mine is. I stare at him through blurry eyes, forcing words out over the anguished lump in my throat. "There was a time I would have jumped into your arms and screamed yes, but we are so far removed from that now." Sorrow fills my chest as I glance at the stunning princess-cut diamond engagement ring that would be perfect if I wasn't so devastated by his betrayal. "How could you even consider asking me to marry you when our relationship is in tatters?"

"We've lost our way, but we'll get it back. I'm still committed to you, and this was my way of proving it. I wasn't expecting us to get married any time soon, but I hoped you would see how much I love you and know I'm still serious about spending the rest of our lives together."

Just kill me now.

"This is the action of a desperate man. It's nothing more," I whisper, drowning in pain and sorrow. "I don't even understand why you claim to want me anymore."

"Because I fucking love you!" he yells. "I made a mistake. Lots of them, but my love for you has never wavered. Not once. You're the other half of my heart and soul, Vivien. Please say you believe that? Please, baby. Please, please, believe me. I can't lose you. I'll die without you."

I clutch the wall behind me, incredulous that he's stooping to emotional blackmail. My heart is in shreds, and I can't tolerate much more. Can't he see that? "I don't believe it, Reeve," I croak, sniffling. "I don't believe a word that comes out of your mouth anymore. I can't marry you. I *won't* marry you, so put that ring away."

I can't bear to look at it. It's the physical representation of all my shattered hopes and dreams. Although the ring is truly stunning, it's ugly to me because it embodies everything I've lost. My heart is obliterated, and I'm amazed it's still able to beat in my chest.

My anger is fading, replaced with utter devastation and a hopeless sense of inevitability. "Actions speak louder than words, Reeve. And your actions confirm I don't matter."

"I'll put out another statement. I'll tell the world it was a mistake. I'll stop taking drugs. I'll pull out of the movie." Hysteria filters through his

voice as realization dawns. He's grasping at straws now, throwing everything at it, because he knows he can't talk his way out of this. Staggering to his feet, he repockets the ring with the saddest look on his face. Seeing it hurts me, but he doesn't deserve any sympathy, and it's not my place to console him anymore. My place in his life is dead and buried, and I can't allow myself to get sucked in any longer.

This must end now.

Even though it'll kill me to say these words, I know this is the way it has to be. "You have pushed me away, downplayed my feelings, scoffed at my concerns, and let yourself be manipulated. We should have broken up like Audrey and Alex and protected our past because everything is tarnished now. All my memories include you, Reeve. Every single memory I have of my childhood, you are in it, and now they are all tainted!" I cry as heartfelt pain surges through my veins. "She hasn't just stolen you from me. She's stolen every good memory. I will never be able to look at our past with anything but pain in my heart."

"She hasn't stolen me, Viv. I don't want her. I only want you." Resignation is clear in his strained tone. He knows I mean this. That there is no way to come back from this.

"I thought we meant everything to one another. I thought you were the one person I could trust with my life. But you've trampled all over my heart. You have shattered my soul and broken my spirit. I hate who I've become." I gulp over the painful lump in my throat as I cut myself open and bleed in front of him. "I don't even know who I am anymore. I'm in so much pain, and I'm so lost, and you didn't even see. You didn't see or you chose to ignore it."

He hangs his head, and it's telling how he's stopped trying to defend himself.

Exhaustion weighs heavy on my shoulders, and my knees feel like they could buckle. I have reached my breaking point, but I need to get this last bit out, because it's the first step in starting to properly heal. "What if the roles were reversed and you were the one in my shoes? Have you ever considered that? How hurtful would it be if I were the one parading another man around in public as my boyfriend, shunning you and relegating you to the shadows in case anyone discovered the truth? Being victimized online and attacked when you have done nothing, abso-fucking-lutely nothing, but try to be a supportive partner? How would it feel to watch me kissing

another man in public, knowing the entire world is watching and laughing at you for being such a gullible fool to believe I was faithful?”

I wrap my arm around my waist as pain lays siege to my body. “You cheated on me with her.” It all boils down to that. Tears roll down my face again. “You have publicly betrayed me. Slain me as skillfully as if you’d taken a sword and sliced me wide-open.”

Tears cascade down his face too, and his shoulders are slumped as he stares dejectedly at me.

“It’s time I put myself first,” I say, straightening up. “I need to protect my heart and my sanity, and you’re just not good for my health. I can’t be with you anymore.”

“No, baby.” He takes a step toward me, but I shake my head, warning him to stay back. “Please, Viv. Please give me one more chance.”

“You’re all out of chances, Reeve. I don’t want to be with you. I don’t want to see you or speak to you. I want you out of my life,” I add, sobbing. This shouldn’t be so hard. He cheated on me in front of the world. Cutting all ties shouldn’t feel like it’s killing me, but it does.

“I think it’s time for you to go, Reeve.” Mom steps up, pulling me into her arms. I cry into her chest, clinging to her like I used to do when I was a little girl and I’d skinned my knee, needing the comfort only a mother can give.

“I’m sorry, Viv. More than you can know. I’ll give you some space, but I’m not giving you up.”

“You don’t have a choice.” I lift my head, pinning him with bloodshot eyes. “You gave up on us a long time ago—you just didn’t realize it.”

Simon walks forward, rubbing the back of his neck. “Thanks for dinner, Lauren, and I’m sorry for all of this.”

Mom stares at Reeve’s dad with narrowed eyes. “Perhaps, if you were around more for Reeve, he wouldn’t feel like he needs to sell his soul to be a success just so you’d be proud of him. You’re not innocent in this either, Simon.”

Dad walks up, circling his arms around both of us, and I’ve never been more grateful for my parents’ love and support as I am now. I know this is going to be one of the most painful things I have ever done. I’m going to miss Reeve more than I can describe. But as he walks out the door with his father, I know there can be no going back.

Reeve and I are over, and there is nothing he can say that will ever change my mind.

In the two weeks that follow, I barely venture out of my house. Media vultures have camped outside the main gates to North Beverley Park, hoping to catch a glimpse of Reeve or me. The only time I left was to visit my ob-gyn to get tested. Thankfully, the tests came back clear, but that doesn't prove or disprove Reeve's claims.

Despite asking for space, my ex is bombarding me daily with gifts, flowers, and notes, and I've had to switch off my cell because I can't read any more of his pleading messages. I asked Mom to deliver the flowers and gifts to a local nursing home and to tell him to stop sending them. Before he left to resume promotion for *Twisted Betrayal*, he dropped by my house a few times, but my parents are steadfast in honoring my wishes, and they turned him away each and every time.

I want him to stop—I *need* him to stop—because I meant what I said, and he's only making it harder.

Audrey is furious with him. She called and ripped into him for doing this to me. Reeve issued a public apology, but I refuse to watch it. My emotions are veering all over the place, and I can't let myself be swayed. I'm experiencing the full gamut of emotions, and I have days where I can barely get out of bed I'm crying so hard and days when I'm so freaking angry I want to punch the wall until I bleed. Other days, I want to punch myself for being such an idiot. For letting it go on so long. For believing all his lies. For missing him, because I do, and that's the most pathetic admission.

Most of all, I'm sad. So unbelievably sad.

I'm glad I completed my exams before Christmas because there's no way I'd be in the right state of mind to focus on anything right now. My heart is broken, and I've never experienced such crushing pain, such devastating loss, such debilitating anger.

"Your dad has hired you a bodyguard," Mom says three days before I'm due to return to UCLA. We're in the kitchen, seated at the breakfast table, enjoying homemade muffins and freshly squeezed orange juice. "And if the media interest doesn't die down, we can assign more."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," I say, knowing nothing of the sort. "Dad told me he spoke to Doug, and campus security will be on the case too."

"I'm worried about you." She reaches across the table to take my hand. "Have you thought any more about seeing a therapist?"

"You and I both know there's no way I'd get in and out of a therapist's office without someone discovering it and reporting it. I'm already a laughingstock. Let's not make it worse." She opens her mouth to argue, but I go on, not giving her an opportunity. "I just need time, Mom. Time to process all my feelings. Time to lock Reeve and all our memories into a box and throw away the key."

"Oh, honey." Tears pool in her eyes. "That's not going to be easy. He's been such a huge part of your life. He was your best friend growing up before he was anything else. I really wish you'd consider therapy. It will help."

"I know you're worried, but you need to let me do this my way and in my own time. I can scarcely get out of bed some days as it is."

"And that's why you should seek help."

Getting up, I round the table and pull her into a hug. "Mom, I love you, and I love Dad and everything you are doing for me, but you have to let me handle this my way. I'm going to focus on my studies, go to physical therapy now my cast is off, resume yoga, design dresses, hang out with my bestie, and do everything I can to heal myself," I say, barely pausing to draw a breath.

She smiles up at me, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. "You are so strong, Vivien Grace Mills, and you make your father and me so proud to be your parents." Her face floods with compassion. "I know you're hurting, and I wish I could take your pain away. But you will get through this. It might get rougher before it gets better, and if you need us, for anything at all, you only have to ask."

Mom pulled out of a new role she was preparing to take because she didn't want to leave L.A. and me behind.

Reeve should take a leaf out of Mom's playbook.

That's what true selfless love looks like.

I tried persuading her to change her mind, but she wasn't having any of it.

"Sometimes, I wish I was a million miles away, someplace no one knew me where I could heal in private without everyone knowing my business," I murmur.

"I'm sure we could arrange a sabbatical with UCLA if you wanted to defer this semester and go someplace," Mom suggests, and a light bulb goes off in my head. My eyes widen as possibilities open. I'm not sure I can make it happen at such short notice, but I'm damn well going to try. "I have an idea. Where's Dad?"

Mom arches one elegant brow. "He's on set today, but you could call him. You know he'll make time for his princess."

"Are you very sure this is what you want to do, honey?" Mom asks a week later as Dad carries the last of my luggage from my bedroom down to the hallway.

"I'm sure." I smile, and it's the first genuine smile I've had on my face in weeks. "I know it's all happened superfast, but this feels like the right move."

"I hate the thought of you being so far from home when you're not in a good place." Her brow puckers with worry. I know she'd love to beg me not to do this, but Mom will never interfere in the decisions I make for my life. I'll be twenty in April, and it's time I started living independently of my parents...and Reeve. I need to prove to myself that I can survive without him. That life will go on and it will get better.

"I promise I will see a therapist," I remind her. "It should be easy to go about my business unnoticed in Dublin."

At least, that's the plan. From the research I've done online, Ireland sounds like the ideal place to hide until all the interest in me dies down. Though I refuse to think of it as hiding. It's more akin to self-preservation.

I'm taking time for myself, to heal, away from the fishbowl that is my current life in L.A. I'm nervous but excited too.

I'm thrilled at the prospect of studying at Trinity College Dublin, one of the world's most renowned and reputable colleges. Established in 1592, it boasts prestigious alumni. I will be joining the likes of Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett as an English literature student, and I'm giddy at the prospect of exploring all that wonderful Irish heritage and legendary Irish charm.

"I'm proud of you, princess." Dad reels me into a smothering hug. "We're going to miss you so much, but I think this is wonderful. Your mom does too. She just can't help worrying."

"I can't, but your dad is right, as usual." Mom wraps her arms around both of us, and we indulge in a group family hug that helps to warm all the frozen parts of me. "And maybe we could visit?" she asks when we break our embrace.

I bite on my lower lip. "Lauren and Jonathon Mills showing up in Dublin might get reported, and I'm trying to keep a low profile. But we'll see," I add when Mom's face drops. "Look at the positives." I squeeze her hand. "You can take that role now." They hadn't recast it yet as they were begging Mom to reconsider so my decision works out best for everyone.

Dad glances at his Patek Philippe watch, as the door opens and our driver starts grabbing my bags. "If you still want to drop by Reeve's house, you'll need to hurry. We'll be leaving in thirty minutes."

I nod, gathering my courage and taking a deep breath. "I'll go now, but I think I'll walk." I can work up the nerve to face him without breaking on the way over. It gives me an excuse to say what I want to say and leave, and if my resolve cracks, I have the ten-minute walk back to compose myself.

"Honey. Are you sure this is wise?" Mom asks.

"I can't leave the country without telling him, Mom."

"You don't owe Reeve anything, Vivien." Mom folds her arms, and I wonder if she'll ever forgive him.

Reeve hasn't just lost me.

He's lost my parents too.

Considering my parents virtually raised him, it's no small matter. From what I can see, Simon Lancaster is still keeping his son at arm's length. Reeve has lost his support system, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried

about him. I'm betting he never stopped to consider that before he took molly and made out with that bitch.

And, just like that, my anger is back.

I've had moments of weakness, where his words and his gestures have almost broken through the fragile walls I've erected around my heart. Then I remember that video—and how everyone knows he cheated on me—and I lose any remaining compassion for my ex.

A tight pain spreads across my chest, and I rub at it, willing it to go away. It hurts so much to call him that. I still can't believe he threw everything we had away for *her*. It's like the nineteen years we shared meant nothing to him, and I don't think I'll ever forgive him.

"Honey." Mom gently grips my shoulders. "You can write him a letter, and I'll see he gets it."

I shake off my melancholy. "No, it's okay. I'm going to speak with him."

Mom still looks uncertain. Dad circles his arms around her waist from behind, and I hate that the loving gesture pierces me straight through the heart. Reeve used to do that to me. Most likely he was subconsciously copying my dad, and I wonder if every time I see a couple engaged in PDA it will feel like someone is tearing strips off my annihilated heart. "Let Vivien do what she needs to do. Besides, I think Reeve needs to know. Otherwise, he may chase after her."

Like hell will he come anywhere near me. I'm doing this for my sanity. To get away from him and the media attention. If the hottest new movie star suddenly appeared on the streets of Dublin, I'm sure the Irish people would sit up and take notice, and my cover would be blown.

Reeve is not ruining this fresh start for me. I won't let him.

With fresh determination, I stride with purpose toward his house.

My hand shakes as I press the bell, rocking back on my heels at Reeve's front door. It's strange to be waiting to be admitted when I'm used to having a key and letting myself in at all hours of the day and night.

The housekeeper opens the door, her eyes widening when she spots me.

"Hi, Mrs. Thompson. Is Reeve home?" I know he's here, because the premiere is tomorrow night and he texted me last night to tell me he was home. He begged me to attend it with him, but I told him a firm no. How the fuck could he expect me to walk the red carpet with that bitch? I'd be up on a murder charge before the end of the night. It's a moot point anyway. We're broken up, and I won't be walking any more red carpets with Reeve. The thought saddens me, but there's no going back now.

He also asked if we could talk, so he'll probably be ecstatic to discover I'm here.

"Hello, Vivien." Her smile is laced with pity, and I loathe it. I know she means well, but I hate that everyone knows he cheated on me. I force out a tight smile, and she steps aside to grant me entry. "Mr. Lancaster is here. He's eating breakfast in the sunroom if you'd like to join him."

"Thank you." Stepping inside, I set my key down on the hallway table. Won't be needing that anymore. Acid churns in my gut, and my heart jackhammers behind my rib cage as I walk through familiar hallways and rooms. Stopping outside the door to the sunroom, I wipe my clammy palms down the front of my skinny jeans, willing my thumping heart to slow down. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, trying to compose myself.

Briefly, I consider fleeing, because now I'm here I don't know if I can do this. I could write him a letter in the car on the way to the airport and avoid seeing him.

A subtle whooshing of air as the door opens confirms it's too late to make an escape. Drawing a brave breath, I open my eyes, coming face to face with the man who broke my heart into itty-bitty pieces.

We stare at one another, and it's painful beyond belief. Tension bleeds into the air, mixing with the usual spark of electricity. Where once our connection comforted me, now all it does is exacerbate the agony. I dig my nails into the sides of my jeans to ignore the almost insurmountable urge to wrap my arms around him. Physically, my body still needs to get with the program. Reeve is breathtakingly handsome, even with punishing shadows under his eyes, a thick five-o'clock shadow, and the anguished expression etched on his face. His gorgeous blue gaze drills into mine, and his eyes turn glassy with emotion.

"Viv," he whispers. "You came." A hint of a cautious smile tugs up the corners of his mouth as he reaches for me.

Taking a step back, I avert my eyes and shake my head, gulping over the lump clogging my throat. Every part of me is in agony. Pain ravages me from the inside, and I wrap my arms around my torso, silently coaxing myself to just say my piece and get out of here.

"I miss you," he adds, shoving his hands in his pockets and leaning against the door frame. His accompanying sigh is heavy with emotion.

Reinforcing the walls around my heart, I lift my chin and pull my shoulders back, letting my arms drop to my side. I'm not going to fall apart in front of him again. "I miss you too, but it changes nothing."

His smile disappears. "Why are you here then?"

"I came to tell you I'm leaving."

He frowns, straightening up a little. "Leaving? Leaving for where?"

I had considered being vague, but I know Reeve. His stubbornness is legendary. If I don't tell him, he'll make it his mission to find out, and I can't have him showing up in Ireland unannounced.

"I'm moving to Dublin, Ireland. My plane leaves at noon."

Shock splays across his face, and he just stares at me for several tense seconds. Dragging his hands repeatedly through his hair, he asks. "How? Why? For how long?"

“UCLA has a transfer program with Trinity College Dublin. It’s usually for junior year students, but Dad knows the president, and he made it happen for me. I’m going to complete my sophomore spring semester there.” Normally, I hate relying on my parent’s contacts. I like to be as independent as possible and to achieve things on my own merits. But this is a unique situation, and there is no way I would be leaving if Dad hadn’t pulled strings and Doug Simmonds hadn’t personally arranged it with Trinity.

Reeve’s face drops, and he scrubs a hand over his stubbly jawline. “You’re going away for five months?”

He says that like it’ll be any different than last year when I barely saw him at all. It won’t make any difference to Reeve whether I’m in L.A. or Ireland or Timbuktu. “At least. If I like it, I’ll probably stay during summer break too,” I explain. Audrey said she’ll come visit me this summer if I’m still there. “As for why, I think that’s obvious. I need to heal, and I can’t do that in L.A. I need to go someplace the media won’t find me. I need to leave all the noise behind.”

“Leave me behind, you mean,” he says in a pained voice.

I wet my dry lips, refusing to hide the truth even if I know my words will hurt him. “Yes. I can’t put you and our relationship behind me when your face is everywhere and reminders of you are everywhere.”

He grabs my hand, and the familiar tingling across my skin hurts so damn much. “Viv. I love you. I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want her. I’ve never wanted her. I only want you.”

I yank my hand back, tucking both hands under my arms so he can’t pull that maneuver again. “I don’t want to leave on bad terms, Reeve. I will never forget what you did, but maybe one day I can find a way to forgive you. You’re a free agent now. You can be with her with a clear conscience.” It kills me to say that, and the thought of him being with her permanently might very well do me in, but I’ll be thousands of miles away, blissfully ignorant, and that’s the way I prefer it. Setting him free will ultimately help to set me free too, so that’s why I’m doing this.

“Viv, please, just *hear* me. I don’t want her,” he blurts. “She means nothing to me and you’re everything.” He grabs fistfuls of his hair. “You’re fucking everything, Viv.” Tears stream down his face, and it’s so hard not to comfort him, but I can’t get drawn back in.

“You made a lot of mistakes that hurt me, but I don't want to hold on to the hurt and the pain. I don't want our relationship to be defined by our final days. I hope someday to be able to look back and remember the good times, because there were a lot of those.” I am nowhere near ready to face that, but in the future, I hope the pain will ease and I can cherish the happy times and remember Reeve the way I want to remember him.

“This isn't the end, Viv. Please, baby. I can't lose you.”

I exhale heavily, rubbing my throbbing temples. “Reeve, stop. Please stop. I can't do this again. You're making this harder.” I drag in deep breaths as I fight to maintain the tenuous hold on my emotions. “I didn't want to leave without telling you in person, and now I've told you.” I turn to go, and he pulls me into his arms.

“Please, Viv. Please don't say it's the end. It's not the end. It can't be. I'm not going to stop fighting for you.”

Wracking sobs rip from my chest as I wrench myself from his arms. The scent of his cologne, the feel of his strong arms around me, the warmth emanating from his masculine body—it's all too much. I can't take it, and Mom was right. I shouldn't have come here. It's undone the little progress I've made in the intervening weeks since our breakup.

“If you love me, you won't fight, Reeve. You'll do this one thing for me,” I sob, backing away from him. “Look what you've done to me! I'm destroyed.” I openly cry, done pretending. “I'm so lost and in so much pain. Please just let me go. Let me go, and don't come looking for me. Don't contact me, because clinging to what we had won't help either of us,” I whisper.

“I hate what I've done to you. What I've done to *us*, and I will get you back because I love you too much to let you go forever.” He clasps my face in his hands, brushing my tears away as his fall. “But I'll give you space. Take whatever time you need. I'll wait for you.”

I shake my head and remove his hands. “No. I don't want any loose ends. We are over, Reeve.”

Determination glints in his gaze. “Not for good, Viv. Never for good.”

“I don't know what the future holds, but I can't go to Ireland with things hanging in the air. The past two years of my life have been spent in limbo waiting for you, and I can't do it anymore. For my sanity, I need a clean break. If you love me, you'll stop fighting my decision. You need to let me go. I can't heal otherwise.”

He opens and closes his mouth a few times before speaking. “Okay, if that’s what you want, but this isn’t goodbye, Viv. Only goodbye for now.”

His stubborn determination knows no bounds. He can believe what he wants, because it doesn’t matter. This is over, and I’m done letting his choices dictate mine. I won’t be making any promises, and I’m done arguing. “I need to go, or I’ll miss my flight.”

“Take care of yourself. I’ll be thinking of you.”

My eyes lock on his. “I’m not saying this to hurt you, but I’ll be trying not to think about you at all.”

“I deserve that.” His sad eyes drop to my chest. “You’re not wearing your locket.”

“It hurts too much to look at it, and I meant what I said about a clean start.”

He takes a step closer, peering deeply into my eyes. “Someday, I’m going to correct my mistakes and win back your heart. I won’t stop until I prove I’m worthy of your love again.”

I can’t respond to that, and I need to get out of here before I throw caution to the wind and take everything back. Reeve has always been a true romantic. He always has the right words at the right time. But loving words and promises aren’t enough to extinguish the deep-seated pain of his betrayal. Still, I came here to leave things on an amicable footing, and I’m determined to do that. I cup his face one last time, and he leans into my touch. “Be happy, Reeve. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

With one last look, I walk off, grateful that he doesn’t chase after me.

The next part of the story takes place in Ireland. There is a glossary at the back of this book you can refer to, which includes some explanations of local words/phrases and Irish/Gaelic pronunciations. We phrase some things differently, so if some of the Irish characters' dialogue seems a little odd, that is why!

The flight lands in Dublin at seven a.m. local time, and as I disembark, I promise myself I'm leaving my tears and my melancholy behind on the plane. The nighttime flight helped, but I found it hard to sleep with the eight-hour time difference and the fact my broken heart took a severe beating earlier today. Having Audrey say goodbye at LAX was a disastrous move too. Leaving my bestie behind only added to my distress.

I spent the first two hours of the ten-and-a-half-hour flight trying to fight tears and the next two hours trying to disguise my sobs from the other passengers. Being in first class helped, and the Aer Lingus flight attendant was super sweet and attentive when she noticed I was upset. Still, it's embarrassing, and I need to get a grip. I'm just lucky no one on the plane seemed to realize who I was.

I'm yawning as I move through passport control, but I perk up as I get my first proper look at Ireland through the large windows as I walk with other passengers toward the arrival hall. Gray skies and rain peer back at me, and it's kind of reassuring. If everything about Ireland is as expected, I think I'll really enjoy my time here.

Out in the arrivals area, I scan the space, my eyes inspecting all the cards held aloft until I spot one that says GRACE MILLS. As an extra precaution, I've decided to use my middle name here. Just in case any locals or visiting tourists make the connection. Pushing my luggage cart toward the rotund man in the ill-fitting black suit, I battle a sudden rush of butterflies.

I can't believe I'm here.

That I've really done this.

Excitement combines with nerves as I approach my driver. His name tag says Micheál, which I'm assuming is a Gaelic name.

"Hi. I'm Grace Mills."

"Howya, love. Aren't you a right looker?" Grabbing my hand, he vigorously shakes it.

"Ugh..." I'm at a loss for words.

"I'm Micheál," he says, pronouncing it like Mee-haul. "I'll be driving ya to your swanky apartment building in town." He winks, but it's not leery in the slightest. He gives off jovial grandpa vibes that have me instantly relaxing. "Good flight?" he continues, taking control of my luggage cart without asking.

"Yes," I lie, because I'm sure he doesn't want to hear how I spent half of it crying over my cheating ex and nursing my broken heart.

"First time in Dublin?" he inquires, waving to another couple of drivers as we walk off, heading into a plexiglass tunnel.

"First time in Ireland," I confirm. Audrey and I had planned to visit when we were in Europe last summer, but we never made it.

"Well, you're in for a treat. What part of America are you from?"

He talks fast, and his accent is so thick that I have to wait a few seconds for my brain to process the words and decipher his question. "Los Angeles."

He whistles under his breath, nodding at me. "I took one look at ya, and I just knew you were a Hollywood princess."

My eyes startle wide, and panic races to the surface at the thought my cover might have already been blown. Maybe I'll just say California in the future, because I don't want to lie and have to keep track of what I'm telling people. Remembering to say my name is Grace will be challenging enough.

He chuckles heartily as we head across the dark, chilly parking lot. A full-body shiver works its way through me, and I can already tell reports about the cold winter weather were not unfounded. I sense a shopping trip in my near future.

"Relax, love. It's only a figure of speech. I've heard all the birds in Hollywood are real beauties and they all want to be actresses." He stops at a black Mercedes car with a yellow taxi sign on the roof. He continues talking while he opens the trunk, and I glance at the other cars around us,

spotting a lot of brands I'm familiar with. "Is it true they all have fake knockers?" he asks.

I blink profusely, staring blankly at him. I thought they spoke English in Dublin, but I'm completely confused and second-guessing myself.

He chuckles at the expression on my face. "Plastic tits," he explains.

Ah, now I'm getting the gist. "It's true a lot of women in Hollywood are fans of cosmetic surgery." Not this gal though. I plan to grow old gracefully, like Mom.

"I've only been to America once," he adds, swiftly stacking my suitcases in the trunk. "I brought me missus and the kids to Orlando, when me missus was me mot. It's a fecking fantastic place."

He might as well be speaking Gaelic. For all I know, he is. I stare blankly at him again, and he chuckles as he opens the back door of the car for me.

"I always forget you Yanks speak differently. Me missus is me wife."

"Good to know. Thank you." My smile is genuine, because it's easy to respond naturally to his friendly manner.

Removing a photo from his wallet, Micheál leans back to show me. "That's my Maureen, and my three boys. She's still a looker, even after all these years." His chest swells with pride.

"You have a beautiful family," I agree, handing the photo back to him.

He talks nonstop throughout the journey from Dublin Airport to the city center, changing subjects seamlessly and barely pausing for a breath. Traffic is heavier than I was expecting but it's not as bad as L.A. His driving skills leave a lot to be desired, and he's constantly switching lanes, honking his horn, cussing, and shaking his fist when other drivers try to cut in front of him.

By the time we reach the brown brick and glass high-rise I'll be calling home for the next few months, my heart is in my mouth from the stress of his crazy driving and he's given me a summary of his life story and a list of places I need to visit. "Home sweet home, love," he says, pulling into an underground parking lot under the Capital Dock Residence building. "This place is the perfect location," he adds, maneuvering into a vacant spot by the doors that lead to the elevators. "You're right beside the Liffey, and it's only a ten-minute walk to Trainers. You're slap bang in the heart of the city with access to all the shops, pubs, and restaurants. You'll have a grand ole time in our fair city."

“Thank you so much, Micheál.” I lean forward, handing him a fifty-euro bill as a tip. Mom’s assistant Moira booked everything, and I know he’s already been paid for the journey.

“Jesus, love. You can’t be giving me that. It’s too much.”

“Trust me. It was worth it for the wealth of knowledge I’ve gleaned on the journey here. You should be a tour guide,” I quip, climbing out of the car.

“Maybe I missed my true calling.” He waggles his brows while unloading my suitcases.

He insists on coming inside with me, and between us, we manage to get all my luggage into the small elevator. Or lift, as Micheál keeps calling it.

Micheál whistles under his breath as we step out of the elevator into a large lobby. “Would you get a look at this place?” he says, looking awestruck as he glances around. “This is how the other half live.”

A tall, slim woman with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail steps forward to greet me. She’s wearing a navy skirt suit with a white blouse and holding a clipboard. “Ms. Mills?” she asks, extending her arm for a handshake.

“That’s me.” I shake her hand.

She smiles, flashing a set of beautiful white teeth. “I’m Ciara, the manager on duty today. I’m delighted to welcome you to Capital Dock Residence, and I hope you’ll enjoy your stay with us.”

“You’re in capable hands now, love.” Micheál grabs my hand, pressing a card into my palm. “Enjoy your time in Ireland, and if you need a taxi, I’m yer man.” I wave him off while Ciara arranges for someone to take my luggage up to the penthouse apartment.

Ciara gives me a quick tour of the communal areas, which includes a resident’s lounge, a game room, business suite, small cinema, and a decent-sized gym. We don’t venture outside, because the rain is plummeting down now, but she points out the landscaped gardens and courtyards, and maybe if I’m still here in the summer, I can make use of the outdoor space. She confirms I’m booked and fully paid until the beginning of June and all the utilities are included in the monthly rental payment.

She escorts me up to my apartment, and I’m blown away by the gorgeous, large, spacious two-bedroom, three-bathroom penthouse complete with a small rooftop garden. Sophisticated interior design and modern furniture are the main features of my new home, and I couldn’t

have asked for anything better. I know it's a world away from the average student accommodations, and I'm lucky. I would've taken a place on campus, but *Trinners* doesn't have many accommodations, and there were no vacancies. Walking to the large floor-to-ceiling windows, I inhale deeply, already feeling a layer of stress lift from my body.

This place is perfect.

Just perfect.

My smile expands as I press my nose to the glass, rain pitter-pattering against the window. The views over the River Liffey and Dublin City Center are spectacular.

Ciara shows me how to work the appliances, use the shower, and regulate the heating. She laughs when I crank the thermostat to the max, feeling decidedly chilly even though the apartment isn't cold. I'm guessing it'll take this Cali girl some time to adjust to the vastly different climate in Ireland.

After she leaves, I do a little dance and emit a squeal before exploring the rest of my new home.

I make a quick call to my parents since I know they are waiting up to hear from me. I texted them when I landed on Irish soil, and I had planned on calling them from the taxi, but Micheál and his enthusiastic banter ended that plan. I FaceTime Mom and Dad, giving them a quick tour of my new place, thanking them profusely for organizing all of this and asking Mom to email me Moira's address so I can send her an Irish care package as a thank-you.

Stripping off my clothes in the bigger of the two bedrooms, I take a blistering-hot shower before changing into yoga pants and a top. Yanking my wet hair into a messy bun on top of my head, I flop down on the bed and open the Irish cell phone Moira organized for me. It wasn't necessary. I could've just used my US one, but I like the idea of switching off my main cell and forgetting about all the shit I've left behind.

My parents and Audrey are the only people I need to stay in contact with, so I shoot them a quick text ensuring they have my new number. Briefly, I contemplate messaging Reeve from my US cell, but I think better of it. I need to cut ties, and it's best to start out how I mean to go on. It's hard though, because I'm used to sharing everything with him without even thinking about it. It's second nature to call him or message him, but I guess I'll eventually break the habit.

I spend a couple of hours unpacking all my stuff and hanging it in my closet. Then I dress more warmly in boots, jeans, and my thickest sweater, grab my jacket, and head out to explore. My inability to sleep properly on the plane is affecting me now, and I need to keep busy to stop myself from falling asleep. Classes start in three days, and I need to have reset my body clock by then. I'm determined to stay awake for as long as possible today.

The instant I step outside, I'm accosted by a blast of cold air I feel deep in my bones. "Holy shit," I mumble to myself. "There's cold, and there's Ireland." At least the rain has stopped, which is a bonus. Pulling up Google maps, I follow the sidewalks to Grafton Street. Ciara said it's the best place to shop, and she suggested I try Brown Thomas, a high-end department store.

I have to walk past Trinity College on the way, and I can't resist taking a peek. I'm wearing the biggest smile as I pass under Trinity's famous granite campanile—the iconic bell tower. Superstition says anyone passing under the campanile when the bell chimes will fail their exams, so apparently, many students refuse to walk under it.

I'm determined to be strong and brave.

To emerge from the wreckage of my heartbreak like a new woman, and from now on, I'm going to laugh in fate's face.

With that in mind, I walk back and forth under the bell tower for several minutes, gathering plenty of inquisitive stares from the men and women walking across the campus.

Taking out my phone, I snap a ton of pics as I stroll among the impressive gray stone buildings, admiring the exquisite architecture. The campus is pristine and clearly well-maintained. Ghosts of students past seem to hover around me, and the air vibrates with the history of the surroundings. My glee elevates with every step I take, reaffirming the decision I made to come here.

Something about this place feels so right.

It's an unshakeable feeling.

Like fate has brought me here for a reason.

Laughing at myself, I resist the lure of the library and the *Book of Kells* continuing my way to Grafton Street. The pedestrianized street is only a few minutes' walk from the campus, and it's bustling with people. I stop outside Bewley's Café to listen to some of the musicians busking in the street, soaking up the electric atmosphere.

My tired body gains a new lease on life as I explore my new city.

I purchase some warmer clothes in Brown Thomas, organizing delivery direct to my apartment building. Then I spend an enjoyable afternoon strolling through the park at St. Stephen's Green, feeding the birds, and wandering through quirky little side streets. When my stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven't eaten anything since the plane, I step into my first Irish pub.

Bruxelles is just off Grafton Street, and it's a traditional Irish pub known for its live music and great food. Pulling myself up onto a stool, I examine the menu, ordering the beef stew because I'm fucking freezing and I could use something hot to warm me up. Micheál told me I should sample the black stuff, aka Guinness, but I'm not sure I could stomach it today, so I opt for a glass of wine, purely because I can. In Ireland, the legal drinking age is eighteen, which is an added bonus.

I do some grocery shopping on the return journey, almost collapsing with exhaustion by the time I make it back to my new abode. It's only seven p.m. and still way too early to sleep. So, I figure out how to use the Nespresso coffee machine and make myself a double espresso before logging on to the Trinity College student portal and downloading my class schedule.

I give up the fight a couple of hours later and crawl into bed, too tired to remember my heartache.

Waking up the following morning, I'm disorientated for a few seconds until I remember where I am. I glance at the clock, surprised to see it's ten a.m. I slept for a solid thirteen hours, which has got to be a new record for me.

Nausea swims up my throat as I wonder what went down at the premiere last night. Grabbing my cell, I press it against my chest as I try to talk myself out of checking the internet. All the thoughts I'd so successfully blocked yesterday resurface, and I think I might be sick. My mind unhelpfully conjures up images of Reeve and Saffron pawing at one another on the red carpet, dredging up the visual of them kissing that is forever imprinted in my brain, and a sob rips from my chest.

Why did I tell Reeve he was a free agent?

Why did I say he was free to be with her with a clear conscience?

Why did I leave?

Tossing my phone on the bed, I sit up, burying my head in my hands as I cry. Pain rips through me like a tornado, flattening everything in its path. Intense longing washes over me, and I wish Reeve was here. I wish he was experiencing all the wonders of Ireland alongside me. I wish that I wasn't alone, but I'd better get used to it, because we're not together anymore. I won't be sending him any of those pics I took yesterday or sharing details of my first day in a new country, because that's not who we are to one another anymore.

Losing Reeve impacts my life in so many different ways, and it's learning how to exist on my own that is my biggest challenge.

One I'm not sure I'm strong enough to accomplish.

Maybe I was too hasty in walking away from him.

Too quick to discount his declarations of love.

"Oh God," I cry out, rolling into a ball on my side. "Make it stop!" I scream to the empty room. "Please make this pain stop!"

My cell pings, and I snatch it up, desperate for a distraction. It's a message from Audrey. She must be out partying if she's still up this late.

You said you didn't want to know, but I'm your best friend, and I know you're tearing yourself apart wondering what happened at the premiere. Reeve wasn't with her. He looked tense in all the photographs, and he kept his distance as much as possible. He left the after-party early, and he was alone. If it helps, he looked utterly miserable. According to reports, she was hanging off Rudy all night. So, dry your tears. Remember I love you and I miss you so much already. Be brave, and go shape your own destiny.

My legs are shaking with nervous anticipation as I enter the lecture hall for my very first class at Trinity. Ironically, it's American literature. Though I will be taking classes in Irish writing, postcolonial literature, Shakespeare, and the Middle Ages too. I am also attending some classes in film studies, because the degree program here is a joint majors course. The syllabus this year has a big focus on screenwriting, so it wasn't a hard sell.

Choosing a middle row in the center section of the room, I claim a seat and take out my iPad, notebook, and pens. There aren't many people here yet, but the class doesn't start for fifteen minutes. I wanted to be early in case I got lost, but it's not a difficult campus to navigate.

Gradually, the room fills up, and sounds of laughter and noisy conversation reverberate around me. There are a couple of guys sitting at the end of my row, shooting curious glances my way, but I'm alone until a petite girl with a strawberry-blonde pixie cut and a stud in her nose plops down in the seat beside me.

"What's up?" she says, smiling at me as she removes her chunky wool coat, placing it on the back of her seat. Leaning down, she stuffs her scarf into her bag.

"Hey." I return her warm smile with one of my own.

She pulls a notepad and pen out of her bag. "I was scared shitless I'd miss the start of class. I'm sure you've heard Professor Chalmers biting the head off me for being late before."

"Actually, I'm new here. This is my first day."

Her pretty blue eyes spark with intrigue. “You’re American?”

“I am. I’m from L.A.” I’ve decided not to lie about that.

“I’ve always wanted to visit L.A, but with five kids in the family, money for trips to America wasn’t plentiful in our house.” She cocks her head to the side, smiling again. “I’m Aisling, by the way. But everyone calls me Ash.”

“Grace. Nice to meet you.”

“What other classes are you taking?” she asks, and I pull out my schedule, showing it to her.

“Deadly. We’ve got a few classes together. I can show you around, if you like?”

“That would be awesome.”

She flashes me a grin, crossing her booted feet at the ankles. “I could listen to your accent all day.”

I laugh. “I could say the same thing.” Her voice is more lyrical and less guttural than Micheál’s but not quite as refined as Ciara’s. It’s obvious that like the US, dialects and speech patterns are different depending on what part of Ireland someone is from.

Our conversation comes to an abrupt end when the professor enters the room and the lecture starts.

Ash and I have the same classes this morning, which is a godsend, because it means I don’t have to wander aimlessly around campus. At lunch, she takes me to the Buttery, one of the dining options on campus, and I meet some of her friends.

“Grace is from L.A.,” Ash tells the two girls and two guys.

“How come you’re at Trinnners?” the pretty girl with red hair asks. I think Ash said her name is Catriona.

“I go to UCLA, and they have a transfer program with Trinity. The opportunity came up to spend this semester here and I jumped at the chance.”

“Who’s your new friend, Ash?” someone with a deep voice asks, and I whip my head around, trying not to stare at the hot guy standing beside Aisling. With his nose ring, eyebrow piercing, skull tattoo, and brown faux hawk with white-blond tips, he’s about as far removed from the stereotypical Irish male image in my head as you can get. His black jacket is open, revealing a wrinkled Muse T-shirt which clings to his broad chest and toned abs. Shredded jeans and scuffed boots complete the look, and

there's no denying he's a good-looking guy. Several girls in the vicinity blatantly check him out.

Ash folds her arms and glares at him. "So, you're talking to me now?"

He narrows his eyes at her while scrubbing a hand along his unshaven jaw. "I'm not a morning person. You know that. You also know the session went on late last night, so stop annoying me."

They've clearly got history, and from the heated way they are staring at one another, it seems pretty tempestuous.

Ash huffs as she turns to me, jabbing her finger in the guy's direction. "This dumbass is Jamie." She looks up at him, fixing him with a tight smile. "Dumbass, this is Grace."

"Hey." I jerk my head in acknowledgment, offering him a small smile.

"You must be new because I'd never forget a face like yours," he says, waggling his brows and licking his lips. Intense brown eyes drill into mine, and I squirm in my seat.

"I just moved here from the US."

He rakes his gaze over me, from head to toe, and heat creeps up my neck. Are all Irish guys this blatantly obvious? "Bring her on Friday," Jamie says to Aisling. "We can show her how we like to party in Ireland."

His smirk is suggestive, making me even more uncomfortable. I'm not that naïve to think he's awed by my beauty. More like my newness is a novelty. Along with the fact I'm from overseas. Guys are the last thing on my mind, and this one screams trouble with a capital T. He's also rude and arrogant, and neither are traits I admire in a man. Plus, there's some history with Ash, and I have zero desire to get in the middle of that. I like my new friend, and this jerk isn't going to get in the way of our burgeoning friendship.

Ash rolls her eyes. "Shut up talking shite, Jay. You're an idiot." A scowl crawls across her pretty face, and she sits up straighter in her chair. "Here comes your tramp. Do us all a favor and fuck off."

A sexy blonde saunters toward us wearing leggings and a long off-the-shoulder sweater that skims her upper thighs. Thick black liner rims her big blue eyes, and her lips kick up in amusement as she loops her arm through Jamie's. "I thought we were meeting the others at Yum Thai?"

"Which one are you banging this week, Aoife, or do I need to ask?" Ash says, eyeing the woman with clear contempt.

“Who says I’m only banging one of them?” Aoife smirks, leaning her head against Jamie’s shoulder. He wraps his arm around her waist while continuing to stare at Ash.

“Charming,” she tells her before turning the full extent of her disgust at Jamie. “I hope your dick falls off.”

Aoife eyes me suspiciously from her perch on Jamie’s shoulder, and I school my features into a neutral line as I maintain eye contact.

Jamie tugs at his eyebrow piercing while smirking at Aisling. He leans his face in closer to hers and lowers his tone a little. “Sure, you do, Ash.”

She huffs out a sigh. “Get lost, Jay. I’m busy.” A brief flash of pain spreads across her face before she hurriedly hides it.

Straightening up, Jamie brushes Aoife’s hair off her shoulder, leans in, and presses a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “It seems I’m busy too.” He winks, licking his lips again, and I’m liking this guy even less with every passing minute.

Aoife turns into him, flinging her arms around his neck. “Your place or mine?” she purrs, licking a path along his neck.

Gross.

Aisling lowers her eyes to the table, and I notice her hands are gripping her chair tight. I clicked instantly with Ash this morning when we met, but it’s this moment right here that tells me we’re going to be great friends.

Reaching under the table, I squeeze her hand.

Jamie and Aoife wander off without saying goodbye, and it’s good riddance. Neither seem like nice people.

“He’s a wanker,” Catriona says. “And you can do so much better.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sleeping with him again?” Ash’s tall dark-haired friend asks.

She vigorously shakes her head. “I’m not. I learned that lesson, but it’s not like I can avoid him, ya know?”

“Who is he?” I inquire, watching the couple disappear through the far door of the restaurant.

“Jamie is one-quarter of Toxic Gods and my brother’s best mate.”

I quirk a brow. “Toxic Gods?”

Bending over in her seat, she rummages through her bag. “It’s a fucking stupid name. I keep telling Dil and Ro to change it.” She pulls out a pack of cigarettes and stands. Lifting one shoulder, she asks, “Keep me company outside?”

We leave our stuff at the table with the others and head outside to the smoking area. Fuck, it's cold, and I'm regretting leaving my new coat on the back of my chair. Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to ward off any shivering. I'm silent as I watch Ash pull a few long drags of her cigarette. "Shit, sorry. You want one?" She holds the pack out to me, and I shake my head.

"I don't smoke."

"Good for you." She draws a few more drags, blowing smoke circles into the frigid air. "I've tried to give it up, but I have no willpower. It's hard to go cold turkey when you hang around the live indie rock scene as much as I do. Most everyone smokes."

"So Toxic Gods is the name of a band?" I surmise.

She nods. "Crap name, but the guys are great. Destined to be stars if Dillon would take it seriously for five fucking seconds."

"And Dillon is?"

"One of my brothers."

"How many do you have?" She mentioned there were five kids at home previously.

"Four, ranging in age from twenty-seven to eighteen."

"Holy shit. That's a lot of testosterone under one roof!"

"You've no idea. Cursing and smoking are only two of the bad habits I picked up from them."

I step aside to let a few people pass by. "It must be kind of nice too. I bet they're protective of you," I say, automatically thinking of Reeve. No one got away with bullying me at school because Reeve would give them hell if they even looked funny at me.

"They are. Mostly Dillon. We were only one year apart in school, and we've always been the closest. My little brother Ronan is in the band with Dillon, and he stays at their apartment in Temple Bar on the weekends, so I'm getting closer to him too. They can be clowns at times, but it's good to know they have my back." Throwing her cigarette butt on the ground, she stomps it out with her boot before linking her arm in mine. "C'mon. Let's get you inside before you freeze your arse off."

I don't see Ash for the rest of the afternoon as we're in different classes. She invites me to go for a drink with her and her friends later, but I decline because I've got my first physical therapy appointment this evening. I've lost a lot of strength in my left hand since the attack, and I need to work on

building it back up again. My natural go-to distraction is designing and making clothes, and I need both hands in full working order ASAP. So, I've booked a few sessions each week with a physical therapist, and I plan to go shopping for a new sewing machine and supplies this weekend.

The rest of the week goes fast, and I'm enjoying my classes and hanging out with Ash and her friends. They have welcomed me with open arms, and it's nice to meet genuine down-to-earth people with no agenda who accept me for who I am. So, when they ask me to go for a drink with them on Thursday night, I agree this time.

We start off at the Pav, the bar on campus, before walking to Grogan's, a local bar that is popular with students and an older crowd. Ash goes to the bar to order drinks with the others while Catriona and I nab the only vacant table in the corner. "Wow, this place is like a throwback to the sixties." I remove my coat and scarf and sit down on a low stool with a blue velvet seat. Wooden panels adorn the lower section of the art-covered walls. Patterned carpet that has seen better days covers the floors while old-fashioned lights hang from the white ceiling. There is no music playing, and the only melody in the place is the lyrical hum of many Irish voices. The place is packed. "Is it usually this busy?" I ask, peering at the eclectic local art on the walls.

"Yeah. It's a popular pub, and Thursday night is a popular night to go out in town."

"This one's on me," Ash says, placing a glass of Guinness down on the table in front of me. "I didn't get you a pint in case you can't stand it. The barman added a dash of blackcurrant. I find that makes it more drinkable." She claims the stool beside me, and the others join us. She clinks her beer bottle against my glass. "Bottoms up!"

Gingerly, I take a sip, letting the taste linger in my mouth for a few seconds before taking another.

"Well? What's the verdict?" she asks.

"It's an acquired taste, for sure, but not altogether bad." I don't think I'll be drinking much Guinness while I'm in Ireland, but I can manage this glass. I ask Ash to take a pic of me with it so I can send it to Audrey later. She has demanded I document everything.

After drinking half the glass, I change my mind. It sits heavily in my stomach, like I've just eaten a bowl of stew, and I need something more refreshing to cleanse my palate. They all tease me when I push the rest of

my drink toward one of the guys and head to the bar to order a vodka cranberry.

“So, what’s your story?” Ash asks a little while later when we’re talking alone. “Do you have a boyfriend back home in L.A.?”

Stabby pains shoot through my heart, and bile churns in my gut. It’s a harmless question. A normal one. One I’m sure I’ll get asked again and again. But it instantly sends me drowning in an ocean of grief.

“Shit, sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” she says when my face clearly conveys my emotions.

“It’s okay.” My watery smile says otherwise. “I had a recent breakup. It’s still pretty raw.”

“Were you guys together long?”

“Yeah. Over five years as a couple but longer as best friends.” I circle my finger around the rim of my glass. “We were neighbors, and our families were close. His mom died giving birth to him, so he basically grew up at my house.” I’m deliberately keeping the details vague on the off chance she knows any of Reeve’s background and makes the connection.

“Shit. That’s rough.”

“Yup.” I take a large mouthful of my drink.

“The guy must be a dope to let someone like you go.”

I think so, because I doubt Reeve will ever find anyone who loves him as much as me. But I can’t let my mind go there. I’m still way too fragile and the last thing I want to do is burst into tears in front of my new friends, and then have to explain. I’m not ready for explanations yet, if ever. “What about you?” I ask, desperately wanting to change the subject. “Are you dating anyone?”

“I’m not seeing anyone. I was going out with this guy from school for a few years. During sixth year, he broke my heart, and I swore off boyfriends after that.” I know from my research that sixth year in Ireland is the equivalent of senior year in high school. She looks off into space with the saddest expression on her face. “Anyway, Trainers has been great. I’ve been embracing my inner slut and sleeping with different guys, but I run a mile if any of them look for more. I had to commute from home during first year here, which made it hard to get with guys, but I’m living in a studio flat close to my brothers’ apartment this year, so I have more freedom.”

“I’m getting a feeling you and I might be kindred spirits,” I tell her, because it’s clear she’s suffering the aftereffect of heartache. Maybe she’ll

have some tips for how to repair the fractures in my heart.

I survey the pile of clothes covering my bed and the floor while I stand in my black lace underwear in front of the mirror in my bedroom, no closer to making a decision. I have no clue what to wear. Glancing at the time on my cell, I curse out loud in the empty room. I tap out a quick message to Ash, asking her for help, and then I pad into my en suite bathroom to apply a full face of makeup. I don't normally wear much makeup, but it's my first proper night out in Ireland, with a bunch of new people, and I feel like I need armor.

I'm straightening my long dark hair when my cell pings with a new message.

Keep it casual but sexy. Jeans with a crop top and heels.

Inspecting the items surrounding me, I choose some ripped black jeans, black and gold Armani high heels, and a black lace crop top I've never been brave enough to wear. The sheer lace design covers my arms and my upper body, but my bra will be clearly visible underneath. The V-shaped hem exposes a decent amount of my midriff, but as I examine my reflection in the mirror, I know I look hot.

Gulping back nerves, I down a vodka shot for courage before I grab my coat and purse, lock the door, and leave to meet up with Ash.

She's waiting for me outside Trinity, and we walk up Grafton Street, meeting the others outside the mall before we walk to the venue. "This place will be mad," Ash warns me as we approach the bar. "Whelans is known for live music, and it's always packed at the weekends. Toxic Gods

have played here before but usually upstairs. Tonight, they're playing in the main room, so it's going to be wild."

We follow the others into the deceptively large bar, and I'm accosted by a blast of heat and noisy chatter from the crowded room. Ash may be pint-sized and slim, but that doesn't stop her from charging her way through the busy room. I spot Jamie's distinctive faux hawk as we approach a long L-shaped seating area in the corner. A scratched mahogany table is in the middle of the space with red leather seating against the wall and a bunch of freestanding high-backed wooden chairs in front. A group of guys and girls are already seated, but there's just enough room for us.

"What's up, assholes," Ash says, leaning down to give a one-armed hug to a guy with messy dark hair and startling blue eyes.

"Sis. You made it." Muscular arms wrap around Ash as he squeezes her tight.

"Where's Dillon?" she asks, straightening up and looking around.

"In the jacks," a guy with long brown hair and matching brown eyes says.

"Come sit here," Jamie says, patting his thigh and arching a brow at Ash.

"Over my dead body," she replies.

The guy she was hugging—who I'm assuming is her youngest brother Ronan—lifts his eyes to meet mine. His mouth turns up at the corners as he gives me a quick once-over. Unlike when his buddy Jamie did it the other day, his inspection is respectful, and it doesn't make me squirm. He's cute in an innocent boy-next-door kind of way. Unlike the guys surrounding him, I see no visible ink or piercings.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" He jerks his head in my direction.

"If it isn't my favorite sister," someone says in a deep husky voice from directly behind me, cutting across the conversation. "About time you showed up."

All the tiny hairs on the back of my neck lift, and warmth races over my skin. Heat rolls off the newcomer in waves, and I feel it even through my heavy coat. My heart hammers against my rib cage, and all my senses are on high alert.

Ash spins around, thumping him in the upper arm while I stand rooted to the spot, watching their interaction out of the corner of my eye. "I'm your only sister, clown, and that joke's getting real old."

“Is this the Yank?” he asks, and Ash thumps him again.

“Be nice, Dillon,” she warns, as I slowly turn around.

Shock splays across his stunning face as our eyes meet for the first time. Panic slams into me, and I’m temporarily horrified at the thought he might have recognized me. Prickles of awareness dance over my skin as every cell in my body sizzles with an instant connection. I’m only a few inches short of six foot in these heels, but Dillon still towers over me. He must be six two or three, at least. Broad shoulders stretch across a tight black T-shirt that clings to his impressive chest and abs. Ink covers both arms, and he has an eyebrow and nose piercing. A silver chain circles his neck, and he’s wearing a cluster of leather bands on one wrist and a few silver rings on one hand.

But that’s not the most striking thing about him.

Bleach-blond messy hair tumbles in waves over his forehead, and the sides are shorn tight. With high cheekbones, a sharp jawline, and a stylish layer of stubble coating his chin and cheeks, he is fucking gorgeous. Piercing bright green eyes stare intensely at me from behind long thick black lashes. Electricity crackles in the small space between us, and I know I’m staring, but I can’t drag my eyes away. Heat blooms in my cheeks as I blush.

I have never had such a visceral reaction to a guy before, and it’s unnerving.

The initial shock I registered has faded from his face, replaced with a look that is borderline angry. A muscle pops in his jaw, and I instinctively step back, the backs of my thighs hitting the side of the table, rattling it. Glasses clink, and drinks slosh over the table.

“Watch it,” Jamie snaps, eyeballing me. “Or the next round’s on you.”

“Stop complaining,” Ash says to Jamie while tugging on Dillon’s arm. “A little drink got spilled. Big deal.”

Dillon is glaring at me, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, and I’m feeling hugely uncomfortable.

Ronan gets up, shoving Dillon aside. “You’re being rude.” He drills him a pointed look.

Ash snorts. “Are you even surprised?”

“I’m Ronan,” he says, smiling at me. “Ash and Dillon’s brother, but please don’t hold that against me.”

“Grace.” I smile back at him. “Nice to meet you.”

Dillon's eyes narrow. "Why are you here, *Grace*?" he spits out, staring at me like my presence personally offends him in some way.

"Ash invited me," I say, purposely projecting my voice and standing taller, even as I gulp over the anxiety traveling up my throat. Dillon's single-minded focus, dark stare, and strange intensity intimidate me. I'm pretty tall for a girl, so it's rare I feel small or an urge to cower, but I'm feeling both things now. He has this larger-than-life presence that is scary as much as it's intriguing. Ash told me there is only a year separating her and Dillon, but somehow, he seems older.

His lips curl into a sneer. "In Ireland," he clips out.

I frown. "What does it matter why I'm here?"

"Just answer the question," he barks, his eyes darting all around for a few seconds before he refocuses that all-consuming lens on me again.

"I don't owe you any explanation, and is this how you always treat new people you meet?"

"I'm suspicious of anyone who comes into my sister's life," he says, leaning his face in closer to mine. "Especially nosy Americans."

"Wow. Generalize much?" Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare at him. What the hell is his problem?

"You're pissing me off now, Dil." Ash grabs his arm, yanking him back.

"Fact." Ronan agrees.

"What's going on?" a familiar blonde says, coming up behind Dillon. It's the same girl who was with Jamie in Trinity on Monday—Aoife.

"Nothing," Dillon grits out, his jaw clenching. Slinging his arm around Aoife's shoulders, he sinks onto a chair beside Jamie, pulling her down on his lap. She paws at him, whispering something in his ear.

Air oozes out of my mouth in grateful relief now his attention is diverted. My limbs loosen as a layer of tension evaporates.

"Don't mind him," Ash says. "He's an overprotective idiot, and his bark is worse than his bite."

"Sometimes," Ronan drawls.

"Why would you need protection from me?" I ask Ash, confusion clear in my tone. "Have you guys had a bad experience with Americans in the past or something?"

"Honestly, don't take it to heart," Ash says. "Dillon is...complicated."

"He's a grumpy prick," Ronan says. "But it's nothing personal. He's angry with the world most days." He flashes me a dazzling smile. "Forget

about him. Tell me more about you. What part of the US are you from?"

I'm grateful for the subject change, even if talking about myself gives me a major case of the heebie-jeebies these days. I'm a little on edge, praying someone doesn't recognize me and out me to my new friends. Yet I don't want to lie. I can be vague and fudge the truth. That way, if my identity is ever revealed, I can still look my friends in the face. "Los Angeles."

His eyes widen. "Really?"

I nod, instantly warming to him. He's the polar opposite of his brother and as friendly as his sister.

"My dream is to emigrate to L.A. and make it big on the music scene. We're good enough to make it, if we can just catch a break."

"You'll realize quickly both my brothers have extremely healthy egos," Ash says, steering me toward the opposite end of the table.

"I got us some drinks," Catriona says, patting the comfy leather seat beside her. "Sit with me."

Noticing the pile of coats and jackets on the window ledge behind our table, I unbutton my coat, folding it and my scarf and placing it on top of the existing mountain.

"Holy fuck. You look smokin'," Ash says, grinning.

Feeling eyeballs on my back, I turn around, meeting Dillon's heated stare. Slowly, his eyes rake over me from head to toe. It's as if he's peeling off my clothes, leaving me naked and exposed to his hungry eyes. I squeeze my thighs together as desire coils low in my belly, and my heart is thumping wildly in my chest. Aoife narrows her eyes, scowling in my direction when she notices Dillon's attention has strayed. Her arms wrap more possessively around his neck, but he's not showing her any attention.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jamie and the guy with the long hair staring at me too, and I'm wondering if it was a good idea to wear this top after all. I'm not sure I'm ready for attention from the opposite sex, even if a part of me is thrilled at their reactions.

My chest heaves as Dillon's eyes linger on my black bra, and my mouth is suddenly dry.

"Wow. You're beautiful," Ronan says, admiration evident in his gaze and his tone. His words break the hypnotic spell I was in, and I wrest my gaze from Dillon, focusing on Ash's younger brother. "If all the women in

L.A. look like you, I'm even more determined to make it there someday." He waggles his brows.

"Most of them *don't* look like me," I supply. "I think there are more blondes with fake tits in L.A. than any other place in the world."

"I'd really love to chat to you about it," he adds, as I maneuver my way around the table, flopping down on the seat beside Cat.

"Not now." Ash nudges her brother aside so she can claim the last seat beside me. "We're here to have a good time. Grace can talk to you about L.A. another time."

"I'm happy to talk to you. Maybe you and Ash could come over to my place for lunch sometime, but just understand I know nothing about the music scene in LA," I admit, curiously eyeing the pink concoction with floating strawberries in the large wineglass. "What's this?" I ask, turning to face Cat.

"Pink Gin with 7UP. It's delicious. Try it."

I'm more of a vodka girl, but I take a sip, instantly liking the sweet, fruity, refreshing taste. "This *is* good."

"It's too sweet for me," Ash says, bringing a bottle of beer to her lips.

"I still feel like pinching myself being able to openly drink," I admit, even if I'm luckier than most because at private industry parties back home no one bats an eye if I drink.

"You can't drink in America?" Ronan asks. He's leaning against the wall, sipping a beer.

Someone hasn't done their homework. "Legal age is twenty-one, and they're strict." I'm not sure how the music industry works, but if it's anything like Hollywood, I think he'll get by.

"That's fucked in the head," Ronan replies.

"Changing your mind?" I tease, taking another mouthful of my drink.

"Nah. I'll just have to get a fake ID." He grins, lifting the bottle to his mouth.

A shrill whistle rings out, and we whip our heads to the end of the table. Jamie, Dillon, and the guy with long hair are standing, eyeballing Ronan.

"Sound check," Dillon says, gesturing him forward.

"You're hanging around to watch our set, yeah?" Ronan asks.

"Sure." I give him a reassuring smile, purposely ignoring Dillon. I don't need to look to know his eyes are fixed on me, because I feel his penetrating gaze crawl over every inch of my skin.

The guys wander off with Aoife trailing behind them.

“What’s up with Aoife?” I ask, when they have disappeared.

“She’s the band’s main groupie.” Ash purses her lips as she confirms my suspicions. “She’s banged them all except Ronan. He’s got more sense.”

“For now,” Cat says. “If they make it big, it will be harder for your little bro to maintain that innocence.”

Ash almost spits beer all over the table. “Ronan might not get with girls as much as the others, but he’s far from innocent. Trust me, I learned that lesson the hard way.”

“I’m sensing a story.” I smile over the rim of my glass, tossing my hair over my shoulders.

“My parents own a farm in County Wicklow, and let’s just say my brothers know how to make good use of the various barns and sheds around our property. I’ve walked in on all of them getting up to no good with girls at least one time.” She visibly shudders. “I don’t have to worry about it with Shane and Ciarán anymore. Shane is engaged and Ciarán has a long-term girlfriend. Despite what I just said, Ronan is a sucker for love, and he’s not into casual sex. He’s had his fair share of girlfriends. Dillon is a hound though. He gets with a lot of women. And I mean *a lot*.”

“I can see that.” I bite down on my lower lip, looking off into space.

“Oh God. No. Not you as well,” she groans, shaking her head.

Heat creeps into my cheeks. “I’ve sworn off men, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind. Both your brothers are hot, but Dillon has this presence about him that is hard to ignore. I have no trouble believing women drop at his feet.”

Just not this woman.

“It’s true, and the fact he’s a total asshole seems to work in his favor. I’d like to say I don’t understand it, but my ex had that dickhead vibe too, and I fell for him so fast.”

“Let’s not go there.” Cat slurps her drink as she looks at Ash. “Mixing talk of that prick with alcohol never ends well.”

We leave our table fifteen minutes later to move to the room where Toxic Gods is playing. It’s a dimly lit square room with scuffed wooden floors, a DJ box at one end, and a small stage at the other. On the very left of the room is an elevated seated section. Aoife and a couple of other girls are already sitting at the top tables, and they ignore us as we enter the reserved area.

Claiming seats in the middle, away from the groupies but close enough to have a good view of the stage, we settle down with our drinks. The room slowly fills with most of the crowd standing in front of the stage. I sneak glances at the band as they warm up. Dillon is out front, at the microphone, and he has a guitar slung around his shoulders. Ronan is on drums. Jamie and the other guy are either side of Dillon, and both have guitars strapped to their bodies too.

“Who’s the guy with the long hair?” I ask Ash, as we wait for the band to start.

“Conor Pierce. He’s the lead guitarist. He and Dillon write all the songs.”

“How long has the band been together?”

“Dillon set the band up when he was fifteen. Conor and Jamie were in his year in school. They had a different drummer, but he dropped out last year when he moved overseas. Ronan stepped in then though my parents weren’t exactly happy about it.”

“How come? I thought your parents were supportive,” Cat says.

“They are. It’s just he’s young, and he’s only sitting his Leaving Certificate in June. They want to make sure he gets it so he has options. Ronan couldn’t give two shits about school, and if he had his way, he would’ve dropped out last year, but my parents refused.” Ash finishes her beer, waving the waitress over. “Ronan hates being at school all week while the rest of the band are living the rock and roll lifestyle in town.”

“June isn’t that far away,” I say. “And I can understand your parents’ logic.”

“What can I get ya?” the waitress asks, whipping a pen and pad out of the pocket of the black apron she’s wearing.

“How about shots?” Ash asks, glancing between me and her friends. We all nod, and she orders sambucas just as the music starts.

Ronan pounds out a rhythm on the drums, quickly joined by Conor and Jamie, and then Dillon steps forward, cradling the mic and closing his eyes before he bursts into song. I’m instantly mesmerized by the gritty carnal edge to his soulful voice and the way his body moves fluidly to the beat of the music. His black shirt molds to his gorgeous physique, and the muscles in his lower arms and biceps flex and roll as he caresses the mic, pouring his heart and soul into the song. His ripped black jeans hug muscular thighs,

and it's clear Dillon works out. He's bulkier than the others without looking too ripped.

His eyes snap open, scanning the crowd briefly before flitting directly to me. From the quick way he found me, it's clear I wasn't the only one sneaking peeks during the sound check. Lyrics flow from his gorgeous mouth, thick with emotion as he pours everything into the song. His eyes don't stray from mine as he stares pointedly at me. Butterflies scatter in my chest as we maintain eye contact, and a thrill sweeps through me.

Our shots arrive, and I immediately grab one, not waiting for the others before I knock it back. I desperately need a diversion from Dillon's electric stare. He has this magnetic charisma, this energy, that just sucks you in. I hate that I'm drawn to it, powerless to avoid his gaze, and I wonder what it says about me.

Reeve is still front and center of my mind.

My heart is ripped wide apart, and I have plenty of festering wounds.

Grief and turmoil are my constant companions.

So, it will be a long time before I can entertain the notion of another man. And that's why this weird connection I feel with Dillon is freaking me out a bit.

We order more shots, and I'm buzzing. High on alcohol and the vibe in the room. The crowd is going crazy. Singing along with Dillon as they play a mix of covers and original music. After a while, we push out into the crowd to dance. Emptying my mind, I close my eyes and let myself get swept up in the music. Dillon's gritty raspy voice wraps around me like a sensual caress, and I could listen to him sing for eternity.

We return to our seats after a few songs, ordering more shots, as we settle in to watch the end of the show. I try not to stare at Dillon, especially when I notice Aoife shooting daggers in my direction, but it's hard to avoid his hypnotic pull. I'm not the only one fixated on him. Most every woman in the place is ogling him.

The other guys are hot too, and I'm sure they have their fair share of admiring fans, but it's crystal clear that Dillon O'Donoghue is the main attraction. Talent oozes from his pores, and it seems so effortless. He is the bona fide definition of stage presence. He was born to be up there. Born to entertain. He has the crowd eating out of his hand, and a line of scantily clad women are pushing for pole position at the front of the crowd, desperately trying to claim his attention.

While I like music as much as the next person, I'm no expert. I know little about musical genres; I just know I like what I like. When Ash said the band was an indie rock band, I wasn't sure what to expect. Maybe something hardcore like ACDC but not this. Toxic Gods is giving me major U2 vibes. They have the same edgy, rock feel but with a unique sound. Dillon's vocals are as enigmatic and distinctive as Bono's, and he has the same charisma and stage presence.

Ronan might have come across as a little arrogant earlier, but he wasn't wrong. Toxic Gods is fantastic, and if they catch a lucky break, I imagine things will really take off for them.

I wake the following morning with the hangover from hell, grateful I declined Ash's invite to continue the party back at the band's apartment. It was almost two a.m. when we left Whelans, and I was smashed. Spending time in close confines with a prickly Dillon didn't appeal to me, and I'm glad I still had my wits about me. He didn't speak to me the rest of the night, but he stole glances at me anytime he wasn't preoccupied with shoving his tongue down Aoife's throat.

The buzzing of the door has me crawling out of bed, groaning. Covering my body with my robe, I pad to my front door, stifling a yawn as I check the peephole.

A jolly man with a big belly smiles at me when I open the door. "Good morning, Ms. Mills. We have a delivery for you." He thrusts a clipboard at me, as I glance at the large box on the ground. "Just sign there." He points to a space at the end of the page. I scribble my signature while he carries the box inside, depositing it on the kitchen counter.

After he leaves, I stare at the brown box for a few seconds wondering what it could be. Ripping the envelope off the top, I remove the small card, startled to discover it's a gift from Reeve.

I'm pissed he's somehow gotten his hands on my address. Sending gifts, while thoughtful, isn't going to help me to forget him. I'm guessing that's the point. I contemplate not opening it, but curiosity gets the best of me. As well as a brief note, he's enclosed a gift card for CLOTH, a specialist fabric shop near Grafton Street. My hands tremble as I unwrap the sewing

machine with tears coursing down my face, both hating and loving his thoughtful gesture.

God, Reeve.

A sob rips from my mouth as my fingers trail along the smooth edge of my new machine.

This reminds me so much of the sweet boy I loved, and it's killing me. The loss hits me anew, and my heart hurts. So freaking much. Pain lashes me from all sides until I can barely breathe.

Why did he have to betray me and destroy what we had?

Why, why, why? I don't think I'll ever understand.

Resting my head on the marble counter, I give in to my grief, openly crying. My pitiful cries bounce off the lonely walls of my apartment, adding to my misery. I cry until I've exhausted all my tears and my throat feels scraped raw. The backs of my eyes sting, and I rub at the tightness in my chest. My head is still pounding, and my stomach sloshes uneasily at the memory of all the alcohol I consumed last night.

Unable to process this multitude of emotions while I'm feeling like death warmed over, I pop a couple of pain meds and crawl back into bed.

Waking a few hours later, physically, I feel better, but emotionally, I'm crippled. I lie in bed, going back and forth over whether I should message Reeve to thank him. In the end, I decide not to. I know if I message him it'll only open a line of communication, and I can't undo all my good work. However, I *can* send him a thank-you card in the mail. I doubt he'll write back, so that way I can appease my conscience without any unwanted complications.

I head to CLOTH after I get dressed and order a ton of supplies to be delivered to my apartment. Then I grab takeout on my way home and perch my butt in front of the fire to watch a movie.

I settle into my new life over the next few weeks, doing my best to keep busy because it helps to distract me from my heartache. I go to my classes and attend physical therapy a few times a week, and I've even had a couple of sessions with a therapist. I join the team at the *Trinity News*, Ireland's oldest student-led newspaper, as a contributing writer. I'm trying to cram

activities into every spare hour, so I don't have too much time to think, but the nights are the hardest. If I've nothing planned, I usually work out in the gym in my building for a couple hours, draw some designs, and chat with Audrey or my parents until it's time for bed. Other nights, I go out to eat or catch a movie with my friends, and we usually do a bit of a bar crawl on Thursday nights, but I've avoided all social interaction involving Toxic Gods. I don't think being around that scene or Dillon is what I need in my life right now.

But I'm so damn lonely, and I'm not sure I like living by myself.

Being here alone gives me too much time with my thoughts, and those are the hardest nights. Nights when I cry myself to sleep, feeling a physical ache at Reeve's loss. Despite strong temptation, I haven't checked social media, and I can't deny I have gleaned some sense of inner peace from shutting out all that noise.

I miss Reeve so much. I hate admitting it, and I hate myself for missing someone who humiliated and betrayed me, but I don't know how to force myself to not miss him. All I know is I want it to stop. I'm tired of feeling like this. Sick of missing someone who didn't appreciate or respect me. Fed up of my happiness being tied to his existence in my life. I know it takes time to heal, and I can't move on until I'm ready, but I wish I could press the fast-forward button and wake up happy again with all the pain left in the past and a bright outlook for the future.

With that in mind, I decide I need to do better, so I invite Ronan, Ash, and Catriona over for lunch at my place on Saturday.

Cat can't come as it's her sister's birthday, so I set the table for three, heat up the butternut squash soup to accompany the chicken salad sandwiches, and move my sewing stuff into the spare bedroom before they arrive so the apartment looks less messy.

"Fucking hell." Ronan whistles under his breath as he stands at the floor-to-ceiling window, staring at the stunning view from my open-plan living space. "This place is sick."

"Ro is right." Ash's eyes are out on stalks. "This place is incredible." She tilts her head to one side. "I don't mean to be nosy—"

"Yeah, you do," Ronan quips, interrupting her. "Nosy is your middle name."

She flips her middle finger up at him before refocusing on me. “I know you have money, because I’ve seen your clothes and you’re the only one who brings an iPad to class, but how wealthy are you?”

“Jesus, Ash.” Ronan strides toward us, shaking his head. “You can’t ask Grace that.”

“It’s okay. It’s not a secret. My parents are wealthy, and I’m fortunate to have grown up without wanting for anything. Mom organized all this for me,” I say, waving my hands around. “I was prepared to live in one of the dorms at Trinity, but they didn’t have any vacancies.”

“I’d take this place over a dorm room any day,” Ash says, arching her back and groaning.

We chat casually as we eat lunch, and I’m enjoying the good-natured banter between the siblings. Ronan fires questions at me about L.A., and I do my best to answer them without giving too much away. He talks animatedly about the band and his plans for stardom. They talk about their crazy family, making me promise I’ll visit the farm one weekend. Every so often, Ash straightens her back and stretches her arms up over her head, and curiosity gets the best of me. “What’s with all the back stretching?”

“Dillon’s lumpy couch doesn’t make for the best sleep,” she replies. “My back is fucking killing me.”

Ronan narrows his eyes to slits. “Try sleeping on the floor in a threadbare sleeping bag.”

“I thought you said you weren’t crashing there anymore after the last time?” A couple of weeks ago, Ash confided that she walked in on Dillon and Jamie tag-teaming Aoife. She had stayed over after a party at their place and stumbled upon them while taking a trip to the bathroom. She swore she was never staying there again. She clammed up after departing that nugget, but I could tell she was hurt. I want to ask her about her history with Jamie, but I stop myself because I don’t want to be a hypocrite. I can’t demand she tells me shit about her life when I’m guarding my secrets so close to my chest.

Audrey says I should tell her. That she’s proven herself in the month since I’ve known her, but I’m still wary. Which makes me feel like a bitch because Ash has done nothing to demonstrate she’s untrustworthy. I know I have trust issues after what Danny did to me, but Audrey pointed out I can’t keep living my life shutting people out. I know not everyone will be like him, but it’s hard to trust people when you’re the daughter of famous

parents and the ex-girlfriend of one of the hottest Hollywood stars. I want to tell Ash, but it feels too soon.

“I didn’t see you yesterday to tell you,” Ash explains. “I had to move out of my flat. They found a shitload of asbestos in the building, and it’s not safe to stay there. I slept on Dillon’s couch last night.”

“Your brother didn’t even offer you his room?” Wow, that guy is an even bigger douche than I thought.

“He did, but there’s no fucking way I’m sleeping in his bed. I’d probably get an STD from the sheets.”

“Eww.” My nose scrunches in distaste.

Ronan chuckles. “I don’t think it works like that, sis, and I know Dil’s a lazy bastard, but he’s not a slob. He does wash his sheets.”

“It’s beside the point,” she says, rubbing her shoulders. “Whether I sleep on the couch or Dil’s bed isn’t the issue. They don’t have room for me, and I don’t want you sleeping on the floor every weekend. I need to find a new place.”

“Move in here,” I blurt without hesitation.

Ash’s eyes blink superfast. “What?”

“I have a spare bedroom that’s going to waste.”

“It’s sweet of you to offer, but I can’t afford the rent for a swanky place like this.” Ash works at a local store a few nights a week, and she mentioned her parents give her a contribution toward her flat, but I know money is tight.

“You don’t need to pay anything. The rent is already paid up, and the utilities are covered as part of the agreement. You’d only have to pay for groceries.”

“Wow. That is really generous,” Ronan says.

“I don’t want to sponge off you. It would feel wrong.”

I knew I loved this girl for a reason. “Honestly, Ash. You’d be doing me a huge favor. I don’t like living alone. It’s kinda lonely.”

Her eyes carefully examine mine. “You’re not just saying that?”

I shake my head. “I swear it’s the truth. I would love your company, and the place is big enough that we won’t be in each other’s way.” Reaching across the table, I squeeze her hand. “Please say yes! It would be so much fun.”

“Ow,” Ash exclaims, pinning her brother with a dark look. “Don’t fucking kick me.”

“Someone needs to knock sense into you. Take the room, Ash.”

I stand. “Come and look at it. Maybe that’ll convince you.”

They follow me out to the bedrooms, and I open the door to the spare double room. It’s not as big as my room, but it’s spacious with a king-sized bed, matching bedside tables, and a large closet. It’s been tastefully decorated in shades of white, gray, and pink, and it has an en suite bathroom with a shower.

“Oh my fucking god!” Ash squeals as she enters the room. “Are you kidding me?” She spins around, and her eyes are as big as saucers. “Pinch me, Ro. I must be dreaming.”

Ronan pinches her arm, and she thumps him in the chest. “I was speaking metaphorically, dumbass.” She rolls her eyes, and I grin.

“Test the bed,” I say, knowing I’ve sealed the deal.

“Is this yours?” Ronan points to my sewing supplies. I dumped them on the dresser earlier to clear the dining room table.

“Yep. I like to design and make my own clothes.”

“Get the fuck out!” Ash says when she’s finished rolling around the bed and groaning appreciatively. She jumps off the bed, walking toward us. Her fingers dance across the various materials. “This is so cool. What kind of clothes do you make?”

“Dresses mainly. I made my own gown for prom,” I stupidly admit, and pain spears me through the heart. My face drops as I revisit that night in my head.

Sympathy splays across her face. “You went with your ex?”

I nod. Remembering that night is bittersweet for a heap of reasons now. “I could make you a dress sometime?” I offer, needing to switch topics.

Her eyes widen. “You could make us dresses for the Trinity Ball! It’s black tie, and everyone dresses up.”

“I read about that. It’s in April, right?” If I’m not mistaken, it’s the night of my birthday.

She nods excitedly. “It’s awesome. You’ve got to come with us. We usually have pre-ball drinks at someone’s place before heading to the campus later that night for the music event. It goes on until the early hours of the morning, and it’s completely wild.” She tugs on my arm. “Please say you’ll come.”

“Please say you’ll move in.” My eyes plead with her to say yes.

“Are you really sure?”

“I am.” I don’t hesitate to confirm it.

“Then I would love to move in.” She flings her arms around me. “This is going to be so fun!”

“**R**emind me again why I agreed to this?” I ask, dumping bags of chips into a large white ceramic bowl.

Ash nudges my hip, grinning. “Because you love your new roomie and it’s about time you threw a housewarming party. Plus, it’s Saturday night. *And it’s Valentine’s Day.*”

God, please don’t remind me.

“That’s four good reasons,” she adds, handing me a vodka cranberry. Her features soften. “I also have a feeling if we hadn’t organized this party tonight you’d spend the night crying in your room.” Her eyes flit to the large bouquet of lavender roses presently sitting in a vase on the dining table. I need to move them before anyone arrives, because they’ll only invite questions I’m not prepared to answer.

They arrived earlier today from Reeve, and I broke down in front of my new roomie for the first time. Tears prick my eyes, and my lower lip wobbles. “Shit.” Ash puts her drink down, taking mine and placing it on the counter, before enfolding me in a hug. We’re both still in our slippers and pajamas. No one is due to arrive for a couple of hours yet, so we planned to get everything set up and then make ourselves beautiful. Ash is so tiny and she barely reaches my chest, but her hug is solid and comforting, and I need it.

“Sorry,” I sniffle, rubbing at my eyes when we break apart. “I hate how fragile I am. It’s been eleven weeks, and I’m still a basket case.”

“I get it.” She hoists herself up onto the marble island unit, dangling her legs off the edge. “It’s been almost three years since my relationship with

Cillian ended, and it still hurts.”

“Ugh. Don’t tell me that.” I crick my neck from side to side, hoping to loosen my stiff muscles. “If I still feel like this in three years’ time, I’ll have to be committed.”

“It does get easier, but the pain of Cillian’s betrayal will always sting.”

Leaning back against the counter, I grab my drink and take a sip, wondering if I should have this conversation.

Ash makes that decision for me, continuing without me having to ask. “Our story sounds a little like yours. Cillian was my boy next door. He lived directly across the road from our farm, and we went to the same school. He was Dillon’s best friend, so he was always hanging around with us. He was my first kiss at eleven, and we spent a few years messing about before it became serious.” She grabs the edge of the island unit, staring off into space as she takes a wander down memory lane. “I lost my virginity to him at fifteen. We were inseparable after that. Fucking like rabbits any chance we could get. He drove me insane half the time, but I loved him,” she adds, fixing her eyes on my face. “We argued nonstop, but we shared this real fiery passion, ya know?”

Do I? I know her question is rhetorical, but it sets my mind thinking. I wouldn’t call what Reeve and I shared a fiery passion, but it was passion none the less. “What happened?”

Tears pool in her eyes, and she grabs her beer, knocking back a few mouthfuls. I wait patiently for her to continue, understanding how hard it is to relive the past. “He cheated on me with my arch-nemesis.” In this moment, I feel her pain as acutely as my own, and I can’t believe we have had similar experiences. “This bitch had been chasing after him for years. Cillian and I had fought earlier that night. It was a particularly vicious fight, and he went out partying without me.” A lone tear rolls down her face. “He had sex with her, but I didn’t find out for six weeks because he was a fucking lying bastard as well as a cheat. Rumors were doing the rounds at school, but he denied them until he couldn’t.” Anger flashes in her eyes, and I can relate to the lightning-fast emotional switch. “He got her pregnant.”

She visibly gulps, and my heart aches for her. I think I would lose my shit if Reeve turned around and told me Saffron was pregnant. My stomach lurches, and I knock back half my vodka in one go, wishing I could scrub that thought from my brain with bleach.

“The chickenshit didn’t even have the guts to tell me before that bitch thrust the news in my face.”

“I’m so sorry, Ash. I can’t even begin to imagine that level of pain.”

“I’ve never been one of those girls who dreams of a big white wedding, but I always imagined my future with Cillian in it. His betrayal destroyed me. Even if I hadn’t kicked his cheating ass to the curb, he would’ve left me. His family are very conservative and extremely religious, and I knew they would force him into marriage.”

I almost spit my vodka all over the floor. “He married her?!” She nods. “What the fuck? We’re not living in the dark ages. He could’ve supported the child without marrying the mother.”

“Of course, he could, but he let his parents force him into it. They had a quickie wedding two months after I found out she was pregnant.” Her chest heaves as more tears shine in her eyes. “Three weeks after that, I tried to kill myself,” she quietly adds.

Setting my drink down, I rush over and hug her with tears clouding my vision. “Oh no, Ash.”

“I was in a real bad place. In so much pain,” she sobs, easing back from my embrace. “She was parading her bump, her wedding ring, and him all over school, and I just couldn’t take it.” She swipes the sleeve of her pajama top across her damp eyes. “The night before I took an overdose of my mum’s sleeping pills, he had come to me, telling me he was sorry but it didn’t mean we had to be over. He said he didn’t love her and he’d only married her because he had to do right by the baby.” She snorts out a laugh. “The dickhead proposed we continue sleeping together and that we could sneak around behind his wife’s back. It was the final straw for me. I lost it that night. Threw shit at him. Screamed and roared. Woke my whole family up.”

“I can’t believe the nerve of him,” I fume, angry on her behalf. “Men are assholes.”

“Dillon beat him to a pulp the next day while I dumped a load of pills down my throat.”

I rub her arm. “I’m glad you didn’t succeed. I would never have met you otherwise.”

“Dillon found me. Called an ambulance and got me to the hospital in the nick of time. My recovery was rough. I ended up having to defer my Leaving Cert while I took time to heal. I put my parents and my brothers

through hell, but I eventually crawled my way out of the black hole, and you will too,” she says, draining her beer and jumping down off the island.

I’m understanding Dillon’s need to protect his sister from all threats more clearly now. I can imagine finding Ash like that must have been traumatic.

“Can you keep a secret?” I ask, as she grabs another beer from the refrigerator. Ash has trusted me with her story, and my gut is telling me I can trust her with mine.

“I can.” She looks me straight in the eye. “But you don’t owe me anything. Just because I shared my story doesn’t mean you have to tell me yours.”

“I want to, but you have to promise you won’t tell another soul. Not Catriona or any of your friends and certainly not your brothers.”

“I promise you can trust me to be confidential. If you don’t want anyone to know, I won’t breathe a word.”

“I need another drink for this,” I say, snatching a second can of vodka cranberry from the refrigerator and dumping it into my glass. At this rate, we’ll both be drunk before any of our friends even get here.

We move into the living room, and I glance at the clock on the wall, wondering if there is enough time to explain.

“We can get party-ready in record time, and all the food and drinks are done,” Ash says, reading my mind.

I flop down beside her on the leather sectional. “Does the name Reeve Lancaster mean anything to you?” I ask, watching her brow creasing.

“The actor?” she says, still looking confused.

“Yeah.” I wipe my clammy hands down the front of my pajama pants. “Reeve is my ex. He’s the guy who broke my heart.”

Her eyes pop wide, and I can almost see the light bulb going off in her head. She hops up. “No fucking way! You’re the girlfriend he cheated on with that tramp Saffron Roberts?”

I exhale heavily. “Yep. That sucker would be me.” I take a healthy glug of my drink.

“I don’t usually pay attention to Hollywood gossip, but I heard mention of it in an online Facebook group, only because I’m a massive fan of the *Rydeville Elite* series. I didn’t see any details though, so I don’t know the specifics.” Wincing slightly, she adds, “*Twisted Betrayal* is coming to the

cinema here in a couple of weeks, and I was actually going to ask you to come see it with me.”

“Hard pass,” I drawl. “If I never see that bitch’s face again, it’ll be a happy day.”

She sinks onto the couch beside me. “What happened?”

I give her the CliffsNotes version of how it all went down. She listens intently without interruption, reaching out to hold my hand during some of the harder parts. “He’s a cheater, a liar, and a coward,” she seethes when I tell her about that awful Christmas Day. “I am so sorry you went through that. No woman deserves to be treated like that.” She rubs my arm. “I probably shouldn’t admit I had a little crush on Reeve at first. But as soon as I heard that stuff online about him being a cheater, he got added to my shit list.”

“Mine too.”

“Cheating is a deal breaker for me.”

“Same here. As soon as it was confirmed, I ended things, even though it killed me.”

“You were right,” she says.

“About what?”

“We *are* kindred spirits.” She slings her arm around my shoulders. “I think you and I were meant to find one another. Maybe together, we can help ourselves to fully heal.”

The party is in full swing, and surprisingly, I'm having an amazing time. Ash and Cat were in charge of the guest list, and it seems like they invited half the English class from school. Beats pulse out of the sound system in the main room where people are lounging on all available couches and chairs. Others stand chatting in the kitchen, and a small crowd is dancing in the living area. I opened the balcony beside the living room so people can smoke where I can see them, but I locked the door to the roof garden. People are either drunk, high, or a combination of the two, and the last thing I need is someone jumping off the roof pretending they can fly.

I'm talking to a nice guy from our class when tingles of awareness skate across the back of my neck, and I turn rigidly still. A loud cheer goes up, and I don't need to turn around to know Toxic Gods has entered the room.

I adore Ash, and we have meshed well as roomies this past week. I love having her here, and I don't regret my decision. The only downside is her brother. All four band members showed up the Sunday Ash moved in, and I purposely stayed out of Dillon's way, grateful they didn't stay long as they were all hungover as fuck.

I knew they were dropping by tonight after they finished their set at Whelans, so I don't know why I'm suddenly feeling nervous. Butterflies flutter in my chest, and my pulse picks up.

"Yay! You made it!" Ash squeals, racing past me to welcome her brothers.

Slowly, I turn around, finding Dillon's dark gaze already locked on mine. He's wearing his signature black T-shirt, ripped jeans, and biker

boots. His almost white-blond hair is a mess of waves falling into his eyes, and I have a sudden urge to run my fingers through it. My heart skips a beat, and blood rushes to my nether regions. Hot damn. Why does he have to look so sexy? And why do I have such a strong reaction to him every time? His lips curve up at one corner, and he cocks his head to the side in a gesture that looks eerily familiar.

Hands wrap around him from behind as a girl with long straight jet-black hair presses herself up against his back. Acid crawls up my throat as I break our intense eye stare, displeased to see the band invited their entourage of groupies to come with. I'm pretty certain Ash would not have invited them. In fact, seeing how much she detests Aoife, I imagine she probably told her brothers they were specifically *not* to come. I don't see Aoife, but she's probably here somewhere. I don't know these girls, and I don't want to pass judgment, but they remind me too much of *her*. Clingy. Manipulative. Bitchy. Ready to turn on any woman who presents a threat.

Shaking off my wayward emotions, I thrust my shoulders back and stride toward them, plastering the biggest smile on my face, determined to be the perfect hostess. Dillon's gaze ensnares me as I approach, and his eyes are superglued to my body despite the girl currently shoving her wandering hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Welcome," I say, deliberately avoiding eye contact with Dillon. "What can I get you guys to drink? We have beer, cider, wine coolers, vodka, gin, and a ton of different sodas."

"Are *you* on the menu?" Jamie asks, undressing me with his eyes. His comment earns a scowl from the brunette tucked under his arm.

"Do I look like something you can drink?" I retort.

His gaze darts to my crotch. "I can think of some juice I'd love to lap up." His tongue darts out, and he rolls it back and forth in a crude manner.

"You're disgusting."

"Trust me, from personal experience, there's nothing disgusting about it," the brunette at his side says with a smug grin.

"Have you no self-respect?" Ash asks her before making a face at Jamie. "Your taste in women gets worse with every passing day," she adds before knocking back her beer. I make a mental note to ask her tomorrow about him.

"Fuck," Dillon hisses, and my eyes are like laser beams as I flick my gaze to him. "Not yet." Grabbing the girl's wrists, he yanks them out of his pockets. The bulge pressing against the crotch of his jeans is obvious in the

extreme, and my stomach sours. I think I'll have to have a quiet word with my new roomie. I can't be around this scene. Not without wanting to hurl. I'm not sure what expression is on my face, but it's enough to have Dillon bark out a harsh laugh. "I think our Hollywood princess is a prude," he says, immediately raising my hackles.

I level him with sharp look. "Just because I don't go around openly groping men doesn't mean I'm a prude."

"Whatever you say, princess." He smirks as he purposely fondles the girl's ass, trying to get a rise out of me.

Planting her hands on her hips, she sends me a withering look. "Where'd you find this stuck-up bitch?"

"She goes to Trainers," Dillon says, as if that explains it.

"Nuff said." Stretching up, she makes a show of kissing him. As if I care.

"What's up, Grace," Ronan says, moving away from Conor and approaching me.

"Hey, Ronan." I give him a quick hug, glad he's here. Ronan is a nice guy, and I can't fathom how he and Dillon are brothers. They look nothing alike, and their personalities are like night and day. Whipping his hand out from behind his back, he presents me with a red rose. "Happy Valentine's Day." He softly kisses my cheek.

Warmth spreads across my chest as I bring the flower to my nose and inhale. "This is so sweet. Thank you."

"Aw, you're so sweet, Ro," the bitch with Dillon says, in a piss-poor impression of my accent. Everyone laughs except for me, Ro, and Ash, and I wouldn't mind bringing all the rest of them up to the roof and helping them to fly.

Straightening to my full height, which happens to be at least three inches taller than the bitch, I pull my shoulders back and look down my nose, pinning her with a dismissive look that conveys how insignificant her words are to me. How dare she come into my house and laugh at me. One more rude comment or snide look, and I'm booting her skanky ass out of my party.

Dillon is watching me with that asshole smug grin of his, and it pisses me off. Why is he always staring at me? He's clearly got zero interest in me, so why does he seem to have difficulty removing his eyes from my face? "What's your problem with me?" I ask, working hard to keep my tone

level and a pleasant smile on my face. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he rattles me.

"Where would you like me to start?" He arches a brow, and his eyebrow ring pulls with the movement.

"Dil! I swear to God I will fucking castrate you if you don't stop this shit! Grace is my friend, and my roommate, and if you can't be nice, you'll have to leave."

Please leave. I chant it over and over in my head hoping maybe if I say it enough times it'll come true.

"You'd like that." Dillon lights up a joint as he eyeballs me, daring me to challenge him and confirm my prude status in his mind, no doubt. "You'd like me to leave, which is exactly why I won't."

Ash pushes past Dillon's fuck buddy, prodding her finger into his chest. "No smoking in here." Ash yanks him outside, and I watch through the glass as she rips him a new one. It's no less than he deserves.

"You really seem to get Dillon riled up," Ronan says, frowning a little.

"It's mutual. He infuriates me." A part of me is grateful he seems to hate me for some inexplicable reason. Another part of me feels wounded. I know I'm not a bad person. I try to be nice to people, and I don't think I have a shitty personality, so I don't understand why he's taken such a strong dislike to me. At any other time, I couldn't care less. But my ego has taken a recent battering, along with my heart, and having someone react to me with such blatant hostility is upsetting.

"What about me?" Ronan asks, flashing me a cheeky wink. "Do I infuriate you?"

"Not a bit." I loop my arm through his. "You bring me roses and act like a reasonable human being. You could never infuriate me. Now, what can I get you to drink?" I ask, pulling him toward the kitchen where the alcohol is.

A couple of hours later, I've forgotten all about Douchey Dillon. I know he was outside smoking with his friends and the cling-ons a while ago, but I have no clue where he is now. Not that I care. With any luck, he's already left. I've been dancing with Ash, Ro, and a couple of guys from school for the past half hour, and I need to take a breather to hydrate my parched throat. But first I need to pee.

I head straight for my bedroom because I'm sure the main bathroom is a mess by now. Placing my hand on the door handle, I frown as the door

opens because I haven't inserted my key yet. Slurping sounds tickle my eardrums as I stand on the threshold, my anger spiking fast. We locked our bedroom doors for a reason, and I have no clue how someone got in here without the key. Fueled by vodka and adrenaline I push into the room, slamming to a halt at the scene in front of me.

Dillon is sitting on the side of my bed with his head thrown back and his eyes closed. The black-haired bitch is kneeling between his legs, sucking his dick. Neither of them has noticed me, and I watch with mounting disgust as she hollows her cheeks, sliding her lips up and down his thick shaft. His jeans are pooled at his feet, and he hasn't bothered to remove his boots.

She lets go of his cock, with a loud popping sound, the second she spots me. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Her words fade into the background as I stare at Dillon's impressively long dick. But that's not what has caught my attention. He has a barbell piercing through the tip of his penis with a diamond-like beading on each end. Holy shit. An ache throbs down below, and stirrings of desire take root.

I've never seen one on a guy.

Well, duh, because I've only slept with Reeve, and he'd rather you cut out his heart than put a needle through his dick.

"Get the fuck out!" she screeches, and I rip my eyes from Dillon's hard-on, lifting my chin up.

His grin is extra smug now, and he spreads his thighs wider, drilling me with that magnetic gaze. "You're welcome to join us, princess. The more, the merrier." He licks his lips, watching my expression, as he curls his hand around his erection and gives it a few quick pumps.

Lust coils tight in my lower belly and my mouth feels suddenly dry as I stand rooted to the spot.

"Get lost, bitch," the girl says, standing and slanting me a look that says she's ready to bring her claws to the party.

Snapping out of it, I race from the room with Dillon's laughter following my every step. Once out in the hallway, I slump against the wall, breathing heavily. My panties are plastered to my body, my skin is flushed, and every cell and nerve ending comes alive in a way it hasn't in a long time. Embarrassment washes over me, and I hang my head until I remember whose room they are in.

Racing back into my bedroom, I grab the girl by the hair, yanking her off Dillon. “This is my room, and my apartment, and you’ve overstayed your welcome. Get the fuck out!” I hiss.

“Let go of me, you stupid bitch,” the girl says as footsteps thud in the hallway outside.

“Jesus,” Ronan says, bursting into the room with Ash hot on his heels.

Ash shrieks, turning back around. “For fuck’s sake, Dil, put your cock away unless you want to scar me for life.”

Dillon chuckles, standing proudly, his hard dick practically winking at me as Ronan drags the girl from my room. She’s shrieking like a hyena, screaming she’s going to kick me in the cunt—how lovely—but I can’t drag my eyes from the manwhore in front of me.

“Liking what you see, princess?” he asks, purposely flicking his tongue out, demonstrating he has a piercing there too.

My body prickles with arousal, and I really need to get him the fuck out of my bedroom. I stare him straight in the eyes. “You’re every bit as disgusting as your friend. And stop calling me that.”

“Are you decent yet?” Ash asks, still hiding her eyes.

“Nope.” Dillon flashes me a grin, showcasing a set of straight white teeth. “I might just stay like this. There’s nothing more freeing than being at one with nature.”

“I think your brother is an exhibitionist, or he likes trying to shock people,” I say, maintaining eye contact. “Pity it won’t work on me.”

“Get fucking dressed, Dil,” Ash snaps. “Or I’m telling Ma you flashed my new best friend.”

“You sure about that, *Princess Grace*,” he sneers, refusing to respond to his sister. Bending down, he slowly pulls his boxers and jeans up his legs, and I’m grateful he’s at least listening to her about that.

“Think what you like about me. I don’t care.” I shrug, relaxing a little now his cock is safely tucked back in his jeans.

He stalks toward me, putting his face all up in mine. At this angle, I spot a little bump in the center of his nose I didn’t notice before. “I think you do care. You want everyone to love you because Mommy and Daddy always told you what a precious princess you were. It bugs you that I can’t stand you. That everything you represent annoys the fuck out of me.”

“Everything I represent?” I shout, shoving him away from me as Ash races to his side.

“Pretty little princess with her pathetic purple roses in her palace rented with Mommy and Daddy’s money,” he slurs.

I moved my flowers in here, away from prying eyes, for a reason. Knots twist in my gut as my eyes dart briefly to the framed pictures by my bedside. One photo shows me with my parents, and the second is a pic of Audrey and me from graduation. Did he recognize my mom and dad and that’s where his comment is coming from? Fuck, I hope not, because the last thing I need is this jerk learning my true identity. I very much doubt Dillon O’Donoghue would keep it a secret, and there’s no way I want to be beholden to him.

A sneer paints his handsome face with an ugly veneer, and I step back as Ash thumps him in the arm, shouting abuse at him. But we’re locked in our own little bubble, ignoring our surroundings.

“Wow. That’s some fucked-up generalization right there. You know nothing about me. Nothing about my life. And you don’t get to come into my apartment and spout this shit at me.”

“You think you’re so superior, like all arrogant rich wankers,” he says, slurring his words again. I don’t care if he’s smashed. Nothing gives him the right to break into my room and then insult me to my face.

“How did you get in here?” I demand, folding my arms across my chest and leveling him with a stern look.

His smug grin makes an unwelcome reappearance. “I picked the lock.”

My mouth hangs open while Ash screams more abuse at her brother.

“Wow. You’re really something else.”

“I am.”

A cocky grin spreads across his mouth, and I’ve had enough of this guy. “That wasn’t a compliment.” I turn to face Ash as Ronan comes back into the room. “I’m sorry, Ash. I know he’s your brother, but he’s a giant bag of dicks, and I don’t want him here. I’m not going to be insulted in my own fucking home just because he’s got some massive stick shoved up his ass.”

“Careful, princess. You’ve just used up your cursing quota for the year.”

“Fucking hell, bro. Stop annoying the girl,” Ronan says. “You need to lay off the weed and the booze, man.”

“Either that or get a personality transplant,” I suggest.

“I’ll talk to him,” Ash says, sending me a pleading look. “We were coming to get you because we kicked everyone out except our friends.

We're up on the roof, and the guys are going to play their guitars. Let me knock some sense into this dumbass and we'll follow you up."

"If he says one more nasty thing to me or he calls me fucking princess again, I'll throw him off the roof and make no apology for it," I warn. I detect a slight curling of his lips, but he smooths them out before I can be sure.

"Come on, Grace," Ronan says, enunciating my name to make a point. "Let's get fucked up."

"Sounds like a plan." Ignoring his asshole of a brother, I link my arm in his, letting him escort me out of the bedroom.

I turn over in bed, and my arm automatically stretches out, reaching for Reeve. Reality slaps me in the face when my palm grazes cold untouched sheets, and I crash down to earth with a bang. The usual pressure sits on my chest as I blink my eyes open, staring at the stark white ceiling, wondering if I'm destined to live with this soul-crushing pain for the rest of my life. When will it stop?

It's the little things that really get me.

Like waking up thinking I'm still going to find Reeve's warm body curled around mine, his large palm flat against my stomach, his morning wood pressing into my ass.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I ward off tears as I slide out of bed, purposely ignoring the roses that seem to stare at me from the top of my dresser. I fell into bed sometime after five, collapsing into an immediate deep sleep, before I could return them to the living area.

Stripping off my clothes, I stand under the steaming-hot water in my shower, welcoming the sharp sting as it pummels my weary limbs like a thousand fine pinpricks.

Apart from the minor setback with Dillon and that black-haired bitch, last night was an epic success, and I really enjoyed myself. I ended up kicking Dillon out because he insulted me again before we'd even made it to the roof. Ash didn't protest, and from the disapproving look she gave her brother before I shoved his annoying ass out the front door, I could tell she was disappointed in him.

We spent the rest of the night on the roof with the remaining band members smoking joints and singing along to Jamie's and Conor's guitar playing. They assumed Dillon had left with his fuck buddy, and no one corrected them. I thought Ronan would, but he seems to have taken my side, which makes me a little uneasy. I don't want to come between family, and I'm beginning to sense Ronan might be developing feelings for me, which could get awkward. Even if I hadn't sworn off men, nothing would happen. He's cute, funny, smart, and great to be around, but I'm not attracted to him. There's no spark. His gaze doesn't scorch a path along my skin, unlike his older brother's.

After showering and dressing, I exit my bedroom, stalling when distinctive moaning sounds filter out under Ash's bedroom door. The banging of the headboard would be a dead giveaway if Ash's blissful scream hadn't just confirmed it. A man cusses in a deep voice, followed by heavy grunting, and I hightail it out of there.

I thought all the guys left around five, but either Jamie snuck back in or he never left. I've no doubt that's who she's got in there.

I hope Ash knows what she's doing with that guy. He hasn't made the best first impression with me, but he seemed different on the roof last night. More mellow and less asshole. The guys are clearly serious about their music, and we were mesmerized listening to them sing and play guitar. Jamie accompanied me when I sang Sinead O'Connor's "Nothing Compares to You," and I blushed profusely when they all clapped loudly in appreciation. Mom has a beautiful voice, and I inherited some of her talent in that regard, but I don't get the opportunity to sing in front of an audience often.

Jamie didn't seem like a bad guy last night, and it's obvious there are hidden layers to him, but I'm still worried for my friend.

Switching the coffee machine on, I set about making breakfast for three when I hear the others stirring. I'm just plating bacon, toast, and scrambled eggs when the lovebirds emerge, freshly showered. "I hope you're hungry," I say, holding up two plates. "I made breakfast."

I set them down on the table and spin around, bumping straight into Ash. She smacks a quick kiss on my lips, and I'm momentarily stunned. She laughs at the expression on my face. "I was just thinking I could kiss Grace for this, so I thought why the heck not?" She shrugs, sliding into a seat beside Jamie while I try to snap out of it.

Jamie grins. "I think you've shocked your friend into stunned silence."

"That she has," I agree, finally snapping out of it. "Do you make it a habit to kiss all your female friends?"

"Only the pretty ones." She winks.

I distribute mugs of coffee and orange juice before taking my plate to the table. I join Ash on her side, and we joke and laugh about the night while we eat. As I refill our mugs, I decide to risk a question. "So, you two bumped uglies last night, huh?"

Jamie bursts out laughing, slapping a hand on his thigh. "Bumped uglies?" He wipes tears from his eyes. "I think Dillon might be onto something with his prudish princess remarks."

"Jamie!" Ash screeches, glaring at him.

I withdraw my previous charitable thoughts, and I'm tempted to dump the entire contents of the coffee pot over his head. "I was trying to be polite, that's all. I can say fucking, screwing, banging, without blushing. I've had plenty of sex, and I grew up in Hollywood. Trust me when I say there is little I haven't heard or seen."

"Sorry," he says, looking and sounding completely unapologetic. "Maybe it's just a cultural thing, but you're too funny sometimes."

"Uh-huh." I level him with a scathing look as I drop back down on my seat. "So, what's the score?" I ask, my gaze bouncing between them.

"We're friends who like to fuck occasionally," he says, spooning a ton of diabetic-inducing sugar into his mug. "It's no big deal, right, Ash?" He winks at her and I want to punch him in his annoying face.

"Right." Her tight grin is borderline a grimace.

Awkward tension bleeds into the air, and I regret asking my question. Maybe I should have waited until he left and asked Ash on her own. Discreetly, I squeeze her hand in silent apology under the table.

Jamie's phone pings, and he snatches it up, reading his message. "I've got to go." He takes his plate, glass, and mug over to the sink. I watch Ash's crestfallen face out of the corner of my eye while he rinses and stacks his plate in the dishwasher. At least the boy has some manners. He grabs his leather jacket from the arm of the couch before coming back to the table. "Thanks for breakfast, Grace." Shoving his hands in the back pockets of his dark jeans, he fixes me with a cocky look. "I guess I should apologize too."

"You guess?" I arch a brow. "What kind of way is that to apologize?"

A sheepish grin creeps over his face. “I apologize for being a dick to you. Sometimes I let my inner Dillon take too much control.”

I snort out a laugh. “I’ll say.”

Placing his hands on Ash’s shoulders, he leans down, whispering in her ear before he kisses her goodbye.

I wait until I hear the front door snick shut before I question her. “What’s the story with you two?”

“You heard him,” she says, vigorously swirling her spoon in her lukewarm coffee. “We’re just friends with benefits—except we’re more like enemies most of the time.” Her head thuds off the table. “Ugh. I’m such an idiot. I swore I wasn’t going to sleep with him again.”

“We had a lot to drink last night. And we were smoking.”

“That’s no excuse,” she grumbles, lifting her head.

“How long has it been going on?” I ask, getting up to make a fresh pot of coffee. If it wasn’t eleven a.m., and I wasn’t already hungover as fuck, I’d suggest we need alcohol for this conversation.

“A while.” Air huffs out of her mouth. “Jamie’s always been flirty with me, but I never thought anything of it. A, he’s a big slut. Almost as bad as my brother. And B, he was one of Cillian’s friends too.”

“So all the guys hung around together?” I surmise, propping my elbows on the table.

“Cillian and Dillon were best friends growing up, and then they met Conor, Jamie, and Aaron—the old drummer—at secondary school, and they all started hanging out.”

“Is Jamie still friends with Cillian?” I know Dillon isn’t because he’s loyal to his sister.

She shakes her head, and tears glisten in her eyes. “The guys were all disgusted with him. They took my side. None of them talk to him anymore.”

I’m glad they supported her. I can’t imagine how much harder her situation would be if Cillian was still friends with the band. “So, the Cillian connection isn’t an issue.”

“Except it is.” She climbs to her feet. “I’m not feeling so great. Let’s lie down on the sofa.”

I grab coffees and waters and join her on the large leather sectional, kicking off my sneakers and stretching my legs out.

“I think I’ve got a brother’s-best-friend addiction. Is there a support group for that?” she jokes.

“There’s certainly a lot of romance books where women fall for their brother’s friend. I’m not so sure about support groups though.” I tuck my hair behind my ears, stifling a yawn. “You can’t help who you fall for, and so what if he’s Dillon’s friend?”

“Dillon made all his friends swear not to touch me after everything that happened with Cillian. I’m strictly off-limits. It didn’t bother me at the time because I didn’t have feelings for any of Dillon’s friends until last summer when something shifted between Jamie and me. There were a lot of heated looks and sneaky touches, and then one night at a party, we had sex. After that, we couldn’t keep our hands off one another. We knew Dillon wouldn’t approve, so we snuck around for a month until Ronan caught us in the act and he went nuts. He said Dillon would go crazy and it could hurt the band. Jamie told me he couldn’t see me anymore the next day.”

“I know Dillon’s a dick, but do you really think he’d care if you two like one another?”

She rolls over onto her stomach, facing me. “That’s the thing, Viv. I don’t think Jamie cares about anything but sex. I’m just another warm body to him.” Her chest heaves, and pain shimmers in her eyes.

“But *you* care.”

Slowly, she nods. “I don’t want to. I’ve tried hard not to, but I do.”

“You deserve someone who will fight for you,” I say, sitting up and crossing my legs. I grab a large pillow, pressing it to my chest.

“I know I do.” She worries her lower lip between her teeth. “And right now, that’s not Jamie, but it could be. He’s got a lot of issues he’s dealing with.”

“Yeah. Who doesn’t?” I sip from my water wondering if that’s just life.

“His older sister died suddenly of a brain aneurysm sixteen months ago. She was his only sibling, and he took it hard. Now, his parents are getting divorced, and he’s a bit lost. He’s resorted to Dillon’s PAW method of coping.”

“Do I even want to know?” I ask, tilting my head to one side.

A wry grin appears on her lips. “Pussy. Alcohol. Weed.”

“What demons is your brother fighting?”

Ash rests her head on the side of the couch, sighing. “Dillon is battling a lot of inner demons. It’s not my place to tell you his story, but he’s always

had an issue accepting love. It's fucked up, because our parents are amazing. Our house was chaotic growing up, but love was never in short supply. Yet Dillon feels unworthy. He's never had a girlfriend, and I think it's because he's too afraid to get close to someone in case they prove he isn't worthy of being loved."

"That's actually really sad," I admit.

"I know." She sits up, mirroring my position. "I know he's been a dick to you, and I think maybe it's because he feels something for you and he doesn't know how to handle it."

"I—"

"Don't try to deny it, Viv. I've seen the way you look at one another. It's the way Jamie and I used to look at one another before he started pretending I don't exist. I'm not excusing my brother's behavior, and I'll be having words with him, but I think he's floundering a little again, like when he was seventeen. I'm worried about him."

"What happened when he was seventeen?" I blurt, intrigued more than I should be.

"He really went off the rails and it was a bad time for our family." Tears fill her eyes. "All that shit happened with me around the same time."

"You think whatever was going on with him was connected to you?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. Cillian was his friend, and he shit all over me. I think Dillon felt responsible, which is ridiculous because the only person at fault was Cillian. I can't even blame that bitch because she was single."

"I'd still blame her. She knew he was with you, and she targeted him. She's not blameless." Like Saffron Roberts isn't blameless. She knew Reeve was in a committed relationship with me, and she still went after him.

"It doesn't matter anymore except for what it did to Dillon. It's like he woke up one morning the spawn of Damien from *The Omen*. He started acting out in a serious way, and he didn't care to hide it. He almost got expelled from school. He was constantly drunk or stoned. He lashed out at everyone. It culminated in him drastically changing his appearance." A grin breaks through her concerned veneer. "When he came home with the piercings, I thought my parents were going to die on the spot. But then he got all the tattoos." She chuckles. "Mum hates them, but she eventually got over it. She just wants to see him happy. I do too, but he's not. The only

time he lets go of his demons is when he's on stage. That's the only time I truly see him happy."

"You probably hate me for making him leave last night."

"No. Not at all." She shakes her head. "He deserved it, but I'm going to talk to him because I can't have two of my favorite people not getting along. I can't cut him out of my life, Viv." Her eyes turn pleading. "He's always been there for me, and I need to be here for him now."

"I would never ask you to cut your brother from your life. It's fine. I can make myself scarce if you want to have him over."

"I'm not asking you to do that. This is your home, and I'm just a blow-in. I will fix things. I promise. I'll make him toe the line."

Good luck with that plan. Dillon clearly marches to his own tune, and I doubt anything Ash says will change his mind.

“Just one thing before we leave,” I say, applying a layer of gloss to my lips. “Don’t forget to call me Grace.” In the two weeks since I told Ash who I am, she’s been calling me Viv at home, and I’m scared she’s going to slip up and out me to our friends and the band.

“Can I be honest?” she asks, as she finishes applying eyeliner. She looks at me through the mirror.

“No, please lie to me,” I joke, fluffing out the soft curls in my hair.

“I think you should just tell everyone who you are. They will understand why you wanted to keep your identity a secret, and they won’t hold it against you.”

“I don’t want anyone to know, Ash.” I lean back against the tile, sighing. “I don’t want to see pitying looks in their eyes or give the guys any more ammunition to make fun of me.”

“They’ve really made a bad impression, haven’t they?” she murmurs, rubbing some product into her short hair.

“Conor and Ronan haven’t.”

“Jamie made his peace with you the morning after he stayed over, and Dillon has promised he’ll be on his best behavior tonight.”

I’ll believe it when I see it. “I don’t want them to know,” I repeat, because this is important to me. I’m still not sure if Dillon saw the photos by my bed, but I guess I’ll find out tonight. If he knows who I am, he will need little encouragement to reveal my secrets and embarrass the shit out of me.

“Celebrities aren’t a big deal in Ireland, and not many people are up to speed on Hollywood gossip. I honestly don’t think anyone will know who you are, and you can trust my friends not to tell anyone. Wouldn’t you rather just be yourself?”

“I know you mean well, Ash, but you have no clue the shit I had to put up with in L.A. I’m loving it here because no one knows any of that. I’m not ready to face it, and I’m not ready to talk about it. If I tell everyone to call me Viv, I’ll have to explain, and I can’t.” The words project from my mouth like vomit.

“I’m sorry.” She grabs my arm. “I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re right. I have no idea how bad things were for you before you came here. I just hate that you don’t feel like you can be yourself with us.”

“I’m still me, Ash. Just because I’m using my middle name and choosing not to tell people about my ex and my famous parents doesn’t mean I’m fake.”

“I wasn’t suggesting you were.” She wraps her arms around me. “Can we just rewind the last five minutes and forget I said anything? You look sexy as fuck, and you’ve finally agreed to come to Whelans again, and I don’t want anything to ruin tonight. We’re going to paint the town red and wash those dicks right out of our hair.”

Eyes bore into my back, and I feel his potent stare without the need to turn around. I knew Dillon was in the bar somewhere, but we’ve been here for over an hour, and he hasn’t shown his face. Jamie is giving Ash the cold shoulder, like usual, and Aoife is hanging all over him. The bitch Dillon was with at our party has been shooting me daggers for the past hour, and I’m close to saying fuck it and leaving.

I only agreed to come out because I know Ash feels torn leaving me at home every Friday night, and I don’t want her to have to choose between me and the band.

Personally, I don’t know how she can subject herself to this torture every week. I know she comes to support her brothers, but watching Jamie with different girls must be killing her. “How do you stand it?” I ask, taking a sip of my pink gin as I subtly gesture in Jamie and Aoife’s direction.

“Alcohol helps. Fucking other guys does too. I haven’t done that in a while, so I think it’s time I found someone to bang tonight. His behavior reminds me why I need to stay away from him. I slipped up at our party but never again. Watching him with other girls helps strengthen my resolve.” She drinks some of her beer. “I’ve thought a lot about what you said. I *do* deserve someone who would fight for me. If Jamie truly cared, he’d talk to Dillon and make it right. I’m done being second best.”

“Amen to that, sister.” I raise my glass to her beer bottle, and we say “Sláinte.”

I rub the back of my neck, feeling tingles all over from Dillon’s intrusive gaze, and I wish he’d focus on one of his groupies instead.

“You do know he’s staring at you, right?” Ash says.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Giving in, I angle my head to the side, and our gazes connect. My heart skips a beat, like always.

Tonight, Dillon is wearing a tight white T-shirt under a black leather jacket and blue jeans that hug his muscular thighs. The usual chains and bands adorn his neck and wrists. He fiddles with his eyebrow piercing as his eyes drift up and down my body, drinking in my one-shouldered silk pink top, formfitting black leather pants, and kick-ass knee-high boots. I let Ash do my makeup and style my hair, and I know I look good. I haven’t missed the ardent stares of men in the vicinity though I’ve been avoiding making eye contact with anyone. I’m still not ready to cross that bridge.

“Holy fuck, Grace. You look gorgeous,” Ronan says, snaking his arms around me from behind, forcing me to break my face-off with his older brother.

“Thanks, Ro.” I beam at him while gently removing his arms. He’s getting braver, and it’s making me uncomfortable. “Where were you?”

“Dillon and I were being interviewed for *Hot Press* magazine. It’s a pretty big deal.”

Pride suffuses his tone, and I twist around in my chair. “That’s awesome.”

“I love how you say that,” he says, winding his fingers through my hair.

“How did it go?” I ask, squirming a little under his adoring gaze.

“Really well. Since we released our self-produced EP three months ago, buzz has been steadily building. One of the main radio stations played the title track last week, and we got a call from *Hot Press* the next day. They’re going to do a feature on Toxic Gods.”

“I’m rooting for you guys,” I truthfully admit. “Let me buy you a beer to celebrate.” I stand.

Ronan shakes his head. “Ladies never buy the drinks.”

I glare at him. “Are we living in the dark ages now?”

Holding up his palms, he backtracks furiously. “I meant no offense! I was just trying to be a gentleman.”

My angry spurt dies out. “You already are. Me buying you a drink doesn’t change that.” His smile expands, and I silently curse. I’ll have to say something to him before he hits on me. I’m genuinely flattered, and I wish I had feelings for him because he’s a decent guy and I know he could help me move on, but I can’t force myself to feel things I don’t. This has the potential to get messy, and I need to handle it soon.

I’m hanging by the crowded bar, waiting in line to place my order, when a shadow looms over me. Spicy cologne tickles my nostrils, and every nerve ending on my body is on high alert. What the hell is with that? Why do I keep reacting to him like this? “What do you want, Dillon?” I clip out, working hard to keep a neutral tone.

“You to look at me, for starters,” he says, pressing his mouth right to my ear.

A full-body shudder works its way through me, and I hate that he most likely noticed. Steeling myself, I turn sideways and look up.

His lush lips part, and air spills softly from his mouth as our eyes engage and the outside world seems to evaporate. Fire kindles in my chest, spreading lower, and I lick my dry lips, wondering if spontaneous combustion is actually a thing. Dillon’s eyes drop to my mouth, and electricity charges the tiny gap between our bodies.

This is *not* happening, and I’ve got to put a stop to it now.

“What?” I croak, averting my eyes.

“Look at me,” he growls, tilting my chin up with one of his fingers. Tingles explode across my face, and from the way his jaw pulses, I’d say he felt it too.

“Why?” I challenge, feeling out of sorts and wanting to get the first shot in.

“Because apologies should always be made face to face. Only cowards apologize when someone is looking at their feet.”

“Okay. I’ll bite.” I’m curious to see if this is bullshit to appease his beloved sister or if he’s capable of any genuine emotion.

He arches one dark brow. “Didn’t peg you for a biter,” he rasps, his seductive tone doing funny things to my insides.

“I’ve been known to bite,” I reply, deliberately biting down on my lower lip.

His greedy eyes follow the movement, and my core throbs, reminding me I’m still a sexual being with needs. Needs that haven’t been properly fulfilled in months. My little electronic friend doesn’t count because there’s no substitute for a real cock.

“My sister and Jamie tell me I’m wrong about you.” He leans his face in extra close, and I stop breathing, staring into green eyes that look almost green-blue in this light. “Maybe they are right.” Grabbing a few stray strands of my wavy hair, he tucks it behind my ear. His fingers brush my earlobe, and I’m close to testing that spontaneous combustion theory.

“Dil.” A whiny voice breaks the spell, and we jerk back from one another.

“Not now, Aoife,” Dillon grits out, not even looking at the sexy blonde.

“But—”

He turns around, clenching his jaw. “I’m trying to have a private conversation here. I’ll talk to you later.” It sounds like he’s taking great effort to not snap at her.

Predictably, she scowls, throwing me a scathing look before she saunters off, sashaying her hips in an exaggerated fashion. Pity for her Dillon has already turned back around to face me. He opens his mouth to speak just as the bartender calls my attention. Giving Dillon my back, I lean over the counter, shouting my order over the background music. Spinning around, I find Dillon’s eyes glued to my ass, and I fold my arms, slanting him a knowing look.

“What?” He shrugs. “If you don’t want guys staring at your arse, you shouldn’t wear tight leather trousers.”

“Was there a reason you accosted me?”

“*Accosted?* That makes me sound like some pervert.” He smirks that annoying smirk, and I narrow my eyes at him.

He chuckles, and I’m two seconds from throat punching him. “Aren’t you?” It’s not like I’ve forgotten what went down in my bedroom. Even after changing my bed that night and washing the sheets, I still couldn’t look at them without seeing him with that skank, so I ended up throwing

them in the trash. And let's not forget Ash saw him tag-teaming Aoife with Jamie. Though neither of the guys knows she witnessed that.

Seeing something in my gaze, he loses the grin, fixing me with an earnest expression. "I'm sorry for acting like a giant bag of dicks." He's smothering a smile again, and this time, so am I. His entire face lights up when he smiles—his eyes sparkle and two cute dimples appear in his cheeks—and I'm a goner. It's like being sucker-punched in the ovaries and the boobs at the same time.

"Why did you?" I ask before I can question the wisdom of it.

"I have my reasons."

"And you're not going to share those with me?"

"If it was something I felt you needed to know, I'd tell you." He jerks his head at something or someone behind me, and before I can stop him, he's paid for my drinks.

"You didn't have to do that." I just tore into Ronan for trying to do the same thing.

"Call it a peace offering." The dimples make a reappearance with his flirtatious smile, and I think I'm in trouble.

"I think I preferred it when you were mean to me," I whisper, instantly clamping a hand over my mouth. *What the fuck, Viv?*

"Be careful what you wish for," he cryptically says, winking before he walks away.

“Are you sure I don’t need to bring anything else?” I call out to Ash through my open bedroom door.

“Just your sexy arse, some cash or your bank card, and something to change into for the event tonight. Wear your jacket with the hood. It might rain.”

I smile to myself as I reach for said jacket. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Ireland in the two months since I’ve been here it’s that it always fucking rains. Now we’re into March, it should start easing off soon. Or so I’ve been told.

“Someone looks happy,” Ash croons from my doorway.

“I’m excited to do all the touristy things,” I truthfully admit. “Audrey can’t believe it’s taken me this long to visit some of the sights.”

“She didn’t tell you she gave me shit the last time we talked? Why else do you think I organized today? Your *bestie* is terrifying.”

I throw back my head, laughing. “Audrey is fierce. I can’t wait for you to meet her next week.” I almost burst Ash’s eardrums when Audrey confirmed she booked a flight to Dublin during spring break. She’s arriving the day before St. Patrick’s Day, so her timing is perfect. Ash and Audrey have been chatting up a storm in recent weeks, and it pleases me that they seem to get along.

“I’m looking forward to meeting her. We’ll have a blast.”

We meet up with Catriona and the guys outside Trinity, heading to a nearby restaurant to load up on carbs for the action-packed day ahead. In order to make the most out of our day, we are spending it mainly in the city

center. This evening, we're taking a tour of the infamous Kilmainham Gaol, and then we're seeing The Frames play at The Royal Hospital Kilmainham.

The Frames are an Irish rock band fronted by Glen Hansard, who I know because he won an Oscar for best song for a movie my dad directed when I was a little girl.

"Why didn't Conor come?" I inquire, as we enjoy a delicious full Irish breakfast.

"He was too stoned to get up this early the night after a show," Ronan says, stuffing toast into his mouth.

"Conor's a loner at heart," Dillon supplies.

"And he doesn't like crowds," Jamie adds.

"Wait! What?" I gawk at them. "But he's in a band! A band with big ambitions. How the hell will that work?"

"He gets lost when he's on stage," Jamie explains, tearing a bite out of a crisp piece of bacon. "He barely even notices the crowd most of the time."

"Who says we're a band with big ambitions?" Dillon asks, and there's a familiar edge to his tone. Things have been better since he broke the ice last week, but he barely said two words to me when he and Ronan came for dinner on Wednesday night. I think he's as perturbed by this freaky chemistry we share as much as I am.

Ronan groans, slinging his arm along the back of my chair. Dillon's eyes instantly wander to his brother's arm, and he purses his lips. "Come on, bro," Ronan says. "Don't pull this shit again."

"Sue me for trying to keep things real," he snaps, and Ash glares at Ronan from behind Dillon, making a slicing motion with her hand across her throat.

"Fine, fine," Ronan grumbles. "Let's not mention the war."

"So, what's first on the agenda?" I ask, pushing my half-eaten plate away.

"Not hungry?" Dillon lifts a brow.

"Are you kidding? Did you see the size of that thing? It would feed at least three people."

"More for us," Jamie says, yanking my plate away.

Dillon and Ronan grab some of the food from my plate before Jamie takes it all, and I watch them devour it like they haven't been fed in days.

"They're savages," Ash says, handing over her half-eaten plate.

“Blame Ma,” Ro says, cutting into his egg. “She always gave us seconds.”

“It’s so unfair,” Cat says. “I only have to look at that greasy plate, and it goes straight on my hips. You three shovel food into your gobs like it’s a national sport, and you all look like that!” She waves her hands in their direction.

“Jesus, Cat.” Ash shakes her head. “Their egos are already floating near Mars. Let’s not give them bigger heads.”

“It’s not our fault the lovely Catriona recognizes potent male sexiness when she sees it,” Jamie lifts the hem of his shirt, tracing his fingers across his toned abs. “Can’t help if the ladies love what we’re offering.”

Ash’s eyes are trained to Jamie’s stomach, and he isn’t the only one noticing. I kick her leg under the table, subtly moving my eyes in Dillon’s direction. She straightens up, coughing. “Come on, slow coaches. Hurry the fuck up. We’ve got a full agenda.”

I insist on getting the check despite my friends’ half-hearted protests. Everyone is giving their time today to come with me, and it’s the least I can do. I have also organized a little surprise for tonight. One I hope won’t backfire on me.

We set off around the city on foot, and I’m glad I wore my trusty sneakers. We visit the GPO, the headquarters of the Irish postal service. It was also the headquarters of the leaders of the Easter Rising, a pivotal moment in Irish history when the Irish tried to take back control of their country from the British. Gunfire was traded, and much of the building was destroyed but later rebuilt. Dillon points out divots in the gray stone pillars where bullets tore into the impressive building. We wander around the visitor center for a bit before we continue our tour.

Next, we head to the National Wax Museum, and they tease Ash and me mercilessly for taking our time in the Irish Writers section. We are escorted out of the building by security after Dillon is caught with his face buried underneath Mrs. Doyle’s skirt in the Father Ted Room. I laugh so hard I almost pee my pants.

A guided tour of the Guinness Storehouse and a beer-tasting session follows, and I readily hand my drinks to the guys while I stock up on souvenirs in the store. We visit Christchurch Cathedral before enjoying chicken wings at Temple Bar. Then we take an Uber to a different part of Dublin to visit Croke Park.

We saunter through the museum to learn the history of GAA—Ireland’s national sport—before taking a tour of the stadium, but my favorite part is the Skyline Tour. The stunning rooftop walkway is Dublin’s highest open-viewing platform offering incredible panoramic views of the city and the sea.

“Wow, this is breathtaking,” I admit, stopping at the highest point to admire the view.

“It blows my mind every time I come up here,” Dillon says, leaning his elbows on the railing. We’re all wearing harnesses, and the others are a few steps ahead, listening to whatever bit of history the tour guide is explaining now. “Do you know anything about Bloody Sunday?” he asks, after a few silent beats.

“Only the U2 song,” I admit. Although, all I know is it was Bono’s way of venting his frustration at the IRA.

“There are two Bloody Sundays in our past. The one U2 referenced was the 1972 massacre of twenty-six innocent civilians in Derry, which is in Northern Ireland. In 1920, the full island of Ireland was still under British rule, and armed police stormed Croke Park during a GAA match and killed fourteen people, including one of the players, and injured many more. It was retaliation for the IRA’s assassination of British intelligence officers known as The Cairo Gang.”

“That’s awful.”

His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, and he looks straight ahead as he continues speaking. “Can you imagine the chaos?” He points at the massive pitch below. “Can you visualize all the crowds in the stands? The players racing after the ball across the field? And then police charge the ground, opening fire.” A veil of sadness washes over his handsome features. “If I close my eyes, I can almost hear the screams and the cries as men, women, and children fled for their lives.”

“You’re passionate about your country’s past,” I softly say.

“I’m passionate about injustice.” His eyes burn with indecipherable emotion as he faces me. “What gives anyone the right to take action which decides another person’s fate without their knowledge or permission? Who decides what is morally just and right? And when is it ever right to justify heinous crimes in retaliation for something else? How can people value other lives so flippantly?”

I'm wondering if we're even still talking about the same thing. "It's not right. There are many injustices in the world, and people don't seem to learn from the past."

"Unless they're forced to learn that lesson," he clips out.

I'm not really sure how to respond to that, and I'm not sure I want to get into some big political debate either.

Silence descends for a few minutes, but it's not uncomfortable.

"You should see a match before you head back to the States," he says, doing a complete three-sixty. "The buzz is amazing."

I roll with it. "When does the season run?" I ask, trying to ignore how close we're standing. I can almost feel the heat rising from his body.

"From May to September."

"I'll probably stick around for the summer, so maybe I can catch a game then." I'm loving it here, and it's definitely helping to be away from the press intrusion in the States.

Dillon turns his head to stare at me, drilling me with one of those deep intense looks of his, as if he's looking straight into my soul and discovering all my secrets.

"What?" I ask, worried I might have dried sauce left on my face from lunch.

"Nothing." He offers me a tight smile before turning his head.

I grind my teeth to the molars. "I know you have something on your mind, so just say it."

He looks straight ahead as I stare at the side of his face, noting the tense set of his jaw. He has a gorgeous side profile. Chiseled high cheekbone. Full soft lips I'm sure deliver the best kisses. And a strong jawline coated in a sexy layer of stubble that would feel delicious scraping against my thighs. Arousal swirls in my belly, and I try to focus my thoughts because swooning over a guy like Dillon is only inviting a world of hurt.

His face isn't perfect though. The little ridge on his nose and the small scar over his right eyebrow ensure that. Yet these small flaws only add to his appeal, as well as the conundrum his personality presents.

We've been chatting a lot today, and he's almost like a different person. He's been in great spirits, and he has a wicked sense of humor. I doubt we needed any of our tour guides as his local knowledge and memory for historical facts is incredible. When he's not acting the clown, he's articulate and intelligent, and I'm struggling to see how a guy like this could deem

himself unworthy of love. Unless he normally keeps this side of himself hidden, and the hostile angry version I was presented with at first is the mask he usually wears.

“I was expecting you to run back home to your boyfriend the instant exams are over,” he says, through gritted teeth, yanking me out of my head.

Panic flares to life in my chest at his words. “I don’t have a boyfriend,” I croak, glancing around to ensure the others are out of earshot.

“Don’t you?” he asks, eyeballing me again.

“Not anymore,” I whisper.

His gaze turns dark as his eyes bore into mine. Tension filters into the air, and I swallow the painful lump in my throat to force more words out. “You know who I am.”

He nods, and I try to control my errant breathing, gripping the rail and exhaling heavily.

“Breathe,” he says, placing his large palm against my lower back. Heat seeps into my body from his touch, even through my clothes. “I’m not going to tell anyone, if that’s why you’re panicking.”

“You’re not?” I inquire, raising my worried eyes to his. He shakes his head, looking sincere. “Why not?”

“Because it’s no one’s business but your own, and I misjudged you at first.”

“Did Ash tell you?” I ask because I need to know if she betrayed my trust.

He turns to face me, peering directly into my eyes. I fight the urge to drown in the hypnotic depths of his gorgeous green eyes. “There is one major thing you should know about my sister, and that is she’s the most trustworthy person you will meet. I know she told you about Cillian. He took her trust and abused it. She would never do that to someone else.”

I instantly feel bad for doubting her for even a second. “I know. And she can trust me too, because I’ve had my trust abused and I could never do that to another person either.”

Lowering my eyes, I lean over the railing, wondering if he’s trustworthy or if his words are as flimsy as the air circling around us.

“I saw the photo by your bed, and I recognized your mum. Google told me the rest,” he admits.

I rest my head on my hands, ashamed to face him, even though I know I’ve done nothing wrong. I just don’t want to see the pity on his face.

“Don’t hide from me,” he says, his tone gruff. “I cannot stand people who run away from the truth.”

Anger bubbles to the surface as I whip my head up. “You think I’m running from the truth?”

“Aren’t you?”

I straighten up, biting the inside of my cheek. “You think you have it all figured out because you’ve read some shit on the internet, but you don’t know anything.” My voice rises a few notches, and I work hard to rein my emotions in. Just when I thought Dillon and I were finding common ground and getting along, he has to ruin it with his narrow-minded half-assed assessment.

“Who were the roses from, Vivien?” he hisses, glaring at me in a more familiar way.

“My ex,” I bark. “And he’s my ex for a damn good reason, but you were right about one thing,” I say, jabbing my finger in his hard chest. “It’s no one’s business but my own.”

I tap my fingers on the wheel as the car idles in the alley across from Christchurch Cathedral where we are waiting for Ronan. Mom's assistant organized a driver's license and a rental for me, but so far, this SUV has been gathering dust in the parking lot under my building. It's about time I took her out for a spin.

Ash is snoring softly from the back seat, barely visible under her comforter. So much for her being my wingwoman. Driving around Dublin city streets has me on edge because I'm not used to driving on the left-hand side of the road. It also feels weird to be behind the wheel in what is our passenger seat. I'm freaking out a little and hoping Ronan isn't as hungover as his sister so he can help. Otherwise, I have no clue how we're getting to County Wicklow in one piece.

The passenger door opens, and Ronan's happy face greets mine. "What's up, Grace," he says, climbing into the seat and slamming the door.

"Ugh." Ash groans from the back seat. "Stop the noise. My head," she mumbles, yanking the comforter up over her face.

Ronan chuckles. "I knew she was overdoing it backstage last night."

"She spent half the night worshipping the porcelain god," I joke. He stares blankly at me, and I giggle. "Throwing up," I explain.

"You Yanks say the weirdest things." He darts in, kissing my cheek. "I cannot thank you enough for last night. I'm still buzzing." He practically bounces in his seat, and I'm glad the risk I took paid off.

At my request, Dad had called Glen Hansard to arrange backstage passes after the event last night. Dad explained my situation, and Glen had

no issue keeping my identity a secret. After he won his Oscar, he experienced the scary attention of the world's media, so he understands my need to keep a low profile. He mostly chatted to the guys about music while we shared a few drinks. Ash slunk off to the bathroom with one of the crew, much to Jamie's obvious disgust. I silently fist-pumped the air on her behalf. It's good for him to get a taste of his own medicine.

"What's the best route to take?" I ask, switching on the GPS.

"We'll take the M50. It's the quickest and easiest route out of the city. I figure you'd prefer to drive on the motorway."

Ro babbles away as I slowly navigate my way out of the busy city center. "Glen already messaged Dil this morning to say he downloaded our EP and he's impressed. He still has a few contacts in L.A., and he's going to put us in touch with them."

Taking my eyes off the road for a second, I flash him a smile. "That's amazing. I hope he can help."

"I still can't believe you arranged that. Your dad must be well-connected to set it up."

I fudged my way through an explanation last night. Honestly, I thought the guys might put it together, but I'm grateful they didn't. They were all young—like me—when the film came out, and Glen's movie success wasn't driving their excitement. They are fans of The Frames, and they were focused on the music. "I'm glad it worked out." I need to divert this line of inquiry before I get in hot water. "Are you sure Dillon is okay to drive his motorcycle?"

His brow puckers. "Why do you care when he was such a grumpy prick last night?"

"Your brother might irritate the fuck out of me, but that doesn't mean I want to see him get into an accident." Dillon gave me the silent treatment last night after our little argument at Croke Park, which suited me fine. I stayed with Ash, Cat, and Ro, while Jamie and Dillon kept to themselves. As much as his sullen moody behavior grated on my nerves, I still offered him a ride today. His mom was sweet to invite me to Sunday dinner, and it wouldn't look very gracious to turn up with only two of her children.

I take the exit for the M50, relaxing when we finally hit the highway. According to the GPS, it's pretty much straight all the way from here until we reach Kilcoole.

“Don’t worry about Dil,” Ro says, the smile dropping off his face. “He knows how to take care of himself.”

“He drank a lot last night, and he’d probably be over the limit if the police stopped him.” I’m glad I switched to water early in the night. My head and my stomach thank me for it. I knew I was driving today, and I didn’t want to turn up to Ash’s house looking like something from a zombie movie.

“You seem very concerned about him all of a sudden. Last night, you could barely look at each other.” I feel his eyes boring a hole in the side of my face. “Did something happen between you at Croke Park?”

“We had a difference of opinion, and some harsh words were spoken.” I shrug, tossing my hair over one shoulder. “It’s no biggie.”

“If you say so,” he sulkily replies, turning his head and staring out the window.

Switching the radio on, I keep the volume low so we don’t wake our Sleeping Beauty. We are both quiet as we drive. While I know Ronan is irritated, I’m not prepared to have a conversation about our feelings when we’re en route to his house. However, his reaction reminds me I need to have that talk with him soon.

Ash wakes when we take the exit for Kilcoole, yawning loudly as she stretches her arms out over her head.

“How do you feel?” I ask, looking at her through the mirror.

“A little more human.”

“You just need to get some of Ma’s famous roast beef in ya and you’ll feel better.” Ro pokes his head through the gap in the console to look at his sister.

“Gawd.” Ash rubs her tummy. “The thought of eating turns my stomach.”

“Jesus!” I exclaim, slamming on the brakes as a silver and black motorcycle overtakes me just as I’m due to take a left turn. The loud rumbling of the engine accelerates when the motorcycle picks up speed, tilting dangerously to one side as it cuts a sharp corner, racing ahead of us in a scary display of recklessness.

“Fucking Dillon,” Ash fumes. “If he kills himself on that thing, Mum will lose it.”

“He’s a bloody show-off,” Ro scoffs.

Passing no remark, I follow the narrow winding roads, driving past rows of tall trees and overgrown shrubbery and bumping along uneven asphalt, until we come to a property bordered by high stonewashed walls.

“Take a right through those gates,” Ronan instructs, pointing across me.

I navigate my SUV easily through the wide-open wrought-iron gates, following the long driveway that cuts across massive fields, bypassing impressively large greenhouses. “I thought your farm was a dairy farm,” I say, driving slowly as I spot the two-story farmhouse in the distance.

“It is,” Ash confirms, “but when Shane graduated with his agricultural degree five years ago, he took over as business manager, and he has made a lot of changes.”

“Diversification is critical for a lot of farmers today,” Ro continues explaining. “Now we grow organic vegetables and fruit, and we’re one of a growing number of flower farmers in Ireland.”

“Shane is your eldest brother. He’s the one getting married soon, right?” I’ve tried to memorize all the names, and who does what, so I don’t embarrass myself today.

“Someone’s been doing her homework,” Ro teases.

“I have,” I readily admit, easing my foot off the accelerator as we approach the big rustic stone farmhouse. Pulling the car into a spot beside Dillon’s motorcycle, I kill the engine. A few other cars are parked in front of the house, confirming the whole family is here for dinner. Wetting my suddenly dry lips, I rub my clammy hands down the front of my knee-length dress, willing my nerves to disappear.

Ronan hops out as a little girl with bouncing brown curls and big blue eyes comes bounding out of the house, quickly followed by two large dogs. The dogs instantly start barking when Ronan scoops his niece into his arms, burying his head in her tummy.

“Welcome to the madhouse,” Ash says, climbing out of the back seat as I slide from behind the wheel. She loops her arm in mine. “Don’t worry. We don’t bite. Expect tons of questions because my family are a bunch of nosy fuckers. My dad will have his head buried in *The Irish Farmer’s Journal*, Mum will pile your plate with food and insist you take seconds, and the boys will be rude arseholes because they just can’t help themselves.”

“Sounds fun,” I lie, wondering why the hell I agreed to this.

Throwing back her head, she howls with laughter. “Please can I take a picture of your face right now because it’s priceless.”

I thrust my elbow into her ribs. “I’ll get you back, just you wait and see. I’ll drag you to L.A., and you can see what it’s like to live in a social media warzone.”

“Sunday dinner at O’Donoghues *can* be scary, but I guarantee it’s not as scary as L.A. I think you’ll survive.” Ash winks, dragging me toward the slim woman standing at the door with a welcoming smile on her face. I’m assuming it’s her mom—Catherine O’Donoghue. Her silver hair is cut in a blunt bob, tucked behind her ears, and Ash shares her heart-shaped face and button nose.

“My darling girl,” her mom says when we reach her, pulling Ash into a big hug. “We’ve missed you.” I hang back, giving them privacy. Ro has already disappeared inside the house with his little niece in his arms, and the dogs have run off someplace.

“Missed you too, Ma.” Ash holds on tight, and a pang of envy swells in my chest. Being here makes me miss my parents. We FaceTime regularly, but it’s not the same. “Can’t breathe,” Ash chokes out a minute later. “I know you missed me, but that doesn’t mean you should hug me to death.”

“You’re too thin,” she says. “Just as well I made plenty of dinner.” Ash’s mom turns her attention to me. “You must be Grace. I’m Cath.” Reaching out, she reels me into a big hug. “You’re very welcome. We’ve been dying to meet you since Aisling and Ronan told us all about you.”

Tears stab the backs of my eyes as I sink into the comforting warmth of her hug. “Thank you for having me. Ash has told me lots about her family and the farm, and I’m excited to visit.”

We break our embrace, but she keeps ahold of my hands. “I could listen to you speak all day. I love the American accent.”

Ash laughs. “I said the same thing when we first met.”

Cath beams at me, stepping aside to let me enter. “Come on inside. Everyone is waiting to meet you.”

I step into the wide bright hallway with Ash, following her mom past a couple of open doorways until we enter a humongous kitchen. The right side of the large space houses wall-to-wall wooden cupboards and a myriad of kitchen appliances. A double-sided stove-slash-oven occupies prime real estate in the space, and a girl with long strawberry-blonde hair stands in front of it, stirring something in a pot. “This is Fiona, Shane’s fiancée and little Chloe’s mum,” Cath explains, taking my hand and leading me over to the stove.

Eyes bore into me from behind, and my heart does a little skip, which is just pathetic, because it really needs to get with the program where Dillon is concerned.

“Hello,” Fiona quietly says, smiling shyly.

“I’m Grace. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You’re a fucking clown,” someone with a deep voice bellows from behind us, claiming our attention. “Ma! D’ya see the state of this bleeding idiot?”

Turning around, I lock eyes with an older version of Ronan. I don’t know if it’s Shane or Ciarán, but he has the same dark curls and piercing blue eyes as his younger brother. He’s not quite as tall as Ro, and he’s stockier, but I could identify them as brothers from a lineup with no difficulty.

“Leave your brother alone, Shane.” Cath leads me toward the long wooden table. “And behave in front of our guest.”

“Da. You talk some sense into Dillon, will ya?” Shane says, gesturing wildly to the broad-shouldered man with thick salt-and-pepper hair sitting at the head of the table.

“Knock it off, Shane. You’re upsetting your mother,” Ash’s dad says without glancing up from his paper.

“Un-bloody-believable.” Shane throws his hands in the air. “Next time I’ll say nothing and let my brother kill himself on that goddamn bike. Am I the only one who cares he’s still riding that deathtrap?”

Dillon rolls his eyes from where he’s standing against the wall behind the table. He has one knee bent, the sole of his booted foot flat against the wall, and his arms are folded across his muscular chest.

Cath lets go of me, striding toward Dillon. She grabs his stubbly chin, yanking his face down to hers. “What have I told you about driving that bike while you’re hungover? You’ll give me a heart attack from worrying one of these days.”

“Shane is overreacting, like always.” Dillon throws an annoyed look at his brother. “I would’ve come with the others if I wasn’t sober enough to drive. I’m not completely reckless.”

A guy with reddish-brown hair snorts as he stretches across the table to grab a piece of bread from the wicker basket in the center.

Sadness washes over Cath’s finely lined face as she grabs Dillon’s cheeks. “Promise me you’ll be more careful. Please, Dillon. If anything happened to you, it’d kill us all.”

Dillon lowers his arms, reeling his mom into a bear hug. He holds her tight, closing his eyes momentarily. “Ma. There’s nothing to worry about. Shane just loves stirring shit.”

It didn’t sound like that to me. It seemed like his brother is genuinely concerned. From the way Dillon took that corner earlier, I’d say his brother’s fears are well-founded.

Dillon presses a kiss to the top of his mom’s head while she wraps her arms around him. Her head only reaches the bottom of his chest, and she looks so small and thin circled in his strong arms.

“And you love swanning around town pretending you’re god’s gift to women,” Shane retorts, smirking and flipping him the bird behind their mother’s back.

“There’s zero pretending involved,” Dillon smugly replies as his mom shucks out of their embrace.

“You just need the love of a good woman, Dillon,” Shane says, snaking his arm around his fiancée as she leans over him to set some bowls down on the table. Shane pulls Fiona into him for a quick kiss, and it’s a sweet gesture.

“Love is for pussies,” Dillon replies.

Cath messes up Dillon’s hair, shaking her head and fighting a smile. “Language, Dillon. You’d swear you were dragged up in a brothel.”

“You should’ve washed his mouth out with soap more often, Ma,” Shane quips.

“Feel like running off screaming yet?” Ro asks, coming up on the other side of me. He casually slings his arm around my shoulders.

“It’s fifty-fifty,” I tease, watching Dillon’s eyes narrow on Ronan’s arm.

“Who’s that?” a girlish voice asks, and I whip around, grateful when Ro’s arm naturally falls off my body.

“This is my friend, Vi—Grace,” Ash says, quickly recovering. “Sorry,” she mouths, cradling her cute three-year-old niece in her arms.

“Hi, Chloe.” I raise my hand for a high-five, and she slaps my palm enthusiastically with her tiny one.

“You speak funny.” She eyes me like I’m an alien species she’d love to examine.

“Grace is from America,” Ash explains.

Chloe’s eyes pop wide. “You’re from Disneyland?” she squeals, almost jumping out of Ash’s arms. “I’m going to Disneyland after my mommy and daddy marry. On our moonhoney.”

Laughter reverberates around the room. “It’s honeymoon, little munchkin,” Shane says, standing and coming around the table. He lifts his daughter from Ash’s arms. “And Disneyland is only one tiny, tiny part of America.” Shane hoists her onto one hip, pinning me with a smile. “I’m Shane. Nice to meet ya, Grace.”

Ash introduces me to the others then. The guy with the reddish-brown hair is her other brother Ciarán. He works for Microsoft as an IT programmer. The pretty brunette sitting beside him is his long-term girlfriend Susie. She’s a local hairdresser. She talks so fast I struggle to understand a word she says, but she’s smiley and pleasant and welcoming. Ash’s dad Eugene gives me a firm handshake, before returning to his paper. Ash giggles, mouthing “I told you” as she deposits big bowls heaving with meat and vegetables in the center of the table.

“Now we all know one another, let’s sit.” Cath ushers everyone to the table.

“You can sit beside me,” Ronan says, pulling out a chair for me.

Ash rolls her eyes. “Knock it off, Casanova. Grace is my friend, so she’s sitting beside me.”

“This is like being back at school,” Shane says. “Why aren’t you staking your claim, Dil?”

“Shut up, Shane,” Dillon replies, slathering lashings of butter on a piece of brown bread. “That’s enough shit stirring for one day.”

“Boys. I won’t tolerate this at the dinner table,” Cath says, her stern gaze bouncing between both her sons. “Zip it. Now.”

“You heard your mother,” Eugene says, reluctantly setting his paper aside.

I end up seated between Ash and Ro with Dillon across from me. Oh joy. Dillon’s searing-hot gaze drills into me as his mother places a loaded plate in front of me.

“Jesus, Ma.” Ciarán shakes his head. “There’s enough on that plate to feed two grown men.”

“Better to be too much than too little,” she says, finishing handing out plates.

My eyes are on stalks at the mountain of food on the table. The bowls in the middle are clearly the infamous second helpings I’ve heard about. I’ve no idea how Cath expects me to eat even a quarter of what is on my plate, but I’ll do my best, as I don’t want to insult her.

Conversation flows freely around the table as we tuck into the gorgeous roast beef dinner. Shane proudly tells me the beef and vegetables all came from the farm, and you can definitely taste the difference. It’s absolutely delicious. The meat is succulent and melts in my mouth—testament to Cath’s impressive cooking skills. Ash clearly inherited her mom’s talent in the kitchen, and I’ve been content to let her cook every night at our apartment when she offers because my skills are limited in the extreme.

When I compliment the gorgeous colorful bouquet holding court in an ornate vase in the center of the table, Cath informs me the mix of narcissi, roses, and sweet pea all came from their greenhouse. I tell them my mom is a great gardener and we have a rose garden back home. The discussion naturally moves to the flowers Fiona has chosen for her forthcoming nuptials and then into more general wedding conversation.

“How are the wedding plans coming along?” Ash asks her.

“Good,” she says, in between mouthfuls of her dinner. “Although I’m a little concerned about the bridesmaids’ dresses. They were shipped from New York three weeks ago, and they still haven’t arrived.”

“I’m sure they’ll arrive any day now, hon.” Shane squeezes his fiancée’s shoulder. “Try not to worry.”

“You should see them,” Ash says, turning to me. “They are the most gorgeous jade-green color.” Ash eyeballs her future sister-in-law. “Grace designs and makes dresses. She made that dress she’s wearing, and she’s making our gowns for the Trinity Ball.”

“Get out! Your dress is gorgeous. I can’t believe you made it yourself,” Susie says, running an admiring eye up and down my floral-print skater dress. It’s pink with a black trim and matching belt, and I teamed it with a white cardigan and black ballet flats.

“I used to make all of Aisling’s dresses when she was a little girl,” Cath reminisces. “I’ve still got my old Singer around here someplace.”

“I have a Singer back at my house in L.A.,” I admit.

“What’s L.A. like?” Ciarán asks. “Microsoft asked me to spend a couple of weeks in their Santa Monica offices on training, and I’ll be leaving a few days after the wedding.”

“Santa Monica is pretty. The beaches are gorgeous, and you’ll have to visit the pier.”

“Is it true it’s hot there all the time?” he asks, and I nod.

“Yep. There are lots of things I love about Ireland, but the cold weather definitely isn’t one of them,” I admit.

“Is it true all the women have fake boobs and blonde hair?” Cath asks, earning a round of titters from the table. “What?” she says, throwing her hands in the air. “I watched that *Selling Sunset* on Netflix, and all the women look like that!”

“Chrishell isn’t blonde,” Ro says.

“Her tits are fake,” Dillon adds, throwing it out there with casual confidence.

“How the hell would you know?” Ash asks, pushing her half-eaten plate away mid-groan.

“We watched the show at our place, and trust me, they’re not real.” He waggles his brows, and Shane snorts. Fiona whacks her fiancé on the arm.

“Wow. Did you put your magnifying glass up to the screen?” Ash teases.

Dillon smirks, flashing those dimples I’m such a sucker for. “Are you for real? Do you not see how little they wear on that show?”

“Google’s your friend.” Ro grins, holding up his cell phone. “Chrishell hasn’t hidden the fact she’s had boob implants.”

“Google isn’t always a reliable source of information, you know,” Ash says. “You shouldn’t believe everything you read online.”

“I’m betting you must’ve met tons of celebrities living in L.A.,” Cath says, her eyes lighting up. “I’m not into all that celebrity nonsense, but if I was ever in L.A., I’d definitely sign up for one of those tours. You know the ones that visit celeb homes. I’d love to—”

“I’m sure Grace is sick of everyone asking her about L.A.,” Dillon says, rudely cutting across his mother.

“The only celebrity your mother has ever gushed about is Lauren Mills,” Eugene supplies, rubbing his bulging belly as he leans back in his chair.

Holy hell.

What are the odds the only celebrity Ash’s mom is interested in is my mom? You couldn’t make this shit up, if you tried. Nerves fire at me, and I shift uneasily in my seat. Dillon looks over at me while Ash squeezes my knee under the table. Blood rushes to my head, making me lightheaded, and I’m terrified I’m about to hurl up everything I’ve eaten.

“Why have I never heard about this?” Ash glances between her parents with a frown.

“I used to go see all her movies before I was married and had you lot. Then the farm and family responsibilities took over.” Cath shrugs, beginning to clear away the plates.

“Sit down, Ma,” Dillon says, standing. “I’ve got it.” He takes the plates from her hand before walking over to the sink.

“You’re all too young to remember this,” Eugene says, continuing the story, oblivious to my inner panic. “But one of her movies premiered at the Savoy in Dublin, back in the day, and rumors were rife that Lauren was going to be there. We got your nana over to mind you lot, and we headed into town early so we could see her.”

“Unfortunately, Lauren had to pull out,” Cath says. “Her daughter fell out of a tree and broke her arm. She didn’t want to leave her. As a mother, I

respected her even more for that.”

I remember that day as if it was yesterday. I was six, and Reeve and I had managed to ditch our nanny in the house and sneak outside. Dad had just left to drive Mom to the airport. The workers from the construction company my parents had commissioned to build a treehouse in our back garden had just left for the day, and I wanted to investigate. Reeve tried to talk me out of it, but I was impatient, and I couldn't wait to see. The two-room treehouse was being built between two large trees, and a bunch of scaffolding propped the half-finished structure up. I got halfway up the side of one of the trees when I lost my footing and my balance. I can still remember Reeve's cries and screams as I fell through the air toward the ground. He caught me, and we both fell awkwardly, but he definitely cushioned the blow. I ended up with a broken arm, and Reeve suffered a sprained ankle, but it could've been a lot worse.

“She's a fine mother and a fine actress,” Mr. O' Donoghue says, yanking me out of the memory and back into the present.

All the blood drains from my face, and bile swims up my throat. This is what I get for concealing the truth. I feel terrible sitting here, after enjoying this woman's hospitality, not letting her know she's in the presence of Lauren Mills's daughter.

“Grace's surname is Mills,” Ronan says. “What a funny coincidence.”

And that's my cue to fess up. I'm not going to insult my friend's mother by lying to her. Clearing my throat, I grip Ash's hand under the table. “Actually, it's not really a coincidence.”

Ro frowns, and a quiet hush settles over the table. Expectant faces stare back at me.

“You might as well tell them,” Dillon says, clawing a hand through his white-blond hair as he resumes his previous position against the wall. His intense gaze settles on mine as he gives me a quick reassuring nod.

“Wait? You know?” Ash's eyes pop wide, her gaze darting between me and her brother.

“He saw the photo by my bed,” I confirm.

“So, you two are an item?” Shane asks, pointing between us.

“No!” Me, Dillon, and Ronan say all at once.

Dillon glares at Ronan. Ronan returns it and then some.

“But you said—”

“Shut up, Shane,” Ronan and Dillon say in unison, trading more pointed looks.

“My mom is Lauren Mills,” I blurt, just needing to get it out. “I’m her only daughter, Vivien Grace.”

Shocked silence echoes around the table with my revelation. “I remember that accident you were just talking about,” I blurt, turning to face Cath. “I was six and too impatient to wait for our new treehouse to be built. I was scaling one of the trees to take a look when I lost my footing and fell. I was lucky I didn’t break more bones.” I’m deliberately leaving Reeve out of the story, because I’m not prepared to get into all that.

“How come Dillon and Ash know? Why didn’t I know?” Ronan asks. Hurt splays across his face, and I feel so bad.

“I didn’t intentionally leave you out, but I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

“Viv came to Ireland to study and to get away from the paparazzi in L.A.,” Ash explains. “It’s not something she wants to publicize, which is why she planned to keep it quiet.”

“I don’t believe it,” Cath whispers. Her hand is clasped to her chest. “But I see it now. You look so much like her!”

I’m sure she’s being polite because my hazel eyes and brown hair are inherited from my dad, but I got my height and my curves from Mom. “I didn’t mean to deceive anyone,” I quietly admit. “And I apologize if I’ve caused any offense.”

“Oh, honey. No.” Cath gets up, giving me a quick hug. “There’s no need to apologize. I just wish I’d known Lauren Mills’s daughter was coming for dinner. I’d have taken out the fancy china.”

The look of regret on her face, combined with her words, breaks the sudden tension, and everyone bursts out laughing.

They ask me a few polite questions after that while I shoot off a message to Mom. She's an early riser, so she should be awake in an hour or two. I plan to call her and put Cath on the phone. I'm sure she'll get a huge kick out of that, as Mom will when I explain.

The rest of the men get up to help Dillon with the cleanup after dinner, and I trail Ash out to the large orchard at the back of her house.

"I had no idea Ma was a closet Lauren Mills fan or I would've warned you," she says, lighting up a cigarette.

"It's okay. At least it's out in the open now. I didn't feel comfortable lying to your family. Especially when they've been so nice to me." I trail my fingers along the bark of the apple trees as we walk between them, wrapping my cardigan more tightly around my torso. A light breeze wafts through the orchard, sending chills down my spine. "I think I hurt Ronan's feelings though."

"Ro needs to toughen up. He's too sensitive sometimes."

"I like that about him. Too often men are told they must be strong. What's wrong with showing vulnerability?"

"You need to speak to him." She slants me a pointed look, before leaning back against one of the trees, blowing smoke circles into the air.

"Speak to who?" someone familiar asks, lifting all the tiny hairs on my arms.

"This is a private conversation, Dil. Butt out."

"Chloe wants you to push her on the swing," Dillon replies.

"C'mon." Ash stubs her cigarette out on the tree, gesturing for me to come with.

"Don't let Shane see you doing that." Dillon smirks. "He'll probably have a heart attack."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," she says with a cheeky grin.

"I want to speak to the princess alone," he says, earning an instant growl from me.

"Dillon. Please." Ash harrumphs. "Would it kill you to be nice?"

"I'm trying to play nice, and you're getting in my way." He gives her a gentle shove. "Shoo. I'll escort her highness to you when we're done."

"You're insufferable," I huff, folding my arms more tightly around myself as a blast of cold air sweeps past me, blowing strands of my hair into my face.

"You want me to kick him in the nuts?" Ash offers.

“It’s okay. I can handle Dillon,” I reply, brushing knotty hair out of my face.

Ash wiggles her fingers, wandering off.

“Is that right?” Dillon lounges against the tree Ash just vacated, crossing his feet at the ankles. The devilish glint in his eye, combined with his lazy, lopsided sexy smile, does weird things to my insides, and I’m questioning my sanity in agreeing to be left alone with him. Honestly, this guy’s facial expressions should be outlawed in all four corners of the globe.

“What do you want?” I want to minimize my time out here with him alone. Number one, because I don’t trust myself with him, and two, it’s fucking freezing and it feels like my toes are turning blue.

“That’s a loaded question.” Flashing me a panty-melting smile, he lights up a joint, as if he has all the time in the world.

“C’mon, Dillon. I’m freezing my ass off here.”

Startled eyes meet mine. He pushes off the tree, stalking toward me, and I gulp at the look of determination on his face. “Hold this.” He thrusts the joint at me, and I frown. He cocks his head to one side. “It’s not going to bite.”

Rolling my eyes, I take it from him, bringing the end to my lips without invitation, inhaling deeply. Amusement glints in his eyes as he shucks his black jacket off. Stepping closer, he takes my free hand, sliding the sleeve of his jacket down the length of my arm. A flurry of delicious tingles spreads along my skin at the feel of his callused fingers against mine. Forgetting how to breathe, I almost choke on the smoke filling my lungs and my mouth, and he chuckles, patting my back until I’ve composed myself.

“I keep forgetting how precious you are.”

His grin is smug in the extreme, and I shove him away, handing the joint back to him. “I’m not some prissy precious princess,” I declare, angrily thrusting my other arm into his jacket. I’m too cold to be stupidly proud in this moment. It feels warm, and it smells like him. “And I’ve told you to stop calling me that.”

“Why does it bug you so much?” He hollows his cheeks as he sucks in a long drag. “Your boyfriend calls you that or something?” A muscle ticks in his jaw as he drops down on his butt, pressing his back up against the tree.

Sitting down beside him, I tuck my knees into my chest. “I told you he isn’t my boyfriend anymore, and no. If you must know, my dad is the only

one who calls me princess, and he says it in a much nicer way than you do.”

“I’m sorry,” he quietly says. “I know I’m being a dick. It’s my default setting.”

“I’m beginning to realize that.” I hold out my hand for the joint. Ash can drive us back to the city. “Hit me.”

He turns his head to the side, and his nose brushes against my cheek, igniting every nerve ending in that part of my face. His eyes probe mine, and I forget how to breathe again. It’s becoming a common, concerning problem in his presence. He stares deep into my eyes, and I could get lost in the mysterious depths of his soulful gaze. “You have the most stunning eyes,” he admits, his voice husky and threaded with raw sexiness. “You have these little gold and green flecks I’ve never seen before. They’re enchanting.” He leans in closer, and our noses bump. His warm breath fans across my cheek, as his heated gaze sweeps over every inch of my face.

“Thank you,” I rasp, no longer feeling cold. His spicy scent clings to his jacket, swirling around me, mixing with his minty breath and the citrusy smell emanating from his skin. The overall effect is intoxicating, and I’m in uncharted territory with this guy. I should run a million miles from him right now, yet I can’t ignore the instinctual pull to stay close to him.

“Let me try something,” he says, and my heart flip-flops behind my rib cage.

Leaning his head back against the tree trunk, he takes a long, slow drag of the joint, closing his lips and trapping the smoke inside. Twisting to one side, he reaches for me. My heart jackhammers in my chest, and butterflies swoop into the pit of my stomach. Long slim fingers touch my cheek, drawing my face in closer to his. He rubs his thumb along my lips before pushing it into my mouth. On instinct, I suck his thumb deeper into my mouth, laving my tongue against his coarse flesh, and his eyes turn a darker shade of green.

He brings his lips closer, his mouth hovering over mine, until there’s barely any gap between us. His eyes dip to my mouth, and I squeeze my thighs together as liquid lust gushes to my core. Keeping his gaze locked on my lips, he removes his thumb before blowing smoke directly into my mouth. Gently, he pinches my lips closed, trapping the fumes inside, and I inhale deep into my lungs. The heady scent of Mary J swirls around me, loosening my limbs, my inhibitions, and my tongue.

“More,” I whisper, incapable of wrenching my eyes from his gorgeous face. Dillon could be a model with those high cheekbones and that strong jawline. He has a unique edgy look with the hair, his ink, and his multiple piercings. Let’s not mention his incredible body, or that fascinating dick piercing, because I’m hanging by a thread here.

I wish we didn’t share such a strong attraction, because I already know I can’t act on it.

If Reeve decimated my heart, a guy like Dillon O’Donoghue would set fire to it; burning it until only charred fragments remained.

Despite my acknowledgment, and the danger I’m in, my ass refuses to budge. We sit side by side in his family’s orchard, under a blossoming apple tree, sharing a joint in companionable silence. After a while, I’ve forgotten why we’re even out here. “How’d this happen?” I ask, softly touching the little ridge on his nose.

“Got into a fight at school. Asshole shoved my face into a wall. Broke my nose in three places.”

“Ouch.” Having suffered relatively recent injuries, I can almost feel his pain.

“I broke his jaw in two places, so I’d call it even.” He shrugs, taking another pull from the almost finished joint. His hand moves to my hip, and he pulls me in closer until our bodies are touching, side to side. Arousal spikes in my blood and drenches my panties. I’m trying to talk myself out of climbing into his lap when his lips brush against mine. It’s a teasing touch. The lightest caress, but I feel it everywhere, and I mean *everywhere*. He touches my chin, and I part my lips, letting him fill my mouth with more smoky temptation.

“You have the most flawless skin,” he whispers, dotting feather-soft kisses along my cheek while drawing circles on my hip through my dress with his thumb. His touch is electric, and I can’t ever remember feeling so turned on from just a few simple touches. Dillon has magic hands and magnetic lips, and I’m slowly falling under his spell, which is so not a good thing.

“What are you doing?” I manage to choke out, grappling with the last vestiges of my self-control.

“I don’t know,” he whispers, pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

Throwing the joint to the ground, he clasps my face firmly in his palms. “I just know I want more of it.”

Before I can utter a single word, his mouth crashes down on mine, and my protest dies on my tongue.

“Vivien Grace!” Ash shouts. “Get your tongue out of my brother’s mouth and your arse over here now!”

I rip my lips from Dillon’s and scramble to my feet.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

That shouldn’t have happened, and I’m glad Ash rode to the rescue before the kiss turned more heated.

“Running scared, Hollywood?” Dillon asks, lifting one knee as he smirks in my direction.

“That never happened,” I coolly reply, like my heart isn’t about to sprout wings and erupt from my chest. “We were stoned, and it was barely a kiss anyway.” His lips had only just collided with mine when Ash staged her timely intervention.

Scrubbing a hand over his prickly jaw, he pins me with a cocky look. “If you say so.”

“Ahh. I’m going.” I stomp off toward his sister, flustered and angry with myself, hating how his dark chuckle follows me through the orchard.

“What in the ever-loving fuck was that?” Ash asks, looping her arm through mine and dragging me away.

“Oh God.” I massage my throbbing temples. “I have no clue. It looked worse than it was, and there were no tongues involved.”

“I didn’t know whether I should interrupt or not,” she admits, steering me toward the house.

“I’m glad you did before it turned into a full-on make-out session. Ugh.” I rub a hand across my tingly lips. “God only knows where those lips

have been.” Ash cracks up laughing, and I thump her on the arm. “It’s not funny.” I tug on her jacket as we reach the door, stopping her from entering. “By the way, I’m stoned, and you’re driving home.”

“No problem, but you need to have some apple tart first. Mom took out the fancy china.” She grins, yanking me into the house, my lips still tingling from that barely there kiss.

Shoving my purse at Ash, I squeal, racing across the terminal in Dublin Airport and flinging myself into Audrey’s arms. We hug it out for ages, forcing other passengers to walk around us, but I don’t care. I’ve missed my bestie. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Me too. I missed your bony ass.”

“I’m feeling left out,” Ash says, pouting as I shuck out of Audrey’s embrace. “And you’re causing a traffic jam,” she adds, pointing toward the crowd now streaming through the doors into the terminal.

I make quick introductions, and then we hightail it out of there.

Ninety minutes later, the three of us—plus Cat—are huddled in a corner booth of a swanky bar just off St. Stephen’s Green. While I’m keen to show my bestie the traditional pubs we usually frequent, I thought she’d appreciate a classier, more modern bar to start off our mini pub crawl. We can’t get too trashed today. Jet lag will kick Audrey in the ass soon, plus tomorrow is St. Patrick’s Day. We’ll need our stamina for the nonstop party that lasts all day, if Ash is to be believed. “I can’t believe the sun is shining,” Audrey says, moaning appreciatively as she tastes her first sip of the pink gin cocktail I recommended. “Viv hasn’t stopped bitching and whining about the cold and the rain.”

I bump her shoulder. “Hey. I haven’t complained *that* much.”

She bats her lashes at me. “Do you know you?”

I laugh, slurping my cocktail through a straw. “That’s been the hardest adjustment. I guess I’m a Cali girl through and through.”

“I still can’t believe you dated he who shan’t be named,” Cat says, staring off into space with a slightly dreamy look on her face that irritates me.

After Sunday, I decided to bring Cat, Jamie, and Conor into my confidence. They're the main crowd we hang around with, and it didn't seem right anymore not to tell them. The guys couldn't have cared less, especially Conor who pretty much keeps to himself. Cat was shocked, only because she seems to share Ash's *Rydeville Elite* obsession. She's been a little off with me since, but I'm hoping it's only temporary.

I didn't give her a blow-by-blow account of the shit Reeve put me through, but she knows enough to wipe that swoony expression off her face.

"He's been keeping his nose clean," Audrey says. "Reeveron speculation is still rampant, but he's keeping his distance from her. I saw this post he put up the other day. It was clearly about you. He—"

"I don't want to know, Rey," I semi-lie. "I'm finally starting to feel less heartsore, and I'd rather not be reminded of all that crap. Ireland's been good to me in that way."

Sympathy skates across her face. "I'm sorry. I won't say another word."

"Did Viv tell you she kissed my brother last Sunday?" Ash just drops it into the conversation with a faux innocent expression on her face. I was a little worried she might have an issue with this thing—whatever it is—between me and Dillon, but she seems to be cool with it.

"You did?" Audrey squeezes my shoulders. "Good for you, babe."

"I was planning on telling you," I admit, giving Ash the stink eye, "but it wasn't really a kiss."

"Their lips were pressed together, and he had his hands *all* over her," Ash confides, and I glare at her disloyal ass. "I'd call that a kiss."

"Same," Cat agrees, chiming in.

"I was stoned!" I blurt.

"Excuses, excuses." Audrey fails to disguise her grin.

"He irritates the fuck out of me most of the time!" I protest.

"Passionate." Audrey waggles her brows. "Tell me more."

"You'll get to meet both my brothers tomorrow," Ash says. "They're playing a set in Whelans. There'll be music all day and night, and the drink will be flowing."

"You'll be off your tits by six o'clock," Cat supplies.

"I've always wanted to celebrate St. Paddy's Day in Ireland," Audrey says. "This is going to be so much fun!"

“So, what’s going on with you and the sexy Irish rocker?” Audrey asks the following morning as we lie side by side in my bed.

“Nothing much.” I scrunch the comforter between my fingers. “The kiss really was a non-kiss. He’d only just placed his lips against mine when Ash interrupted.”

“And that was a good thing...or not?” she inquires, sliding her hand under her long red hair.

I eyeball my bestie. “I don’t know.” I worry my lower lip between my teeth. “It scares me.”

“Dillon does or the thought of what he represents?” she quietly asks.

I contemplate her question for a few seconds. “Both, I think. He makes me feel things, Rey. Things I can’t handle yet. The chemistry between us intimidates me, and I’m terrified that if I let him in, he’ll destroy whatever is left of my heart.” Tucking my hands under my head, I share my truths with my bestie. “I didn’t come here to find another man. I came here to find myself.”

“Can’t it be both?”

“I don’t want to complicate an already complicated situation, and I can’t risk my heart again. It’s still in desperate need of repair.”

“I’m going to be honest, because that’s how we always roll.” She leans over and hugs me. “I love you like a sister. You know that, right?”

“Yes, and you know that’s how I feel too.”

“I just want you to be happy, whether that’s single, reunited with Reeve, with Dillon, or some other guy.”

“Why would you say that about Reeve? You know I—”

“I’m not telling you what to do, Viv, or putting ideas in your head.”

“What are you saying then?”

“That you have options, and I will always support your decisions. I’ve been talking more regularly with Alex,” she admits, and my eyes pop wide. “Just as friends,” she rushes to assure me. “I’m still seeing Troy, and Alex is casually dating. But he’s told me Reeve has reached out to him, and he’s making amends, putting more effort into their friendship. Alex said Reeve is missing you like crazy and he’s seen the error of his ways. He wants to fight for you, but he’s giving you space like you asked.”

“I’m not getting back with him.” I shake my head. “He betrayed me. The trust is gone.”

“I know, babe.” She props up on one elbow. “You feel like that now, but I speak from experience when I say you don’t know how you’ll feel in six months’ time, one year’s time, or two years from now.”

“No offense, Rey, but you can’t compare your breakup to mine.” I sit upright in the bed, resting my spine against the headboard. “Alex didn’t cheat on you in front of the whole world. That’s the big difference.”

She sits up beside me. “I know, but you and Reeve have a shit ton of history Alex and I don’t. That’s a big difference too.” She scrubs her hands down her face. “Ugh. I’m not explaining this right.” She turns her head to the side so we’re looking at one another. “Maybe things are completely over between you two, or maybe they’re not. But you’re here now. In a gorgeous place. You’ve made new friends. Found a new scene. And you’re glowing, babe. You’re turning a corner, and I think you should make the most of every opportunity.”

“You think I should get with Dillon?”

“I think you should do whatever you feel like doing. You have no ties, no responsibilities, no shithead paparazzi trailing your every move. You’re young, free, and single, and you can do whatever you want, do whomever you want,” she adds with a naughty glint in her eye.

“One part of me wants to do it, because I know it’s the first step in truly moving on, but another part of me is sick at the thought of sleeping with anyone else.” I bark out a bitter laugh. “It’s ridiculous, right?”

She vigorously shakes her head. “No. Not at all. I can relate, but here’s the thing. I didn’t start properly moving on until *after* I started dating again. Look at it this way,” she adds, pulling her knees into her chest. “Being with someone else is either going to help you to move on or confirm that things with Reeve aren’t fully reconciled.”

“What if I’m not ready to face that truth yet?” I whisper.

“Then you’re not ready.” She shrugs. “There’s no rule book for this. Just do what feels right. What makes you happy. But promise me you’ll try.”

“I am trying.”

“I’m proud of you, Viv, and I hope you’re proud of yourself too. You are stronger than most people I know. To come here after what happened and to pick up the pieces and start over in a new place is huge. Not many people could do it.”

“Heartache is a strong motivator. I’m not going to let what happened define who I am for the rest of my life. And no guy is going to determine

how I live my life.”

“Atta girl.” She yanks me into another hug. “Now, let’s get up. We’ve got a parade to see.”

“Excuse me,” I say, holding the tray aloft as I edge my way through the crowded bar. The walls rattle with heavy beats as bands play on all available stages at Whelans.

“I got it,” a man with a familiar husky voice says from behind me, and I almost drop the tray in fright. Dillon chuckles, taking the tray as his mouth presses to my ear. “Do I make you nervous, Hollywood?”

“Don’t be stupid,” I lie. “As if.” I brush damp strands of hair behind my ears. It’s hot as hell in here, and I’m glad I took Ash’s advice and dressed casually and comfortably in jeans and a green T-shirt. A sprig of shamrock is pinned to my chest, and both Audrey and I have miniature Irish flags painted on our cheeks and green streaks in our hair.

“You’re really getting into the spirit of things, huh?” Dillon effortlessly holds the tray overhead with one hand as he rakes his gaze over me from head to toe. Placing his free hand on my lower back, he steers us toward our usual table in the corner. My skin burns from his touch, even through my shirt, confirming what I already know—I’m fucked when it comes to this guy.

I’ve been mulling over my conversation with Audrey in the hours since we talked, and maybe she’s right. Maybe I need to stop freaking out about this attraction and just let nature take its course. It’s not as if a guy like Dillon would ever be serious about someone like me. He’s a serial fucker, rotating bed partners as often as he changes clothes. He probably just wants to nail the Yank and brag about it to his friends. Maybe I need to take a leaf out of his book and just treat it like a casual fuck with no strings attached.

It's only sex. And if it'll help me move forward with my life, then maybe it's worth the risk.

"Earth to Hollywood," he says, glaring at a guy blocking our path. "Where'd you go?"

Hollywood is almost as annoying as princess, but at least it doesn't remind me of how much I'm missing Dad every time I hear it. "This will probably be the only time I'm in Ireland on St. Patrick's Day. I'm making the most of it," I shout to be heard over the noise of the crowd. "You weren't at the parade," I add.

"Aw, did you miss me?" he purrs, straight in my ear, making me jump. Tremors zip up and down my spine, and a throbbing ache vibrates between my legs.

"Like a hole in the head," I joke, as a short, stocky guy wearing an Irish rugby jersey slams into my shoulder while walking past. Beer sloshes onto the floor from the three pint glasses he's carrying. My sneakers skid on the sticky liquid, and I almost take a tumble.

"Watch it, dickhead!" Dillon snaps, glowering at the guy. He slides his arm around my waist, holding me steady. "I fucking hate how every asshole and his mother crawls out of the woodwork on Paddy's Day."

"It's an experience, for sure," I agree, as we reach our table.

Dillon carefully sets the tray down in front of Ash. Audrey quirks a brow at me, blatantly checking Dillon out while I distribute drinks. "I didn't get you a drink," I explain, looking up at him. "I didn't realize you guys had arrived."

"It's fine. We've got to head straight to our sound check."

"Introduce me, Viv," Audrey says, staring shamelessly at Dillon.

"Dillon, this is my bestie from L.A., Audrey. Audrey, Dillon."

Dillon chuckles, murmuring bestie under his breath like it's a naughty word. "What's up?" He jerks his chin in acknowledgment.

"It's good to meet the guy I've heard so much about," she says, and a familiar smirk tilts the corners of his mouth. My jaw slackens, and I make a slicing motion with my hand, cautioning her to quit that shit. Dillon already sports an ego the size of the planet, and he needs no more encouragement.

Pale arms encircle his waist from behind, and I'd recognize those nasty red talons anywhere. It's the skank from that night at my place. Ignoring the rapid beating of my heart and the acid crawling up my throat, I scoot past Ash and Cat, plopping down in the seat beside Audrey.

Dillon extracts the girl's arms from his waist, pushing her off without looking at her. Leaning down, he places his large palms on the table, peering into my eyes. "You're coming up to watch our set, right?"

"We wouldn't miss it," Audrey says. "I can't wait to hear if you're as good as Viv says." Dillon's eyes stretch wide, and, if I'm not mistaken, a slight flush stains his cheeks.

Interesting. Maybe he's not quite as arrogant as I thought.

Behind Dillon, the skank is seething, looking like she wants to rip my head off my shoulders.

"That sounds like a challenge." Dillon's gaze flits between me and Audrey. "And everyone knows I never run from a challenge." Smirking, again, he straightens up, fiddling with his eyebrow ring. "I'll catch you later," he adds, spotting Ronan, Conor, and Jamie draining their beers and standing. He maintains eye contact with me for a few seconds, spearing me with a sexy grin before he walks to the end of the table to join his friends. The skank plasters herself to his side, and he pries her off, crossing his arms as he says something to her. Her head whips around, and she glares at me before storming off into the other room. Good riddance, if you ask me.

"Woah. My ovaries are on fire." Audrey fans her face. "You held out on me," she accuses, narrowing her eyes. "He is so fucking hot and sexy as shit. You should totally climb that tree and ride that pierced cock until he's given you at least four orgasms."

I spit my drink all over the table. I cannot believe she just said that in public.

Actually, I can. It's so Audrey.

"Girl, if you don't want him, I'll happily take him off your hands," she adds.

Ash pops her head in between us, looking a little green in the face. "I almost barfed listening to that. Gross, so gross. That's my brother! A sister should never hear that shit!" She visibly shudders, and I laugh.

"Your brother is hot. Both of them are," Audrey says. "You didn't fall off the ugly tree either. Good looks clearly run in the family."

"Sucking up has totally redeemed you," Ash quips. "But you should know both my brothers only have eyes for this one." She jabs her finger in my chest.

"I noticed," Audrey says, as Ash tugs on my arm.

“You should talk to Ro now.” Her eyes lift to her youngest brother, and I see he’s looking straight at me.

“Now?” I shriek. “As in, just before they go on stage?”

“Yep.” She fixes me with a no-nonsense expression. “Ro looked like he was ready to beat the shit out of Dillon just now. He’s not blind. He sees the sparks flying between you.”

“You don’t seem to mind the idea of Dillon and Viv but not Ro and Viv,” Audrey says, voicing what I haven’t been brave enough to ask. “Why is that?”

“Viv isn’t attracted to Ro. She’s attracted to Dillon,” Ash states matter-of-factly. “And Dillon is attracted to her. Oh, he’s trying to fight it, but we all see it.” Her features soften as she looks at me. “I don’t want to pressure you. I would never do that. I just think you two could be good for one another. I’m excited to think Dil might finally have found a girl worthy of risking a relationship for.”

I lift my palms as panic bubbles up my throat. “Woah. Let’s not get carried away here. We’ve got chemistry. Right now, that’s all it is.”

“I hope you explore it, but I’m here for you, no matter what.”

“It won’t get awkward if anything does happen?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. As long as we agree that whatever happens between you and my brother won’t impact our friendship.”

“I can get with that plan.” I don’t know how easy it would be to separate things, but I can try.

“Ro needs to understand he’s out of the running,” Ash adds. “Please put him out of his misery. He’s my little bro and I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“You know I’d never do that, Ash. Ro is a great friend.”

“Tell him that,” she says, giving me a nudge. “Please, just tell him.”

I know she’s right. I also know I’ve been delaying this talk, because the thought of hurting Ronan upsets me, but I can’t let this linger. Whether anything happens between Dillon and me doesn’t even matter. Ro needs to know he’s a friend and nothing more.

Drawing a brave breath, I approach him just before the band leaves the room. “Hey. Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure.” A happy smile covers his mouth as he angles his body into mine. “I’ll meet you guys up there,” he says to the others. Dillon drills me with a look, but I pretend I don’t see it. “So, what’s up?”

My tongue darts out, wetting my dry lips. Fuck. How do you say this to someone without coming off like a conceited jerk and without hurting his pride as well as his feelings? Shoving my hands into the back pockets of my skinny jeans, I force a shaky smile on my face. “You know you’re one of my best friends, right, Ro?”

His eyes examine mine as uncertainty filters into his gaze. “Sure.”

“I was so nervous coming to Ireland, but meeting you, Ash, and Cat was a stroke of luck because you’ve made this experience everything I’d hoped it would be.”

“What are you getting at?” He folds his arms across his chest.

I purposely soften my expression and lower my voice. “I value your friendship so much, Ro, but that’s all there will ever be between us.”

Hurt flickers in his eyes. “Because of Dil?” His voice hums with quiet resignation.

“No.” I shake my head, hating to have to say this, but I don’t want him harboring false hope. “Because the feelings I have for you are strictly platonic. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for how you feel, and it’s cool. I appreciate you telling me.” He takes a step forward. “Was that it?”

I nod. “Are we okay?” I reach out to touch his arm before thinking better of it.

He smiles, but it doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “Of course. Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

I sigh as he walks off, trudging back to our table with a heavy heart. Grabbing my vodka, I knock back a large mouthful as I slide into my seat. “I hate you for making me do that,” I tell Ash.

“It had to be done.”

“Yeah. I know.” I swallow over the lump in my throat.

“He’ll get over it. Ro falls in love every other week. By next week, he’ll have forgotten all about you.”

I hope she’s right.

Alcohol sloshes through my veins, and I’m nicely buzzed as we push our way to the front of the crowd in the upstairs room where Toxic Gods has

just started their set. “Over here,” Ash hollers, guiding us over to the right, away from Aoife and the other groupies.

My eyes latch on to Dillon as I sway my hips in time to the rhythmic beats of the music. He looks so good up there, wearing his signature black, his clothes already clinging to his toned physique with the stifling heat of the packed room. The Irish flag is wrapped around his slim waist, in a nod to the occasion, and a green bandana is tied around his brow. Apart from that, he’s remarkably low-key, but I guess this day isn’t as much of a novelty for the locals.

The band rips through a montage of covers and original songs, whipping the crowd into a frenzy. I guzzle water as we dance, wishing I could douse myself in it. Little beads of sweat pool between my breasts and cluster on the back of my neck, and a fine line drips down my spine. Yanking a hair tie off my wrist, I pull my hair into a messy bun on the top of my head, but it only grants light relief.

“He can’t keep his eyes off you,” Audrey shouts in my ear.

I look up at the stage, finding Dillon’s dark gaze already locked on mine. I get a thrill knowing I’m the one he’s constantly staring at. Girls are screaming at him, throwing bras and panties onto the stage, and he only has eyes for me. The atmosphere is already electric in the room, but the energy pulsing between him and me is enough to power a nuclear generator. I’ve caught a few side-eyes from different girls, but I’m careful to keep my distance. The irony isn’t lost on me. Maybe I have a type and I’m destined to go for guys other girls want.

I sincerely hope that isn’t true because I’m sick of other women hankering after my man.

The guys finish their set to the enthusiastic roaring of the crowd. Dillon jumps down off the stage, after passing his guitar to Conor, as the next band is getting ready to rock it out. Women grab at him as he makes his way toward us, but he has singular focus—me.

“Holy shit, babe,” Audrey roars in my ear. “He looks like he wants to eat you alive.”

I slap her arm. “Not helping!” I’m practically hyperventilating at the hungry glint in his eyes as he heads straight for me.

“Uh-oh.” Ash pulls me down, shouting in my ear. “You’re in trouble. Just remember to make him double bag it!”

“Ash!” I shriek, as she and Audrey burst out laughing. “I’m not sleeping with your brother!”

Lips brush my ear. “Is that a challenge?” Dillon grabs my hips from behind, tugging at my earlobe, and it’s like there’s a direct line to my pussy. My core throbs, screaming at me for release, as I push back against his body. He grinds his erection against my ass as his hand slips under my T-shirt. “Well?” he asks.

“Well, what?” I whimper, moving my body in sync with his movements and the music reverberating around the room.

His deep chuckle sends shivers cascading down my spine. “Is that a challenge? Because you know how I feel about those.”

“It’s...not,” I stutter.

Tingles race across my neck when he presses his lips there. “You don’t sound sure,” he whispers against my overheated skin, and my legs almost

buckle.

“I’m not one of your groupies,” I say, angling my head so I can see his face.

All playfulness disappears from his face. “I know you’re not.” His earnest tone goes some way toward reassuring me. “But you can’t deny we have chemistry,” he adds, sweeping his fingers along my cheek. Jerking his head back, he tosses waves of damp white-blond hair out of his face.

“I won’t lie about that.” I stare deep into his startling green eyes. “But I’m still not sleeping with you.”

He lowers his face to mine until there’s only a tiny gap between us. “Yet,” he whispers, as his tongue darts out, licking across the seam of my lips.

Gingerly, I lift my hand, trailing my fingers softly across the dark stubble on his chin and cheeks.

“Hmm.” Closing his eyes, he leans into my touch as we’re jostled from the side. We should probably leave the dance floor, but I don’t want to break this connection. I feel like I’m getting a glimpse of the real Dillon, and I like it.

He moves us back a little to where it’s less crowded, and he continues to hold me like this, with his chest to my back, as we dance, grinding against one another, uncaring who sees. There is no sign of Ash, Audrey, or Cat, but I’m not worried. I know my Irish friends will look after my bestie, and I’m sure they just left to give us some privacy.

Dillon’s hands wander, palming my stomach, lingering on my hips, and gliding up and down my arms as we gyrate together to the sound of our own beat. Nibbling on my neck, he licks a path up and down my sensitive flesh with his hot tongue, and low moans trickle out of my lips. His expert fingers work my body into a tizzy until I’m no longer in control. My head is thrust back on his shoulder, my eyes are closed, my body flush against him, and I’ve never felt more wanton or more desired. I’m majorly turned on by the sizzling touch of his hands and the feel of his hard-on digging into my back. I’m seriously considering eating my words and dragging him someplace to have my wicked way with him when something cold and sticky unexpectedly hits my face and my upper body, and I scream.

“What the fuck, Breda?” Dillon snaps, as I blink my eyes open, wincing when liquid drips from my eyelashes into my eyes. The black-haired skank smirks at me, holding an empty pint glass in her hand. Looking down, I see

my shirt took the brunt of her jealousy. Sopping wet cotton adheres to my stomach and my chest like a second skin. Warm hands grip my upper arms as Dillon turns me around to face him. He curses, glaring at Breda over my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I need to go." I attempt to wriggle out of his arms, but he holds me tight, piercing me with a stern look.

"You're not going anywhere."

"I'm a fucking mess, Dillon," I say, in case he's missed the obvious. I bet I'm rocking a great pair of panda eyes, and last time I checked, that shit isn't attractive.

"I have a spare shirt in my bag, and I'll take you to the staff toilets to clean up. She's not ruining your night." He slides his hands down my arms, turning one of my palms over and lacing his fingers in mine. It's a sweet gesture, one I would never have thought him capable of.

"C'mon, Dillon. It was only a joke," Breda says from behind me.

Keeping my fingers locked in Dillon's, I turn around to face her.

"You're a clingy jealous cunt, and I'm sick of your shit," Dillon seethes, fixing her with the full extent of his disgust. "You're not welcome around us anymore, so fuck off."

"You're dumping me for *her*?!" she screeches, waving her hands around like a crazy person. Her eyeballs are rolling around in her head, and she's clearly high as a kite.

"That would imply we were in a relationship, which we aren't," Dillon hisses. "We fucked one time, Breda. *One time*, and it was a big mistake. I've tried letting you down gently, but fuck that shit. You don't get to throw your drink in anyone's face. Grace hasn't done anything to you, and that shit you just pulled is not on. In case it's not clear, I'm not interested in you, now or ever, so back the fuck off before I have you thrown out."

He doesn't wait for her to reply, leading me off the dance floor to a staff door at the back of the room. A burly man with heavy eyebrows and a thickset mustache guards the entrance, but he nods at Dillon, stepping aside to let us enter.

"I'm really sorry about that," Dillon says, glancing worriedly at me as he pulls me along the narrow hallway. A few bodies loiter inside a large room on our left, but no one bats an eye as we pass by.

"It's not your fault your psycho radar is out of whack," I deadpan. Or maybe it is. I don't know. I'm too wet, sticky, and pissed off to care.

“I’m pretty sure it is my fault.” He shoots me a sheepish look as he leads me into a small coatroom. Coats and jackets hang off hooks on the wall, and a variety of bags are stuffed into open cubby holes on the other side of the space. “I only brought her to your party to wind you up, and now she’s like a dose of bad breath I can’t shake.” He removes a black duffel bag from one of the holes, dropping it on the ground.

“Nice analogy,” I drawl, plucking at the wet material clinging to my flat stomach as he rummages in his bag.

“Here.” He thrusts a wad of black cotton at me while bending over his open bag. “These might help too.” He hands me a pack of wipes.

I arch a brow, holding the items away from my wet shirt, and he grins. “Don’t judge. It gets hot as fuck under stage lights.” Straightening up, he claws a hand through his hair. He points over my shoulder. “Toilet is right across the hall. Take as long as you need. I’ll be right here.”

I knock on the door of the single toilet, to ensure it isn’t occupied, before I step inside. The scent of lavender and jasmine floats through the air as I lock the door behind me. From the schedule pinned to the wall, I can see this bathroom has only recently been cleaned.

Stripping out of my wet shirt is harder than it looks. “Ugh.” I throw it into the sink, rinsing it under the hot water as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Yep, I’m sporting a nasty case of panda eyes, and my Ireland face paint is a streaky mess of color on my cheeks. Using a couple of wipes, I scrub my face clean. My purse is downstairs at our table, along with my gloss and mascara, but right now, I couldn’t give two shits that I’m wearing no makeup. I am so over this and ready to call it a night.

Thankfully, my bra is only slightly damp, so I leave it on as I use another couple of wipes to clean my stomach, chest, and my arms. After toweling dry, I slide Dillon’s plain black tee over my head. Predictably, it swamps me, skimming way below my butt. I twist the material into a knot under my boobs, and it looks more presentable. Spritzing some of the complimentary spray, I hope it masks the scent of cider that still seems to cling to me. I wring out my ruined shirt, balling it up, hoping Dillon has a spare plastic bag I can put it into. After going to the toilet and washing my hands, I emerge to find Dillon in the hallway waiting for me.

A dark glimmer of lust flits across his retinas as he drinks me in. “Fuck me.” He claws a hand through his hair. “You look too fucking good in my shirt.” In two seconds, he’s across the hallway, pinning me against the wall.

His strong, muscular arms cage me in as he leans in close. Too close. Spicy notes of his cologne invade my senses, and I gulp over the lump clogging my throat.

Dillon is gorgeous, and I already know sex with him would be out of this world because he oozes sexual confidence from every pore. But I can't do this to myself again. I can't put myself in another world where girls have ulterior motives and I'm collateral damage. Whatever this is between us ends here. "I need to go," I say, gently pushing at his chest as I avert my gaze.

"Don't do that." His fingers curl around my chin, and he forces my eyes to his. "Don't shut me out. I know you were into it downstairs." His fingers creep up the side of my face. "I promise I'll tone down my default setting if you don't push me away."

His eyes lower to my mouth. A flash of silver glints at me when his tongue darts out to lick his lips. Carefully, he presses his body against me, and my nipples harden the instant his chest touches mine. He rubs his nose against mine, as his fingers caress the side of my neck.

God, his touch does intense things to me, and I'm putty in his hands.

Arousal coils in my belly, and my body is screaming for a release only he can give me. The shirt drops to the floor, and I grip his waist. A needy moan escapes my mouth when his lips replace his fingers on my neck, and he plants a slew of drugging kisses along my traitorous skin. My hips arch against him as raw need courses between my legs. "I know you want this as much as me," he whispers with his lips edging dangerously close to my mouth. "Stop fighting it. Give your body what it needs."

His finger rims the low band of my jeans, and I jolt out of my lust-fueled bubble. "No." I push more firmly at his shoulders. "I can't do this."

He instantly withdraws, stepping back and giving me space. His eyes scrutinize mine. "What are you so afraid of? I won't hurt you. I promise."

I'm horrified when tears fill my eyes. "You shouldn't make promises you don't know you can keep," I rasp, avoiding his outstretched arm as I brush past him, racing along the hallway and out through the exit door.

“I’ll get it!” Ash hollers when the bell chimes, bounding out of her room and racing toward the front door of our apartment.

Audrey left yesterday morning, and I’ve been melancholy ever since. Her trip was too short, and I’m already missing her like crazy.

“Package came for you,” Ash says, strolling across the living room toward me. She sets it down on the table. “Wow, I love this color,” she exclaims, trailing her fingers along the deep blue satin material bunched around my sewing machine. “I love how there’s a hint of purple hidden underneath the blue. It makes it more vibrant.”

“I agree, and you have a good eye.” I snatch the large brown padded envelope up. “I should have your top finished by tonight so you can try it on and see if it fits,” I confirm, reaching for my scissors. Both of us have opted for quite daring dresses for the Trinity Ball. Mine is like a minidress under a full skirt with a slit right up the front and a plunging neckline that ends at my navel. Ash is wearing an emerald-green satin high-necked sleeveless crop top and matching full-length skirt that will look amazing with her strawberry-blonde pixie cut. Both dresses are ball-worthy in a nontraditional way.

Now my physical therapy has ended, and my hand is back to normal, I’m throwing myself into getting the dresses finished early as I’ll have to start studying in earnest next month. Exams are only seven weeks away, and I can’t believe how fast time is flying.

“It’s from Dillon,” Ash says, as I cut the opening of the envelope. I arch a brow. “I recognize his handwriting.”

I empty the contents of the package on the table, and my heart does a funny little dance. Lifting the shirt I wore on Paddy's Day to my nose, I inhale the fresh lemony scent with a slight lump in my throat.

"Fucking hell. Dil must want in your knickers real bad, Viv." Ash rummages through the myriad of Cadbury's chocolate bars spread across the table, while I put the shirt down and inspect the small box of Lyon's Tea.

A flash goes off, and I whip my head up to Ash. "What are you doing?"

"Taking photos because no one is going to believe my brother is capable of this shit without proof."

"Do not share that!" I level her with my best "don't mess with me" look. "This is super sweet, and you're not going to tease him for it," I warn.

"Aw. You're no fun." She swipes her fingers across the screen of her phone before thrusting it in my face. "Gone. See?"

"Why would he do this?" Dillon doesn't seem like the type to make thoughtful gestures.

"In our house, we believe tea and chocolate can cure all ails." She plucks the box of teabags from my hands. "Dil asked where you were last night, and I said you were missing Audrey too much to come out to party." She perches her butt against the edge of the table. "He avoided the skanks last night too, and I know for a fact he went home alone, straight after their set." Her blue eyes sparkle. "I think my brother likes you. Like *really, really* likes you."

"No need to throw a party," I drawl, spotting the obvious glee on her face.

"Hey." Her expression turns more solemn. "I didn't mean to scare you." She sinks onto the chair beside me. "Is it wrong that I'm giddy over the prospect of seeing two of my favorite people happy together?"

"I'm scared, Ash." I examine my fingernails like they're the most fascinating things. "Even more so after Paddy's Day."

"Tell me this." She props her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. "If it wasn't for the groupies, would you give it a shot?"

I shrug. "Probably. Yes. I don't know."

"I understand why you're afraid, but Dillon is not Reeve. People think because Dillon's a dick he's a disrespectful jerk, but he's not. Our parents raised all the boys to be respectful of women. Dillon would never let those

skanks hurt you or belittle you. He wouldn't make excuses for them or his behavior."

"I believe you, because he defended me and took care of me the other night." When I was lying in bed the next morning, thinking over everything, I realized that. "And he accepted responsibility without me having to say anything. That was Reeve's biggest failing. He always made me feel like I was somehow at fault."

"I know Dillon has gotten with a lot of girls, but he treats them well. He never lies. He is always straight with them, ensuring they know it's a onetime thing. Aoife is the only one I've known him to be with more than once, but he has told her straight up it's just sex. I've no doubt she sticks around, hoping it will become more, but I know it won't. She fucks the others thinking it will make him jealous, but Dillon never cares."

"Why am I different?"

She shrugs, getting up and snatching the tea. "You'd have to ask Dillon that. Now, put your sewing shit away. You're taking a break for tea and chocolate."

I send Dillon a quick message thanking him for cleaning my shirt and for the tea and chocolate, and he sends me a brief "You're welcome" message back. Neither of us engages in further conversation over the following week, but he doesn't stray far from my thoughts. Reeve doesn't either. I'm mulling over everything Audrey and Ash have said, and by the time Friday rolls around, I'm ready to get out of my head. Overanalyzing everything is driving me crazy, and avoiding Dillon isn't going to make him magically evaporate from my brain. So, that's how I find myself back at Whelans with Ash and Cat Friday night after swearing I was going to keep my distance last week.

"Is this seat taken?" Dillon asks, looming over me. Their set finished fifteen minutes ago, and we returned to our usual table in the corner, waiting for the band to show up.

"Depends on who's asking?" I cheekily retort, trying not to ogle him too obviously. He's wearing a Guns N' Roses T-shirt today over dark jeans with his usual scuffed boots. His hair is even messier than usual, and my fingers

twitch with a craving to run my hands through it. I honestly don't know how I'm expected to keep my hands off him when he always looks good enough to eat.

"What if it's me?" He flashes me that stupidly annoying hella sexy smug grin, and I'm a lost cause.

"You can sit," I relent, discreetly shoving Ash as she pinches my thigh under the table.

"Here." Dillon hands me a glass as he sits down. "You drink pink gin and 7UP, right?"

I nod, accepting the drink. "Thank you." Our fingers brush in the exchange, sending little jolts of electricity zipping up my arm.

"Good set, bro." Ash leans across me for a knuckle touch with her brother. "When are we going to hear these new songs you're writing?"

"You're writing new music?" I inquire.

His lips twitch. "I'm our chief songwriter. What else do you think I do with my days?"

"Watch porn. Jerk off. Bang groupies," I deadpan, shrugging casually.

His chest rumbles with laughter, his eyes dance with amusement, and his dimples come out to play. I'm mesmerized by him. Drawn to him in a way I'm not even sure I felt with Reeve, and we shared an intense connection that spanned years. There is something so familiar about Dillon yet thoroughly unique. I can't explain it. I just know fighting my attraction to him will only lead to more pain down the line.

What if I return home and regret never acting on our chemistry?

"You're staring." He lowers his voice so only I can hear. His thigh brushes against mine, infusing my body with liquid heat.

"You're kind of beautiful," I blurt before I can engage my brain.

"*You're* beautiful, and there's no kind of about it."

My cheeks flush at his compliment, and I see no trace of humor or insincerity on his face. "Thank you," I whisper, dropping my eyes to my lap.

"You act like no one's ever told you you're beautiful before, and I know that can't be the truth."

I tip my chin up, stabbing him with a direct look. "I'm kind of not myself at the moment."

"I kind of want to do something about that." His lips kick up, and I can't help smiling.

“You do?”

He nods.

“Why?”

He purses his lips, taking a moment to reply. “I’ve never felt drawn to any woman from the first second I met them, like I have with you.”

“You were an ass to me,” I remind him.

“I was confused, and it scared the crap out of me. Still does.” He maintains eye contact as he lifts his bottle to his lips, tipping beer into his mouth. Even the way his throat works as he drinks gets my juices flowing. We have this raw sexual chemistry I’m both keen and terrified to explore.

“That makes two of us,” I admit.

“Then I don’t see what the problem is.” His cheeky grin makes a reappearance. “We can be scared together.”

“You don’t just want to fuck me?” I ask, and Ash almost chokes on her drink. I turn to face her, rubbing my hand up and down her back as she splutters. I know she’s talking with Cat and the girl who’s here with Ronan, but she’s definitely keeping one ear on our conversation. As if I wouldn’t tell her everything later, *ad verbum*.

Dillon’s eyes take a leisurely stroll up and down my body, giving new definition to eye-fucking. He might as well have stripped me bare by the way his scorching gaze mentally undresses me. I flush all over, and I’m sure my cheeks are the color of ripe strawberries. Leaning in, he presses his mouth to my ear. “Trust me, there is no part of me that doesn’t want to fuck you.”

I jerk back, but he slides his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in closer. “Stop. Fucking. Running,” he growls. “I wasn’t finished speaking.”

“I kind of want to slap you right now,” I admit.

“And I kind of want to knock some sense into that beautiful thick skull of yours. So just shut up and listen.”

I gnash my teeth at him, wondering how it’s possible to want to kill someone and kiss them at the same time.

“You’re sexy with a body to die for. I’m a horny twenty-year-old man with sex on the brain twenty-four-seven. *Of course*, I want to fuck you. I want to fuck you so hard you’ll be feeling my cock inside you for days. But —” He grips my chin, forcing my eyes to his. “Listen up, Hollywood. This is the important part.” I narrow my eyes to slits, glaring at him, but he just chuckles. “I also want to get to know you. I *like* being around you.” His

Adam's apple jumps in his throat. "Your presence calms me, and I just want to spend time with you."

Ash fails at her attempt to disguise her snort of laughter. I dig my elbow into her ribs and stomp on her foot, hoping she gets the message and butts out.

Dillon blows out a breath before draining the rest of his beer.

My expression softens, matching my insides. Gingerly, I touch his bare arm. His skin is warm to the touch as my fingers stroke the dark hairs coating his muscular arm. Every part of Dillon is gorgeous, but his arm porn is to die for. Shaking myself out of my lustful thoughts, I lift my head, finding his intense gaze waiting for me. Our eyes lock, and our surroundings fade. My heart thumps against my chest cavity, and butterflies swoop into my belly. "I know that was hard for you to say," I rasp, struggling to speak with the heated way he's staring at me.

"It was. This isn't me. I have no clue what I'm doing." He barks out a bitter laugh. "But I'd like to try."

"What exactly are you saying?"

"Go out with me?"

"Like, on a date?"

He nods.

Wiping my clammy hands down the front of my jeans, I remind myself I'm strong and brave. I've promised myself I'm going to go with the flow and see where things take me, so this isn't difficult to concede. "Okay."

His eyes light up. "Yeah?"

I smile, hoping I won't regret this. "Yeah. I'll go out with you."

“Do I look okay?” I ask, barging my way into Ash’s room without invitation. She’s lying on her stomach on the bed with a pen between her teeth and a book opened in front of her. I’m frazzled over my impending date with Dillon and seriously considering canceling it. I need my Irish bestie to talk me off the ledge.

“You look perfect,” she says, “though you might want to put your hair up.” Her lips twitch, and I narrow my eyes.

“You know where he’s taking me?”

“I do.” She makes a zipping motion with her finger. “Don’t bother asking. These lips are sealed.”

All I know is it’s an afternoon date, and I’m guessing it’s outdoors since Dillon told me to dress warm. “Is it normal to feel physically ill?” I flop down on my back beside her on the bed.

She chuckles. “You’d swear you were never on a date before.”

I roll over onto my side, facing her. “Not like this.”

Genuine curiosity sweeps over her face. “You didn’t get nervous going on dates with Reeve?”

“I did, but it was different. He was my best friend, and I’d known him my whole life. It was more of an excited kind of anticipation. I don’t remember my stomach pitching, my hands sweating, or my heart galloping so fast it feels like I’m on the verge of a coronary. What if I throw up on him?”

She roars out laughing. “You’re too funny.” Seeing my glare, she tries to rein in her mirth. “You’ll be fine. Dillon will put you at ease.” She pats my

arm.

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t you know your brother at all? I’ll probably want to poke his eyeballs out in less than a minute.”

“That’s all part of the attraction.” She sits up, cross-legged. “I have a really good feeling about you two.” Her eyes glimmer mischievously. “Imagine you end up getting married!” She squeals, bouncing on the bed. “Then we’d be sisters for real!”

“Aisling Margaret O’Donoghue,” I shriek, whacking her in the chest. “You’re not helping with the no-puking situation!”

“I’m sorry.” She’s trying not to laugh.

“No, you’re not.” I pout.

“No, I’m not,” she agrees, scooting across the bed when I reach to whack her again. “I let my mind run away with me sometimes, but I’m just excited. You two looked so cozy last weekend, and Ro said Dillon’s been writing up a storm all week, which is a sure sign he’s feeling shit.”

“And Ro is really okay with it?”

She bobs her head. “He’s fine. I told you he would be. He’s officially seeing Zara now.”

“Wow. He’s a fast worker.”

“Told ya. Relax. It’s all good. There won’t be any need for pistols at dawn.”

“You’re so weird.” I shake my head, grinning.

“But you love me anyway.”

I throw myself at her, hugging her tight. “I do. Thank you. I needed that pep talk.”

“Just relax and enjoy yourself. Hopefully, my brother won’t irritate you too much!”

“I am not getting on that thing,” I say, setting foot on the sidewalk outside my building and stalking toward the curb to my date. I plant my hands on my hips and glare at Dillon. He’s slouched against the side of his motorcycle, wearing a leather jacket, black jeans, and his usual smirk.

“Scared, Hollywood?” he teases, unfurling to his full height.

“Straight up.”

He moves in close to me, looking hotter than any man has a right to. His fingers curl around my chin. "I thought we agreed we'd be scared together. Hmm?"

"There's scared, and there's insanity." I point over his shoulder. "That is insanity. I saw how crazy you are on that thing, and this might be hard to believe, but I'd love to live to see my birthday in eleven days."

He chuckles. "You have such little faith." Leaning in, he presses a lingering kiss to my cheek. "I promise you'll survive the ordeal."

I thump him on the arm, as he turns to the side, frowning a little. "This is no laughing matter."

He sighs, losing the snarky humor. "Vivien Grace." His fingers sweep along my cheekbone. "I promise I will take care of you. I will go slow, and I won't make any risky moves. I've been riding for three years, and I've never had an accident. You can trust me. I swear."

"Trust isn't easy for me."

"I'll bet." He drops his hand, and his pinkie hooks in mine. "I'm guessing you've never been on a bike."

"I haven't."

"Then you've got to do this. It's Saturday. The sun is shining. We'll hit the open road, and as soon as you feel the wind on your back, it'll blow all the troubles from your mind. There is nothing as exhilarating as this." He wraps his hand around mine. "C'mon, Hollywood. Take a risk with me." He presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Live a little," he whispers.

His words could be construed as condescending, but I can tell it's not. "Okay, but don't make me regret this."

"You won't." He looks over my shoulder, frowning.

"What?" I whip my head around, spotting a man dressed in jeans and a navy jacket leaning against the wall by my building. He's wearing shades while he whistles under his breath and scrolls through his phone.

"Is that guy familiar to you?" Dillon asks.

I shake my head, peering into Dillon's eyes. "No, why?"

"I thought I saw him outside Whelans last weekend." He shrugs. "Must be my overactive imagination at work."

Alarm bells blare in my head, and I swallow back bile. Dillon smiles while I cast a shaky glance at the guy, but he's gone. Prickles of apprehension wash over my skin. I haven't noticed anyone hanging around, and I sincerely hope Dillon is mistaken. If the paparazzi have discovered

my location, I will legit cry. Especially since I already told my parents I'm staying here until August and Moira is in the middle of extending my rental agreement.

Dillon helps me to put my helmet on, and I climb onto the motorcycle behind him, jumping when he kick-starts the engine, and it roars to life. He grabs my hands, pulling my arms tight around his waist. My body is flush against his, my core pushed up against his ass, and his spicy scent swirls around me when I press my helmet against his back.

Slowly, he inches out into the traffic, carefully weaving in and out of busy city center traffic, until we hit the M50. We pick up speed, and I hug him tighter as we drive toward our destination, enjoying the thrill of being this close to him. I never did get to ask him where we're going, but it doesn't matter. I'm enjoying this a lot more than I thought I would, and apart from fleeting nerves at the start, I'm relaxed and comfortable. Dillon has stayed true to his word, pulling no dangerous maneuvers, and I no longer fear for my life.

Sun beats down on my back, heating me through my jacket, and it makes a welcome change from the cold and the rain. Now we're into April, the weather is definitely more pleasant though still a lot cooler and less predictable than I'm used to.

After a while, Dillon takes an exit off the highway, and we fly down smaller tree-lined roads, passing through a couple of towns, before we hit a sign for Killiney. He slows our pace as we ride over speed bumps in the road before turning right between stone pillars, entering a park. Driving past open fields on both sides, we reach an open-air parking lot at the top, and Dillon slides into a vacant space, killing the engine, and parking the bike.

I ease my helmet off as he does the same. Strands of hair have come undone from my ponytail and I swat wispy hair off my face.

"Surprise. You're alive," he drawls, and I laugh.

"That was actually fun."

"Told ya!" He tweaks my nose, helping me off the seat. He unzips his black leather jacket, revealing a wrinkled U2 shirt.

"You love your band shirts," I tease, unzipping my own jacket.

"I'm a rocker." He shrugs. "And I like shirts." He lifts the seat up, removing a Nike backpack. "Bono lives near here."

"Really?"

“Yep. If it’s not too late when we leave, I can drive by his place, if you like.” He slams the seat down, and it clicks into place.

I shrug, because I’m not really fazed.

A wide grin stretches across his mouth. “I keep forgetting you’re not bothered by celebs.”

“One of the things I love about Ireland is how relaxed people are about fame. It’s a refreshing change.”

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, he takes my hand, leading me toward a path. “I hate the thought of fame,” he admits, as we walk.

“That surprises me.” I admire the gorgeous scenery as we walk up an incline. “Because you own that stage. You have real stage presence. The natural kind. Not contrived. I think that’s why you have the audience eating out of your hand. They can’t help but be drawn to you.”

“When I’m up there, I feel like the truest version of myself, if that makes sense.”

I smile at a couple holding two toddlers in their arms as they pass by us. “It does,” I tell him, as we walk up gray stone steps. Everywhere I look, I see green. Grass. Shrubs. Gorse bushes. Trees. Plants. No flowers, but it’s still beautiful. “I can tell you’re happy. Your passion oozes from every pore when you’re entertaining a crowd.”

“I can’t reconcile that with the other side of fame.” He pulls me to one side to let an elderly couple pass, draping his arm around my shoulders. On instinct, I lean into his side, pressing my face into his neck, inhaling the citrusy scent of his shower gel. His lips nuzzle my hair, and I can’t get over how natural it is being with him like this.

“Is that why you’re not keen on moving to the US?” I surmise, when we commence walking again. His hand is solid and warm in mine, and quiet contentment blooms in my chest.

“That’s part of it.”

I’m quiet for a few beats as I think of how to respond. “I think you’re right to seriously contemplate what it’ll mean for your life. It would be a shame if you couldn’t make it work, because I think you’re extremely talented and the band is going places.”

“Is it possible to have success on the worldwide stage and hold on to your integrity, do you think? Can you have all this fame but still be yourself? Or is it too easy to get sucked into the machine?” He looks deadly

serious as he casts a glance at me. “I know you’ve seen the nasty side of the industry, so I value your opinion.”

Wow, this is some heavy shit for a first date, but I’m glad he’s opening up to me. I’m quiet for many seconds as I work out how to explain my thoughts. “It is possible. I’ve seen it with my parents. There’s no denying their love and support kept them true, but as individuals, they are both strong.”

He nods, listening intently to my words as we ascend the hill.

“I think you can hold on to your integrity, but you need to be really strong-willed. You’ll have people pulling you in all kinds of directions, and if you don’t know your own mind, and you can’t stick to your resolve, you’ll get sucked in. It’s that easy.” I gnaw on the inside of my mouth, as bile churns in my gut. “Reeve swore he didn’t want the spotlight. That it was all about the acting for him. He promised nothing would change, and I believe he meant that. I believe he started out with those lofty aspirations, but it didn’t last long. I always thought he was strong, but it all unraveled so fast.”

“And he grew up in the business,” Dillon says after a few awkward beats of silence. “What hope do a bunch of naïve Irish boys from County Wicklow have?”

“If you ask me, I think it might be easier for you to hold on to your principles. You have a loving family who will help you to stay grounded, and you’re going in with your eyes wide-open. The fact you’re hesitant because you don’t want that side of fame is half the battle. The rest is down to how resilient and dogmatic you can be.”

We don't talk for several minutes, but it's a comfortable silence. I can tell Dillon is deep in thought. In a lot of ways, I completely relate to Dillon's situation. I have never wanted to be famous. I've always been happier staying in the shadows, but Reeve's fame forced me into the spotlight. I thought I was prepared for it. That I'd prepared my whole life for it, but I wasn't. I don't know if it's ever possible to fully prepare yourself for that kind of intrusive invasion.

"Wow," I exclaim when we reach the top of the hill. A large stone obelisk occupies center stage on the grassy incline. Blue-green ocean extends as far as the eye can see on one side with the vast expanse of the Irish landscape on surrounding sides. "What is this place?"

"This is Killiney Hill. It's one of the highest vantage points in County Dublin. Killiney is only a half hour's drive from Kilcoole, and we spent many Sunday afternoons here as kids. Now, I come here when I need to clear the cobwebs from my head." He continues talking as we walk around the obelisk. Pointing at a worn bench tucked under an alcove on the other side of the structure, he smiles. "I've written plenty of songs from that very spot. Sometimes Conor and me grab a couple of sleeping bags, a few bottles of beer, and come up here to write and jam."

"It's a wonder you don't freeze to death," I mumble, shivering as imaginary chills ghost over my spine.

He chuckles. "Us Irish must have thicker skin than ye thin-skinned Yanks."

“Ha! I might have started out like that, but I’ve definitely developed thicker skin over the past couple of years.”

In a surprisingly sweet gesture, he presses a kiss to my temple. “I’m sorry for all you’ve been through.”

“You mean that.” I look up at him, and his eyes have that hypnotic green-blue sheen I’ve noticed in certain light.

“I do.” He squeezes my hand, kissing my brow again. “Come on. I know a secluded spot where we can eat lunch.”

My eyes are on stalks as we wander around the top of the hill, going up and down various steps and exploring other smaller stone structures that are dotted around Killiney Hill. I make Dillon take a ton of pictures of me to send to my parents and Audrey, and he jumps into a photo, taking a selfie of us in front of the obelisk.

I look at the pic with a warm smile on my face as he holds my hand, bringing us over to a rocky area that faces the Irish Sea. In the photo, our hair is windswept, our cheeks are rosy red, and we’re both sporting massive smiles. I’m shocked to see how happy I look. I swallow over the lump in my throat at the thought I might finally be moving on, wondering why I feel joint elation and sadness.

Dillon veers off onto a narrow, bumpy grassy path, guiding me down closer and closer to the edge.

“Is this safe?” I inquire, noticing how there is no one else around.

He chuckles. “You really are a scaredy-pants, aren’t you?”

I flip him the bird, and he tips back his head, laughing heartily. The sound warms my bones. “It’s fair to say I’ve led a more sheltered, less reckless existence than you.”

His laughter instantly dies, his smile fades, and for a moment, he looks almost...angry. As if I’ve insulted him. “Did I say something wrong?” I inquire, frowning as he slams to a halt at a small rocky ledge right on the edge of the hill.

He offers me a tight smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t mind me. I’m a moody fucker.”

“I’ve noticed,” I deadpan, even though I know he’s deflecting. “At least you’re self-aware. There’s a lot to be said for that.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware of all my failings,” he cryptically replies. My brow puckers as I watch him unpack a red-and-black-plaid blanket and some food and drink from his bag. Muscles flex and roll in his shoulders

and back as he lays the blanket out flat on the rock, and I get the sense he's silently berating himself for something. "Come sit." He pats the blanket. "I promise it's safe." He sits down first, his long legs dangling off the edge.

Cautiously, I sit down beside him, ignoring the rapid pounding of my heart.

"I've got chicken, tuna, or ham," he says, opening a Tupperware box.

They all look delicious, made with a variety of different breads, filled with various lettuce and dressings.

"This is delicious," I say, after I've devoured a chicken sandwich and a tuna one. "What deli did you get it from?"

He smirks, and I'm glad to see the previous strained look is gone from his face. "Deli O'Donoghue."

My eyes pop wide. "You made these?"

"Don't look so shocked. I have many talents." He waves his hands in front of my face. "These hands are *very* skilled." His tone and expression are suggestive in the extreme, and a lick of arousal flows through my veins.

"They've had enough practice, I'm sure," I murmur.

He brushes a few stray strands of hair off my brow. "Does my history with women turn you off?"

Do I like thinking of him with other girls? No. And I really don't like the whole Aoife situation. However, everyone has a past, and I don't want to hold that against him and ruin things between us before they've even started. "A little, if I'm being honest. But you can't change your past any more than I can change mine."

"Would you want to?" He seems genuinely interested in my response.

"That's the million-dollar question." I stare out at the Irish Sea, wondering if I would change things even if I could. Tilting my head to the side, I stare at him. "If I could erase the last couple of years, I would, but before that, everything was perfect. In a lot of ways, it's easier to cling to the hurtful stuff, to let my anger override my other emotions. It's easier to forget about the good times, but there were lots of good times," I quietly admit, absently rubbing crumbs off my thighs as I stare at my lap.

"What's he like?" he asks, and I jerk my head up. "I'm guessing everything reported isn't true."

"It's not. Reeve isn't a bad person, and I know he loved me. I guess he just lost his way."

"That sounds like polite bullshit." He hands me a bottle of water.

“I need to believe he was manipulated and tricked into following the path he did, because the other reality is too hurtful.” I release a shaky breath. “If he knew what he was doing, it means he didn’t care that he hurt me, and that thought is unbearable.” Tears sting my eyes, and I wish I could rewind to ten minutes ago and not start this conversation.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to upset you.” Dillon circles his arm around my shoulder, pulling me in closer, and I rest my head against him. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“How much of a basket case I am?” I ask, half-laughing, half-crying.

“How badly he damaged your heart and whether there’s any hope for an impatient asshole like me.”

I lift my head and turn into him, draping my arms around his shoulders. “He hurt me, but I’m not some fragile broken doll you need to walk on eggshells around.”

He clasps my face in his hands. “I already know that, Viv. I just don’t want to rush you when you’re not ready. You’ll need to set the pace because the very last thing I want to do is hurt you too.”

“I think you’re a liar, Dillon O’Donoghue.”

All the blood drains from his face, and his Adam’s apple jumps in his throat.

Easing back, I inspect his face closely, wondering why my words have evoked such a reaction. Maybe he’s realizing how vulnerable he’s made himself today, and he’s uncomfortable. That must be it. “Remember, we’re going to be scared together.” The panicked look on his face dials down as I lean in, kissing one corner of his delectable mouth. “You wave that asshole flag around, wearing it with pride, but I’m onto you.” I playfully tweak his nose, softly smiling. “You do it to keep people away. To stop yourself from feeling. I recognize the signs, so don’t try to deny it. But it’s not who you are. Underneath that façade hides a different man. One I really want to get to know.”

His hand moves to my hip. “I’ve told you things today I haven’t fully shared with anyone. You’re already getting under my skin.” His eyes drift to my mouth.

“You’re getting under mine too,” I whisper, pushing my body in closer to his. My eyes drop to his lips, and I want to know what it would’ve been like if Ash hadn’t interrupted us in the orchard that Sunday. Drawing on inner reserves of strength, I pin him with a confident gaze. “Kiss me.” I

tighten my arms around his neck, moving our faces closer. “Kiss me like you’ll die if you can’t taste my lips.”

A chuckle rumbles through his chest. “You English students.” He shakes his head, his eyes turning a darker shade of green as his hands move to my hair. Slowly and methodically, he removes the tie from my hair, and glossy dark strands fall around my shoulders. “Are you sure this is what you want?” His gaze skims over my face as his fingers thread through my hair.

“Oh my God. Just kiss me already.”

He moves us back a little from the edge, wearing his trademark smirk the entire time. His lips part in a glorious smile, revealing his twin dimples, and we move at the same time, our lips colliding in perfect synchronization. Angling his head, he kisses my lips in an unhurried fashion, like we have all the time in the world. I cling to his shoulders, pressing myself in flush to his chest as our kiss continues. Heat skates over my skin, seeping into my bones, warming every part of me. Butterflies are doing cartwheels in my chest, and blood thrums in my ears. My hands dive into his silky-soft hair, and I moan into his mouth. Grasping the opportunity, he eases his tongue between my lips, groaning as he diligently explores my mouth. A throbbing ache pulses between my thighs, and when he pulls us down to the ground, lifting me over him so I’m straddling his thighs, I don’t raise any objection.

His arms clamp tightly around my back, keeping me in place so we don’t fall off the hill in the height of passion. Our kiss turns more heated, and we’re devouring one another, and it’s still not enough. He hardens underneath me, and black spots burst behind my closed eyelids as I grind against his erection, wishing we were skin to skin, yet knowing I’m not ready for that yet.

“Jesus, Viv.” Dillon moves his mouth from my lips to my ear, sucking on the sensitive flesh there. “What the fuck are you doing to me?”

“Less talking. More kissing,” I pant, and he chuckles, pressing a trail of hot kisses along my neck and across my collarbone before returning to worship my lips.

We kiss and kiss until we’re forced to break apart or risk lockjaw. Scooting back even farther from the edge, he leans against a smooth rock, holding me in his arms with my back pressed to his chest.

I cling to his strong arms, trailing my fingers along his skin, marveling at how safe and secure I feel in his embrace. At how easy this is. I lean my

head back against his warm, hard chest, and a blissful sigh slips from my lips. Angling my head, I look back at him, loving how swollen his lips are from my kisses. Our eyes remain glued together, and we stare at one another for an indeterminate period, not talking, just drinking our fill.

It's not awkward.

Not in the slightest.

It feels like the most natural thing.

It's like looking into the mirror of my soul and seeing all my emotions reflected at me. No words are spoken, but words are redundant. My chest heaves with a rush of emotions, and I close my eyes as he plants a soft kiss to my lips. "On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate my first attempt at a date?" he whispers over my mouth.

My eyes pop open. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

I blink profusely. "I'm seriously your first ever date?"

"Woman. Am I the kind of guy who would lie about such a thing?"

"Valid point." I grin, inwardly squealing as I lightly drag my nails through the bristle on his chin—just because I can. I get an inordinate thrill when my hands move to his hair because I have wanted to play with his hair so many times. "I love your hair." I rub the silky strands between my fingers before fisting it in my hands.

"Fuck," he hisses, his eyes glinting with unconcealed lust. "If you keep doing that, all gentlemanly thoughts will fly from my head and I won't be responsible for my actions."

Slowly, I extract my fingers from his hair, but it's a chore.

"Ten," I whisper, giggling when I spot his frown. "On a scale of one to ten, this date is a ten."

"Huh." He doesn't look pleased, and I arch a brow. "Only a ten?" He nips at my earlobe, and I squirm. "I'll have to try harder next time."

I shake my head, fighting a smile. "Spoken like a true overachiever," I tease. "It's a ten, and the date isn't even finished. I'm pretty sure you'll struggle to top this."

"Ha!" He barks out a laugh. "Challenge accepted, milady."

I laugh, rolling my eyes again. "You're such a dork."

"As long as I'm *your* dork," he says, and the moment turns heavier.

I smile, but I don't reply. I don't want to force labels on whatever this is. I just want to exist in this moment with him. He must agree because he lets

it drop, and I face the front again, snuggling into his arms as I look out at the stunning view.

Dillon dots kisses in my hair, against my temple, my cheeks, and my neck, as we sit in silence, watching the gentle motion of the waves far below us, listening to the sound of excited children running around someplace behind us, and it's sheer heaven. I could sit here like this with him for eternity.

The sun lowers in the sky, and a faint gray hue replaces the previous bright blue canvas. Swirls of cool air waft over us, and I shiver. "Time to go," he whispers, planting an openmouthed kiss against my neck.

"Do we have to?" I grumble.

I can almost see his smile as he presses a kiss to my cheek. "Let's grab some fish and chips and eat it on the beach," he suggests, pulling us to an upright position.

"I think you've just elevated this date from a ten to a twenty." I circle my arms around his waist, grinning up at him.

"Hell yeah!" He fist pumps the air. "That's what I'm talking about!"

“Hey, are you okay?” Ash sticks her head through the door of my bedroom the following morning. Concerned eyes meet my bloodshot ones. “I heard you crying.”

“No,” I admit, sobbing openly.

She strides across the room, bundling me into her arms. “If my dickhead brother has caused this, I’m going to fucking castrate him,” she seethes.

I know how much Ash loves Dillon, so the fact she’s willing to instantly go into battle for me means more than I can say. Ash was out last night when I got home, so we haven’t had a chance to speak about my date. “It’s not Dillon’s fault. It couldn’t have been a better date, and he couldn’t have been more of a gentleman.”

“Ah.” She hugs me close, smoothing a hand along my back. “You’re feeling confused and guilty.”

I nod even though it’s more than that.

“The first time I slept with someone after Cillian, I physically threw up. Then I crawled into my bed and cried for three days straight.” She stares off into space while stroking my hair. “No one understood. They assumed I was over him because it’d been six months since things ended. They didn’t understand that grief and heartache don’t work to a specific timeline or understand how I could seem to be over him one day and be inconsolable the next.”

I’ve suffered those whiplash mood swings too. The type that makes me feel like I’m an emotional headcase and I’m going insane. “Yes,” I sniff, shucking out of her arms and sitting back against the headboard. “Yes to all

that, but it's also the bittersweet feeling that I'm moving on, and why do I feel so fucking guilty? I was the one who was betrayed. Reeve and I have been broken up for almost four months, so why am I wracked with guilt? Why does it feel like I've cheated on *him*?"

"Because you meant forever when you promised him that." She sits beside me, tucking her petite legs into her chest. "If there's one thing I remember from that time, it's don't try to find logic or make sense of everything you feel. You feel it for a reason. You're justified in feeling it, and it's all part of the bigger picture. It's all part of healing."

"I really hope you're right because I'm done feeling like my emotions are playing ping-pong with my head and my heart."

She turns to face me. "You had a good time with Dillon though, right?" Expectation lights up her pretty face.

A genuine smile crests over my lips. "I had the best time. It was awesome. Dillon was awesome." I fill her in quickly on where we went and what we did, including the fact we kissed.

"Yes!" she exclaims, making a funny gesture with her arm. "Ro owes me twenty."

I quirk a brow. "Do I want to know?"

"He said there was no way you'd get on the bike with Dil, but I knew you would, so we bet on it." She nudges my shoulder, smiling. "Lunch is on me on Monday."

"You're lucky you won that bet." I swipe at the dampness coating my cheeks. "Because it was definitely touch and go at the start."

She repositions herself on my bed, sitting cross-legged. "I know you have a rebellious streak in you, Viv. It's not obvious, unless you dig deep, but it's there. You haven't had a chance to let loose because of how you grew up and *where* you grew up, but you can be anyone you want to be here." She touches my arm. "That's the other reason I knew you were better suited to Dil and not Ro. He'll help you embrace that inner part of yourself you've never explored."

"Are you high right now?" I peer into her clear blue eyes.

She laughs before swinging her legs off the side of the bed. "Deny it all you want, but I know what I see."

I roll my eyes because she's clearly delusional. I don't have a rebellious bone in my body.

“Ro will be here shortly to get the bus with me. Why don’t you come with us? You know Mum would love to see you. She was just asking me this week when you’re coming back for dinner.”

“Your mom is one of the sweetest, kindest people I’ve met, and I hate saying no, but I’ll just be a Debbie Downer if I come. I’d rather eat ice cream in my pajamas while watching back-to-back romantic movies.”

Sympathy splays across her face, and I know I don’t need to explain it. Ash understands in a way most girls our age wouldn’t. “Don’t be too charitable. I’m guessing she’s hoping you’ll call your mum again so she can talk to her one more time.”

I grin despite my present heartache. “I have it on good authority that she’s about to receive a special care package from L.A. this week.”

“Get out!” Ash’s eyes widen.

“Don’t breathe a word. Mom wants it to be a surprise.”

She bounces on the bed, jostling the mattress. “What is it?”

“A bunch of DVDs, some signed promo shit, and Mom included some local L.A. produce. Candles, candy, skincare stuff, and God knows what else. Knowing Mom, she went to town.” Mom is delighted Ash’s family have taken me under their wing. I think it helps to reassure her knowing there is a mother figure in my life when I’m so far away.

“Oh my God. Mum is going to go crazy when that arrives.” She gives me another hug. “Thank you! And thank your mum from me.”

“You can thank her in July. My parents are flying over for a week in between work commitments. We’re planning on going to Cork and Kerry, and Mom said to ask you to come.”

“I would love to, provided I can get the time off work. I usually work longer hours during summer break.” She chews on the corner of her lip. “Do you think she’d have time to drop into my house? I think Mum would about die if she got to meet her in the flesh.”

“Mom has a pretty hectic schedule planned, but why don’t we get your mom over here for lunch the day they arrive?”

“That’s a brilliant idea. Message me the date, and I’ll make it happen. It’s a pity they aren’t coming in June. They could’ve come to Shane and Fiona’s wedding with you.” I was pleasantly surprised to receive a wedding invite last week. I can’t wait to experience an Irish wedding; I’ve heard they can be pretty wild. Ash said the hotel they are getting married at is in County Wexford and it’s gorgeous.

Ash glances at her cell, hopping up. “Shit. I need to get a move on, or I’ll miss the bus. Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Positive. Tell everyone I said hi.” I grab my purse from my bedside table, rummaging through the contents. “Hang on a sec,” I call out. Finding my keys, I throw them to her. “Take my rental. Mom’s assistant got you added to the insurance. Just don’t wreck it. I know Dil isn’t the only O’Donoghue with a reckless streak.”

She squeals, racing across the room and yanking me into a fierce hug.

“Can’t breathe,” I croak, only half-joking.

“You are the most thoughtful, generous person I know. How did you even manage this?” She takes pity on me, letting me go.

“I snuck a copy of your driver’s license and sent it Moira. She did the rest.”

“Seriously, thank you for organizing this. It sure beats the smelly bus.”

After Ash leaves, I take a long soak in the tub, trying to quiet my hyperactive mind, but it’s no use. I wish I was the kind of girl who took everything in stride. But I’m the kind to overthink everything, and I just want it to stop.

I like Dillon.

A lot.

Even more so after yesterday.

He opened up to me, and I saw a different side to him. A side I want to explore. Yet I’m freaking terrified too. Terrified of getting my heart trampled on again. He’s a moody prick at times, and I have no experience dealing with that. I get the sense he’s hiding something, and that concerns me. What if I place my trust in him and he lets me down too?

“Ugh.” I scrub my hands down my face before dunking my head under the water. When I come up for air, I’m still stewing over everything. Are my fears founded? Or am I letting the past cloud my perspective? Is this what I’m going to be like with every new relationship going forward? Will I doubt every guy because Reeve betrayed my trust? Will I think every guy is hiding something from me if he doesn’t immediately open his heart and spill every vulnerable secret? Is that in any way fair to the guy?

My brain churns these thoughts, over and over, round and round in circles, and I get out of the cold bath, shivering and annoyed at my inability to just go with the flow. As I dry myself, I decide it’s not fair to hold Reeve’s sins and my past over Dillon’s head. I’ve got to give him the

benefit of the doubt unless he does something, or says something, that justifies concern. It doesn't mean I have to trust him out of the gate. No one should be trusted until they've proven themselves, but that doesn't mean I should automatically distrust every guy I meet either.

Wearing fresh pajamas, with my damp hair in a messy topknot, I'm scrolling through the movie options on my TV when the doorbell chimes. I pad along the hallway in my bare feet, startled to see Dillon's gorgeous face staring back at me through the peephole. He sticks his tongue out, and I'm smiling as I open the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm hoping you're up for some company," he says, lifting the plastic bag in his hand. "I come bearing gifts. Ice cream, chocolate, and wine." He waggles his brows, piercing me with that infamous cocky grin.

My heart melts a little, and tears prick the backs of my eyes. Fuck, I'm a hot mess these days, and I've got to get a grip.

"Hey." The grin slides off his mouth as he steps closer. "Don't be upset."

Acting on instinct, I fling my arms around him, hugging him tight. "I'm happy you're here."

"Does that mean you're going to invite me in?" His flirtatious tone and cheeky grin papers over the fractures in my heart, and I grab his hand, pulling him into the apartment.

"Won't your mom be mad if you don't arrive for dinner?" I inquire, guiding him to the kitchen.

"Nah. She'll be grand. Especially when she discovers I'm keeping her new favorite person company."

I bend down to grab a couple of bowls from the cupboard, and when I straighten up, I catch Dillon staring at me with his mouth slightly open. Setting the bowls down on the counter, I cross my arms and fix him with a knowing look. "Were you just checking out my ass?"

"I was," he readily admits, slowly dragging his eyes up my body. "Don't blame me. You were wiggling it right in my face."

I snort out a laugh. "You're incorrigible." I reach overhead to grab some wine glasses, and my top lifts a little, exposing a sliver of skin.

"Damn, Hollywood. Those pajamas should be illegal."

I spin around, finding his eyes are now fixated on my bare legs. He rakes his gaze up the length of my legs, over my stomach, lingering a little

on my chest, before meeting my face. Hunger radiates from his eyes, and I catch my breath.

“Those legs should be illegal, as well as other parts of your body,” he says in a gruff, deep tone that sends shivers sweeping over my skin. My nipples harden to sharp points, poking against my cotton pajama top like a calling card. Of course, he notices, and the look he gives me makes my knees buckle and my core tremble with need.

“I can change,” I croak, not trusting myself in the face of such intense chemistry. I move to walk off, and he darts forward, planting his hands on the counter, caging me in.

“Don’t,” he whispers, leaning in to kiss my neck.

I grab the counter, tilting my head to one side as if on autopilot, granting him more access. He trails his lips seductively up and down my neck, and every part of my body is on fire. Without warning, he pulls back, adjusting himself in his jeans before running his hands through his wild blond hair. “Sorry.” His voice is thick with the same need coursing through my veins. “I didn’t come here for that.”

“What did you come for?” I ask, straightening up.

“I came to watch movies, drink wine, eat ice cream, and cheer you up.”

Tears well in my eyes again. “Sorry,” I sniff, swiping at the moisture clinging to my lashes. “I’m a bit of a basket case today.”

“It’s okay.” Without hesitation, he pulls me into his arms, enveloping me in a firm hug I desperately need. I cling to him, siphoning his warmth and his strength until I feel fully composed. “Thank you,” I quietly say, looking up at him.

He brushes his mouth against mine in the sweetest kiss. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m right where I want to be.”

I stretch up and kiss him quickly. “We best eat this ice cream before it melts.”

“I’ll make you a deal.” He removes the carton of chocolate ice cream from the bag. “I’ll serve the ice cream while you change into tracksuit bottoms or a black sack or anything else as long as it’s baggy and it conceals those tempting legs.”

“I thought you said I wasn’t to change.” I pin him with a faux innocent expression.

“If you want me to keep my hands to myself, covering those gorgeous legs is your best bet.”

I'm not sure I want him to keep his hands to himself, but the fact I'm indecisive means he probably should. "On it," I purr, smirking as I sashay to my bedroom to change.

"Oh, fuck, no!" Dillon vigorously shakes his head, glaring at the TV screen. "Are you trying to torture me, woman? Anything but *The Notebook*. I'm begging you." Closing his palms together, he begs me with his eyes, but it only makes me more determined. He doesn't wait for my reply before continuing to plead his case. "Why can't girls' go-to movie be *Deadpool* or *Jason Bourne*, huh? Fuck, I'd even sit through *A Star is Born* and be happy."

"Are you insane?" I raise my hand. "Actually, don't answer that." I smirk at his scowl. "That movie does *not* have a happy ending, and I can't watch a romance without a happy ending."

"*The Notebook* doesn't have a happy ending either!"

"The ending was my favorite part of the book. Although it's poignant, it still made me smile because they're together for eternity and their love will live on. *A Star is Born* made me ragey as hell. I wanted to cut a bitch after I watched that movie."

"That kind of turns me on." He smirks, and I roll my eyes.

Curling my bowl into my chest, I swing my covered legs up onto the leather couch, as I press pause on the remote. "I'm going to admit something very few people know." He flops onto the middle of the couch with a resigned sigh, lifting my feet and plonking them in his lap. He gives me his undivided attention as I scoop a big spoonful of ice cream. "I've never watched *The Notebook*. I was only four when it premiered in movie theaters, but I have read the book. I was *not* impressed."

His mouth hangs open and his eyes pop wide. "So, why the hell do you want to watch the movie?" Incredulity drips from his tone.

"We were discussing it recently in my American lit class, and everyone said the movie is ten times better. I want to see if it's true."

"It's not," he deadpans. "We should just watch *Deadpool*."

"Not happening, dude." I wave my spoon in his face.

“Now *I’m* going to admit something. Something lots of people unfortunately know,” he wryly replies, shoveling a large mouthful of ice cream into his delectable mouth. I watch in fascination as he swallows it in seconds. “I’ve seen this movie way too many times to count.”

“How does that even happen when you’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“I had a heartbroken sister who watched it nonstop for weeks. I was the only sucker in the family strong enough to endure that shit on a continuous loop.” He makes a face before shoving the spoon into his mouth again. His aim is a bit off, and chocolate ice cream paints the corner of one side of his mouth.

Without pausing to think about it, I put my bowl down and crawl to him. “You are the best brother. Ash is so lucky to have you.” Before he can respond, I lick the ice cream off his face and press my lips to his. He kisses me eagerly, and I plunge my tongue into his mouth, groaning as the taste of ice cream and Dillon explodes on my tongue. He puts his bowl down on the floor without breaking our lip-lock, and I’m impressed. Grabbing my hips, he repositions me until I’m straddling him, and our kissing grows more frantic.

Dillon is an amazing kisser, and I could do this all day.

“Wait.” He rips his lips from mine a few minutes later, and I instantly miss his mouth. He scoops some ice cream onto his spoon and shovels it between his lips, winking.

Catching on, I grin as I lean down and kiss him. He slides some of the ice cream into my mouth, and I moan against his lips, grinding my hips against his when I feel his erection nudging me.

We finish the rest of our ice cream like this, and by the time we’re done, I’m hotter than lava, and my body is aching to be filled by him. Dillon clearly feels similar things as he flips me over on my back, so I’m underneath him, and then he proceeds to kiss the shit out of me. Closing my eyes, I lose myself in his kisses, reveling in the blissful sensations flowing through my body. I don’t think I’ve ever been so turned on just from kissing.

My back arches off the couch when he presses his long hard body down on top of me, careful not to crush me with his weight. My legs automatically wrap around his waist, and I thrust up against him, groaning at the hardness pushing against my soft center. We grind against one another as our kisses grow more demanding, and I’m seconds away from

ripping my clothes off and jumping on his cock when he pulls back. “Fuck, Viv.” Rocking back on his heels, he claws his hands through his hair as his chest heaves.

My pajama top is stuck to my back, and my panties are soaked, dripping with desire for this man. I have never wanted anyone as much as I want him in this moment, but I’m glad he stopped it. I don’t want to move too fast. This morning proves my emotions are still out of whack, and I need to put the brakes on. I don’t want to sleep with him and subsequently fall apart. That wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

Dillon extends his hand, pulling me up into his arms. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat under my ear soothes me, and I close my eyes, savoring the feeling of being in his arms. “You make it so hard to resist you, but I’m determined to do this the right way,” he whispers in my ear.

“At least one of us has self-control.” My words are muffled against his chest.

“God fucking help us if we’re relying on mine.” Sarcasm is thick in his tone, and I giggle. “Come on.” He repositions us on the couch until we’re comfortable. He’s sitting, and I’m lying down on my side with my head on a cushion on his lap. “Let’s just watch this bloody movie. I might as well get it over and done with.”

“They are so adorable,” Ash says, regaling Cat with details of my and Dillon’s escapades this week. “Seeing Dil like this makes me so unbelievably happy. Who knew he was such a closet romantic?”

Ash came back Sunday night to discover us curled against one another on the couch while *Bohemian Rhapsody* played on the TV. Remnants of the chicken pasta dinner Dillon cooked were left in the kitchen, along with the empty ice cream carton and wine bottle.

“Your brother is very romantic,” I agree with the biggest smile on my face.

We’ve been pretty much inseparable since Sunday except for during the day when I have school and Dillon is doing whatever aspiring rock-stars-slash-songwriters do. He showed up outside Trinity on Monday, holding a bunch of lilies and asking me to dinner. Tuesday, he took me to this little boutique movie theater to see *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. On Wednesday, we worked out together in the gym in my building before he and Ash cooked their mom’s special chicken curry. Then last night, we took off on his motorcycle for Trim Castle, a historical three-storied keep that was featured in the *Braveheart* movie.

I’m learning Dillon is fascinated with the past, and he appears to have a huge knowledge of Irish history. He told me he’d considered studying history at Trinity, but he hates being cooped up indoors, and he doesn’t think the structure would suit him, so he chose not to go to college and to focus on the band instead.

The more layers I'm uncovering, the more I'm intrigued. He is nothing like I first expected him to be and everything I never saw coming. While he is different from the prickly, rude guy I initially met, he still has little moments where that brash, obnoxious side of his personality rears its head.

I haven't had any other meltdowns since Sunday, but I know that's partly because I'm busy, and when I'm with Dillon, there is no room to think about Reeve or the confusing emotions still swirling around my brain when I'm not quick enough to shut them out.

"Aoife looks like she wants to gouge your eyeballs out with toothpicks," Cat murmurs, bringing me back to the present. I look in Aoife's direction, and sure enough, she's glaring at me with unconcealed venom. When Dillon was here earlier, she was all smiles and sweetness, but the second the guys moved to the main event room, she stabbed me with the full extent of her jealousy. During the guys' set, we stayed well clear of her, and I'll be grateful when Dillon reappears as her clear resentment has me on edge.

"Should I be worried? And does she go to Trainers, or does she just hang around Jamie there all the time?" I ask, needing to understand how big of a threat she poses.

"She isn't a student. She works full-time in Dunnes." Dunnes Stores is a leading Irish grocery chain. "I'd watch my back if I was you," Ash adds. "But she'll probably just switch her attention full-time to Jamie now."

"I'm sorry." I know Ash is staying away from Jamie, but that doesn't mean he's not occupying real estate in her head.

"Thank fuck." Ash sighs, glancing over my shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Dillon asks, and I whip my head around, grinning as our gazes connect.

"Your ex-fuck-buddy over there didn't get the memo you're off the market. She's been sending daggers at Viv all night."

Dillon lifts me out of my chair, frowning. "I didn't see anything, and I've been watching." Sinking down on the seat, he pulls me into his lap. His arms band around me, and he brushes my hair to one side, pressing a kiss to my neck. I lean back against him, my chest humming in satisfaction as I melt into his arms.

"She's only doing it when you're not around, dumbass." Ash rolls her eyes. "Honestly, men are so fucking thick. Of course, her claws aren't going to come out in front of you! She wants you to think she's all sweetness and

light. I expect she's biding her time, waiting for you to return to her skanky ass."

"Ash." Dillon's tone contains censure. "You shouldn't call her that."

"Why not? If the cap fits," Ash retorts, gulping back a mouthful of beer.

"Weren't you the one who lectured me about not labeling women who enjoy casual sex as sluts?"

"Groupies are different. It's not that I have an issue with her sleeping with multiple guys, or even multiple guys at the same time"—she drills him with a pointed look, referencing the threesome she saw him having with Jamie and Aoife—"it's the fact she has an agenda. Aoife has dollar signs behind her eyes. She sees you as her ticket out of here. That's why I called her a skank."

"Fair enough," Dillon concedes, nodding. "It's not like I don't know that, and I'm done with her now anyway, so it doesn't matter." He turns my face slightly, pressing his mouth to my ear. "I don't care about Aoife unless she's making you uncomfortable. Is she?"

"She is." I look him straight in the eye. "Her nasty looks are forcing me to relive my past. I know I'm probably more sensitive than most, but I agree with Ash. She has an agenda, and I don't want to be caught in the crossfire."

"I'll talk to her and make sure she cuts it out. Next time, you need to tell me. If anyone pulls any crap, you come straight to me, and I'll handle it, okay?" I nod. "I won't let anyone disrespect you." Resituating me on his lap so we're face to face, he drills me with a solemn look, and I get the unspoken message—He's not Reeve, and he won't let his groupies treat me like shit.

A layer of stress lifts from my shoulders. "Thank you."

He cups my cheek. "Show me how grateful you are?" His eyes shimmer suggestively, and I need no further encouragement.

All week, we've been kissing and making out like demons, and I'm on the verge of spontaneous sexual combustion. A few of our sessions have grown very heated, and there's been plenty of groping over clothes, but we haven't taken it further, and he hasn't put any pressure on me. Dillon is letting me set the pace, like he promised. I'm growing more and more relaxed with him and finding fewer and fewer reasons to hold back from taking our relationship to the next level.

Tired of waiting for me to show him, Dillon grabs my face and slams his lips to mine. My arms snake around his neck, and I angle my head, opening my lips to welcome his skillful tongue. The small circular ball of his ring gently scrapes against my tongue, and I can't help imagining what it would feel like if he went down on me. That thought heightens my arousal and elevates the anticipation every time we kiss, and this is no different.

He kisses me deeply and passionately, uncaring we have an audience, until all my worries have fluttered away.

"Get a room!" Ro shouts, and we reluctantly break apart.

"*You* get a room!" Dillon retorts, gesturing to where Ronan's new girlfriend is presently draped all over him. Thankfully, everything is great between all of us, and Ash was right. Ronan has moved on, and he doesn't appear to harbor any grudges. I haven't seen much of him, as I've been spending a lot of time with Dillon alone, but any time he has been around, it's just like always. I'm hugely relieved.

"I won't be able to see you now before Wednesday," Dillon tells me later that night as he walks me home. "We've got to rehearse a lot before the ball." The guys managed to secure a twenty-minute slot at the Trinity Ball, which is a big deal for them.

"Will the groupies be there?" I ask.

"No fucking way. Even if it wasn't a closed rehearsal, we wouldn't bring them. I'd only want you there."

"Okay. Good."

"Don't worry about them. For as long as we're together, you're the only woman I'll be with. You're the only one I want." He lifts our conjoined hands to his lips, kissing my knuckles. "I talked to Aoife, and I set her straight. She won't give you any more grief." His eyes drill into mine. "If she does, you let me know, and she'll be cut off completely."

His words hint at our inevitable ending, but I refuse to linger on that now. I still have months left in Ireland, and I'm determined to have fun with Dillon for however long it lasts. We're both going into this with our eyes

open, knowing this has a termination date. As long as my heart doesn't get invested, it'll work out fine.

"I won't share you," he adds, "and I hold myself to the same standards. I know I don't have much experience to go on, and I understand if you're reluctant to trust me, but I promise I won't cheat on you or mess around with other girls. I know what you've been through, and I could never hurt you like that. I've seen what it did to my sister. I never want to be that guy."

He says all the right things, and I want to accept his words at face value, not read into everything, but it's hard when your trust in the male race has been completely decimated. Still, I made a vow to myself that I wouldn't punish Dillon for Reeve's sins, and I meant it.

"Thank you." I peck his lips, hating how much reassurance I crave. He must think I'm so clingy and needy, and that's not who I am deep down inside. "I needed to hear that."

"I know." His eyes are all seeing as he tightens his arm around my shoulders, holding me closer to his side as we walk.

"I guess I'll just have to find a way to survive without you for a few days," I say, replying to his original statement. "I've tons of studying to keep me occupied, and I have to turn in my next article for the paper." The *Trinity News* student paper published an article I wrote on being an American student in Dublin last month to favorable feedback, so they asked me to write something else. "I've also got to finish an assignment for my scriptwriting class, so it should be enough to keep me from missing you too much."

He pushes me into the nearest wall and kisses me like he might never get to do it again.

"What was that for?" I pant, when we finally surface for air. "Not that I'm complaining." I grin.

"You said you'd miss me. I liked hearing that."

Sweet baby Jesus. This guy is going to ruin me. If he keeps this up, I'm going to have a hard time stopping my heart from becoming invested. Pressing my body against his, I wrap my arms around his neck. "Won't you miss me?"

His lower hand slides around my back, and he pulls me in tight to his body. His erection presses into my stomach, shooting darts of desire straight to my pussy. "I think that answers your question."

He smirks, and I nip at his earlobe. "So, you'll only miss my body?"

Holding my hand, he steers me in the direction of my apartment. “I will miss everything about you, Viv. I just love being with you, full stop.” He glances at me, and sincerity radiates from his eyes. “I love how you constantly challenge me and you’re never predictable. You always surprise me. I love your excitement for new things and how brave and strong you are.”

His beautiful words wrap around my heart like a comfort blanket, and I can almost feel some of the fissures being repaired.

He squeezes my hand, drawing circles on my skin with his thumb. “It feels like I’ve known you forever, and I’ve never felt this happy with any girl. I’ve never met anyone who consumes my every waking thought like you do.” He flashes me a boyish grin. “You’re under my skin, Hollywood. In more ways than one.”

“Do you want to come up?” I offer, when we reach my apartment building.

One side of his mouth lifts, and his eyes heat. “For a nightcap or...”

“I’m not fucking you. I’m not quite ready yet, but I—” I pause to summon my courage, dropping my tone a couple of octaves. “I thought you might like to stay the night. We can do other things, just not full sex.”

His lips kick up at the corners as he winds his hands in my hair, pulling my head toward him. He rests his brow against mine. “You’re adorable when you get all flustered.” His lips brush against mine. “I’d love to spend the night.” Still holding my head, he tips my chin back. “You set the pace. Always.”

I practically drag him to my bedroom, and we’re kissing and grinding against one another the entire time. We collapse on my bed in a tangle of limbs, and slowly our clothes come off until I’m only in my bra and panties, and he’s in his black boxers, the outline of his long thick dick obvious against the thin cotton.

He crawls over me, holding himself upright by his elbows as he bends down to kiss me. “Can I touch you?” he purrs in my ear, and my core screams out a “hell yeah.”

“Yes,” I rasp, running my hands up and down his back.

In a lightning-fast move, he removes my bra, burying his head in my chest. “These are beautiful.” He cups my breasts, grinning and licking his lips as he looks up at me.

“I’m glad you approve,” I tease, my body tingling in anticipation.

He rakes his gaze up and down my body. “Oh, I definitely approve. Your body is to die for.” Warmth spills into me from his complimentary words, helping to relax me. He lavishes my breasts with attention, sucking and biting my flesh as I moan and writhe underneath him. I hiss when he drags one of my nipples between his teeth, tugging on it as his fingers roughly tweak my other nipple, and a painful-pleasurable sensation courses through me with his forceful touch. Lifting his head, he pierces me with intense dark eyes. “If this is too much, tell me to stop and I will.”

“Don’t stop,” I blurt, needing more.

The grin he sends me is nothing short of devilish. Lowering his mouth to my breast again, he sucks hard on my flesh, and I cry out when his tongue laves against my nipple, feeling the cool metal stroke against my taut peak. He sucks and fondles my breasts for a few minutes before sliding down my body.

Pushing my thighs apart, he runs his hands up and down my legs. “These legs have a starring role in my fantasies,” he says, continuing to stroke my skin. “So beautiful.” He trails his hands higher and higher until he reaches the apex of my thighs. Shoving his face in my pussy, he inhales deeply. “Fuck, Hollywood. You’re fucking soaked.” He rubs me through my lace panties before ripping them off with his bare hands. Strips of lace float around the bed as I stare at him in shock. He chuckles. “I’ll replace them if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried. I’m just—” I blush, and he inches up my naked body, putting his face in mine.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Tell me.”

“I’ve read about guys doing that in books, but it’s never happened to me before,” I sheepishly admit, grabbing clumps of his gorgeous hair. “It’s fucking hot.”

He grins before claiming my lips in a searing kiss that curls my toes. Rocking his boxer-covered cock against me, he works me into a frenzy in no time, and I’m wondering why I’m holding back on the fucking front. “I need to taste you,” he says, biting my lip. “Can I fuck your cunt with my tongue and my fingers?”

He’s so crude, but it cranks my arousal up a few notches. “Oh God.” I yank his mouth to mine. “Yes, please.”

His mouth trails a path from my lips to my neck, and he spends a couple of minutes sucking on my flesh, grazing his teeth along my collarbone and

nipping my breasts before he returns to the apex of my thighs. I scream when he sucks on my inner thighs, softly biting and then soothing my sensitive skin with his tongue.

“Watch me,” he grits out, flicking his eyes to mine as he settles in between my thighs, lying flat on his stomach. I prop up on my elbows, my body wound tight with anticipation and raw need. Butterflies race around my chest, and lust spools low in my belly.

When he thrusts my legs over his shoulders, his nostrils flare, and his eyes burn with desire as he spreads my pussy lips with his thumbs and stares at my most intimate parts. My chest heaves, and I swallow thickly as he drinks his fill before he leans in, licking a path up and down my slit. “So fucking gorgeous,” he murmurs. “You taste like heaven on my tongue.” He wiggles his tongue up and down my slit, lapping it against my clit, and when his ring hits my swollen bundle of nerves, I almost come off the bed.

“Holy fuck.” I throw my head back and close my eyes as the most delicious tremors zip up and down my body. I can already feel my climax hovering, waiting to explode, and I don’t think it’s going to take much to reach orgasm.

He chuckles. “Like that, Hollywood?”

“Hell, yeah. Do it again.”

“Eyes on me,” he commands, and I open my eyes and lower my chin. “I’m going to fuck you now, and you’re going to explode all over my face.”

With a wicked grin, he plunges his tongue into my pussy and devours me. Keeping my eyes on him is hard because I want to throw my head back, close my eyes, and just savor the intense sensation as he slides his tongue in and out of my cunt. That silver ball in the middle of his tongue is doing amazing things to my insides, and my climax is building fast. My hips are moving, pushing against his mouth, as he works me over like a pro. Every nerve ending in my body is alive with static electricity, and I’m drowning in sensations, both familiar and new.

Dillon is setting the oral sex bar extremely high, and I have a feeling this man is going to ruin me for all others.

Yanking fistfuls of his hair, I pull his mouth in even closer to my pussy, tugging on strands of his hair in a way I’m sure is painful. His lustful growl tells me he approves, so I continue pulling his hair as he worships my cunt with his naughty tongue.

Rubbing two fingers against my clit, he pushes down on my nub, stroking it in a relentless, harsh pace that matches the thrusts of his tongue and I have no time to warn him before I come apart. I scream out his name as I buck and writhe on the bed, shoving my pussy in his face as I ride the waves of the most intense orgasm of my life.

“Yum,” he murmurs, with his face still between my legs. “Hold still, I want to lick every last drop.” With one hand, he pushes my ass back on the bed, holding me in place, as he laps all my juices, making appreciative noises that almost have me coming again. “Fuck, that was sexy.” He slides his body against mine as he crawls back up to me. “I can’t wait until my cock is filling every inch of your sweet tight cunt.”

He’s so dirty, but I love it.

His glossy lips are covered with my cum, and I like seeing my essence smeared across his mouth. A primal possessiveness sweeps over me, and I yank him down flush on top of me, scraping my nails up and down his back. “Taste yourself,” he says, slamming his lips down on mine.

Teeth clash as we violently kiss, sucking and biting on each other’s lips until mine feel swollen and bruised. I’m holding him flush to my body, my hands roaming his back, grabbing handfuls of his ass, and I need to see all of him, taste all of him. “Stop,” I pant, shoving at his shoulders. “It’s my turn to taste you.”

A familiar smirk crosses his mouth as he jumps up, ripping his boxers down his legs and kicking them away. He stands over me, his feet on either side of my legs, stroking his impressive erection. His crown is glistening with beads of precum, and I bolt upright, swiping my tongue across his tip, moaning at the salty taste coating my tongue. “Sit up against the headboard, and prop pillows at your back and under your arse,” he demands, fixing me with his hungry stare as he slowly pumps his straining dick.

I do as I’m told, excitement bubbling up my throat as he moves toward me. “Tilt your head back, as far as you can go, and open your mouth wide.” His lips twitch. “How good is your gag reflex?”

“Uh...I’m not sure it’s ever been tested.” My cheeks flare up again. I don’t know why I’m getting embarrassed. I’ve had sex. I’ve sucked cock. But I’m not used to being with someone so experienced. I’m used to a gentler touch, so this rougher version of sex is new to me, and I’m feeling a little out of my depth. Don’t get me wrong—I’m fucking loving it; I’m just feeling a little inexperienced around a guy like Dillon.

He comes closer, and his gorgeous dick salutes me. “I’m going to fuck your mouth,” he warns, dragging one hand through my hair. “If it’s too much, grab my wrist, and I’ll pull out.” Bending down, he kisses me hard on the lips. “This is about your pleasure and enjoyment as much as mine. If you’re not enjoying it, I need to know.”

I love how attentive he is to my needs. “I’m loving everything so far. I’m sure I’ll love this too.”

Letting go of his dick, he cups both sides of my face. “You are so sweet, Vivien Grace. Sexy as sin but sweet as sugar at the same time.”

“You say the nicest things.”

“It’s all true.” He straightens up but keeps his knees slightly bent so the angle is right. “Now, open wide, Hollywood.”

I follow his instructions, and he slaps his cock against my cheeks and my mouth, teasing me with his tip, brushing it lightly against my lips. My tongue darts out, licking him any chance I get, until he slowly eases into my mouth. I suck his tip, my tongue swirling around the two ends of his piercing, and he curses, jerking his hips as he pushes in deeper. Grabbing his ass, I widen my mouth as he continues inching in, almost choking when his crown hits the back of my throat.

“Good girl.” He looks down at me before grabbing my hair and twisting it around his hand. Then he fucks my mouth without restraint, sliding in and out aggressively while tugging on my hair and stretching my neck back. I suck and lick him while he thrusts in and out, pivoting his hips and rolling his cock inside my mouth. Tears leak from my eyes, and I almost gag a couple times, but he eases back when it happens, stalling for a second to ensure I’m comfortable, before picking up his punishing pace.

I don’t even consider stopping, even though my neck and jaw are stretched uncomfortably, because I’m enjoying it too much. The look of bliss on Dillon’s face as he rocks into my mouth almost undoes me. I love that I’ve put that expression on his face. That I’m the one giving him pleasure. He doesn’t hold back, thrusting, moaning, and cursing as he fucks my mouth with abandon. “I’m going to come,” he groans, as his ass cheeks stiffen in my hands. I look up at him through wet eyes, urging him to keep going.

His entire body locks up, his powerful thighs strain, and he shouts my name as ropes of hot salty cum hit the back of my mouth, gliding down my throat. Releasing his hold on my hair, he pops out of my mouth and slumps

to his knees beside me. His lips collide with mine, and he kisses me urgently, moaning into my mouth as his tongue slips inside me. He wraps his arms around me as he kisses me like I'm precious treasure.

My heart is full, my body sated, and I'm feeling even closer to him.

"Holy fuck, Viv," he rasps, eventually pulling back. "You never cease to amaze me." I beam with pride at his words. Holding me tight against his chest, he peers into my eyes. "Was that okay for you?"

"It was more than okay. I loved it, and I love your piercings."

"Wait till you feel my cock inside you. This will sound arrogant, but fuck it, I don't care if it's true. I will give you the best sex of your life, and that's a fucking guarantee."

"I don't doubt it." I thread my fingers through his hair. "And I'm working my way up to it."

He plants an adoring kiss on the corner of my mouth. "There's no rush. My blue balls can wait." He flashes me one of his signature grins before sliding off the bed, extending his arm to me. "C'mon. Let's clean up in the shower, and then we can go to bed."

I don't stop to think about it, leaving no space to second-guess myself, clasping his hand and letting him pull me up.

“Happy birthday, birthday girl!” Ash screams, bouncing on my bed on Wednesday morning, dragging me from a deep sleep. “Oh my God, Viv. You’re sleeping with it now.” She shakes her head, grinning as she yanks the pillow out from under my head. “You’ve got it so bad for my brother.”

“Give me that!” I snatch it back, pulling it into my chest. “This just happens to be one of the best presents I’ve ever received.”

“It’s certainly the cheesiest.”

I reread the words on the pillow, as I have done countless times since Dillon had it delivered on Monday.

“When you’re in need of a hug, give me a squeeze.”

He’d added a note in his distinctive handwriting saying he knew this was a poor substitute for one of his hugs, but he hoped it would help if I was feeling sad. I honestly can’t fathom how Dillon hasn’t had a relationship before because he’s either the world’s greatest fake or the most genuinely romantic guy ever.

“Speaking of the sap,” Ash adds. “He sent breakfast over for both of us, so get your lazy arse out of bed and join me in the kitchen.” Her lips pull into a smile. “You also have presents. Lots of presents, so come on, get up!” Yanking on my foot, she tugs me down the bed, and I throw a cushion at her.

“I’m getting up. I need to pee and brush my teeth, and I’ll be out then.”

I watch her leave, smiling at Dillon’s latest romantic gesture. I know he feels bad he couldn’t be here this morning for my birthday. I reassured him

a million times on FaceTime last night that it's fine. Toxic Gods has been rehearsing around the clock, ahead of tonight's Trinity Ball, and I don't hold it against him. We'll get to celebrate later, and I can't wait to see him. Excitement races through my veins as I sit up, a combination of birthday happiness, enthusiasm for the ball, and elation at the prospect of seeing Dillon tonight.

I've decided I want tonight to be *the night*.

I've thought about it these past few days, and I want to have sex with Dillon.

I'm ready.

Waking up that Sunday morning, after he blew my mind with his skillful tongue, mouth, and fingers, was incredible, and it felt right. His strong arms had kept me safe all night, and I had the best sleep. Snuggling into his warm chest, and feeling his ripped masculine body against mine, was perfect and I want to take things to the next level. Coming to Ireland, I made a decision to be brave and strong, and this is me doing that.

I'm taking control of my life and my sexuality, and I'm not going to feel guilty for giving in to my desires.

A tiny kernel of guilt had attacked Sunday morning because waking up wrapped around Dillon had reminded me of similar mornings with Reeve. I didn't mention anything to Dillon because I never want to hurt him or have him compare himself to my ex, but I think he could tell anyway.

My therapist, Sheila, says it's normal to feel like this and completely natural. That little things will trigger memories of Reeve, especially because we share such an extensive history. She says a lot of women do it subconsciously when they move from one relationship to another. She also says, in time, I will find a way to make peace with it all, and I will be able to look back on my good memories with fondness.

I really hope she's right.

Grabbing my journal, I add another entry to my list of personal promises: Stop comparing Dillon to Reeve.

The journal was another one of Sheila's ideas, and I've been writing like crazy—recording my feelings, my thoughts, and my hopes for the future. I've also documented the past, both the good and the bad, and it's helping me to process my emotions.

After a quick bathroom stop, I head out to the kitchen, slamming to a halt at the sight that awaits me. Familiar spicy notes tickle my nostrils, and

my jaw drops to the ground as I stare in shock at all the bouquets of lavender roses. There are enough to open a florist, and the smell is almost an assault on the senses.

“There are twenty-one bouquets, in case you’re wondering,” Ash says, pouring boiling water into a teapot. “That colorful bunch in the vase on the table are from your parents. The other twenty are from Reeve. One for every year you’ve been on the planet.” Her scathing tone matches the mocking sneer on her face, making her feelings clear.

I stare at my Irish bestie, the unspoken question still lingering on my tongue.

“Don’t be mad, but I opened the cards. Today is a big day for you. It’s your birthday, and I know how excited you are about the ball. I just wanted to ensure nothing he had written would upset you. I apologize if I crossed a line.”

I know her actions are coming from a good place, so I let it go even if it does feel like an invasion of my privacy. I’d have shared them with her anyway. “It’s okay. I know you did it to protect me, but in the future, maybe check with me first?”

She nods, walking toward the table. “Come on. Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

After a gorgeous breakfast, I open the gifts from my parents, Ash, Cat, Ro, and Audrey. “Mum baked you this,” Ash says, lifting the top off a cake tin to reveal a gorgeous chocolate cake with “Happy 20th Birthday Vivien” written in red icing on the top.

Happy tears pool in my eyes, as I haul my friend into a hug. “Your mom is the best. I want to call her to thank her.”

Ash pulls out her phone, punching in numbers. “Dil wants to give you your present tonight,” she supplies, thrusting her phone at me. “I’m really hoping that’s not a euphemism for what I think it is.”

I burst out laughing just as Mrs. O’Donoghue answers the call, and I have to hurriedly compose myself. We chat for a few minutes, and I pass her over to her daughter while I clear the table and load the plates and silverware in the dishwasher.

When I’m finished, I take the silver-foiled package into the living room, drumming my fingers on the arm of the couch, as I question the wisdom in opening Reeve’s gift. He’s been giving me my space, but he’s still fighting for me too. Sending housewarming, Valentine’s, and birthday gifts is

chipping away at my resolve, and I'm so conflicted. My heart hurts again. One part of me loves he hasn't forgotten me and he's still fighting hard for our relationship. But another part of me wants him to stop because how can I truly move on if he keeps sending me reminders of the Reeve I love? He's making it more difficult to hold on to my anger, and I'm not okay with that.

And then there's Dillon.

God.

Tossing the package on the couch beside me, I cradle my head in my hands. This is not how I saw today panning out.

"I can open it, if you want," Ash says, plonking down beside me when she's finished her call.

I lift my head, staring at the package like it's a ticking time bomb. I suppose it is, of sorts. "I don't know if I want to open it at all." I flick my gaze to my friend. "Why is he doing this?"

"I think he's regretting his actions and he's worried he's lost you for good."

"You could be right, but I'm not sure I can deal with this today." Dillon's gorgeous smile surfaces in my mind's eye, and my heart jumps in elation. Whatever will happen or not happen with Reeve in the future doesn't change what's happening in the present. I swore I wasn't going to let my ex interfere in my life, and I meant it. Knots loosen in my shoulders as I reach a decision. "I need to contact him and tell him I have a new boyfriend." I wave my hands around the room, gesturing at the flowers. "This has to stop. It's not fair to Dillon."

"It's not fair on you either. It's making things harder."

I nod, exhaling deeply. "It is," I agree, "and it's going to end here. But first I need to see what he sent me." I rip the paper open before I change my mind.

I'm going to give myself to Dillon tonight, and I need to see what's in this gift to know I can leave Reeve in the past and move forward.

I remove the heavy bubble-wrapped interior package, unpacking it with slightly trembling fingers. Ash scoots in closer to me as I open the leatherbound album. Our names are printed within a love heart on the front, and inside, Reeve has filled the album with memories from our past, from the time we were little right up to now. I don't dwell on the photos, unwilling to revisit the past today, so I skim through the book until I come

to an envelope about halfway through the album. The rest of the pages are blank, and I can guess why.

“Wow. He knows what he’s doing sending you this. It’s the sneakiest form of psychological torture.”

“I know,” I whisper, running my finger under the envelope. I suck in a gasp when I withdraw the card and the recent photo of Reeve. I raise trembling fingers to my lips as my gaze roams over the heart-shaped tattoo with my name inked over Reeve’s chest. The message on the card is short and simple, but it drives his point home:

You’re now imprinted on my skin the same way you’re imprinted on my heart. You’re in my blood, Viv, and that will never change. I miss you. I love you, always yours, Reeve.

At the back of the album is a larger envelope containing architect sketches of a vast property.

“What’s that?” Ash inquires, curiosity overriding her derision.

“It’s our dream home,” I whisper. “We’ve been talking about the kind of house we wanted for years. I’d drawn rough sketches. He must have kept them and commissioned someone to draw these.”

“That’s super intense for being so young,” she murmurs.

“Reeve grew up in an empty house with a father who abandoned him after his mom died. Yes, he spent tons of time at my house, and yes, my parents stepped in to help raise him, but he still spent a lot of time alone in a massive house with only paid staff for company. More than anything, he wanted a home to call his own and a loving family. It’s why we had such grand plans. He always seemed so sure of what he wanted.”

“Pity he didn’t remember that before he threw away what you two had,” Ash scoffs.

Sadness washes over me, and I’m regretting opening the package. I didn’t want to feel this today. Reeve really has upped his game. Usually, he’d buy me diamond jewelry for my birthday, so this is not the norm. I get what he’s trying to do. Remind me of the happy memories and the plans we made for the future. Inking my name on his body isn’t just for me. It sends a clear message to the world. But I can’t forget what he’s done. I think I’m moving into a space where I can forgive him, but forgetting is that much harder.

Reminding me of the plans we made for our future only strengthens my resolve. He threw away everything the first time he was truly tested, and

that speaks volumes.

I close the album, smiling sadly. I can't hold on to this. It will only keep me tethering on the edge of sanity, seesawing between the present and the past.

I need to move on.

I'm *ready* to move on.

Maybe things might be different in the future. Maybe we both need time apart to fully appreciate what we had. Maybe we need space to experience the world with other people. Maybe we'll eventually come full circle and find our way back to one another. Or maybe this is the end. All I know for sure is that I want to move forward with Dillon, and I can't do that while clinging to the past.

I know Reeve didn't mean for his gift to have this effect, but in a warped way, it's actually helped. "I'm going to return the gift, and I'll talk to Ciara downstairs and see if they can use the flowers around the building instead."

Relief floods Ash's face, and I realize she was worried on her brother's behalf. Those two are so close, and I'm slightly envious of their relationship. "That sounds like a plan." She squeezes my hand. "I'm so proud of you. You are much stronger than I was."

"You are one of the strongest people I know, and I'm sure that's not true."

"What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, right?"

"Damn straight."

Ash glances at the time on her cell. "We have a couple of hours before the makeup artist and hairdresser get here. We're low on food, so I was thinking we could run out and stock up now. Trust me when I say you'll be incapable of doing much of anything over the next two days. The Trinity Ball is hardcore."

Snagging our jackets and purses, we head out into the city to the nearest grocery store. We grab enough food for the next few days so we don't have to step foot out of the apartment if we're as hungover as Ash predicts we'll be. We've just paid for our purchases, when the headline on *OK!* grabs my attention from a nearby newsstand. My feet move of their own volition, and my heart is pounding erratically behind my chest as I walk toward the magazine stand.

Bile swims up my throat as I stare at the cover of the magazine in horror. The headline reads “Reeveron cozy up with PDA on Mexican beach!” Splashed across the front is a picture of Saffron and Reeve on a sun lounger by the sea. She’s straddling his waist, wearing only a thong, leaning into him with her face angled to the side so her features are clearly visible. Reeve has his hands on her bare ass, and his face is buried in her naked chest. It’s not as easy to discern it’s Reeve from the pic as most of his face and torso are hidden, but I know it’s him. I know his body, and he’s wearing the board shorts I bought him when I was in Europe last summer.

“Fuck.” Ash comes up behind me, sliding her arm around my waist. “What a fucking shithead.”

I pick the magazine up, but Ash snatches it from my hand. “Do you really want to look at that?”

My chest tightens, and tears cling to my lashes.

This is just like Christmas all over again.

Reeve is trying to hide his betrayal behind a grand gesture. Sending me that birthday gift is another attempt at manipulation. But just like Christmas, it won’t work.

“Don’t do it, Viv,” Ash pleads. “All it will do is hurt you even more. That bastard has claimed enough of your tears.”

She is right. I don’t need to see inside to read what’s written or stare at more damning pictures. Swallowing thickly, I nod, placing it back on the stand, letting her drag me out of there before I change my mind.

I stumble out of the store and along the sidewalk with Ash’s arm looped through mine. I clutch the grocery bags for dear life, and I’m in a dazed kind of fugue state as we head back to our apartment, but it doesn’t last long. Initial hurt gives way to red-hot anger, and by the time we reach our place, I’m seething and hell-bent on destruction.

“Give me a second,” I tell Ash, leaving her by the elevator as I seek out the manager on duty. Thankfully, it’s Ciara. She’s the nicer of the three property managers. I tell her what I need, and she promises to send people up to our apartment ASAP.

“What’s going on?” Ash asks, when I stomp back to her.

“I’m getting rid of the flowers and the gift.”

“We could go up to the roof, destroy the flowers, and take a pic to send to him,” she suggests, as we step foot in the elevator.

“The thought had crossed my mind, but the flowers haven’t done anything. I can’t justify wrecking something so beautiful. Let someone else get enjoyment from them because I sure as fuck can’t.”

After the flowers and the gift are gone, I open the champagne chilling in the refrigerator and hand a glass to Ash. We weren’t planning on drinking until much later, as we need to pace ourselves, but this is an emergency, and I fucking need alcohol. “Let’s toast,” I say, grinding my teeth to the molars. “I’m finally free. Fuck Reeve Lancaster. And fuck Saffron Roberts. I hope she makes him miserable as sin.” We clink glasses.

“I hope she gives him the clap and his dick falls off,” Ash says, and I almost choke on my champagne.

“Amen to that!”

My arm flies out, and I grab Ash's elbow before she takes a tumble. She snort-laughs, and I grin as I loop my arm through hers. "I told you, you should've drank more water at dinner." Ash and I finished the bottle of champagne before the hair and makeup people arrived at our place. Then we sipped vodka while they were dolling us up. We were giddy as fuck as we climbed into a taxi that took us to the campus where we traveled between a few different pre-ball parties. By the time dinner was served, my head was spinning a little and I felt a teeny bit nauseated, so I purposely switched to water and shoveled food in my mouth to line my stomach. It worked, and now I'm a hell of a lot more sober than my friend.

I want to be in full control and look my absolute best when I see Dillon and tell him I'm ready to fuck his brains out. We haven't seen the guys yet because they're busy getting things set up for their performance. Toxic Gods is one of the first acts on stage, so they'll be able to join us for the remainder of the night, and I'm already on a countdown.

"Water is for pussies," Cat says, giggling. "It's the Trinnners ball! That means we need to get fucking wasted."

"Amen, sister." Ash raises her fist for a knuckle touch, and I think I'll have my work cut out with these two tonight.

Wandering into a tent, we grab some drinks before making our way back outside. Dillon and Jamie are a few feet in front of us, glancing anxiously around the packed space. "Dillon!" I holler, tugging Cat and Ash with me as I head in their direction. A few others in our group trail behind us.

Dillon spins around, and the look on his face is almost comical. His jaw drops to the floor, and heat scorches a blazing trail across my flesh as he drags his hungry gaze slowly up and down my body. I know I look good. The blue satin dress turned out exactly how I wanted it to, and I'm flashing plenty of leg, which I knew Dil would like. Soft bouncy curls cascade over my shoulders, complementing my smoky eyes and nude lips.

Dillon stalks toward me, his nostrils flaring, desire evident in his dark eyes. Without saying a word, he reels me into his arms, claiming my lips in a possessive kiss that has my ovaries swooning and tripping over themselves. When he dips me down low, without breaking our lip-lock, I swear I hear a collective sigh from the women around me. "Damn, Hollywood. You look beautiful," he purrs in my ear, as he straightens us up. "Are you trying to get me arrested for indecency because right now I'm having a hard time not dragging you behind one of those tents to fuck." He bites my earlobe, before nuzzling his head into my shoulder.

I purposely let his comment slide. If I respond, there's a strong chance I'll let him drag us back there and have his wicked way with me. "You like my dress?" I ask, biting my lip and smiling coyly at him.

"Yes. It's stunning, like you," he growls, sliding his hand under the slit in the skirt and stroking my thigh. "Easy access." He winks. "Me likey a lot."

"You have sex on the brain," I tease, grasping his shoulders.

He arches a brow, smirking. "Haven't we had this conversation before?"

"We have." I stretch up on my heels, pressing my mouth to his ear. "I'm ready," I whisper in my most seductive tone. "Later, I say we ditch the after-parties, go back to my place, and fuck for the rest of the night."

His hands move to my hips, and he yanks me against him, grinding his pelvis into my stomach. "There's your answer." His expression softens and turns more serious. Twisting one hand in my hair, he tilts my face up. "Are you sure?" I bob my head. His eyes probe mine carefully. "I wasn't expecting this reaction. I thought you might be upset tonight."

"Ash told you."

"She did." He plants a feather-soft kiss on my brow, and I melt against him. "Are you okay?"

"I am now."

His eyes drill into mine. "I can't believe I'm going to say this," he murmurs, smiling a little. "We don't have to bang tonight. In fact, I'd rather

we didn't if it's a knee-jerk reaction to your dickhead ex." He pecks my lips briefly. "And for the record, he *is* a dickhead, but it's lucky for me. His loss is definitely my gain."

"I'm glad you think so." Holding his arm, I peer deep into his eyes. I want Dillon to understand this is only about me and him. "I had already decided this morning that I want to take our relationship to the next level. What Reeve has done doesn't change how I feel about you. Reeve is my ex for a reason. He's in the past. I prefer to exist in the here and now. With you."

His kiss this time is unhurried, slow, and passionate, and I know I've made the right decision. I'm glad I worked all the anger and hurt out of my system earlier. That I used the time getting ready to wrangle those emotions into a lockbox. Reeve only has the power to hurt me and ruin my life if I give him that power, and I refuse to do that anymore. Tonight is proof I have wrested back control. I'm having a good time, and the night is only getting started.

We move closer to the stage right before Toxic Gods appears, screaming and whistling encouragement as they play a medley of five songs. The crowd is appreciative, and it's so weird to see people in ball gowns and tuxedos rocking it out on the grass. I'm happy there are no groupies in sight, which eliminates any lingering stress. I thought for sure Jamie would've gotten tickets for Aoife and the others. But, if the looks he was throwing Ash's way earlier are any indication, he has ulterior motives. Ash swears she's not going near him, but I can see it happening. The attraction between them may not be as palpable as it is between Dillon and me, but it's there. I'm not going to judge; I just worry about Ash getting hurt, but she's a grown-ass woman, capable of making her own choices.

"Miss me?" Strong arms wrap around me from behind a while later, and the spicy scent of Dillon's cologne tickles my nose.

"So much," I say, turning in his arms. Opening my mouth to congratulate him on his performance, I let the words die on my tongue when I see him in a tuxedo. He was wearing his usual black jeans and T-shirt combo on stage. He didn't attend dinner, so there really was no need to rent a tux. I know he did this for me, and I fall a little harder in this second. "Wow," I choke out, "you look so fucking hot." He really does. He managed to wrangle his messy blond waves back off his face, and his jawline is smooth for a change. He's still got his piercings in, and the edges

of his tattoos creep out from under the sleeves of his jacket, but he looks handsome and sophisticated.

And so very mine.

Producing a long-stem white rose from behind his back, he hands it to me. “For the most beautiful girl at the ball.” My nose brushes against the soft petals, and I breathe in their delicate scent. “White roses represent new beginnings and rebirth,” he explains, offering me his hand. “Will you be my new beginning? And can I be yours?”

Be still my beating heart. This man slays me in all the best ways.

Ash makes a gagging sound, but I ignore her, taking Dillon’s hand and beaming up at him. Our gazes connect, and a zap of electricity shoots up my arm the second our skin touches. My chest heaves as I stare into his beautiful face, and butterflies swoop into my belly, turning somersaults. My heart swells, soaring to dizzy heights the longer we just stand there staring, lost in an intimate moment, despite the noise surrounding us.

A flash pops, and we both turn sideways. “You are sickeningly cute. Mum said I was to take pictures, so get in closer,” Ash says with a happy smile on her face. We pose for several pictures, with our arms wrapped around one another, and I make her send them to me so I can forward them to Audrey and my parents.

Dillon leads me over to a quiet corner, handing me a badly wrapped pink package. “Happy birthday, Viv.” He kisses me sweetly, and my cheeks are flushed when we break apart.

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re my girl. I’m pretty sure it goes against the boyfriend code to not buy your girlfriend a present on her birthday.”

His words send an enormous thrill through me. “You already got me a gift. Thank you for breakfast,” I add, having forgotten to tell him previously.

“Open it.” He shuffles nervously on his feet, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black pants.

I tear the pink paper off with zero patience, and he grins. There are two gifts inside. The first is a photo album.

“To make new memories,” Dillon explains, rubbing the back of his neck.

I’m momentarily frozen to the spot. How ironic that Dillon chose a similar gift to Reeve’s. Shaking myself out of my temporary melancholy, I

stop overthinking it. It's not that unusual. Dillon knows I'm documenting my trip through photos. It makes sense he'd give me something like this. "Thank you. I bet I have enough photos to fill half this album already."

"I look forward to filling the rest." He smiles, making me swoon again.

My heart is in my throat as I lift the lid on the small black box, and I gasp as I lift the silver necklace from the cushion. "Dillon, it's beautiful."

"It's a Claddagh necklace. The Swarovski crystal represents your birthstone. April is actually diamond, but until Toxic Gods makes it big, I rob a bank, or win the lotto, that's all I can afford," he half-jokes.

"It's perfect. I love it." I fling my arms around his neck. "Thank you so much." I dust kisses all over his stunning face, and my heart is fit to burst. "Help me to put it on," I say, easing out of his embrace. I remove the silver diamond choker around my neck, stowing it carefully in the inside zip pocket of my purse. Dillon looks at it, frowning, and I can guess where his mind has gone to. "It was a birthday present from my parents," I softly say, and his puckered brow smooths out.

I hold my hair up so he can fasten it around my neck. "All done." He presses a kiss to my temple as I finger the delicate chain.

"Take a picture of me wearing it. I need to show Audrey."

Wordlessly, he takes my phone and snaps a pic, and I send it to my bestie.

Grabbing more drinks, we join the rest of Toxic Gods and our friends, spending an enjoyable few hours dancing and listening to music. Dillon is attentive, and he never leaves my side. He even insists on coming with me to the bathroom, keeping me company as we stand in the long line. Back outside, I burst out laughing as he and Jamie search through some large bushes at the side of the field, emerging with twigs and leaves stuck to their suits. "Laugh all you want, but we have tequila," Jamie says, waggling his brows and raising the full bottle.

"They have tequila at the bar," I remind them.

"We have to pay through the nose for that," Jamie says.

"Not all of us are loaded Americans," Dillon says, and his words slice a layer off my happiness.

He makes the odd cryptic remark about money at times that irritates me. I mean, it's not like he grew up poor. Ash has explained the challenges that come with running a farm and supporting a large family. I know things haven't always been easy, but none of them ever went without, so I don't

understand why Dillon has such a chip on his shoulder. It's unfair I should be punished for growing up in affluence. It's not like either one of us has gotten to choose our families.

"Sorry," he murmurs, pulling me into his arms. "I didn't mean to upset you. I guess we just have different outlooks on money."

"If it bugs you that much, maybe you should pursue the band's interests more thoroughly."

"It's not about being rich per se." He sways to the music with me in his arms. "And we get by. We're lucky we have a regular slot in Whelans, and we're starting to earn decent money from streaming our EP."

"Then what is it?"

He shrugs. "My own hang-ups, I suppose." He kisses the tip of my nose. "I know it's not fair to take it out on you. You didn't choose your upbringing, and you're not flashy with your money or mean either."

"I know I'm fortunate, and this is cliché, but money doesn't guarantee happiness. Look at my ex. He had every material possession, yet he would've given it all up to have his mom back, his dad present, and a loving family environment."

Dillon snorts, and a sneer pulls up the corners of his mouth. "Please don't use *him* to make a point. That dickhead had everything handed to him, you included, and he doesn't fucking appreciate it."

"Woah." I run my hands up his chest. "Where is all this coming from?"

His Adam's apple bobs in his throat, and air whooshes out of his mouth before he tightens his arms around me, burying his head in my shoulder. "Sorry, I'm just pissed on your behalf. He hurt you, and that's not okay with me."

I relax against him, running my fingers lightly through his hair. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought him up."

He lifts his head. "It's okay. I know he was a big part of your life. I know you don't intentionally do it. I understand he's tied to a lot of your memories."

Dillon's mood swings give me a headache sometimes. He seems to veer from one emotion to the next and back again all within the same minute. I don't call him on it, though. I don't want anything to ruin this incredible night. "Thank you for understanding." Stretching up on my heels, I kiss him. "But let's not talk about him anymore."

We drink shots of tequila and dirty dance in the crowd, kissing and groping one another, while drunken revelers party hard around us. By the end of the night, bodies litter the ground and groups of disheveled students sit on the grass outside tents, smoking, drinking, and laughing.

The night is still young though, by Trinity Ball standards, and many attendees start wandering off to parties while others stay put, content to wait a few hours for the pubs to open. According to Ronan's girlfriend, some students party hard from the day before the ball to the day after, and it's not unusual to spot students in ballgowns and tuxes in pubs across the city.

"What do you want to do?" Dillon asks, breathing tequila fumes across my face.

"Ride your cock like a porn star all night long," I reply without hesitation.

"And the prude has left the house!" Jamie pipes up, looking highly amused. I flip him the bird, and he cranks out a laugh.

Ash spits her beer all over the path. "TMI, Viv. Holy fuck. I did *not* need to hear that. Please, someone scrub my ears out." Jamie whispers something in her ear, and she levels him with a glare. Dillon watches the interaction with a muscle popping in his jaw.

"Dil." I tug on his sleeve, dragging his gaze away. "What are we doing?"

He clasps both sides of my face. "You're sure you want to do this with me tonight?"

"One hundred percent."

He stabs me with an intense look I feel all the way to my core. "C'mon, then. Let's get out of here."

“Hurry, Dillon,” I pant, holding up my hair so he can unbutton the back of my dress. A trickle of sweat rolls between my breasts, and my skin is a little clammy. We couldn’t find a taxi, so we ran all the way back to my apartment, both of us anxious to be together.

“I’m trying. Could you have made these buttons any smaller?” He curses, and I giggle. “Done,” he adds a few seconds later.

Wiggling out of the dress, I let it pool at my ankles before turning to face him in just my blue lace thong and my silver Louboutin sandals.

“Fuck. Look at you.” His eyes rake up and down my body, and I can almost feel the sensual caress. “We need to capture this moment.” Kneeling in front of his duffel bag, he pulls out his phone. “Can I take a photo?”

I chew on the inside of my mouth, not sure if this is a good idea.

“I promise I won’t show it to anyone. This is just for me.” He reassures me, flashing me one of his infamous panty-melting grins, and I’m a goner. “Ammo for the spank bank,” he adds. Cupping his crotch, he strokes his hard-on over his pants.

Jeez. As if a girl could resist. “Okay, but from the neck down.” I don’t want my face shown in case it ever ends up in the wrong hands.

He snaps a pic, drops his cell on top of his bag, and closes the distance between us. Leaning down, he plants a row of drugging kisses along my jawline and my neck. He tweaks my nipples, hardening them instantly. “You looked like Hollywood royalty at the ball,” he says, bending his head to suck my nipple into his mouth. “Tonight, you’re my queen.” I’m

guessing his use of queen over princess is on purpose, and his thoughtfulness only makes me crave him more.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I complain, pushing his shoulders. “Strip for me, baby.”

He levels me with a devilish glint in his eyes. “Undress me.” Standing up straight, he stares at me, challenging me with a heated look, waiting for me to make the next move.

“Gladly,” I purr, slipping the jacket off his shoulders and tossing it on the back of the chair. Next, his shirt and bow tie come off, and I take my time exploring the dips and curves of his abs, the broad expanse of his chest, and the defined muscles in his biceps and arms.

My fingers trail over the ink covering both his arms, skimming across Celtic symbols, skulls, crosses, roses, and knives. Musical notes and song lyrics are inked across his chest. Walking around him, I examine the scorpion on his back. He jumps when my fingers move along the intricate drawing. “This is gorgeous. Does it have any special significance?”

He shrugs, but his muscles seem tight until I start pressing kisses into his back, kneading the corded knots in his shoulders, easing the tension I find there.

“The scorpion represents a lot of things that have meaning to me,” he says after a few beats.

“Like what?” I trail my fingers around to his front and slowly open his pants. His erection brushes against my hand as I work the zipper down.

“Determination, rebirth, resilience.”

“I like it,” I whisper, moving around to his front. “I love all your ink.” Tugging his pants down along with his boxers, I kneel in front of his straining cock with saliva pooling in my mouth. “That’s not all I love,” I tease, grinning up at him.

“You look good on your knees.” Grabbing my head, he guides me toward his dick.

I lick the precum crowning his tip as he fondles my breasts with his free hand. Slowly, I take him into my mouth, sliding my lips up and down his velvety-soft length.

“Touch yourself,” he demands, thrusting into my mouth in slow, measured strokes.

My hand trails down my body, and I slip my fingers into my panties, circling my swollen clit and moaning around his cock.

“Push two fingers into yourself,” he directs, and I do as he says. “Work them faster.”

“Fuck, yeah.” He thrusts more forcefully into my mouth as I finger myself, growing wetter by the second.

“Enough,” he commands after a few minutes, withdrawing from my mouth. “I want to come in your pussy after I eat you out.”

Throwing me back on my bed, he shreds my thong with his teeth, and it’s so fucking hot I almost come instantly. Parting my thighs, he dives in, feasting on my pussy, using his magical tongue and fingers, until I’m shattering against his mouth and he’s dry humping the comforter. Ripping the foil packet open, he slowly and carefully rolls a condom down his length. “Are you still okay with this?” He checks one final time.

“Yes. Hell yes. Fuck me, Dillon. Do it now.”

“It would be my pleasure, Hollywood.” He runs his hands up and down my legs as he situates himself between my thighs. Throwing my legs over his shoulders, he dips two digits inside me, coating his fingers in my juices, before bringing them to his mouth. “Tasty.” He winks, and it shouldn’t be sexy, but it is.

Guiding his cock to my entrance, he pushes inside me in one fluid thrust, shoving his dick in to the max. “Jesus, you’re so tight.” He holds himself still, letting us both adjust. Muscles bunch in his abs, and his shoulders are rigid with the exertion involved in restraining himself. After a few seconds, he leans down, claiming my lips in a hard demanding kiss, as he starts to rock inside me.

Stars explode behind my eyes as he fucks me, and the feel of his piercing is unlike anything I’ve felt. It drags across my insides in the most blissful manner, heightening my pleasure. When he slams inside me, pushing to the hilt, I scream as the most intense sensation whips through me. Every thrust is like a mini orgasm, and I’m clinging to him, writhing and moaning, spewing curses and begging him to go harder.

Dillon straightens, pulling my legs up a little, and this new angle is even better. Pivoting his hips, he pounds into me with almost animal savagery. Sweat glistens on his chest as he maintains a punishing pace, and his stamina is as impressive as his skill.

Screaming his name, I detonate like a firework on the Fourth of July, sparking across the universe in bursts of colorful light that seem never ending. Before I’ve come down from my high, he flips me over and yanks

my butt up, nudging my thighs farther apart with his legs. I have no time to recover when he rams into me again, and I scream from the pit of my lungs as he slams into me like a madman. Digging his fingers into my hips, he thrusts powerfully inside me, hard and fast, before he yells out as his own release reaches its peak.

Dillon continues thrusting, holding my hips steady, until he's milked his climax. Then we collapse on the bed in a tangled sweaty heap, both of us struggling to get our breathing under control. His arms band around me from behind as we spoon. After a few minutes, he brushes my hair aside, nipping at my neck. "Well, Vivien Grace? Did I live up to my promise?"

I have never been fucked like that, and there's no contest—that was definitely the best sex of my life. Twisting around in his arms, I sweep my fingers across his cheek as I smile. "Yeah, baby. You definitely did."

I can barely walk the next day when I eventually surface from bed and stagger into my en suite bathroom to pee. We got home just after five, and we fucked relentlessly for hours, desperate to explore one another and all the ways we could induce pleasure from our bodies. So, I'm currently running on fumes and a few hours' sleep.

Staring in the mirror as I wash my hands, I survey the faint bruising on my breasts, my hips, and the inside of my thighs and the two hickeys on my neck with an amused smile. Perhaps I'm sick in the head, but I love seeing his marks on me. Love feeling the pulsing ache between my thighs, knowing he fucked me good last night.

Allowing my mind to wander to Reeve, I test my emotions, and, nope, I'm good. I have zero regrets. Dillon blew my mind last night and then some. There is no part of me that regrets sleeping with him. I brush my teeth before heading back into the bedroom, where Dillon is stirring.

"Ugh." Dillon pulls my special pillow down over his head. "Make it stop."

My cell is vibrating across the bedside table, so I grab it and crawl back into bed. Dillon's arm juts out, and he pulls me back into his chest, nudging my ass with his morning wood. My pussy pulses with need like the greedy cunt she is as I retrieve my messages.

I have several from Ash, asking me to call her when Dillon leaves to head home. That can only mean one thing—she spent the night with Jamie. Hoping she doesn't regret it, I read Audrey's message next. She wants me to call her the instant I wake, no matter what time it is. That doesn't sound good, and my spidey senses tell me it's something Reeve-related.

"Why the sigh?" Dillon asks, dotting kisses along my bare back.

"It's nothing," I lie, not wanting to talk about my ex.

"You sure?" He grazes his teeth along my neck, and I close my eyes as he jerks his hips against my ass.

"Yep."

His fingers slide around my waist and creep lower. "Are you sore?" he whispers against my ear, sending a flurry of tingles along my sensitive skin.

"Not that sore," I confirm, eagerly parting my legs for his hand.

He dips two fingers inside me. "Always so wet. I fucking love it." Slowly he pumps his fingers in and out of me while his other hand kneads my breast. Anticipation coils in my belly while he rolls a condom on, and I'm reveling in the newness of our intimacy. When he slips into me from behind a few minutes later, I let loose an appreciative moan, arching my back and pivoting my hips in sync with his thrusts. He's gentler today, and while I hate I can't see his face or kiss him, I love this angle and how it grants him access to touch me everywhere.

We both come within seconds of each other, and we lie there, silent and sated, pressed as close as two people can be. Dillon dusts kisses all over my neck, my shoulders, and my back, and I could happily stay like this all day. Until my tummy rumbles, reminding me it's been hours since we ate. "I think that's my cue to get us some breakfast."

"Brunch, you mean," he says over a yawn. "It's already one."

Kissing his strong arms, I slide out of the bed, perching on the edge of the mattress while I pull pajamas out of my drawer. The bed jolts behind me, and Dillon curses. I whip my head around to see what's wrong. Dillon is on his knees, with his back facing me, his fingers frantically searching the bed. I lean over, placing a hand on his back, and he jumps. "What'd you lose?"

"My, ah, mobile phone. I think it went down the back of the bed."

I frown, glancing around the room until I see his bag on the floor under wrinkled clothing. Getting up, I move to it, finding his phone under his

crumpled pants. “I found it.” He buries his face in the pillow as I approach, and I set his phone down on the table. “What’s the matter?”

“My head is pounding,” he says, his words muffled as he speaks into the pillow. “Could you get me some tablets.”

“Of course.” I press a kiss between his shoulder blades before heading out to the kitchen.

When I return a few minutes later, he’s sitting up against the headboard, cradling his head in his hands. Slivers of buttery light filter through the blinds, casting him in a golden light.

I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.

The comforter is bunched at his waist, and his naked chest is a work of art. He’s all smooth skin, defined curves, and ripped muscles. The ink on his body only adds to his hotness, and I wish I could capture this moment on film. His hair is sticking up all over the place, disheveled from my fingers, but he still looks sexy as fuck.

Dillon could easily be a model if the rock star thing doesn’t work out for him.

“Here.” I hand him a glass of water and two pain meds.

“Thanks, Viv.” He knocks them back before pulling me down on top of him. “How about I cook us some eggs and bacon, and then we come back to bed?”

He kisses me, and from the minty freshness of his breath, I can tell he’s made a trip to the bathroom too. “How about you stay right here, and I’ll bring us omelets in bed?” I suggest.

“I want to look after you.” He trails his hands up and down my sides.

“It’s my turn to look after you.” I massage his brow. “You’re the one with a headache.”

A funny look crosses his face before he smiles. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

After stealing more kisses, I reluctantly leave him to make food.

I call Audrey from the kitchen while I'm preparing our food, not wanting to have this conversation with Dillon in proximity. I didn't have time to call her yesterday, but I'd messaged her to say I had seen the *OK!* picture and I was fine. I am about to hang up when her sleepy voice finally answers. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Better than fine." I smile to myself as I put her on speaker, chopping onions and tomatoes while I proceed to fill her in on the ball and spending last night with Dillon.

"Good for you, babe. How was it? The sex, I mean?"

"Out of this fucking world. I lost count of the orgasms he gave me, and I can barely walk today with the ache between my legs."

"I hope he's nowhere in the vicinity. Let's not give him an even bigger head."

There's a slight edge to her tone I don't much care for. "He knows he's good, and he deserves all the praise. Trust me on that score."

"Are you happy, Viv?" she asks, after a few tense beats, in a more somber tone.

"Yeah, yes, I think I am."

Another pregnant pause ensues. "I'm not going to lie. I've been worried sick since I saw that picture. I thought you might do something reckless."

"Does riding my new boyfriend's cock for hours pass as reckless?" I quip, needing to lighten the inexplicable tense atmosphere.

"I'm sure to Reeve it probably would."

"Good," I snap.

“I called him,” she admits, and I nearly slice the tip of my finger off.

“Why would you do that?”

“I was worried this would undo all your progress, and I wanted to know if it was true.”

Setting the knife down, I grab the counter, not sure if I want to hear this.

Audrey takes the decision out of my hands. “He says the picture was taken in Mexico ten days ago, when they were nearing the end of the promo tour. They were all out by the pool drinking and doing drugs.”

A bitter laugh escapes my lips. “Let me guess. It was a mistake. He wasn’t in his right mind. He thought she was me.”

“Yeah, it went something like that.”

“He must think I’m such a fucking idiot! Sending me those gifts, thinking it would make everything okay.” Bile floods my mouth as I dice chorizo.

“Here’s the thing. Reeve has been working on that photo album for months, and he got that tattoo weeks ago. He sent it before Mexico happened, so I think the gesture was sincere.”

“I don’t fucking care, Audrey,” I hiss, lowering my voice. I don’t want Dillon to come out and investigate.

“Viv. I’m on your side. Always.”

I’ve never had reason to doubt that before, but it doesn’t sound reassuring right now. “So, what is this? It sounds to me like you’re rooting for Reeve.” I crack eggs into a bowl, trying to rein in my anger. I don’t want to fight with my bestie, but she’s pissing me off and ruining my good mood.

“It was hard to talk to him and not feel some compassion. He’s messed up, Viv. Alex and I are worried about him. But it’s not just the partying and the drugs. It’s that *bitch*. She’s still manipulating him, and he’s struggling to shake her off. She’s hell-bent on sticking her claws into him. At this point, he’s convinced she’s only doing it to get at you. He doesn’t think she’s really into him or ever has been. It’s more the thrill of stealing him from you.”

“She can have him. I’m done.” I won’t let Audrey or Reeve guilt me into changing my mind. I know she’s just concerned about him, and in the past, I would’ve jumped to help him, but I’ve got to prioritize myself, or I’ll undo all my good work.

Technically, Reeve hasn’t done anything wrong this time. He’s single now, so if he wants to cavort half-naked on a sun lounger on a Mexican

beach with that whore, he's free to do so. It clearly doesn't matter that it's disrespectful to me to find out like that, on my freaking birthday, but whatever. I'm so done with this. My wrist works overtime as I vigorously whisk the eggs, hoping Audrey will just let this drop.

"He's hired a top-notch investigator. A guy who specializes in this kind of investigation. He knows she leaked the photo to *OK!*, and he suspects she is in cahoots with Cassidy and Bianca. He's going after them, Viv, and he's already issued an ultimatum to the studio."

"What ultimatum?" I hate that I ask the question before I've had time to engage my brain.

"He told them he won't do promotion for the final movie with Saffron. That they have to be split up, in different countries, or he's not promoting it at all."

"I'm glad to see he's finally growing a pair, but it's too late for us."

"He's talking about coming to see you," she adds. "He's due to resume filming *Sweet Retribution* in a few days, so it won't be anytime soon. But he has a week off, in the middle of June, before he starts filming that superhero movie over the summer. I think he'll turn up then."

Reeve has been continuously auditioning for other parts, and he's in high demand off the back of his *Rydeville Elite* success, but I don't know what other jobs he has booked. That Australian movie he made last summer is due to release in early August, and it's just another milestone I won't be around to share. Mad as I am, I'm still proud of him and glad his career is taking off in the way he'd always dreamed of.

"Thanks for the heads-up. I'll make sure it doesn't happen."

"What are you going to do?"

"Send him a message that tells him loud and clear to leave me alone."

After we've eaten, I ponder what to do about the Reeve situation. I know, for a fact, without checking, he's been blowing up my US cell. Thank fuck, Moira hadn't passed my Irish cell phone number on. I discovered Mom's assistant was the one who gave Reeve my Irish address before she knew we'd split. Mom explained in time to stop her divulging my new cell, and

I've made it very clear to Audrey, on several occasions, that she's not to share my Irish number with Alex or Reeve.

But I know my ex inside and out. I know he's been trying to reach me, and I need to respond because he *cannot* come here. I refuse to allow it. I won't let him blow my cover and damage my new relationship. I'm happy, and Reeve showing up would ruin everything.

"Penny for them," Dillon says, rolling over and propping up on his elbows. He's lying on his stomach staring inquisitively at me.

"I need to deal with Reeve. I'm just trying to figure out how."

He purses his lips. "How about you give him a taste of his own medicine?" he suggests with a gleeful glint in his eye.

"What are you thinking?"

"Send him a pic of us together in bed, and I'm sure he'll get the message."

He waits patiently while I consider it. I know it would get my point across, and I know it would hurt him. A part of me wants him to know what it feels like. But is this stooping to his level? Shouldn't I rise above that?

"He deserves to know, and it's not like you'd be blasting our photo all over social media for the world to see," Dillon quietly says, as if he's reading my mind. Briefly, I contemplate doing just that, but I discard the idea as fast. I went off social media for a reason, and I'm not falling down that rabbit hole again. I also don't want to drag Dillon into my shit, even if the exposure might be good for Toxic Gods. Dillon has his own little following here already, and if I start sharing pics of us online, I risk the wrath of more groupies. I haven't forgotten how viciously I was attacked by Reeve fans, and I still, occasionally, have nightmares about the assault.

But the most important reason why I can't go on social media is I don't want to expose my location. Someone would figure it out, and my safe haven would be gone. No revenge is worth that sacrifice.

"You're right," I tell Dillon. "Sending it privately is more respectful than how I found out about him and that whore." I switch on my US cell, and it pings successively with a ton of notifications. Dillon leans over my shoulder, tucking his arm around my waist. "Holy shit. You have hundreds of notifications from him."

"I haven't switched it on since I arrived here. Knowing him like I do, he's been messaging me daily, and he was obviously frantic to get ahold of

me once the pic leaked,” I add, scrolling through the long list of calls and messages from the last two days.

“He’s certainly persistent.” Dillon watches as I group delete everything. “I don’t understand it. Why is he trying so desperately to win you back if he’s fucking his costar?”

His words sting a little, but I try not to let it show because I understand the point he’s making. “I have no idea what game he’s playing, but I’m done playing it with him.”

We strip out of our clothes and lie down in the bed. Dillon has his arms wrapped around me in a way that shields my breasts but makes it clear we’re naked. “Bury your head in my neck,” I say. “I don’t want him to see your face.”

“Why not?”

“Reeve seems a bit unhinged right now, and I don’t want him coming after you.”

A pang of sadness slaps me in the face. I can’t believe it’s come to this. But it has, because I don’t know him at all anymore. Who knows what he’s capable of now? I agree with Dil. I don’t know why Reeve is trying so hard to get back with me if he’s still messing around with Saffron. He’s clearly still taking drugs, which makes me hurt for him. I’d never have thought Reeve would follow this path, and I hope he stops before he reaches the point of no return.

“I don’t give a fuck if he comes after me. I can handle him, but it’s your call.” Dillon turns away from the camera, pressing his lips to my neck and shielding his face. It’s actually way sexier like this. Resting my hand on Dillon’s back, I stare at the camera and take the pic.

We straighten up against the headboard as I get ready to compose my message. “Can you send that to me too,” Dillon asks, resting his chin on my shoulder. “That is one sexy ass photo.”

“We look good together,” I quietly say, forwarding the pic to my Irish cell. I want a copy of it too.

“We really do.” He kisses my lips sweetly, watching silently as I type out a message I hope will stop Reeve from getting on a plane.

Don’t you dare come here, Reeve. No one knows I’m in Ireland, and I want it to stay that way. I’m in a good place. Don’t take that from me. Please stop messaging me, and stop sending gifts. It’s over. I’ve moved on,

just like you. Accept we are done, and you have no one to blame but yourself. Have a good life. All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy.

Before I can overthink it, I press send. Then I turn off my cell and shove it back in the drawer.

“Freedom!” I yell, fist-pumping the air and bouncing around in the passenger seat of my SUV. “Exams are over. The sun is shining—shocker right there—and I have all summer to hang out with my friends. I’m so happy I could scream!” I exclaim, beaming like a complete loon. But it’s the truth. I’m radiating happiness, and I don’t care who knows it. I’m deliberately not thinking about the fact next week is the first week in June and I only have ten weeks left in Ireland. Going there would totally burst my bubble, and I refuse to acknowledge that yet.

“You are such a dork.” Dillon shoots me an amused smile, chuckling, as he drives one-handed.

“I am, but I’m *your* dork.” Unbuckling my belt, I stretch across the console and smack a loud kiss on his cheek. He’s wearing a white, black, and red T-shirt I bought him over shredded dark jeans that hug his long powerful legs. Slowly, I’m trying to introduce color into his closet and his life. I even got him to trade the biker boots for sneakers, which is a feat. Dark designer shades hide his beautiful eyes, the usual layer of dark stubble coats his chin and cheeks, and his glorious face is tan from being outside these past couple of weeks in the warmer weather. Muscles flex and roll in his arm as he drives, looking cool and confident, and he couldn’t look any hotter.

One look at him is all it takes to inflame my heart and stoke my libido.

These past six weeks have been amazing, even if our time together has been largely confined to Friday nights in Whelans and my apartment. Cramming for exams was no fun, but I got there in the end, and now I’m on

the other side. We have the rest of the summer to be together, and I'm excited for some of our plans.

Dillon swats my ass. "Too fucking right." His sexy smirk has my ovaries doing a happy dance. "You're mine. *All mine*," he growls in that husky voice I love so much.

"Gross," Ro and Ash say in unison from the back seat.

"This is old news," I scoff.

Everyone is used to our PDAs by now, but it's more like PDLs—public displays of lust.

Reeve was very touchy-feely with me, but it was always appropriate affectionate gestures like sweet kisses, cuddling, and holding hands.

Dillon is like the modern-day equivalent of Neanderthal Man, groping me excessively any chance he gets, giving zero fucks to anyone who happens to be watching. He's always slapping my ass, grabbing my hips, ravishing my mouth or my neck, or biting my earlobe with the odd sneaky boob touch thrown in for good measure. I'm sure there are some girls who would hate that, but I freaking love it. I love how much he wants me and how hard it is for him to keep his hands off me. Dillon has proven he's capable of the sweeter PDAs too, but I like it when he's rough with me.

Slinking back into my seat, I fasten my seat belt and add, "Unless you're Aoife." I make a face, like I do anytime I'm around Dillon's ex-fuck-buddy. It's true she has quit giving me shit, but I don't miss the longing looks she sends Dillon's way every Friday night at Whelans. It's really grating on my nerves.

Like, fuck off and get your own man, bitch.

I guess she's pissed she no longer has the attention of any members of the band. Conor rarely touches the groupies. Ro is seeing a different girl now. Dillon is clearly taken. And Jamie has blown her off.

Something appears to have shifted between Jamie and Ash since the Trinity Ball, but he still won't officially claim her as his girl, much to Ash's frustration. Hence why she's presently not speaking to him. I haven't gotten the deets yet because Dillon has been with me all weekend. All I know is she returned to our apartment late last night with steam practically billowing from her ears.

"I think I drilled the point home on Friday." Dillon winks, showcasing a wicked smile. "Literally."

My thighs squeeze together when I remember the raw possession in his gaze as he fucked me mercilessly in the bathroom in Whelans. After we returned to our table, a chorus of whistles and cheering rang out—from everyone but the groupies. I guess my freshly fucked hair, swollen lips, disheveled clothing, and overall disorientation gave the game away. “You did that on purpose?”

“I don’t need an excuse to fuck you, Hollywood. You know I can’t keep my damn hands off you”—Dillon grabs my thigh, smirking—“but I felt like Aoife needed stronger reinforcement. I’m sick of the way she looks at me. It’s disrespectful to you.”

This is why he’s so perfect for me. He understands without me having to say it, and he doesn’t hesitate to jump in to defend me and our relationship. Dillon is making it incredibly difficult to stop my heart from becoming permanently invested. “Goddamn it. I really want to jump your bones right now.”

“Double gross.” Ash makes a gagging sound.

“I’ll just message Ma and tell her we’ll be late for Sunday dinner because Dillon’s busy corrupting you again,” Ro deadpans.

Dillon flips his brother off through the mirror. “Jealous much, bro?”

“Hardly. One woman isn’t enough to satisfy me.” Considering he’s on to girl number three since I had my little chat with him, he is more than proving that point.

“Maybe *I*’m the one corrupting Dil.” I swivel in my seat to look at Ro. “Have you ever considered that?”

“Nah. You’re far too sweet, and everyone knows it.”

“I say we ditch these two at the side of the road and bang in the car,” Dillon suggests while simultaneously giving someone the finger through the window. The other driver blares his horn, speeding past us, and I level my boyfriend with a stern look, warning him not to give chase like he did the last time he got into it with someone on the road.

I recently had Dillon added to the insurance, and I usually let him drive because he’s a terrible passenger, and it’s not worth the hassle. He bugs me nonstop about my driving skills if I’m behind the wheel. I’ll admit I’m not the world’s greatest driver. I’ve been driven around a lot, either by my parents’ driver or Reeve, but it’s not like I’m the worst driver either. Mainly, I don’t go fast enough for my impatient boyfriend, or I’m too

polite. It incenses him if someone cuts me off or beeps their horn and I don't retaliate.

We always end up arguing if I drive, so now I just give in and let him drive instead. Lately, I've had a couple of near misses when I've turned off one street onto another and automatically gone to the American side of the road, almost causing an accident. So, Dillon driving is probably for the best. Saves me a headache and a ton of stress. Not that I'll ever admit that to my boyfriend!

"You two fuck like bunnies," Ash says. "I heard you going at it all night long—thanks for the sound effects, by the way—so I'm sure you can manage without banging each other till you get home."

Dillon chuckles. "If only they knew the truth. That you're insatiable and as far from pure and a prude as they come." He waggles his brows, and I know what he's referencing. I let him take my ass last night, and he rocked my world. I've also discovered I like being tied up and spanked, and I love when he bosses me around in the bedroom. Dillon is a very considerate lover, and I like how he takes control and always ensures I'm satisfied.

Lifting one shoulder, I smile sweetly. "I tried to tell you when I first arrived, but no one would listen. You were all too busy judging the book by its cover."

"I know the truth now," Dillon says with a suggestive gleam in his eyes.

"And you can keep that truth to yourself, thanks very much," Ash drawls. "I already know too much, and I've seen *way* too much." A full-body shudder works its way through her, and Dillon and I bust up laughing.

"What don't I know?" Ro asks, sitting up straighter with an inquisitive expression on his face.

"Dillon didn't realize I'd come back to the apartment last night, and he wandered out to the kitchen earlier in all his morning glory. I almost barfed up my breakfast," Ash explains.

"Hey, I'll have you know my cock is a work of art. Your best friend certainly seems to think so." Dillon winks, and I giggle.

"Sisters do *not* need to see their brother's dick piercing." She flops back on the seat, rubbing a hand over her chest as her lips pull into a grimace. "Honestly, I feel ill all over again."

Ro joins in the laughter this time, and I can't keep the grin off my face the rest of the way to Kilcoole.

“Pass the spuds,” Ciarán says, looking across the table at Dillon. But my boyfriend doesn’t hear him because he’s too busy trying to jam his hands between my thighs under the table. This is only my third time at Sunday dinner, and I’m sweating buckets, thinking everyone can see the tug of war going on between us.

I don’t know what’s gotten into Dillon today.

Maybe he’s friskier because he took my anal virginity last night, but he hasn’t stopped groping me all day. However, even I have some hard and fast limits. I definitely draw the line at being fingered under the table in front of his entire family, so I’ve spent the last ten minutes swatting his hand away and warning him to behave.

“Earth to lover boy,” Shane bellows, nudging Dillon from his other side. “Get your paws off your woman and pass your brother the spuds.”

My cheeks inflame, and it feels like I might pass out from a combination of embarrassment and overheating.

“Sorry.” Dillon smirks, squeezing my thigh one final time before releasing me, passing the potatoes to Ciarán. “I get hugely distracted whenever my girl is around.”

“We’ve noticed.” Shane smirks, and I can see where Dillon got his smirk from. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen. I am going to enjoy giving you all the crap you gave me when I fell for Fiona.”

“Stop teasing your brother,” Cath, Dillon’s mom, says. “I think it’s wonderful to finally see Dillon happy and in love.” She beams at us, oblivious to the fact her son has just turned to stone beside me.

Shane subtly nods his head in his mother’s direction, and her smile fades when Dillon abruptly stands, scraping his chair back. “I need a smoke.” Bending down, he pecks my lips. “Finish your dinner. I’ll be back.” Without another glance in my direction, he stalks to the back door and leaves.

Dillon doesn't come back, and I don't know if I should go out and look for him or if it would be considered rude to get up from the dinner table when we're not finished. Everyone continues talking and eating as if nothing's wrong, and I wonder if Dillon storming off and everyone pretending it's fine is normal.

"Will you help me serve up dessert, Vivien?" Cath asks, breaking me out of my troubled inner monologue.

"Of course." I get up and follow her into the kitchen. The others remain seated at the table at the other end of the room, talking and laughing.

Cath stands in front of the window, sighing. I stand alongside her, seeing no sign of Dillon outside. Her smile is sad when she turns to me, patting me gently on the back before she walks to the refrigerator.

I whip the cream while Cath removes the apple and rhubarb crumble from the oven. "I'm sorry if I offended you," she says as we work amicably side by side, spooning servings of crumble and cream into bowls.

"You didn't offend me, and I don't think you really offended Dillon either. He struggles to talk about his feelings. I'm sure you know that better than me."

Dillon is gradually opening up to me, but anytime the conversation veers into heavy subject matter, he tends to clam up. He still hasn't told me what happened when he was seventeen, but he has alluded to it a few times. I'm torn between wanting to push him—because I want to know everything there is to know about him—and letting it drop. Our relationship has a termination date, and encouraging him to fully open himself up to me

emotionally will only make that inevitable ending all the harder. Right now, we're having tons of fun, and we talk about all manner of things when we're not out in a pub or fucking like bunnies. I've decided not to push it. To just go with the flow and accept our relationship for what it is.

Cath clasps my hand, and her eyes are shining with tears when she looks at me. "You're breaking through those walls he has around his heart, and I love that. I see the way he looks at you. The way you look at him. But it isn't my place to put a label on your relationship, and I shouldn't have said what I said. I just want him to be happy." She bats tears away.

"I want that for him too. He's an amazing guy, and he deserves every happiness."

"I'm so glad you came into his life, Vivien. Sometimes, the right people have a way of showing up when we least expect them." She places her hand on my arm. "Just don't give up on him. I know he struggles to accept love and it's hard for him to reciprocate, but it seems to come so naturally when he's with you."

I don't know that Dillon's in love with me because that's another thorny topic I refuse to discuss—even with myself—but we are damn good together, and the connection we share is more than the initial intense attraction we both felt.

I am perplexed why he finds it so hard to receive love and be worthy of it.

Love practically seeps from the walls of this house, and I doubt you could find a more loving, supportive family anywhere in the world. "I'm trying to understand it but coming up empty," I admit. "You have the most loving family. You only have to look to see it. It's a joy to behold. And I know you and Eugene are amazing parents. I don't need your children to tell me that, so why does Dillon feel like this?"

"Dillon has been fighting different demons his entire life," she explains, scooping crumble into the last bowl. I add a dollop of cream as she continues. "We have tried to support him to the best of our abilities, to let him know how loved and cherished he is, that he's no different—"

"Ma!" Dillon snaps, appearing in the doorway. "Stop." Some silent communication passes between them, and the shroud of sadness etched on Cath's face hurts my heart. I don't know what has gone on in the past, but whatever it is still pains Dillon's mother.

“Are we eating dessert or what?” he asks, striding toward us and snatching two bowls up, like nothing is wrong.

Cath collects herself, pressing a kiss to her son’s cheek. “Of course. Let’s go.”

“Come with me,” Dillon demands, an hour later, looming over me and extending his arm.

“You need to chill out, Dil,” Ash says, blowing smoky puffs into the air.

“Gimme that.” I snatch the joint from between Ash’s fingers, taking one last drag before I clasp Dillon’s hand. If I wasn’t mildly stoned, I might be concerned about the look of thunder on my boyfriend’s face.

“You need to butt out.” Dillon tells his sister, hauling me to my feet. His hand wraps around mine as he steers us away from the orchard, toward the front of the farm.

“Where are we going?” I ask, jogging to keep up with his long-legged strides.

“To deliver your punishment,” he says, stopping abruptly and slamming his lips down hard on mine. He swats my ass. “You’ve been a naughty girl, Hollywood.”

He continues walking toward a structure in the near distance.

“I didn’t mean to be nosy,” I protest, understanding exactly why he feels the need to punish me.

“Doesn’t change the fact you were.”

“Your mom worries about you, and I care about you. Neither of us were speaking out of turn behind your back.”

“If you want to know something about me, Viv, you ask me.” He swivels his head, piercing me with a pointed look. “Me. Not my ma. Not Ash or Ro or Jamie. *Me.*”

“You don’t tell me anything,” I grumble, almost tripping as we approach what looks like a barn.

“Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you,” he challenges, unlocking the steel doors to the barn. He opens them fully before stepping aside to let me enter.

“What happened when you were seventeen?” I blurt, letting my eyes roam our surroundings. I was expecting to find cows, a milking shed, or a

room stacked with supplies, not a recreation area of sorts. There's a large pool table on the left and a bunch of beanbags and couches on the right. Three freestanding heaters are dotted around the space. A long, scratched pale wooden table is propped against one wall, housing a TV and stereo system. Some beers and a half-empty bottle of vodka are tucked into the corner.

"You know what happened." Dillon leads me to one of the couches, pushing me over one of the arms, on my belly. "I failed my sister. She tried to kill herself, and it almost killed me." He yanks my dress up. "Any more questions?" he asks in a clipped voice, and I'm instantly chastised. I don't know why I think there's more to it than what happened with Ash. Maybe it's a sixth sense, but I've got to let it go. It's clearly painful for him and everyone in the family.

"No. I'm sorry," I whisper, feeling a rush of cool air waft across my ass as he tugs my panties down my leg.

Whack! His hand comes down firm on my butt, and a whimper flies from my mouth. Red heat floods my body, blood pools in my core, and my arousal leaks from my pussy, trickling down my legs as Dillon delivers a swift punishment, slapping me in quick succession. "God, I love when you're a naughty girl, Viv. It makes the sex even hotter." The telltale ripping of a condom wrapper and the lowering of a zipper have me squirming on the arm of the leather couch. Dillon folds his body over my back, licking my ear, and I squeal. "This will be hard and fast because Fiona is arriving shortly with my niece, and it won't take Chloe long to find us."

"Hard and fast is my favorite," I pant, feeling his dick nudge my pussy from behind. "Do your worst, Dil."

He slams into me, and we both groan as he fills me to the brim. Wasting no time, he grabs my hips and fucks me into oblivion, thrusting deep with every stroke, making me see stars. Just before he comes, he rubs two fingers back and forth over my clit, and my orgasm hits the same time his does.

He helps me to stand when we're both done. "Hold your dress up," he instructs, kneeling in front of me. He removes a pack of wipes from his back pocket, cleaning between my thighs with tender care, and tears prick my eyes. This side of Dillon has the power to undo me in a major way.

I can't fathom how fast Dillon can switch from sweet to sour, but he certainly makes life interesting, that's for sure. I wish I understood what

secrets he keeps under lock and key, and I wish I was around long enough to uncover them. For the first time in weeks, I crack open the cage around my heart, letting myself feel. Allowing the truth to shine.

My heart is already invested. My head too.

I'm falling for this complicated enigma of a man.

And I'm terrified what that will mean come August when it's time to leave.

Dillon locks the barn, tucking me into his body and slinging his arm over my shoulders. "Are you okay?" He peppers my cheek with warm kisses.

"I'm perfect." I snuggle into his side, glad he seems to have snapped out of whatever mood he was in.

He chuckles before stopping suddenly at the corner of the barn. Pressing my back against the wall, he places his hands on either side of me, lowering his brow against mine. Closing his eyes, he breathes deeply as I lightly hold his hips. "I know I'm not the easiest person to be with," he whispers. "I know I'm a moody prick, and I have anger issues, but they're never directed at you."

"I know."

His eyes pop open, and I'm shocked to see such naked emotion staring back at me. "You make everything better, Viv." He cups one side of my face. "I never knew it could be like this, and sometimes I'm terrified beyond words."

"I get that." I brush my mouth against his in a featherlight kiss. "And it's okay to feel what you're feeling, Dillon. Just sometimes, I'd like it if you could let me in."

"I'm letting you in more than most people." Frank honesty is etched across his face. "I want to let you in more. Just be patient with me."

"I can be patient." Time is our enemy, but I'm not voicing that. Neither of us ever mentions August for obvious reasons. Snaking my arms around him, I press my body flush to his, overwhelmed with a sudden burst of intense pain.

Letting this man go is going to hurt me.

Yet there is nothing I can do to protect myself from that pain.

Slowly, Dillon has weaseled his way into my heart, and I don't want to shove him out.

“You’ve come to mean everything to me, Viv,” he whispers in my ear as we clutch one another tightly. “It’s happened so fast. Like lightning. I didn’t think it would be like this, and it confuses me as much as it makes me happy.” He eases his head back, so he’s looking into my face, while still clinging to me. “Does that make any sense?”

“It makes perfect sense.” I kiss him, fighting a bout of emotion. “I feel the same way too.” This is the closest we’ve come to admitting our feelings, and my heart is racing around my chest cavity like a car with broken brakes.

“I don’t know where we go from here when—” I nod when he stops mid-sentence, understanding without him needing to say it. “I just know I don’t want to stop. I want to keep doing this with you. I—”

A guttural moan carries on the wind, cutting Dillon off. My startled eyes meet his suspicious ones when another moan rips through the quiet country air. Dillon snags my hand and pulls me around the corner of the barn. I gasp out loud, clamping my hand over my mouth far too late.

“You fucking bastard!” Dillon seethes, slipping his hand from mine and racing toward the couple screwing against the side of the barn.

“Dil, no!” Ash cries, dropping her dress and quickly pulling her panties up her legs. “Go!” she yells at the unfamiliar man with the dirty-blond hair and panicked expression. She shoves his shoulders as he rebuttons his jeans with shaky fingers. His wedding ring glints in the late afternoon sun, and I instantly know who he is.

“Oh, Ash,” I whisper, coming out of my comatose state and running toward my friend.

“I’m going to kill you, you motherfucking bastard,” Dillon yells, charging Ash’s married ex.

Dillon grabs him around the throat, throwing him up against the wall of the barn as Ash stands rooted to the ground, horrorstruck. I pull my friend into my arms, and she immediately comes apart, sobbing against my shoulder. “I’m a horrible person. What have I done?” she cries, clutching my dress and clinging to me.

I’m torn between comforting my friend and preventing my boyfriend from being hauled in on a murder charge. “Dillon, stop!” I shout, cradling Ash in my arms as he throws Cillian to the ground, jumps on top of him, and starts punching him with his fists.

Cillian is tall and stocky, and I’m sure he could take Dillon on and it’d be fairly evenly matched, but he’s not fighting back. He’s letting my

boyfriend beat the living daylights out of him. I don't know the man, but I guess he's carrying at least some guilt over what happened. Whether that's now, or in the past, I'm unsure.

"Dillon. That's enough!" I call out as blood flies from Cillian's nose spraying Dillon's shirt. Dillon's fists keep flying, and Cillian is fighting back now. Panic is clear in his eyes. He's afraid Dillon is going to kill him, and so am I.

"Ash, babe. I'm going to put you down on the ground, but I'll be back." She nods, looking dazed as I place her on the ground. Tears stream down her face, and I ache for her. She will beat herself up for this when she sobers up.

Rushing to where Dillon and Cillian are, I drop down on the ground, putting my face all up in my boyfriend's. "Dillon." I cup his face, repeating his name, asking him to stop over and over, but he's in his own little world. Cillian groans, swinging his fists, trying to push Dillon off, but it's like Dillon is fueled with supernatural fighting ability. He just keeps striking him, and if he doesn't stop, he *will* cause serious damage. A few of Cillian's punches get through, hitting Dillon in the face and the stomach, but it's not enough to stop him.

The situation calls for drastic measures, and I spring into action, yanking fistfuls of Dillon's hair and pulling his head back. He has a cut lip, and one of his eyes is swollen. Acting on instinct, I smash my lips to his, pushing my tongue into his mouth as I kiss him hard.

I need to bring him back to me, and this is the only way I can think to get through to him. Gradually, I feel him loosening against me, kissing me back, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Until I'm shoved from behind, and Dillon and I tumble to the side, away from Cillian.

Fresh rage builds behind Dillon's eyes as he helps me to my feet, pushing me behind him, using his body to shield me as he faces off against his former friend. Wrangling out of his hold, I move to his side, grabbing him to keep him from charging again. "You cheating cunt! You stay the hell away from my sister, and if you ever touch my girlfriend again, I'll fucking kill you!" Dillon roars.

"You're a crazy bastard, O'Donoghue." Cillian sways on his feet, spitting blood onto the ground. He lifts the hem of his shirt, using it to dab blood off his face. "I let you have the first few punches, because I deserved

those, but you don't get to threaten me, asshole. Your sister wanted it. I've done nothing wrong."

"Except cheat on your wife," I hiss.

"This is nothing to do with you." He jabs his finger in my direction. "Butt out."

Dillon jerks forward, and I grab his shirt, yanking him back. "Let it go," I say, working hard to sound calm. "This ends now."

"Like fuck it does," Cillian yells. He points his finger at Dillon. "I'll have you arrested for assault, you prick." Clutching his middle, he grimaces.

"I'll have you arrested for trespassing," Ash shouts, climbing to her feet, as she appears to emerge from her fugue state.

I step forward, glaring at the degenerate in front of me, done with playing nice. "You will not press charges against Dillon. If you even breathe a word of what happened here today, we will go straight to your wife and your parents and tell them you've been stalking Ash for months and you forced yourself on her today when she was stoned and incapable of pushing you away."

"That's bullshit," he splutters. "No one will believe you."

I wave my cell in his face. "I recorded you," I lie. "Whatever the circumstances, it shows your wife you were cheating on her. And if ruining your marriage isn't enough, I'll ruin your fucking career too. I'll email this to your boss. I'll post it on social media. I'll destroy your reputation." I would never, in a million years, do any of those things. Even saying it feels like I'm sinking to new lows, but there is nothing I won't do to protect Dillon and Ash.

His eyes narrow suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"I'm your worst fucking nightmare." I glare at him, taking another step forward. "Don't fucking push me, Cillian. I can ruin your life like that." I snap my fingers.

"You're all fucking mad," he says, his gaze bouncing between the three of us. "And you two are a match made in hell." He jabs his finger between Dillon and me.

"Leave," I command. "Don't say a word about Dillon or Ash. Not if you value the life you've got."

"Crazy bitch," he mutters, and Ash and I pounce on Dillon to hold him back.

Cillian walks off, shaking his head and muttering to himself. Wow. Ash sure knows how to pick ‘em.

Not that I can throw stones.

Cillian staggers down the driveway, almost falling a couple times. A car slows going past him, and I spot Fiona behind the wheel. Thankfully, she doesn’t stop, heading toward the house.

“Well, that was fun.” Sarcasm drips from my tone as I stare at brother and sister. “We should do that again some time.”

“Bloody hell.” Dillon reels me into his arms. “Is it wrong I’m turned on right now?”

“Yes,” Ash and I say in unison.

“Let’s get back to the house.” I thread my fingers in his. “We need to clean you up, and you.” I swing my gaze on Ash. “You, my friend, have a lot of explaining to do.”

“**W**hat has gotten into you today?” I ask Dillon, ten minutes later, as I tend to his injuries in the main bathroom. My man is shirtless, sitting on the closed toilet seat, with me in between his legs attempting to clean him up. We left Ash downstairs to explain the mess she made to the family. I have no clue what she’s going to tell her parents, but I doubt it’ll be the full truth.

“I’m not sorry I beat that shithead’s ass.” He winces as I clean the cut on his lip. “Just sorry you had to see it.” He grabs my wrist, stalling my movements. “I don’t know why you’re with me when we both know I’m not good enough for you.”

“I know nothing of the sort.”

He looks at me with such vulnerability I almost cry. “Hey.” I wrap one arm around him, holding him gently to my chest. “I’m with you because you’re an amazing person. You’re talented, sweet, sexy, funny, caring, thoughtful, and you make me happy.”

“Do you really mean that?” he asks, rubbing circles on the inside of my wrist with his thumb.

“I do, Dil.” I press a kiss to his head.

Silence engulfs us for a few beats. “I’m also moody, short-tempered, and an angry bastard a lot of the time. I definitely curse too much. And I should probably go easier on the beer and the weed.”

“You forget reckless and a rule-breaker,” I tease, smoothing a hand up and down his back.

“Those too. And that’s exactly it. You deserve so much better than me. I’m not worthy of you, Viv.”

His self-deprecation is killing me. Why can’t he see the things I see in him? Why doesn’t he see himself the way his family does? Ash would tie herself to a stake for Dillon, and I’m pretty sure his mom would walk over hot coals for him. Ruffling his hair, I kneel in front of him. “Dillon. Please don’t do this. I’m with you because I want to be with you. I like all the different sides of you, and no one is without flaws. Not even me,” I joke, desperately wanting to lighten the moment.

“You’re perfect,” he murmurs, bending down to kiss me. “I know I made a joke of it outside, but you standing up for me to him meant everything.” A familiar smirk appears on his face along with those cute dimples I love, and I silently rejoice. “It *did* also turn me on.” Taking my hand, he places it on his crotch, waggling his brows.

“No more sex until we get home,” I warn, standing and grabbing the washcloth.

“What now?” Dillon asks, sighing wearily as we step foot in the hallway. I have cleaned up his lip, put an ice pack on his eye, and applied arnica cream to the faint bruising on one cheek. Soft cries filter out from the living room, and we walk inside, hand in hand, wondering what drama is unfolding now. Surely Ash didn’t tell them she was fucking Cillian outside? “What’s wrong?” Dillon casts worried glances around the room.

“The bridesmaids’ dresses have gone missing in the post, and the designer can’t ship new ones in time,” Cath explains.

The wedding is only a few weeks away, so I feel Fiona’s pain, and maybe I can do something about it. “Does anyone have a picture of the dress?” I ask.

“I do.” Ash pulls out her phone. Her eyes light up as she passes it to me, and I know she knows where I’m going with this.

I examine the pretty knee-length strapless silk and chiffon dress in jade green. It would be easy to make, and I can rustle them up in next to no time now I have zero commitments. I hand the cell back to Ash, trading a

conspiratorial smile with my Irish bestie, before I face the bride. “I can make replicas of that dress, no problem. How many do you need?”

“What?” Fiona splutters, turning around in Shane’s arms, pinning me with red-rimmed swollen eyes.

“Vivien has offered to make the dresses for you, love.” Cath pats her back while beaming at me.

“You can do that?” Fiona asks in a shaky voice.

“Of course, she can. I showed you our dresses from the ball. Viv made both,” Ash proudly explains. “These are simple in comparison.”

“They are,” I reassure her. “And now my exams are finished, I have plenty of time to make them before the wedding.”

“Oh my God.” Fiona rushes toward me, yanking me out of Dillon’s arms and squeezing me to death.

“Eh, Fi. You might want to let Vivien breathe, or she won’t live long enough to make your dresses.” Shane appears behind his fiancée. “Thank you,” he tells me.

“It’s my pleasure.”

Fiona gives me the measurements for her sister and Ash, who are the only bridesmaids, and little Chloe’s measurements. They try to give me money for supplies, but I won’t hear of it. “Consider it my wedding gift to you.”

Dillon hauls me back against his chest, almost smothering me like his soon-to-be sister-in-law. “That was unbelievably generous. Thank you so much. I’m in awe of you.” Before I can respond, he kisses me passionately, holding me tight in his arms, surrounding me with his love. When we break our lip-lock, he doesn’t let go, his protective arms keeping me close to his chest. Cath smiles at us, leaning her head on her husband’s shoulder.

We leave a short while later. Ro isn’t coming back to the city as he has to stay home to study. His Leaving Certificate exams are only eight days away, and his parents are refusing to let him play with the band until after the exams are over. The second we pull away from the house, Dillon levels Ash with a fierce look through the mirror. “Start talking.”

I toss a sympathetic look over my shoulder at her. Her hands are knotted in her lap, and she looks like she’s sweating bullets. “I told Ma and Da that Cillian showed up unannounced and he was trying it on. I said I stupidly kissed him, you found us and then went apeshit on his arse.”

“What really happened, Ash?” Dillon growls, pulling out onto the road.

She gulps nervously. “Mostly that. He appeared in the orchard. I told him to go. He begged me to talk to him. I took him around the side of barn so no one would see us. He said he still loves me and he’d leave her for me.”

“Jesus Christ, Ash.” Dillon rubs his temple.

“I knew it was bullshit. I know he won’t leave her even if he is as miserable as he says he is.”

“Why the hell did you let him fuck you then?” he barks, and tears spill down Ash’s cheeks. Running my hand along his thigh, I urge him to calm down with my eyes. He blows air out of his mouth, visibly pulling in the reins. “I shouldn’t have shouted at you. I’m sorry. I’m just worried, Ash. He’s bad news. Look what happened the last time.” His voice cracks.

“Pull over,” I say. His eyes lock on mine. “Pull over and let me drive. I only had three pulls on that joint, and one glass of wine at dinner, and it was hours ago. I’m not drunk or stoned. You get in the back and talk with your sister.” He doesn’t argue, pulling to the side of the road, and we swap around. When we take off again, the conversation resumes, and I listen as I drive us home, casting quick glances in the mirror at them every so often.

“I’m sorry, Dil. I’m so, so sorry.” Ash cries into his shoulder.

“Shush.” He hugs her tight. “You don’t have to apologize. But I do need you to promise me you’ll stay away from him. He’s a selfish prick to keep preying on your emotions like this. He had his chance with you, and he blew it. Tough shit if he’s not happy. That’s all on him.”

She snuffles, nodding.

“He’s not good for you, Ash,” Dillon continues. “You deserve so much better than Cillian.” Our eyes lock through the mirror as he repeats the words he said to me, a little over an hour ago. “You deserve better than Jamie too,” he adds, shocking both me and his sister.

Poor Ash. She looks like she’s going to throw up. “You know?” she croaks. He nods. “How?”

“I’ve had my suspicions since last summer. I asked him once, and he denied it, so I let it go.” Dillon looks briefly out the window as I pull out onto the highway. “I warned him off you, and I probably shouldn’t have done that.” He looks back at his sister. “I just wanted to protect you. You were vulnerable, and I didn’t want anyone else to hurt you. Jamie is sound, but I’m not sure he has it in him to do the relationship thing.”

“No one thought that about you either, and now look at you,” Ash says, peering up at him.

Dillon smiles softly at me. “Valid point.” I return his smile, wishing I could kiss him right now. Dillon looks at his sister again. “Which is why when he asked me this morning if he could go out with you, I said I wasn’t the one he should be asking.”

Ash jerks her head up. “Wait! He told you about us? This morning?”

Amusement lingers in Dillon’s tone. “Yes, this morning when I went home to get changed.”

“Oh God.” Ash buries her head in her hands. “I’m such an idiot. I was feeling low and upset after our argument last night, and that dickhead Cillian played on my vulnerabilities. Jamie won’t want anything to do with me when he finds out.”

“Ahem.” I clear my throat. I’m not having that. “Jamie’s been fucking Aoife and God knows who else for months.” I hate double standards.

“He hasn’t been with her since April,” Ash says. “We’ve only been with each other, and it was an unspoken rule that it stays like that.” She has a point, and she shouldn’t have fucked anyone else, especially not her cheating ex, but Jamie hasn’t been a saint either. He’s hurt her, and it’s clear Ash’s broken parts aren’t mended—they’re only glued together. I’m going to suggest she sees my therapist when we’re alone. Sheila has really helped me to process my feelings and move on, and I think Ash could use her support too.

“You weren’t officially going out,” Dillon says. “And it’s only an issue if you tell him. I don’t see that he needs to know.”

“You mean *you’re* not going to tell him?” Her jaw slackens.

He shakes his head. “I’m not.” His mouth curls into a lopsided grin. “Don’t look so shocked, Ash. You’re my sister.”

“But he’s your best friend.”

“He is, but you’re my *sister*. If it comes to sides, I’m always on yours.”

“Well, what’s the impression of your first Irish wedding?” Dillon asks, twirling me around the dance floor of the ballroom of the gorgeous hotel just outside Gorey, County Wexford.

“It’s been magical. You can just feel the love in the air.” I beam up at him, throwing my head back as he spins me around.

He chuckles, pulling me in close to his chest. “You’re such a romantic.” His arms encircle my waist.

I swat his chest. “Says the man who sang a song he wrote for me at his brother’s wedding.” My throat swells, and I choke up.

“Oh God. Don’t cry again,” he says, looking genuinely panicked.

My lower lip wobbles, and happy tears well in my eyes. “I still can’t believe you did that.”

Fiona and Shane hired a local band to play at their wedding because they wanted their brothers to enjoy the night, not to have to entertain their guests. However, the band was a good sport and let the guys play a few songs while they took a short break.

Ash barely held me together as Dillon told the whole wedding that “Terrify Me” was a song he’d written for me and about me. Thank God, Ash had the foresight to record it on her cell—and I’m sure the official videographer captured it too—because I was in such shock I didn’t fully appreciate the lyrics or the fact it’s a much softer, more romantic sound for Toxic Gods.

“You must know you’re my muse,” he says, breaking me out of my head.

My heart thuds proudly behind my chest. “I am?”

He nods, sweeping his fingers across my cheek. “I’ve been writing nonstop in that journal you made me. You’re the inspiration behind all my lyrics.”

I found a songwriting journal at a local store, and I crafted a Toxic Gods cover, incorporating their logo, out of crushed velvet. The other guys in the band were so envious I ended up making them similar notepads just to shut them up.

“Everything about you inspires me, Viv,” he murmurs, kissing the tip of my nose as we dance to the music. “You have such a good heart. Helping others makes you happy, and that’s how I know you’re inherently good.”

Fiona was delighted with the dresses, and Shane was profuse in his praise during his speech. “Seeing little Chloe looking so angelic in her dress has been one of the highlights of this day,” I say.

He kisses me softly. “There. That’s what I’m talking about.” He looks deep into my eyes with so much emotion I’m choking up. They say

weddings make you emotional, and this one most definitely has. I can't help being affected by the outpouring of love in the room, and I know we're not the only ones feeling it. "You're an angel, and I'm so happy to have met you."

"Thank you," I whisper, blushing a little.

A new song starts up, one I don't know. Dillon smiles down at me, emotion practically oozing from his pores, and I'm not sure my heart is going to withstand this day intact.

"Dance with me under the stars?" he asks, and my knees almost go out from under me. I nod as if in a trance, high on so many glittering emotions. As if I could ever turn such a request down.

Lacing his fingers in mine, he leads me out a side door to a small courtyard. Cath and Eugene watch us leave with matching giant smiles, and I get the sense they're hoping Dillon and I will give them a day like this in the future. Butterflies swoop into my belly, and a fluttering sensation spreads across my chest at the thought.

Dillon sweeps me into his arms in front of the impressive gardens, holding me close, as we move in time to the beat. He purposely left the glass doors open so the music filters outside.

"What song is this?" I ask, listening intently to the beautiful lyrics.

"It's an older song by a group called Savage Garden. The song is "I Knew I Loved You." It's always been a favorite of mine." He tilts his head back a little so he can look at me. "Especially now," he adds, in a whisper.

I stare into his gorgeous green eyes as he sings to me, and my heart pounds louder and louder in my chest, swelling with so much emotion it almost feels like I'm drowning. Tears prick my eyes as the words sink deep, their meaning registering on so many levels. Dillon pours everything he's feeling into his singing, swirling me softly around the courtyard under the backdrop of the twinkling stars, never taking his eyes off me.

Drops of rain fall from the sky without warning, but I barely feel them, hypnotized by this amazing, beautiful, complex man spinning me in his arms. Singing his truths because he can't form the words behind the sentiments.

The rain comes down heavier, plummeting in thick sheets as we continue dancing, plastering our hair to our faces and our clothes to our bodies like second skins. Another song starts, and Dillon twirls me around

faster and faster, and I laugh, tipping my head up to the dark sky, letting the water cleanse me of all my fears and uncertainties.

When he pulls me in close, locking me in his protective arms, his laughter dies along with mine as our gazes connect with an intensity so powerful it seems bigger than both of us. His chest heaves in sync with mine as we stop dancing, staring at one another because there is nothing that can drag either one of us away from the other. I want to stay like this forever. Secure in his gaze. Trapped in his adoration. Surrounded with emotion that threatens to unravel everything I thought I knew about myself.

My heart is open, and I'm shielding nothing. From him. From myself.

I knew this was the risk.

But I barreled headfirst into this relationship anyway, and I'm not sorry I did.

How could I have any regrets when it's brought us here, to this place, to this realization?

I know neither one of us is going to put words to the emotion.

Yet we both know it exists.

Our truths are traded when we move as one, our lips meeting as if for the first time, and I know, for the rest of my life, I will never *ever* forget this moment.

The moment I realize I am utterly and unequivocally in love with Dillon O'Donoghue.

The weeks fly by in a mad flurry of activity. Toxic God's EP is getting more notice, and one of their songs is getting decent airplay on some Irish radio stations. Things are definitely picking up for the band. They are playing three to four events a week now, and the crowd is getting bigger and their following is growing.

One of Glen Hansard's US contacts has reached out—an A&R scout who works for a major record label—and it sounds promising. Apparently, he loves the stuff he has listened to. He's due to arrive in Dublin in three weeks to see them perform live, and he wants to talk to them about their future. The guys are freaking out. Giddy with excitement. But I sense reticence within Dillon. Of course, when I ask, he deflects my questions, and eventually, I let it drop.

In between events, Dillon and I wander the Irish countryside on his motorcycle. I've kissed the Blarney Stone, explored the incredible *Titanic* museum in Belfast with my jaw trailing the floor, marveled at the Stone Age tombs and passageways at Newgrange, and given in to my inner sex goddess when I let Dillon fuck me against the cross on the top of Bray Head under the shadow of night.

It's just as well I'm not religious or I might have been struck down for that last one.

We've gone camping with our friends in the Wicklow Mountains, ridden bicycles around the Sally Gap, hiked the Sugarloaf Mountain, watched a few GAA matches, and attended a three-day music festival in Marlay Park, which was basically a three-day-long drink-and-weed-athon.

The highlight of my Ireland trip was definitely the Cliffs of Moher. Words don't exist in our vocabulary to describe the rugged beauty of the landscape because it was a truly magical, breathtaking, out-of-this-world experience. We spent a full day there, touring the visitor's center, walking the pathways on either side of the cliff, and I was even brave enough to lie down flat on my belly on the slab front, beside Dillon, while we stared over the ledge. Most visitors stayed back, and we were among the few crazies peering down the steep edge of the cliff side. It was an incredible rush, and an impressive lesson in the true wonder of Mother Nature. It was only later, back in our hotel room, I discovered some tourists have actually died there. It was a sobering moment, and I doubt I'd have been so brave if I'd known that at the time.

My parents' visit rolled around fast, and we had a fantastic week together exploring Cork and Kerry and driving along the Wild Atlantic Way. Audrey traveled with my parents, and it was amazing to see her. I have really missed her. Initially, she was planning on spending more time in Ireland with me, but I'm on borrowed time with Dillon, and now she's back together with Alex, we came to a mutual understanding it was best if we spent this summer apart. We still got to spend quality time together during the week, which was amazing, if a little strained.

Ash came to Cork and Kerry with us, and things were a teeny bit awkward between her and Audrey. Ash is naturally Team Dillon, and while Audrey has nothing against her brother, she is clearly rooting for Team Reeve. I really don't understand why. She's been pretty tight-lipped, and all she has said is he's missing me, working hard to make amends, and she has her reasons for suggesting I don't rule him out. Part of me is incredibly upset with her, even though she insists she is firmly on my side. Not wanting to fight with her over it, I suggested we agree to shelve all talk of men on our trip, and just enjoy ourselves.

That suited me fine as I was still annoyed with Dillon over his outright refusal to meet my parents. Apparently, he doesn't "do the parents thing." It stung. Especially after he'd been so romantic in the weeks leading up to my parents' arrival. It's not like I asked him to travel with us. I knew he couldn't take a full week off with his band commitments, but would it have killed him to come for lunch with his mom and Ash? Ash claims he's in love with me and that has him scared shitless, but it's no excuse for being rude.

Mom didn't say anything, but I could tell she wasn't impressed, even if she loved Cath and they hit it off from the get-go.

Honestly, Dillon gives me a severe case of emotional whiplash at times. He turns hot and cold as often as the Irish weather, and I still can't figure him out.

Nonetheless, I love him and his stupid stubborn ass.

Finally allowing myself to accept what I've known for some time was both liberating and crushing in equal measure. Reeve is still there, still claiming a piece of my heart, and I suspect he always will. It's not like I can just switch off feelings I've nurtured for years with the snap of my fingers. They are like my memories in that regard. An inherent part of me, and no amount of denial will force them away.

I have always been skeptical of love triangles in books and movies, struggling to understand how someone could love another man when they're already so much in love with someone. However, I know now I was naïve to believe it doesn't exist. Now I've had cause to seriously think about the subject, it makes perfect sense. I love my mom *and* my dad. I love both my besties. When I have children, I imagine I will love them all with the fullness of my heart. So, it stands to reason I can love two men at the same time. I just never looked at it like that before.

I want to hate Reeve for the things he's done that have hurt me, and for splitting us up, but how can I hate him when his actions have led me to this point?

Coming to Ireland has undoubtedly changed me. I feel like I have found myself and found my way. I have discovered aspects of my personality that have never had the time to flourish, and Dillon has helped to coax those parts of me to life. I am stronger and more confident to go after what I want—to demand things that will fulfill me and to not let anyone stand in my way or tell me my desires don't matter.

Dillon has awakened a side of me I never knew existed, and I wish I could continue this journey of self-discovery with him because he brings me immense joy. He pisses me the hell off at times too, but what we have is so very real. This is a no-holds-barred love, and while we haven't said those three words, we both feel it and live it every day.

Our love is an intense fiery passion, a soul-deep connection that kicked into place the instant we laid eyes on one another, and while similar in some regards, it is also vastly different to what I had with Reeve.

Dillon loves me with a fierceness that scares us both. His need is all-consuming, and all it takes is one look and we fall into one another, lost to everyone and everything that isn't us. Ours is a love that could raze kingdoms and burn worlds, and that realization is as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

Neither of us has said the words out loud, but as our inevitable separation looms in the near future, I'm struggling to not break down in tears. How will I ever leave this man? Yet, in ten days, it will happen. The very thought of it feels like a stake has been driven through my heart.

"Earth to Hollywood." Dillon grazes his teeth along my neck, pulling me out of my depressive thoughts. "You look like you've been in your own little world."

Hearty laughter and boisterous conversation surround us in the busy pub as the bartender calls out last orders. The guitarist entertaining us with her gorgeous voice and dry wit is packing up her stuff, but no one else is making any move to leave. Our friends are still huddled around the table, joking and drinking.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I snuggle into his side. "I was just thinking back over the past few weeks. We crammed a lot in."

His arm slides around my shoulders, holding me close. "I wanted to show you as much as possible." *Before you leave me* is missing from the end of his sentence.

A heavy silence rests between us like usual lately. We are both too chickenshit to say it, but we feel it crushing our souls.

"Do you know this pub was the scene of a famous murder almost twenty-five years ago?" Dillon says, in between mouthfuls of beer.

"Now he tells me," I deadpan. A shiver tiptoes down my spine. "If you tell me some ghost haunts this place, I'm out of here."

"Two ghosts," Jamie pipes up, clearly eavesdropping on our conversation. "If you count the Black Widow. She died a few years ago in prison."

"She actually died in a hospice," Dillon clarifies. "They had moved her there when her cancer progressed and they knew she was close to death."

"They should have let her rot in jail," Ash says, bumping my hip. "Drink up, it's almost closing time."

"What happened?" I lift my vodka cranberry to my lips.

“The owner’s wife murdered him here back in ninety-six, but she didn’t get away with it. She was sent down for life,” Dillon explains.

“It put Jack White’s Inn on the map. It’s infamous,” Ro says, waving his hand around the crowded pub. “Even now.”

“Welp, that was a lovely way to end the night.” Another shiver rocks through me.

Dillon smirks. “Just keeping it real, Hollywood.”

“And who says the night is ending?” Jamie drains the last of his beer, slamming his hands down on the wooden table, rattling glasses and spilling drinks.

“Arsehole,” Ash mutters, rolling her eyes. Our gazes connect, and we smile. She says that, but I know the truth. She is head-over-heels, ass-over-tits, in love with him, and he is the same with her. I know she harbors guilt over what went down with Cillian, but they would not be here, looking all loved up if she’d told him what happened. It’s best left in the past. No good would come from spilling that truth. Jamie grabs her face, smushing his lips to hers, and Dillon’s mouth pulls into a grimace.

To be fair, he hasn’t given them shit, but he watches like a hawk, and I feel a little bad for Jamie sometimes. If he even raises his voice to her, Dillon gets ready to knock him flat on his ass. It must feel like walking on eggshells sometimes. I know Dillon’s protectiveness comes from a place of love, but he’s got to accept he won’t always be there to shelter his sister. Plus, she’s a grown-ass woman capable of making her own decisions, and he needs to let her live her life and deal with the consequences of her actions.

The transformation in Jamie is astounding. Though I suppose it was the same with Dillon. Neither of them even glances at the groupies. They only have eyes for us.

Until you leave. My snarky inner devil whispers nastily in my ear.

“Come on, dickheads.” Jamie slams his hands on the table again, knocking Conor’s bottle of beer to the floor. He must have a death wish.

“You’re such a jerk, Jay,” Cat says, but there’s no heat in her tone. Her boyfriend whispers in her ear, and Ash sends me a knowing look. She isn’t Stephen’s biggest fan because rumors of his infidelity have been circulating since just before our exams, and she doesn’t trust he’s being faithful to her friend. Ash and Cat had a big falling out when Ash told her what the gossipmongers were saying, and they’ve only just started talking again. I

haven't heard from Cat in weeks. I guess she assumed I would take Ash's side, but I don't really care. She earned a place on the bottom of my shit list with the way she reacted to news of Reeve being my ex.

"I'll pay you back from my stash," Jamie tells Conor.

Conor just shrugs, in that affable laid-back manner of his. I swear, in the entire seven months I've been in Ireland, I have only heard that guy say a handful of sentences. The shy blonde tucked under his arm doesn't seem to care. I have no clue how they know each other, whether they are dating, or if he just brought her along to Brittas Bay this weekend.

"Let's get this show on the road," Jamie says, standing. "Time to head back to the house and finish the party there."

“Who’s up for skinny-dipping?” Dillon suggests when we arrive at the beachside vacation house that belongs to Conor’s grandparents a half hour later. The walk back here from the pub was dark and perilous, but we made it in one piece.

“Hell to the no.” I shake my head, crossing my arms around my waist.

“Prudish much?” Jamie smirks, and I thump his shoulder.

“That’s not the reason. If the water was that freaking cold earlier, I’m not willing to test the temperature at midnight.” The beach at Brittas Bay is stunning. Grassy dunes surround miles of gorgeous sandy shores. Crystal-clear shallow water looks deceptively inviting until dipping a foot in and realizing it’s cold enough to freeze body parts.

“Bawk, bawk.” Ro and Jamie make chicken sounds, flapping their arms about.

“I’ll keep you warm,” Dillon purrs, wrapping his arms around me.

“You can’t return to the US without skinny-dipping in the Irish Sea,” Ash says, and I throw caution to the wind.

“If I die of hypothermia, it’s your fault,” I tell my bestie.

We grab towels from the house, heading out through the back garden that leads directly to the sand dunes. Racing one another to the beach helps to warm me up but not much. This will be a true test of endurance, but I’m up for the challenge.

It’s pitch-black on the beach with only faint illumination glistening on the water from the moon overhead. Behind us, most of the properties

closest to the beach are in darkness, which makes sense, as this is mainly a family destination and I expect most people are in bed.

Dillon undresses in front of me, shielding me with his body while I yank my jean shorts down my legs and tug my sweater and tank off over my head. “Bra and knickers too,” Dillon says, shoving his boxers down his legs, standing proudly in all his naked glory.

Shrieks and squeals rip through the silent night air as our friends run toward the water, completely naked.

Unclipping my bra, I let it drop to the sandy floor, leveling my boyfriend with a pointed look, even if he can’t properly see it. “I do understand the meaning of skinny-dipping, Dil.” He strokes his hardening length as I clutch his arm to steady myself while I pull my panties down.

Predictably, he tweaks my nipple. “I love it when you get snarky with me. Keep it up. It just turns me the fuck on.”

“Everything turns you on.” I shriek when he yanks me in flush to his body, thrusting his hard length against me.

“Everything about *you* turns me on,” he corrects, taking my hand. “Come on.” We sprint toward the water, and I’m already shivering. “Don’t think about it. Just run in and duck down under the water. It’ll be a shock at first, but I know how to warm you up.” His tone is suggestive in the extreme.

The others are already in the water, laughing and messing around, splashing water at one another.

“Eyes on your girl, Ro,” Dillon snaps as we near the water’s edge. I’m not sure what skinny-dipping etiquette exists, or if there even is such a thing, but I’m not surprised Dillon is getting possessive. Frankly, I’m amazed he suggested this. He doesn’t like anyone looking at me, and he made his point about not sharing clear from the very start.

Gripping my hand harder, Dillon pulls me into the ocean. Shock blasts through me as a blanket of ice slams into my body, leaving no part immune to the chilly effects. I scream as if I’m being murdered, and the others all burst out laughing. Acting out of instinct, I try to wrench my hand from Dillon’s and retreat, but he’s having none of it. Throwing me over his shoulder, he wades through the cold water, whacking my ass as his arms band around my body before he dunks us under the water.

My organs go into instant shock, and I thrash about futilely. Every part of my body feels like I’ve been pelted with an ice gun. When we burst

through the water's surface, my teeth are chattering, and I'm too cold to even scream. "Wrap your legs and arms around me," Dillon says, helping my frozen limbs to cooperate. He bobs us up and down as he treads through the water away from our friends. I'm facing them, and they're all coupling off, kissing and sliding hands under the water.

"Is skinny-dipping in Ireland code for fucking?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Dillon chuckles, keeping me upright as he wades a little farther away. "Not that I'm aware of, but I'm down with that plan."

"Don't pretend like this wasn't your entire motivation for suggesting skinny-dipping in the first place."

He nips the underside of my jaw. "Is it a problem I want you so badly all the time?"

"Never." I tighten my arms around his neck. "And it's definitely mutual."

He kisses me then, over and over, running one hand up and down my back, while holding me up with the other. I grind my pussy against his pubes, building friction as he lowers his mouth to my breasts and worships them. Gradually, I forget the cold water and the breeze wafting around our bodies.

"Hold on, and don't scream unless you want to scream my name. That's totally fine." I can hear the smile in his voice.

"You're crazy. You all are," I add, watching the moving shapes of our friends in the near distance.

"Crazy about you," he murmurs, claiming my lips as he slowly lowers me down a little more into the water, positioning me on his cock.

I forget about everything but him the instant he fills me. His piercing rubs along my inner walls, and when he presses against my cervix, I seriously see stars. Clamping my legs around his waist and suctioning my arms around his neck, I thrust up and down in sync with his movements, moaning and whimpering as he fucks me. Everything seems heightened tonight, and maybe it's the water or...

"Oh my God. No condom!" I shriek, stalling my movement.

"You're on the pill, and we're both clean," he grunts, continuing to rock into me. Veins throb in his neck and his arms with the exertion involved in holding me up and fucking me. "I'll pull out before I come if it makes you feel better," he offers.

“Okay.” I relax, pivoting my hips and resume fucking him.

Dillon pulls out a few minutes later, groaning as his cum shoots all over my upper stomach. I didn’t come, but I wasn’t expecting to out here in these Arctic conditions. Dillon cleans his cum off my skin, and I flinch at the coldness of the water now I don’t have his cock to distract me. He kisses me before hoisting me farther up his body. “Climb up, Hollywood, and drape your legs over my shoulders.”

“What? No.” The others aren’t that far from us now, and they’ll be able to see enough to figure out what’s going down. “You can finish me off back at the house.”

“Like fuck I can.” He shoves me up his body by my butt. “Do as you’re told, or I’ll eat your arse out in front of everyone.”

Well, that would be infinitely more embarrassing, so I climb up his body, eventually managing to slide my legs over his shoulders, gripping his forearms for dear life as he devours my pussy with his tongue. His arms hold me in place at my back, and I’m in awe of his strength and stamina. At least if he drops me, it won’t be life-threatening, not unless I actually freeze to death. As his expert tongue plunders my pussy, I forget all my concerns, riding his face with no shame and screaming his name as I come loudly.

“Guess I can’t call you a prude anymore, huh?” Jamie teases, a few minutes later when we reunite with the others.

I splash water in his face, fighting a grin as the others crack up laughing.

“Your neighbors are dickheads,” Jamie tells Conor, as we’re forced to move our party from the outside deck to the living room.

“Be fair, Jay,” Ash says, looping her arm through his. “They have small kids, and we are pretty obnoxious and loud.”

“You forgot drunk and stoned,” I tease, sinking onto Dillon’s lap while he sits in the recliner chair. Cat and Stephen went to bed when we got back from the pub, so it’s only the eight of us now. I hate to be mean, but the atmosphere is more relaxed when Cat’s asshole boyfriend isn’t around. No one likes him, and I bet Ash is regretting inviting them this weekend.

“Too drunk and stoned to sing?” Jamie inquires, removing his guitar from his case.

“Definitely not.” I’m actually not drunk in the slightest, having paced myself tonight, and I’m only mildly stoned. I purposely stayed relatively sober because I’ve been planning this surprise for a couple of weeks.

“What’s going on?” Dillon asks as I get up to sit beside Jamie. He’s perched on a little ledge in front of the elevated open stone fireplace.

“I’m going to sing for you,” I explain while Jamie strums a few strings on his guitar.

“What song?” Curiosity rings in Dillon’s tone.

“‘She Moves Through the Fair.’”

A slow smile spreads across his mouth. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I return his smile, my heart beating fast. “I know you wanted to hear me sing, and after watching *Michael Collins* the other week, I knew it had to be this song.” This song speaks about love and loss, and it’s heartachingly beautiful with sentiments we can relate to.

Dillon missed out on the rooftop singalong during the housewarming party we threw back in February—because he was being a dick—but the guys told him I have an amazing voice, and he’s been begging me to sing with them for months. I absolutely refuse to get up on stage, even though a part of me feels an enormous thrill thinking about it. However, my abhorrence of the spotlight overrules any temporary adrenaline rush.

I considered singing at Shane and Fiona’s wedding, but after Dillon serenaded me with his song, I was a pile of goo on the floor and incapable of anything but swooning.

Dillon singing to me that night made me determined to find an opportunity to sing to him, and after we watched the *Michael Collins* movie with Liam Neeson and Julia Roberts, I knew what I wanted to do.

I wanted to honor Dillon’s Irish roots and his love of the Irish history by learning a traditional Irish song. In the movie, Sinéad O’Connor sings a slightly altered version of “She Moves Through the Fair” where the pronouns are altered from female to male to suit the film. Man, she has such a stunning voice, and her rendition is hauntingly beautiful. I could watch the video of her singing it live on stage a million times and never grow bored. Yet, I chose to sing the original version, practicing when Dillon wasn’t around, using a YouTube video performed by a talented singer named Caitlin Grey for guidance. After I had a pretty good grasp of it, I

practiced with Jamie. He and Ash gave me some direction until we felt it was perfected.

“Ready?” Jamie asks, and I nod, stuffing my nerves back down my throat. Wiping my clammy hands down the sides of my jean shorts, I clear my throat.

Jamie strums the chords, and I start singing, staring at my boyfriend as the lyrics leave my tongue. My heart swells as my voice soars, and I have everyone’s undivided attention. Passion flows from my mouth as I sing the devastatingly beautiful song, feeling so many emotions as the words embed deep in my soul.

Dillon’s Adam’s apple bobs in his throat as he watches me in raptured awe. Our connection vibrates across the room as we stare at one another, and I see the same overwhelming set of emotions flit across his eyes.

When the song ends, I’m greeted by initial silence, and then a communal round of applause breaks out. My cheeks flush, and my heart is jumping around my chest as Dillon stands, striding toward me with a determined look on his face. His arm extends as he reaches me, and I let him pull me to my feet. With fierce tenderness, he reels me into his embrace, locking his arms around me and burying his face in my hair. My arms automatically wind around his back, and I rest my head against his chest, closing my eyes and fighting tears.

I don’t know how long we stand there, in the middle of the room, wrapped around one another while our friends probably don’t know where to look. Eventually, Dillon tips my head back, and I’m startled to see such raw emotion in his glassy eyes. He stares at me, chest heaving, and I see his love written across his face as plain as day.

Pain presses down on my chest, but I won’t give in to it. I can’t. I don’t want this last special weekend in Ireland to be marred by sadness. I’m not sorry I sang that song even if it has forced both of us to face our reality. Stretching up, I kiss him, and our lips rest against each others’ as we silently speak our truths.

Hours pass, and we sit around the living room, drinking, eating chips and cookies, talking, and laughing, and I never want the night to end. Dillon is cocooned around me, like he’s afraid to let go. I’m cuddled into his side on the reclining chair, unable to untangle my limbs.

Orangey-red streaks paint the sky outside, signaling the start of another day, and we finally depart to our bedrooms except for Ro and his girlfriend.

They drew the short straw, so they're sleeping on the couch.

Dillon stumbles as I lead him up the stairs, and I realize he's far drunker than usual. Circling my arm around his back, I let him lean on me while I steer him to the room we're staying in. Dropping him on the bed, I bend down to kiss his brow. "I'm going to grab us some water. Be back in a sec."

"Stay," he murmurs, reaching his arm out.

I smile, lifting his palm to my face and pressing a kiss to his skin. "I'll be right back."

When I return a few minutes later, he hasn't moved a muscle. I prop pillows against the headboard and force him to sit up against it. "Drink." I shove the water in his hand. Kneeling in front of him, I remove his sneakers. Grains of sand fall on the hardwood floor, so I grab a towel from our weekend bag and gently clean his feet.

"You care about me," he says, but it's more of a statement than a question.

"I do." I toss the towel on the floor and pop the button on his jeans.

"I...I care about you too." He slurs the words a little.

"I know you do, babe." I brush his messy hair off his brow. "Drink," I order, tugging at his jeans.

"I need to tell you something," he croaks, and I stop pulling his jeans down his legs.

"Okay." I peer into his face, instantly seeing the turmoil there.

"I'm afraid to tell you."

I gulp over the ball of nerves in my throat, wondering what it is he has to say, instinctively knowing it's not something I'll want to hear. I pull his jeans off and tuck his legs under the covers.

"We promised each other honesty, Dillon. If it's something I need to know, just tell me." I whip my clothes off and crawl into bed beside him.

His eyes flutter closed before popping open again. "I never planned this. It wasn't supposed to happen," he slurs. "Now I'm going to be like the man in that song, driven mad by the loss of the woman he loves." His head drops back against the headboard, and his eyes close again.

My heart stutters in my chest, and tears well in my eyes. I don't know if they're happy or sad ones.

The bottle slips between his fingers, and I grab it in the nick of time.

"Why did he tell me? Why couldn't it have been like this." He points a shaky finger between us, as I place his bottle down on my bedside table.

“The way it’s meant to be.”

“I don’t understand.” He’s not making any sense.

Dillon slips down under the covers, and I lie on my side, gently wiping the quiet tears falling from his eyes with mounting concern.

“You’re mine, Vivien.” He pulls me into his warm naked chest. “You’re mine. Not his. *Mine. Mine. Mine.*”

Now it’s my turn to cry, and I’m working hard to hold my sobs inside. To keep shoving that pain back down inside. To not think about this because there is nothing I can do about it. It’s not like I can stay even if I want to. Dillon is right about one thing; it wasn’t supposed to be like this. My heart was not supposed to get involved. It was supposed to be fun, and I could walk away without looking back.

A loud snore rips through my desolate thoughts, and I look up at my boyfriend. He’s out cold. Head back. Mouth slightly open. Oblivious to the emotional torment twisting my insides into knots.

I guess I fall asleep because the next thing I’m aware of is the bed shaking as Dillon gets up. I have no clue what time it is, but my eyelids are too heavy, and they refuse to open. I’m just drifting back to sleep when the bed dips and Dillon wraps himself around me from behind. I smile in my semi-sleep state, loving how safe and warm I always feel in his arms. His lips brush my ear. “I love you, Vivien Grace. You are the one. The only one. For now and eternity.”

The bed is empty when I wake next, and sunlight is streaming through a small gap in the curtains. Dragging my tired body out of bed, I pee, brush my teeth, and take a quick shower before changing into a purple, pink, and white full-length summer dress. Slipping my feet into my low-heeled silver sandals, I grab a light, white cardigan and head downstairs.

Ro, Conor, and their girlfriends are in the kitchen, and Ash is standing over the stove flipping bacon. “Where’s everyone else?” I ask.

“Jay is sleeping off his hangover,” Ash supplies, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Cat and the dick left, thank fuck.” Ro’s eyes roam quickly over my dress. “You look pretty today.” Hurt flickers across his girlfriend’s face, and I don’t blame her. I don’t think Ro meant it intentionally, but he should think before he speaks. If Dillon were here, he’d probably punch him for that comment.

“Um, thanks.” I shuffle awkwardly on my feet. “Where’s Dillon?”

“He’s outside.” Conor jerks his head at the sliding double doors.

“I just made a fresh pot of tea if you want some?” Ash says, as I move to the kettle to make some coffee.

“You know me, girl. I need my caffeine fix first.” I make two mugs of coffee and wander outside to find my boyfriend.

Dillon is out on the deck sitting on one of the wicker lounge chairs, leaning forward with his shoulders stooped and head cradled in his hands.

“Hey.” I take the seat alongside him, setting the mugs on the ground. Gently, I place my hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Slowly, he lifts his head. “I’m fine,” he says without looking at me, staring straight ahead.

“Dillon. Please look at me.”

He turns his head, and my heart aches at the tormented look on his face. His eyes are bloodshot, the layer of stubble on his face is thicker than normal, and he looks pale.

“What is it? What’s troubling you?”

“I’d have thought that was obvious, Viv,” he softly says.

I nod, wetting my dry lips. Handing him a coffee, I take a sip of mine. “Are we going to talk about it?”

“What’s the point?” He cups his large hands around the mug, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

“I hate this.”

“Me too.” He threads his fingers in mine, and we drink our coffee in silence, staring out at the ocean in the distance.

“You said some stuff last night,” I say, when we put our mugs down. Panic skips across his face, and his back stiffens. “You don’t remember?”

He shakes his head. “What did I say?”

“That you had something to tell me but you were scared.”

“That’s all I said?” he asks, staring me straight in the eye.

“You mumbled some other stuff that didn’t make sense.” I want to tell him he told me he loved me twice, but I know he won’t want to hear that, and I can’t have that conversation. Yet I am curious as to what secret he was going to divulge.

“It’s nothing.” Pulling his hand from mine, he stands. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I just need a little space right now.”

It’s hard not to feel hurt by that, but I nod.

“I’m going for a walk. I’ll talk to you later.”

I watch him walk off until his form is just a speck in the distance. My heart throbs painfully the entire time.

“Have you spoken to your brother?” I ask Ash on Friday morning. It’s been four days since we returned from Brittas Bay, and Dillon is officially ghosting me.

“Nope. Jay said he’s been locked away in his bedroom all week writing and pining.”

“I don’t get it.” I curl into a ball on the couch, grabbing a cushion and clutching it to my chest. “I might as well have left already. I thought he’d want to spend every last second with me.” Tears fill my eyes, and I angrily swipe them away. I swore I wouldn’t cry over any guy ever again, and look at me now. I’ve been a pathetic mess this past week. I have four days left in Ireland, and I did not plan to spend them crying into my pillow with a new broken heart.

“Aw, Viv. Don’t cry.” Ash bundles me into a hug. “It’s like I said on Monday. Dillon telling you he loves you is huge. H.U.G.E.”

“Don’t make excuses for him. What he’s doing is unacceptable after everything we’ve shared.”

“You’re right. He’s hurting you, and he’s a coward. It isn’t okay, and I’m going to give him a piece of my mind when I next see him. I just want to explain why I think he’s withdrawn. Dillon loves you, like *really* loves you, and you don’t realize how big of a deal it is he said that. The only time he’s ever told me he loves me is when I tried to kill myself. He was holding me in his arms, crying and telling me he loved me. As far as I know, that’s the only time he’s told anyone he’s loved them since he was a little kid.”

“He doesn’t even tell your mom?”

“Nope.”

“That is really fucking sad.” His family is big on the “I love yous.” I have noticed Dillon never says it back, but I assumed he was just more private about it with his mom.

“I know.” She rubs my back while I stare at the ceiling. “He’s terrified.” She snorts out a laugh, and I look at her, wondering how she finds any humor in this. “Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh. I was just thinking how apt that song he wrote you is. He is literally running scared.”

“He doesn’t even remember he said it.”

“Trust me, he remembers.”

“What do I do?”

“You get your sexy Yankee arse into the shower, dress to impress, and then we’re going to Whelans. You’re going to get your man back.”

I don't see Dillon before their set, but he sings every song for me, staring at my face as he belts out the lyrics. The crowd goes nuts when they debut "Terrify Me," and I'm glad he didn't mention me by name when he dedicated it to "his mot." I don't think my heart could take another direct hit. As soon as they finish, Dillon hands off his guitar, jumps off the stage, and stalks toward me. Without warning, he pulls me into his arms, hugging me tight. A sob escapes my mouth before I can stop it. "I'm sorry, Viv. I didn't mean to abandon you all week. It just hurts."

"How do you think I feel?"

"I can't bear the thought of you leaving. It's killing me inside."

"So, you thought you'd ghost me all week and start the breaking early?"

He moves us off to the side where it's quieter. "I don't know how to process this. It wasn't intentional. I was just all up in my feels, and I shut myself away, pouring my emotions onto the page." He sweeps his fingers across my face. "I thought it might be easier to go cold turkey, but I was wrong. I'm sorry. I'm no good at this stuff."

I cup his face, relieved to be back in his arms, even if it's only delaying the inevitable. "No one is, Dillon. There is no rule book for this kind of thing."

"I want to rewind time and do things differently," he blurts.

I jerk back. "Why would you say that? I wouldn't change a single thing about our time together except it'd be nice if you didn't give me emotional whiplash so much. But I know that's part of your charm. Part of who you are." Honestly? I'd even take his mood swings if it meant I was with him.

"I'm going to make it up to you. We're going to have the best few days. We still have time."

Dillon and I are inseparable over the following days, even more so than usual. We cling to one another, always finding ways to touch, and we largely stay confined to my apartment, spending hours tangled together in bed. Dillon's anger and frustration are most obvious when he's fucking me, venting his emotion through hard thrusts and rough touches that speak to my very soul. We are hangry for one another, punishing our bodies for the sins of our hearts and minds.

"Come with me," Dillon says on Sunday evening, dragging my lazy, melancholy butt off the couch and pulling me into the bathroom.

"What is this?" I stare at the tub with a physical pain in my chest. Scented steam rises from the water, tickling my nostrils. Rose petals float

across the water, and soft music is playing in the background.

“I have plans for us tonight. I kicked Ash out. I’m commandeering the kitchen, and you’re to get your beautiful self in the bath and relax.”

“Jesus, Dillon. Are you truly trying to destroy me?”

He brushes a tear off my cheek. “Time is running out, Hollywood,” he whispers. “I want our last night together to be memorable.”

Toxic Gods has a booking tomorrow night which they tried to get out of, but couldn’t, so this is it. I’ve been trying hard not to think about it all day, but my bad mood can attest to my failure.

“Take your time in the bath, and then get dolled up. But you’re to stay in your room while I set things up. I’ll come get you when I’m ready.” He produces a glass of bubbly from behind his back, handing it to me.

I love you.

It’s on the tip of my tongue. I want to say it so badly, but it’s only going to make things worse. I can’t stay in Ireland. I’ve got to return home. “Thank you.” I kiss him softly. “You’re the best.”

I cry quietly in the bath, wishing things could be different, cursing my fragile heart for falling for someone I can’t have. Even if there were a way for me to stay in Ireland, Dillon probably won’t be here for much longer. Toxic Gods is going places. It’s only a matter of time before his star explodes, and I can’t go through that whole scene again.

I’ve got to let him go. For his sake and mine.

I just don’t know how I’m going to do it.

“Don’t peek,” Dillon says a couple of hours later, leading me up the stairs to the roof with his hand over my eyes.

“I’m not,” I lie, totally trying to squint through the gap in his fingers to see what he’s done.

He brings us to a halt and removes his hand. “Surprise.”

“Dillon,” I whisper, staring in amazement at the small marquee erected on the roof. Strings of colored lights decorate the interior, and the floor is covered in a myriad of vibrant patterned beanbags and large cushions. In the center is a low glossy black table set with candles and silverware. Incense wafts through the air from a few diffusers set up around the space. In the corner, a narrow rectangular table holds plates and covered silver platters.

“Do you like it?” he asks, and I realize I haven’t said more than his name. He looks at me with so much vulnerability, and he seems so young in this moment, so unsure of himself.

I clutch his arm, smiling up at him. “I love it. This is amazing.” I skim my eyes over his black button-up shirt and black pants, and my mouth waters. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled to the elbows, highlighting his gorgeous, strong muscular arms. He’s tan from spending so much time outside with me this summer, and it looks good on him. “As are you.” Grabbing his biceps, I press a long, lingering kiss on his lips. “You look so freaking hot.”

Leading me inside, he kneels to remove my high heels so I can sit cross-legged on the large cushion in front of the table. “I cooked an Asian-themed meal so I thought we could eat like this,” he says, looking nervous.

Leaning down, I kiss him. “This is fantastic. Thank you for going to so much trouble.”

After an exquisite meal, all cooked by Dillon, I sip prosecco while he serenades me with his guitar and that husky voice I could listen to all day.

When it gets chilly, we head inside to my bedroom. Dillon clearly snuck in here when he said he was going to the bathroom because there are rose petals on the bed and the only light is from the various flickering candles strategically placed around the room. My half-packed luggage is propped against the wall, serving as a poignant reminder of my imminent departure. But I'm not thinking about that now. I want to enjoy every second of our last precious moments together.

Throwing my arms around him, I kiss him hard, devouring his mouth as my fingers pop the buttons on his shirt. I slide my hand under the band of his pants, finding him hard and warm, ready and waiting. Without speaking, I remove his pants, boxers, sneakers, and socks and crawl on my knees between his legs, taking him into my mouth.

His fingers weave in my hair as I suck and nibble on his straining length, wanting to savor every second. Dillon's gaze is brimming with emotion and burning with desire as I lavish attention on his dick.

Lifting me by the arms, he pulls me to standing, planting a firm kiss on my lips, sliding his tongue into my mouth while lowering the zipper on my dress. It falls to my feet, and I step out of it as Dillon scoops me into his arms, carrying me to the bed. He makes quick work of my bra and undies and begins licking and kissing a path along my skin, taking his time worshiping every part of my body.

There's a softness to his gaze, a tenderness to his touch, that is wholly new, and I'm enjoying this gradual sensual buildup until neither of us can take it anymore. Nudging my thighs apart, he holds himself still, his cock poised at my entrance. He leans down, brushing his nose against mine, planting a sweet kiss to one corner of my mouth, and then the other, before claiming my lips in the lightest kiss as he slowly and carefully inches inside me. He's not wearing a condom, but we stopped using them after Brittas Bay. Now I've felt him moving inside me without one I can't go back. I'm on the pill and he usually pulls out, as an added precaution, coming on my stomach or my breasts.

Every other time we've been together, it's been fucking. But not tonight. Tonight, Dillon makes slow sweet love to me, and if I wasn't completely in love with him before this, I certainly would be now. He is unhurried, teasing sensations from my body with rolling hips, sensual thrusts, and tender strokes. His lips skim across my face and my neck, while his hands

roam my breasts, softly cupping their weight, before he gently sucks on my nipples as he moves inside me with utter devotion.

I don't even realize I'm crying until he kisses my tears. Then he's crying too.

How can my heart feel full of joy and pain at the same time? How is this happening when I have to leave and there is no promise of a future for us? What have I done to deserve such wicked suffering?

"Viv." He kisses me as he quickens his pace. "God, I don't ever want to stop feeling this."

"I know," I sob, throwing my arms around his neck and holding him close as my legs tighten around his waist. "This is the best feeling in the world."

We come together, bodies joined in every possible place, and we stay entangled in one another for a long time, both of us afraid to move, unwilling to break this connection.

Eventually, he pulls out of me, and we lie side by side, skin to skin, fingers laced together. He's wearing the saddest, most heartbreaking expression, and I feel something vital rupture inside me. Something inherent is imploding inside me in a way I've never felt.

"I love you," he blurts, and I simultaneously want to jump for joy and die.

No, Dillon. No. Please don't say it to my face. Don't make me say it back. It will destroy me to tell you I love you and then leave.

"Don't leave," he adds when I say nothing because I can't force my vocal cords to work. I'm in too much pain to speak. Tears cascade down my face. "Stay," he whispers. I cry again, my chest heaving as pain ravages my body, forcing every muscle to shudder and shake uncontrollably. His lips brush my ear. "Say I'm the one."

My heart cracks wide-open, and I want to scream yes! I want to tell him he is the one. That I long to stay with him. But I can't. It isn't possible. There are too many obstacles in the way. Lifting my tearstained face to his, I plead with him to understand. "I can't. I'm sorry."

I watch him shutting down. Bit by bit, the wall goes up, and he retreats behind it. Nodding tersely, he swings his legs out of bed. "Then I guess that's it."

I sit up, panicked and confused. "Please don't go. I thought you were going to stay tonight?"

He cracks out a bitter laugh as he pulls his clothes on. “Why delay the inevitable? We might as well do this now.” Shoving his feet in his sneakers, he turns around with his pants on and his shirt unbuttoned. I cower at the aggression and rage painted across his face, pulling the covers up over me to shield my body, feeling suddenly vulnerable. “It’s not like you really care. If you did, you’d want to stay.”

“I do!” I stand, wrapping the sheet around myself. “I wish I could stay here with you. I swear I do. But it’s not possible, Dillon.”

“Anything is possible if you want it badly enough.”

“That’s not fair!”

“What’s not fair is you making me love you and then leaving to go back to that prick!” he roars in my face, spittle flying in the air, and I take an automatic step back, plastering my back to the wall.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” I protest.

“Bull-fucking-shit.” An ugly sneer slides across his mouth. It’s one I haven’t seen since the early days. “You’re pathetic. Crawling back to him after he’s probably spent months fucking his costar.”

“Reeve has nothing to do with this. He won’t even be in L.A.” I actually have no clue what his schedule is like, but I’m pretty sure that’s the truth. He’s in hot demand, and his schedule is usually jam-packed.

He jabs his finger in my face. “You can’t even admit it to yourself.”

“Dillon, my entire life is back in L.A. My classes are starting in ten days. I’ve signed up for an evening costume design course. I have taken out a lease with Audrey on an apartment near UCLA. My parents are there.”

“You could transfer to Trinity permanently, but you never even tried, did you?”

“The thought did cross my mind.”

He harrumphs. “Yet you did nothing about it.”

Anger simmers under my skin. “Hang on here a second. You never gave me any indication until right now that you wanted me to stay! Do you think I’m a mind reader?”

“Cop the fuck on, Hollywood. We both know what we’re feeling. Or maybe I was the only one who fell.” He purses his lips in disgust as he buttons his shirt.

“You know that’s not true, and what difference would it make anyway, Dillon? You’re not going to be in Dublin for much longer. The band will take off, and you’ll go with them. You’ll be gone for years, and there’ll be

groupies and women coming out of the woodwork, and I'll be pushed aside. We'd try to make it work, but it wouldn't. I know. I've already been there."

His fists clench at his side, and a muscle pops in his jaw. I have never seen him so angry, and I'm a little bit scared. "Know one thing, Vivien. I am *not* Reeve Lancaster!" he yells, and I wrap my arms around myself. "I would *never* cheat on you. *Never.*"

He walks toward the door, and I stand rooted to the spot in so much pain I can barely breathe.

How did a perfect night become such a nightmare?

His shoulders slump as he turns around in the doorway. All the fight has left his face. "I would have stayed for you, Vivien. I would have fought for you. No matter what happens, know it was real." He shakes his head sadly. "Goodbye, Hollywood. I hope everything works out for you."

My tear ducts are broken. Worse than they were when Reeve splintered my heart. I can't stop crying. I haven't been able to since Dillon walked out of my bedroom last night. Pain is an ever-present pressure on my chest and lump blocking my throat. Spindly fingers have a vise-grip on my heart, and they refuse to let go, squeezing and squeezing until I can barely breathe. Anxiety and heartache kept me awake most of last night. At least it might mean I can sleep on the plane. My flight leaves at four in the morning, but I have to be at the airport by one, so tonight is officially my last night on Irish soil.

Packing the last of my things in my suitcase, I glance at my cell, but Dillon still hasn't returned any of my calls or messages. Although he was cruel last night and he said a lot of hurtful things, I know he lashed out because I hurt him first. I froze when he told me he loved me, and I was wrong not to say it back. I was wrong to keep that truth locked up inside me for so long instead of letting it out. Maybe if I had opened that conversation earlier, he would have asked me to stay, and we might have found a way of making it work. I'm not really sure how, but we never gave us a chance to find out.

It's too late to do anything about that now, but I can rectify at least one thing.

Ash props her hip against the door. "Are you sure about this?" she asks, her eyes skimming over my empty room. She's moving in with Jamie at the end of the week when the rental agreement officially ends here. They have found their own one-bedroom place, and it's a big deal for them. I'm happy

for my friend, and I hope Jay doesn't fuck things up. She's going to need him in the coming weeks because I know she will miss me as much as I'll miss her.

"Yes. I can't leave things how they were last night."

"I'm worried." She pushes off the door, entering my room. "He was so drunk and so angry last night. I've seen my brother press the self-destruct button before. It's not pretty, and he's liable to do or say anything."

"I appreciate the heads-up, but I've still got to do this."

"I don't want to see you hurt." She pulls me into a hug, and we cling to one another. "I am going to miss you so much. You better phone me every day."

"I will, and I sent my US number to your cell as I won't be using my Irish cell anymore."

"Are you sure you can't stay?" she asks, shucking out of our embrace.

"I don't see how it's possible." I push air out of my mouth. "I mean, I could probably arrange a permanent transfer to Trinity and come back, but what good is me being here if Dillon is off traveling with the band?"

"You know he's got concerns about going to the US, and that's even if this meeting with the A&R guy pans out. It might turn into nothing."

"I doubt that. The guys are way too fucking talented to be passed over forever. If it doesn't happen now, it will happen at some point."

"He'd drop out for you."

My eyes widen. "He said that?"

She shakes her head. "He doesn't have to say it for me to know it's the truth. I know he would choose you over the band in a heartbeat."

"I wouldn't want him to do that. I wouldn't want him to pass up such an amazing opportunity for me. It would come back to haunt us, and I couldn't live with that kind of guilt."

"You could go with them. Switch to online classes and travel the world with the band. That's what I'm going to do if it takes off for them."

"You have it all worked out." I smile sadly.

Her hands land on my shoulders. "I am the last person in the world who has her shit together, but it's not insurmountable. You can make this work if you want to. I just hate to see you both miserable and hurting. He loves you. You love him. That should be enough."

"It should be, but it often isn't." Of course, my mind instantly wanders to Reeve. I thought our love was enough to weather any storm, to climb any

mountain, but it wasn't.

"Don't bite my head off for saying this, but is your past with Reeve clouding your judgment when it comes to Dil?"

"Undoubtedly," I agree without hesitation. "But I can't help how I feel. I took a risk once before, and it burned me in a bad way. Even if it was possible to travel with Dillon, there will still be the groupies and the media, and I don't think I can do that again."

"They'll be there when you return to L.A."

"They don't care about me anymore. I'm no longer newsworthy."

"You will be if you get back with Reeve." Her eyes narrow a little.

"I have no plans to do that." Truthfully, I don't know what will happen with Reeve and me when I return home, and I don't have the brain capacity to contemplate it now.

"All I've heard about Reeve, from you and Audrey, tells me he's not going to give up on you. You have history and a bucketload of shared memories. What chance does Dillon stand against that?"

"Ash, stop." I rub a tense spot between my brows. "Don't do this. I don't want to fight with you before I leave. This has never been a competition between them. I love them both. You know that. I really do love your brother." My heart cracks, and a sob bursts from my lips. "I love him so much, and that's why I'm stepping into the lion's den tonight. I'm going to tell him what I should have told him last night."

"I'm sorry." She hugs me again. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will always ship *Dillien*."

A laugh rips from my throat before I can stop it. "I can't believe you gave us a ship name."

"You deserve one, because the love you two share is *epic*. I'm a hopeless romantic now, in case you missed that memo." She loops her arm through mine, tugging me into the kitchen. "Let's do drinkies before we leave for Bruxelles."

"I feel sick," I admit, stopping outside the door to the pub a few hours later. My bags are all packed at the apartment, and I just need to be back there around midnight to get changed before Micheál picks me up.

“I’m here for you.” Ash threads her arm through mine. “Just remember he loves you and he’s hurting.”

Fighting nerves, I push through the door and enter the pub.

“Don’t forget the asshole gene is part of his DNA too,” she shouts in my ear as we’re immediately accosted with laughter and loud conversation.

Rock music blares out of the speakers, and the place is thronged. Then again, summer in Dublin City is usually like this. Bars and restaurants are teeming most every night. This is only the third time Toxic Gods has played here, but it’s one of my favorite Dublin pubs.

“Fuck, shit, piss.” Ash clings to my arm, and my eyes swivel in the same direction as hers.

My heart gives out the second I locate Dillon, spread-eagled on a chair at a table in the back, with Aoife perched on his lap. All the blood drains from my face, and my instinct is to run back out the door, but I won’t give him or her the satisfaction. I am strong and brave, and I will hold my head up high as I do what I came to do.

Acid churns in my gut, and an anxious fluttering sensation creeps along my chest as I grip Ash’s arm tighter and walk toward the band’s table on wobbly legs. Pain stabs me in the heart, like a thousand fine pinpricks, as Aoife wraps her arms around Dillon’s neck, bending down to dot kisses along his jaw and his neck. He isn’t touching her. He isn’t paying her any attention, sprawled in the chair, gripping the armrest in one hand and bottle of beer in another, shooting me that annoyingly smug grin as I step toward him.

“Well, well, look what the cat dragged in?” He lifts his beer to his lips.

Aoife fixes me with a gloating look, and I’d love nothing more than to yank her from his lap and slam her pretty face into the table.

Higher moral ground. The angel on one shoulder helps me to remain calm and remember what I came for. “Could I speak to you in private?”

He glares at me with naked hostility, and I’m reminded of our initial meeting. “Nah.” His nose scrunches up. “I said all I needed to say last night.”

“Well, I didn’t.” I wet my dry lips.

“Don’t you have a plane to catch, Hollywood?”

“Dillon, please.”

Aoife giggles, running her hand back and forth across his chest, and I want to break every one of her fingers.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing, bitch,” Ash says. “You know he’s only using you to piss Viv off. He doesn’t give a shit about you. He loves Vivien, not you.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ash,” Dillon hisses, pointing his bottle at her.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Jamie barks, standing and moving to Ash’s side.

I let go of her, letting her boyfriend slide a protective arm around her.

“You are seriously out of line, Dil,” Ro says, pinning his brother with a cutting look. “You need to apologize to Ash and Viv.”

“Still trying to get in her knickers, eh, little bro?” Dillon glances at his phone. “She’s got a few hours. Be my guest.” He waves his hands in my direction. “Knock yourself out.”

He hits the bull’s-eye, smashing my heart into smithereens with his cruel, dismissive words. I need to do what I came here to do and leave. Ignoring Dillon and the tramp, I turn to the others. “I just wanted to say goodbye in person, and I hope everything works out with the band. It’s been great meeting you all. Ireland more than exceeded my expectations, and a lot of that was down to you guys.”

Dillon snorts, and Aoife giggles, but I ignore them. One by one, the guys get up and hug me. Ro’s girlfriend gives me a little wave, but she’s never been a big fan of me anyway. She probably can’t wait to see the back of me. Catriona surprises me, apologizing for not being a better friend and wishing me well back home.

“I know this isn’t the last I’ve seen of you,” I tell Jamie as he hugs me. “Whether you’re in L.A. with the band or visiting me with Ash, I expect I’ll see your annoying face again.”

“You betcha, Hollywood.”

His use of Dillon’s pet name sends a fresh wave of pain hurtling through my chest, but I put a brave face on it. “He’s hurting bad,” he whispers in my ear. “She’s nothing but a tool to piss you off. Don’t buy into it. He loves you big-time, Viv.”

I squeeze his arm, grateful for his words. Maybe there is hope for Jamie Fleming after all. I sure hope so, for my friend’s sake.

Turning around, I face Dillon again. I wanted to say this in private, but I’m not ashamed to say it in public either. When I walk out of this door, I need to know I am leaving with my head held high.

Aoife gloats like the cat that got the cream, eyeing me with smug haughtiness as she dusts kisses all over his face. I ignore her the best I can, staring Dillon straight in the eye. “I should have said this last night, but I froze. Actually, I should’ve said it when I first realized it.” My heart jackhammers behind my rib cage, and butterflies swoop into my chest. “I love you, Dillon. I love you more than words could ever express. For as long as I live, I will never forget you.”

My lower lip wobbles, and tears threaten as I stare at his impassive face. I wasn't expecting a reply, not really, but I was expecting to see some kind of emotion on this face. This blank, emotionless reaction hurts more than anything. Spinning around, I give a little wave to the guys, pretending I don't notice their pitiful expressions. Ro and Ash look like they're ready to rip Dillon limb from limb. "Take care, everyone." Somehow, I force my legs to move, putting one foot in front of the other.

"Thanks for the sex, Hollywood! It was fun while it lasted. Say hi to Reeve for me," Dillon shouts after me, hammering the final nail in the coffin.

I barely make it out the front door before I throw up, emptying the contents of my stomach all over the cobblestone path. Tears stream down my face as I retch.

"He's not worth it," Ash says, crouching down beside me a few minutes later. She rubs her hand up and down my back. "He was a total prick in there to you, and I told him that. I want to kick his arse all over town. I have never been more disappointed in my brother than I am right now."

"It doesn't matter." I straighten up, wiping my mouth with the back of my sleeve. "I said what I came to say, and I'm ready to go home now."

For the first time, I really feel those words. I want to return to L.A. and put as much distance between me and Dillon as possible. I want my mom. I need her to hold me in her arms and tell me everything will be all right.

"I'm proud of you, Viv. That took huge guts. You're a true princess and my hero." Ash hands me a bottle of water, and I rinse my mouth out. "We

can say goodbye here,” I tell her. “I know you want to see the band.”

She thumps me gently on the arm. “Don’t be stupid. I’m coming with you. We’ll say goodbye at the apartment, like we planned.” Ash wanted to come to the airport, but I asked her not to. Saying goodbye to Audrey at LAX only added to my pain back in January, and I’m keen to avoid that this time. Plus, my flight is at an ungodly hour. No sense in Ash hanging around Dublin Airport until four a.m.

We grab a taxi, and I let my friend comfort me on the silent ride back to our apartment. When we get home, Ash gives me some space to call Audrey while she sets about making us something to eat. She’s worried now I puked up my dinner. I don’t have the heart to tell her I doubt I could eat and they’ll be plying me with food and drink in first class. I know she needs to do this, so I let her.

Audrey picks up on the fourth ring. “You’re not coming back, are you? You’re staying with him,” she blurts before I’ve gotten a word out.

I crank out a harsh laugh in between sobs. “You’ve got that all wrong. I can’t get home quick enough.”

“Oh no, Viv. What’s happened?”

I tell her everything, sobbing and choking over the words as tears roll down my face, ruining my makeup.

“Fuck, Viv. I’m so sorry. You sound as bad as you did when Reeve and you broke up.”

“I can’t do this again,” I cry. “I can’t take this heartache again.”

Silence descends on her end, and the only sound is the permanent tearing of my heart as I cry my eyes out to my bestie.

“You really love him,” she says when I compose myself.

“I do,” I whisper hoarsely.

“More than Reeve?”

I don’t answer for a few minutes. I won’t deny I’ve had similar thoughts these past couple of weeks as I’ve contemplated returning home and what that means. “I love them both in different ways. Both of them speak to my soul.”

“I feel guilty. I had written Dillon off, believing it wasn’t really that serious, but I was wrong. I see that it is. I still think you need to hear Reeve out, and the selfish part of me wants you two to fix things so it can be like old times with the four of us all together.”

“It can never be like old times. That ship has sailed.” We’re in different places now. Logistically and metaphorically speaking. And we are different people.

“If you love Dillon, Vivien. If you really love him and he’s the one, then fight for him.”

“He doesn’t want me to.”

“Bullshit. He told you his truths last night. He’s hurt and lashing out. You should still give him shit for that Aoife stunt, but fight for your man if he’s the one you want.”

“I did that before, and look where it got me.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Dillon isn’t Reeve. If he meant what he said last night, he’s prepared to put you first in a way Reeve didn’t when he got his big opportunity.” There’s a pregnant pause while we both stop to process her words. “If he’s not the one, if Reeve is, get on that plane and don’t look back. But if Dillon is the one, you can’t leave without making that clear to him. Otherwise, it will haunt you for the rest of your life.”

After we hang up, I write a long letter to Dillon, telling him everything I should have said weeks ago. I’m going to drop the letter off at his place on the way to the airport. Pubs close early in Ireland on Monday, so I know the guys will be back at their place by midnight, giving Dillon enough time to come and get me. I’ve told him the ball is in his court now. I’m not chasing him. I told him I loved him in front of everyone, so he knows where my head is at. If he wants me to stay, he needs to come to the airport and stop me from getting on that plane.

I don’t tell Ash my plans, because I know she won’t be able to help interfering. If Dillon wants me, I need to know he’s acting of his own free will and not because his sister is putting pressure on him.

I manage to swallow a few mouthfuls of the gorgeous chicken pasta Ash made before pushing it aside. “I have something for you, and I need a favor,” I say, sipping my water.

“What is it?” Ash looks as glum as I feel, and I hope my gift will cheer her up.

I drop the keys to the rental in her palm. “The car is yours. I bought it and put it in your name.”

“Get the fuck out!” Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re my bestie. I love you, and I’m going to miss you. Plus, I know how much you hate the smelly bus. This way, you’ll be able to pop back home and see your folks whenever you want.”

She bursts out crying, flinging herself at me. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, Viv, and it’s not because you bought me a car, you crazy bitch.” Sniffing, she eases back, swiping her tears away. “You have helped me more than you realize. I see your strength and your humility and your amazing heart, and it inspires me to be a better person.”

“You *are* a good person, Ash. One of the best I know.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a true friend before you. I don’t have this bond with Cat. I can tell you anything, and I know you’ll never judge. I will miss you more than words.”

“This isn’t goodbye, Ash. Only goodbye for now.” Reeve’s face appears in my mind’s eye, and I hear him telling me that back in January. A pang of longing sweeps over me, and what I wouldn’t give for one of Reeve’s hugs now.

“I am seriously in shock.” Ash tosses the keys in her palm. “I can’t believe you bought me a car.”

“You’re welcome. I feel happier knowing you’re not risking life and limb taking the bus,” I joke, trying to bolster my mood. “I need one last favor.”

“Anything. You know that.”

Walking to my room, I retrieve the special edition Fender from my closet.

She gasps when I arrive back in the kitchen with it. “I got this for Dillon. I had hoped our last night would go differently, and I had planned on giving it to him myself. Will you see he gets it?”

“He doesn’t fucking deserve it,” she snaps, still mad at her brother.

Taking it out of the case, I run my fingers over his name etched into the wood.

“Jesus, Viv. It’s beautiful. He’s going to feel like such an ass when I give this to him.” She folds her arms across her chest. “If it didn’t have his name on it, I’d probably have given this to Jamie.”

I burst out laughing. “At least you’re honest.”

“Then I’d take it back off him when he did something to piss me off and give it to my brother when he redeemed himself.” She traces her fingers over the guitar strap where Toxic Gods is embedded in the leather.

“Look after him for me,” I say in case he doesn’t come through as I hope.

“I will if you promise to look after yourself.”

“Always.” If there’s one thing I’ve learned on this journey of self-discovery, it’s that I can’t care for anyone if I don’t care for myself first.

“This isn’t goodbye, Viv.” Ash hugs me close. “It *is* only goodbye for now. I feel that deep in my bones as if it’s been ordained by God himself.”

I don’t know if she’s right. I guess time will tell.

Dillon doesn't show. I dropped the letter in his mailbox, and I know there were people inside because music and laughter vibrated through the door. Someone would have found it and given it to him. I frantically pace the floor in the boarding area, glancing every few seconds at the clock on the wall, peering down the hallway, hoping to see his white-blond head racing toward me, but it never does. I wait to board until the very last second, only doing so when the flight attendant states the flight *will* leave without me if I don't go now. Momentarily, I consider skipping the flight and returning to Dillon's apartment, but I can't. I laid my heart on the line tonight. It was his turn to prove he meant what he said Sunday night, and he's failed me.

I manage to hold the tears at bay until the plane lifts in the air, leaving Ireland and my love behind, and I can't contain my heartache any longer. Clutching Dillon's pillow to my chest, I sob to my heart's content, uncaring I'm making a scene. Thumbing through the photo album he bought me only makes it worse. Dillon helped me choose every pic, and every photo holds a precious memory. Burying my face in the album, I cry louder, and it truly feels like my heart is broken beyond repair this time.

Hysterical laughter breaks through my snotty tears as a thought lands in my mind. How ironic I spent the plane ride to Ireland sobbing over Reeve, and now I'm just as heartbroken leaving the Emerald Isle, crying endless tears over another man.

Only I could do this to myself.

Is it possible to be both healed and wounded? To feel whole and broken at the same time? Because that's how I feel. Like the part of me that was broken and lost on the way over has been mended—Dillon's love played a big part in helping me to reach that point—but now other parts of me are damaged, and I'm feeling more lost than ever.

The flight attendant moves me to a private cabin, keeping a close eye on me the entire time. She told me she has a daughter, around my age, and I can tell she's worried about me. She looks at me—crying hysterically as I listen to Toxic Gods songs on my phone, clutching the pillow Dillon bought me, scribbling manically in my journal, and rubbing my fingers repeatedly over my Claddagh necklace—like I might need to be committed. Perhaps I do, because this time, it feels like there is no coming back from this loss.

I knock back the Valium Ash snuck me before I left, and eventually I fall asleep.

When we finally land at LAX, I'm all cried out and numb. The relief I should feel at being back on Californian soil is hidden behind a wall of grief and pain. I move as if on autopilot, shoving my oversized shades over my eyes to disguise the state I'm in, shuffling through customs and out into the terminal, moving toward the man holding a placard with my name.

I know my parents would greet me if they could, but even at this early hour, they'd be spotted by fans or the paparazzi who hang out at the airport, and I don't need that shit the second I arrive. It's strange Max, our full-time driver, isn't the one picking me up though. This man doesn't say much as he pushes my luggage cart outside to a sleek black Mercedes, setting it against the trunk, before opening the back passenger door for me.

I slip inside, gasping when I see who's waiting for me.

“Hey, beautiful.” Reeve angles his body so he's facing me. “You are a sight for sore eyes.”

I can only stare at him in shock. His hair is back to normal, the brown strands threaded with natural blond highlights, and his jawline is smooth, showcasing his tan skin and the beauty mark over his lip I love so much. He's wearing a blinding-white designer T-shirt over khaki shorts and his old Vans. The golf watch I bought him for his seventeenth birthday is strapped to his wrist. Familiar blue eyes stare at me with love and hope, and it's like looking at the Reeve of my past. The boy who was my everything before he became the man who took an axe to my heart. But none of that matters right now, because he's here, and I'm glad to see him.

I fling my arms around his neck, blinking back tears when his arms automatically lock around my back. "I'm happy to see you." It's the truth. His warmth and the familiar scent of his cologne reminds me of so many happy times. I ease out of his arms, my eyes skimming over his handsome face. "You look good."

"So do you." His smile is wide, his eyes happy and relieved as they drift briefly to my lips.

Butterflies flutter gently in my chest. "What are you doing here? Where are Mom and Dad?" I was expecting my parents to be waiting in the car for me, and I don't know what he has said or done to get them to agree to this.

"I've spoken with your parents a lot this summer, and we're building bridges. I asked them if I could pick you up, explaining my reasons, and they agreed." Reeve scoots closer, his knee brushing against mine through my jeans. "I missed you so fucking much."

I missed him too, but I was also busy with my new boyfriend, so reiterating his sentiment doesn't feel right. Especially when I spent a large early portion of my trip brokenhearted. I can't forget what Reeve did or how his actions made me feel. Confusion swirls through my mind, clouding my brain. I hang my head, unable to do this now.

"Viv, look at me. I need to see your eyes, baby." He tilts my chin up with one finger, and I don't stop him when he removes my shades, revealing my red-rimmed bloodshot eyes and tearstained splotchy skin.

His Adam's apple jumps in his throat. Fear and pain are etched upon his face as he stares at me. My chest heaves with powerful emotion as I look at him, hating he can see through me so easily but loving that he does too. Reeve knows me better than anyone, as I know him. You can't spend virtually your whole life with someone and not know them inside and out.

The protective layer around my heart thaws a little as our connection crackles in the tiny gap between us. Loving Reeve has always been this all-consuming entity with no start and no end. All the same feelings are there, hidden behind a shit ton of complexity and confusion.

"Am I too late?" he whispers, tentatively reaching out and cupping one side of my face.

On instinct, I lean into the warmth of his soft palm, contemplating how to reply to that question.

"Viv?" His concerned gaze scrutinizes mine. "Have I lost you for good?"

I can't answer that when I'm so lost within myself. "I don't have the mental or emotional capacity for this conversation right now, Reeve." Tears fill my eyes. "I feel lost all over again." A tear leaks out of one eye, and he pulls me into his arms without hesitation. My head drops against his chest, and I let him comfort me even though I know I probably shouldn't.

"It's okay, baby." He strokes my hair as his other arm bands tight around my body, keeping me flush to his chest. "I'm here now, and I'm going to make everything better." He instructs the driver to leave, and the privacy screen goes up. "I know you're not in the mood for talking, but can you just listen?" I nod against his chest. "I need you to know I still love you. I've never stopped loving you. I wanted to hop on a plane to Ireland at least once a week, but I promised I'd give you space to work through things, and I wanted to keep my word."

A gnarly sort of sound escapes my mouth, and I jerk out of his hold. "This is all sounding far too familiar and not in a good way."

"You are right, but things are different now. I'm me again, Viv." Taking my hand, he threads our fingers together, and fiery tingles shoot up my arm. His touch still affects me, but I'm not surprised. It's not like I ever fell out of love with him. It would've been so much easier if I had, but I know I will love Reeve Lancaster all my life.

Doesn't mean we'll be together though.

"What does that mean?"

He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "You were right about everything, and I should have believed you. You have always had my back, and instead of letting you in, I shut you out. I'm disgusted with myself." He shakes his head, sighing. "I made a lot of bad decisions. I chose to believe the wrong people and it cost me the most precious thing in the world—you. I'm not excusing my behavior. Not at all. I'm just trying to explain how I ended up in such a bad place. At the start, being away from you unsettled me more than I could have imagined. I was overwhelmed with everything expected of me on set and really feeling my age. The other actors were all older and more experienced in movies and life. I felt lost and young, and I was definitely out of my comfort zone. Bianca and Cassidy were pushing me to break up with you, and the stress of that combined with the movie responsibility and the long hours took its toll. Saffron—"

I growl at the mention of her name. It's an automatic reaction, one I can't control.

“I know you hate her with good reason. I hate her too, but I need to tell you everything. You need to know it all, and I can’t not mention her name.”

“Fine.” I clip the word out because I want to hear what he has to say. I’m stronger and wiser now, and I won’t give her the power she once held over me.

“She suggested I pop a few uppers. She said it was how everyone coped with long shifts on set. She said everyone was doing it. I’d seen the guys snorting coke, so I stupidly believed her.” His tongue darts out, wetting his lips. “I hid the true extent of my drug use from you because I was embarrassed. I had always been anti-drugs, as you know. It was a slippery slope, and I was plunging headfirst down it. I know now that I should have confided everything to you, but I didn’t want to see the disappointment in your eyes. I wanted you to be proud of me. I wanted Dad to be proud of me.”

He briefly closes his eyes. “I should have gone to your mom and sought her advice before signing that new contract, but I was already fucked up from pills and coke and Saffron was mouthing in my ear, saying fake relationships were the norm and if you loved me you wouldn’t have a problem with it.”

I lean my head back against the headrest, wondering if my parents know any hitmen. I would really love to put a bullet between that conniving bitch’s eyes.

“I’m doing all the things I should have done from the start,” he continues before I can question him on what exactly has gone on between him and his costar. Or ex-costar now, I suppose. “I will explain everything I’ve discovered back at my place. For now, I need you to know I’m done with letting assholes manipulate me. I’ve cut ties with Bianca. I have a new supportive team around me who genuinely cares about me and my best interests. I’ve signed with Margaret, and Edwin Chambers is my publicist. I pulled out of the movie I was due to film this summer so I could get to the bottom of things and make amends,” he cryptically adds.

“What about her? I need to know what happened, and I don’t want you holding anything back. This is your only chance to fess up, Reeve. You’re lucky I’m even giving you a chance to explain.”

“I know that, Viv, and I’m grateful.”

“Have you fucked her?”

Slowly, he nods, and I close my eyes as pain jumps up and slaps me across the face. “Have you fucked other women since we broke up?” I ask, forcing my eyes open. I need to look at him when he says this to know if he’s telling me the truth.

He vehemently shakes his head. “Nope. I haven’t so much as looked at another woman. The only woman I want is you.” He rubs the back of his head. “With Saffron, it was only one time,” he rushes to assure me. “In Mexico, when those pictures were taken. I was high and drunk, and I have no recollection of it. All I know is I woke up beside her, and it was obvious what we’d done.”

Tears pool in his eyes. “I threw up the second I realized the truth and what it meant for us. That fucking bitch laughed. She stood over me while I puked my guts up in the toilet, laughing and smiling while snorting a line.” Anger flares in his eyes. “She had the audacity to assume we would be together after that, but I made it abundantly clear I would never have fucked her if I’d been sober and I wanted her nowhere near me. I went to the studio and told them I would walk if they didn’t keep her away from me when we weren’t filming. I told them the only way I’d promote *Sweet Retribution* was if she was nowhere near me.”

That matches what Audrey told me a few months ago, and I know he’s telling me the truth. It’s written all over his face. The knowledge he only fucked her once helps a lot. Given the circumstances, the fact we were broken up, and I was already with Dillon means I can’t hold it over him. It wouldn’t be fair to do that to him.

“They agreed, and that pissed her off,” he continues. “I found out afterwards she had staged the whole thing. Had a photographer hiding close by to take the money shot. She timed it perfectly to ruin your birthday. I’m so sorry.”

“What a pity you hadn’t done that the first time it was obvious she was interfering.” There is no heat behind my words, and though it still hurts, especially that public kiss shared around the world, I have learned to deal with it. Sheila, my therapist in Ireland, helped me to process all my feelings, and I’ve come to accept what has happened. I will never forget it or how it made me feel, but I can discuss it now and not want to scream in a fit of rage.

“I should have. Everything would’ve been different if I hadn’t been so weak. So stupid. I failed myself as much as I failed you.” He twirls a lock

of my hair around his finger, and fierce determination washes over his face. “I won’t ever fail you again, Viv. If you give me one more chance, I will prove to you I’m worthy of it.”

I can see he really means that, but I can't just accept his word for it. Reeve has a long way to go before he proves himself to me, and that's if I even want that. I am so confused right now. My head is a complete mess over two different guys, and I don't know whether I am coming or going. Jet lag isn't helping either. I deliberately don't respond to his statement. "You have changed," I murmur, seeing him in a slightly different light.

"I've worked hard these past few months to right my wrongs and focus on the things that matter. In case it's not clear, that means you first and then my career. I've spent so long trying to win my dad's affection I didn't realize I was taking yours for granted. Your parents too. Losing all of you was the wake-up call I needed to pull my head out of my ass. Fuck my dad. I'm done trying to please him. Ironically, he's actually made more of an effort, but it's too little, too late for me."

The car pulls into the underground parking lot of a low-rise apartment building, and I frown as I look out of the window. "Where are we?"

"My apartment in Pacific Palisades."

"You own an apartment?"

He nods. "It's only a stopgap. I found a couple of perfect sites to build our home, but I wouldn't dream of buying anything without your involvement."

I squirm on the seat. This is too much heavy. "Reeve..."

He flashes me a boyish smile and my heart thump-thumps behind my chest cavity. "I know I'm probably coming on too strong. I promised myself I wouldn't do that, but I'm going to win you back, Viv. I'm not giving up."

His smile fades a little. “Not even if you tell me that Irish guy has a fighting chance.”

Pain eviscerates my heart and punches me in the lungs, and I struggle to breathe. For a while there, I’d actually managed to forget about Dillon.

“Fuck.” Reeve gently grips my arms. “I’ve got you, Viv. Breathe in and out. Nice and slow.” He breathes with me until I’ve regained my composure. His eyes lower to my collarbone, and his face pales. “Did he buy you that?” he asks, and I glance down, only now realizing my fingers are stroking my Claddagh necklace. I nod, and he squeezes his eyes shut.

The car glides to a halt, and when his eyes pop open, they are full of pain. I should probably feel some modicum of pleasure to have inflicted even an ounce of the agony he inflicted on me, but I get no joy out of seeing him hurt. “Do you love him?” he whispers, piercing me with an anguished look.

I’m not going to hide anything, and I have done nothing wrong. “Yes.”

He buries his head in his hands, and the urge to comfort him is riding me hard, but I don’t move a muscle. After a couple minutes of awkward silence, he lifts his head, spearing me with fearful blue eyes. “Do you still love me?”

“Yes. I do. I love you.”

Relief floods his face. “I can work with that.”

“Reeve...”

“I know, Viv. You don’t need to say it. I know you, remember?”

Taking my hand, he helps me out of the car, and I let him hold me as we take the elevator to the top of his apartment building.

“I got the penthouse, but it’s not huge. At least, not compared to where we both grew up.” Taking his keys out of his pocket, he opens the door.

“I lived in a penthouse in Dublin, and I actually loved that it was smaller. Much easier to clean.”

“I can’t wait to hear about your trip. What is Ireland like?” he asks, pulling me into a large bright open living space. On the right is a massive kitchen with white cabinets, stainless-steel appliances, and dappled white-and-gray-marble countertops. A matching island unit separates the kitchen from the dining table, and beyond that is the living room.

“It was amazing. I’ll tell you all about it, but wow. This view is to die for.” I march past the gray leather sectional toward the far window. All the

windows in this space are floor-to-ceiling windows offering incredible views of the Pacific Ocean in the near distance.

“I bought this place for the view,” he states, coming to stand alongside me. “I probably should’ve bought a place in Beverly Hills or West Hollywood to be closer to the studios, but I wanted to be near the ocean. Now that I’m clean and sober I’ve taken up running again, and I jog every morning at five a.m. down at Santa Monica Pier.”

“Clean and sober?” I inquire, looking sideways at him.

“I attended an outpatient rehab clinic for a couple months to wean myself off all the shit I was doing. I saw a therapist there too.”

“It was that bad? Why didn’t I see it?”

“It was hella bad after that photo surfaced. I reached a real low point, but ultimately, it was a turning point. It was at that juncture I decided to turn my life around. As for why you didn’t see it—I didn’t want you to see it, Viv. And, before you ask, I didn’t do much shit when I was with you. I didn’t need to.” He softens his voice, brushing his fingers across my cheek. “You’re the only drug I need.”

“No drug is healthy, Reeve. They’re all addictive and damaging to your health.”

“Except you. You were always good for me. I was a fucking fool to have vented my frustration at you instead of confiding in you and letting you help me make the right decisions. I’ve grown up a lot these past few months. I missed you like crazy.” He traps my face in his palms. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Vivien. I have missed your gorgeous face.”

Staring into Reeve’s handsome face, being back in L.A. with him, I realize I’ve really missed him too.

“Do you think you can ever forgive me?”

I circle my hands around his wrists. “I already have.” He arches a brow, looking shocked. “I needed to forgive you to heal. I saw a therapist in Ireland, and she helped me to that realization. I know you didn’t intentionally set out to hurt me, Reeve. I’m angry you made so many stupid decisions. I’m mad you turned to drugs and that bitch instead of me, but hearing your explanation helps me to understand it a little better.”

He moves to kiss me, and I jerk back out of his hold, raising a hand. “That doesn’t magically solve everything. You still betrayed me, and that’s not something I can forget in a hurry. Earning my trust again will not be

easy, and I can't promise you anything, Reeve. You don't own my full heart anymore, and I'm a bit of a hot mess now, in case you didn't notice."

"I know I have a lot to do to prove my intentions are true. I need to work hard to regain your trust, but I'm going to do it. I've already set things in motion, and I won't stop until I've got you back." He closes the gap between us again, gently pulling me into his arms. "I can't exist in this world without you, Vivien Grace Mills. I've tried, and it's not worth living if you aren't there by my side."

Romantic Reeve may yet be the death of me.

My tummy rumbles, saving my bacon.

"You must be tired, and you're clearly hungry. Sit. Let me make you something to eat."

"I got some sleep on the plane, but I didn't eat much." I couldn't stomach food, but I feel like I could eat now. "I need to stay awake to reset my body clock," I say, stifling a yawn. "That will be challenging."

I randomly scroll through the TV, flicking through channels, while Reeve putters around in the kitchen. Twenty minutes later, we are enjoying gorgeous spicy chicken wraps from the decent-sized balcony off to one side of his apartment. My nostrils twitch, and I soak up the sun and the hint of salty sea air. "California sun, oh, how I've missed you." I lean back in my chair, patting my full stomach.

"You *are* looking a little pasty," Reeve quips, and I flip him the bird. "I'm really glad you're home," he quietly adds, his adoring gaze raking over me. "You look good, Viv."

"I am good." It's not really a lie. Setting my newly rebroken heart aside, I am in a good place.

"I love seeing you here. I knew when I was buying this place you'd love it. And wait until you see the properties I've earmarked for our forever house. They will blow your mind. Did you even look at the architect plans before you returned your birthday gift?" The words fly from his mouth with urgency.

"Reeve, enough with the heavy. Please. I've had the most horrendous forty-eight hours. Can't we just chat and catch up?"

His crestfallen face confirms he's disappointed, but surely, he can't expect me to get off the plane and fall straight back into his arms?

"I know I'm getting carried away, but I've been waiting for a chance to start making it up to you for months, and I'm a little anxious."

It's hard to remain immune to those words. "I understand, and I like that you're trying to make amends. It reminds me you're still you, but I just got off a plane, Reeve, and I'm tired and emotional."

"Of course. I won't overburden you, but I do need to fill you in on the Bianca, Cassidy, Saffron situation, as well as what I've been doing this summer."

"So, fill me in." I drink some of my sparkling water.

"I know your parents hired a PI to find those girls who attacked you, but he was making no leeway. I found a guy who specializes in these kinds of investigations, and I worked closely with him until we had enough paperwork to tie most everything to Bianca and Cassidy."

I remember Audrey mentioning this guy too. "Not Saffron?"

"She was most definitely involved, but I can't go after her without hard evidence, and we don't have that yet. She's a sneaky bitch. She got others to do her dirty work, so there's no footprint. I've spoken to the assistant director she was dating, and he's pretty sure she sabotaged the footage the night before our prom, but he has no way of proving it. He actually dumped her after that though she pretended she was the one who ended things."

"They were behind all of it?"

He bobs his head. "According to Cassidy, it was Saffron who suggested you be shoved in a corner at my premiere." He rubs the back of his neck. "Something I wasn't aware of, by the way, until your father ripped me a new one the next day. Cassidy made it happen. You already know Bianca was the one who hired a hacker to hack your computer, but now she's insisting it was Cassidy's idea. They didn't just remove your post though. They connected to your cell via your laptop and planted tracking software on it."

"Those fucking bitches! I can't believe the nerve of them, or actually, I can. Nothing should surprise me anymore." I shake my head, shocked, angry, and relieved that Reeve is getting to the bottom of everything they did to me. To us. "That's how Bianca knew where I was the day she accosted me at the café." I sit up straighter. "So, it was Bianca who set those fans on me?"

He shakes his head. "I think that was Saffron too. Bianca said she provided details of your location, but she claims she had no idea what Saffron was planning."

A likely story.

“Did you find those girls? If one of them testifies against her, we can get Saffron that way, right?”

“They are still in hiding, but my guy will keep looking for them. Like I said, it’s hard to prove Saffron’s part, but we have indisputable evidence of Cassidy’s and Bianca’s wrongdoings. I went to the studio and showed them everything. Cassidy’s been fired, and her name is dirt in the industry. I have filed a Class A lawsuit against Bianca. That’s mainly the angle I’ve been working all summer. I figured I couldn’t be the only client she has done this to. I visited some of her other clients, and we discovered proof of shit she’d done to them too.” A satisfied smile slips over his mouth. “She is done in this business. She has lost all of her clients and every shred of respect. By the time we are through with her, she will only have the clothes on her back.”

“Wow. I knew she was a piece of shit, but that is truly disgusting. I’m glad those two got what they deserve, but I hate we can’t pin anything on Saffron.”

“Yet,” he reiterates.

“It will really piss me off if she gets off scot-free.”

“She hasn’t escaped unscathed,” he adds, topping up my glass of sparkling water. “She’s officially finished with the production. She won’t be at the premiere, and she won’t be doing any promotion.”

I remove my shades, staring at him. “How come?”

“She OD’d, and her sister has sent her to rehab.” He reaches across the table, taking my hand. “She’s gone from our lives now, Viv. She can’t hurt us anymore, and in case she gets any ideas when she emerges from rehab, I have already instructed Carson Park to apply for a restraining order in both our names.” Carson is the Lancasters’ family attorney.

“Thank you.”

“One final thing.” He gets up, pulling me to my feet and reeling me into his arms.

“I did a thing.”

“Oh God, Reeve. What now?” My heart lurches to my mouth.

“A good thing, I hope you’ll agree. I did an exclusive interview with Oprah, and I told her everything. I needed to publicly clear your name and let everyone see how viciously you’ve been treated and how stupid I was not to believe you from the outset. I came clean about the drugs and the stress of carrying such a big movie and how I didn’t respond well to the

pressure. Obviously, I had to be careful what I said about Bianca with the impending court case and I can't accuse Saffron of shit when I have no proof to back up my claims. Bianca's and Cassidy's words don't count because they're both nasty backstabbing bitches, and their reputations are in the toilet."

"How the hell did you get the studio to agree to that?"

"When it airs next month, it will generate a huge amount of publicity for the franchise, ahead of the release of the last movie. All publicity is good publicity, so they're on board."

This is what my parents and Audrey were hinting at in July when they visited Ireland. They knew he was doing all this. It definitely goes a long way toward rectifying things with us, but it doesn't mean I'm ready to jump right back into a relationship with Reeve. I don't know my own heart right now, and I can't make any hard and fast decisions. But I am grateful he has done this, and I won't deny how much it means to me.

"Thank you, Reeve." I hug him briefly. "Thank you so much for doing that. It helps. It really does."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Come and watch the interview. If there is anything you don't like, I can have it edited out. Margaret helped me get a clause added to the contract that gives us editorial rights."

I sit on the couch with Reeve for the next hour, watching the interview with a constant lump in my throat. Gradually, we gravitate toward one another, sitting with our arms wrapped around each other, thighs pressed close together. Heat rolls off him in waves, thawing all the frozen parts of me. It's impossible to keep my hands to myself as I listen to him telling Oprah how much I mean to him. Sharing snippets of how we fell in love and opening his personal photo album, showing the world pictures of us from the time we were babies until we were teens. Every milestone is represented, and I'm a blubbery mess by the time he switches it off.

"Hey." He brushes tears from my cheeks as I attempt to get my emotions under control. "Happy or sad tears."

"More happy than sad," I truthfully admit. I sling my arms around his neck, and my entire body is trembling with emotion as he wraps me in his warm embrace. The citrusy scent of his cologne is like a balm to my aching heart, and if I thought I was confused earlier, it's nothing on how I feel now.

Heartwarming memories resurface in my mind, and I'm reminded of all the reasons why I love this man. He has gone to so much effort to rectify his wrongs, slicing his chest open and showing the entire world how much he feels for me in that interview. As grand gestures go, it's at the tippy-top of the scale.

"I love you, Viv. I love you so much. I'm sorry you ever felt like that wasn't true. I am going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, whether you'll let me or not."

I snort-laugh because it's so typically stubborn of Reeve. Easing back, I peer into his gorgeous blue eyes. "Always the charmer."

"Every word is true, Viv." His lips lower to my mouth, and my pulse throbs in my neck. "I lost my way for a while, and I hurt us both in the process. I will not make that mistake again." Before I can stop him, his lips are on mine, insistent and demanding, devouring me like he never thought he'd get to taste my mouth again.

Tingles cascade over my skin, reaching every part of me, and I'm arching toward him, clinging to him, with a need that is unflinching and indisputable. His fingers weave through my hair as his tongue slips into my mouth, and I'm drowning in Reeve, consumed with his touch, taste, and the feel of being back in his arms. I'm kissing him back without restraint or regret, drowning in the familiarity of being with him like this. It's as easy as breathing. As if we've spent no time apart. As if we haven't been to hell and back these past few years.

I don't stop him either when he removes my clothes and his own, lying me down flat on the couch, kissing and touching me everywhere, helping to remind me that what we share is a love that will never die. His lips blaze a trail from my mouth to my neck, and he sucks on that sensitive spot just under my ear. Blissful tremors shake me to my foundation, and there is no thinking, just feeling, as I immerse myself in the pleasurable sensations Reeve is awakening in me. My hands roam his body, reacquainting me with every inch of his skin.

When his mouth closes over one nipple, I arch my back, almost falling off the couch as I feel a pull deep in my core. My body reacts instantly to Reeve's touch as if my skin has memorized the sensory response when he caresses me in certain places. He worships every part of me with his lips and his fingers as I slide a hand between us, grabbing his hard length and

pumping him in my hand. He moans into my mouth, whispering my name over and over as he molds my body to fit to his.

His fingers slip inside me, finding me ready and willing, and there's no hesitation. Lifting my hands up over my head, Reeve presses his body down on mine, linking our fingers as he claims my mouth in a passionate kiss. "I love you, Viv. Over everything and everyone. The only thing that matters to me is you. You have my heart for now and eternity." My thighs open for him, and our eyes remain connected as he inches inside me with tender care. "God, Viv." Tears prick his eyes, and I dust kisses all over his face.

"Let me feel your love, Reeve. Show me you mean everything you've said today."

He kisses me senseless while he moves his cock in and out of me. My legs wrap around his back, and my hands roam his spine and his firm ass, holding him close as he pivots his hips, thrusting deeper inside me, until it feels like he's buried so deep he's a part of me. We kiss and kiss, both of us as greedy as the other, and I moan as his fingers fondle my breasts and sweep along my sides, eliciting a rake of fiery shivers every place he touches.

Lost to the incredible intimacy of being with Reeve like this, I feel a sense of inner calm, inner peace, that can only come when two people know each other as well as we do. Reeve is my home, as I am his. So much of who I am is entwined in Reeve, and he reminds me of the parts I haven't visited in months, connecting me to elements of myself I had locked away along with memories of us.

As he thrusts inside me, making slow passionate love to me, I realize what this means. I'm irrevocably in love with Reeve, and our connection is still very much alive. I don't know what this means for our future, but I know I need him back in my life, in some guise, because I miss him. I miss this.

We come together, and it breaks me apart and heals me at the same time. As we descend from our high, we curl against one another, skin to skin, with my head buried in his shoulder. My fingers trace over the heart-shaped tattoo on his chest with my name inside. I still can't believe he got this for me because he's always been adamant he didn't want any ink. Thinking of ink naturally leads me to thoughts of Dillon. Reality hits, and I'm crying before I realize it.

My heart and soul forever belong to two men.

It's an irrefutable truth that won't ever change.

Reeve is the air I breathe.

Dillon is the fire that consumes me.

How am I expected to live without a part of my heart?

I don't know what this means for my future or where I go from here, but I can't deny the truth any longer—I'm deeply in love with two men, and I'm a hot mess because I have no clue what to do.

Reeve kisses every tear, giving assurances, whispering how much he loves me, promising me it is going to be all right. I sob into his shoulder, clutching him to me, hating myself for what I've just done, because it feels like such a betrayal so soon after leaving Dillon, while another part of me desperately clings to the man I have loved my entire life, never wanting to be separated from him again.

My emotions veer back and forth, going round and round, until I literally make myself ill from trying to work out the complex machinations of my heart. Nausea swims up my throat, and I race to the bathroom, vomiting the entire contents of my stomach.

Reeve comforts me as I retch and cry until I'm physically and emotionally drained. He passes me a toothbrush to use while propping me up before he carries me back out to the living room and plies me with water. He cradles me protectively in his arms as I cling to him like a limpet. I'm all cried out and no closer to knowing what I'm going to do with my love life. Reeve doesn't pressure me to talk. He just holds me for an indeterminable amount of time.

After a while, he helps me into my underwear while he pulls on his boxers. He carries me outside to the balcony, placing my feet on the ground. Pulling me back against his chest, we hold one another as we stare at the placid ocean. His arm bands around my bare breasts, shielding me. He dots kisses along my neck, and I arch my head back, both loving and hating how much his arms feel like home. Like I belong here and this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

"I know you're upset, and I can guess why. I'm not going to lie and say I'm happy you love this Irish guy, but it's my fault you were even there in the first place, so I've got to man up and accept the situation." He spins me around, hauling me in close as his lips brush softly against mine. "He's not here, Viv. I am. And I'm all yours in every sense of the word. I won't be making any decisions about my career without your involvement.

Everything I do from here on out will be done placing your needs above mine. I know you need time, and I'll give you that, but please say you'll give us another chance. If we try and you say it's not working for you, it will kill me, but I'll walk away. I will do whatever it takes to make you happy, because that is the only thing that matters to me anymore. You are my entire world, Viv, and I won't stop until I have proven that to you."

Five+ Years Later

Staring out the window of my home-office-slash-library, I smile as I watch Easton's brown head bob excitedly when his dad lifts him up onto the top of the slide. Pure exhilaration is etched upon his handsome little face as he shoots down the slide. He grows more and more like Reeve with every passing day. I can't believe he will be five in May.

Smoothing my hand over my small bump, I hum to my little princess, awash with happiness. Family life with Reeve is everything I had hoped it would be and more. Being married to the man who has been my significant other, in so many ways, from my earliest memory, is equally fulfilling.

Reeve and Easton are my world, and I know my daughter will be too. Okay, we don't know if it's a girl yet, but I have a sixth sense. I just feel it in my bones. We have our sixteen-week ultrasound in three weeks, and Reeve is more excited than a kid on Christmas morning.

I stare adoringly at my husband as he chases our son around the playground, more in love with Reeve now than I've ever been. As a dad, Reeve is everything his father isn't, and I know he never wants Easton to doubt he is wanted, loved, and cherished. Easton is the apple of his father's eye, and Reeve is the most amazing dad, showering Easton with love and being there for all the important moments, unlike his own absent father.

Watching them together is beautiful, and I'm so grateful for the love we share. I will never take it for granted.

My cell vibrates with an incoming call, and I rush around my desk, swiping the screen to accept Audrey's video call. I've been calling her all week since I discovered the news, needing my bestie's advice.

Alex and Audrey got married two years ago, and they live in Boston where Alex is the head football coach at a local high school. I'm hoping they might return to L.A. once Audrey graduates next year because I miss her a lot. She is in her last year of med school and snowed under with hospital rotations, classes, and assignments. With the time difference and our busy schedules, it is murder trying to find time to talk, let alone meet up.

"Squee. I see a bump! Look how cute you are," she says. Her gorgeous face looms large as she peers in close to the screen.

I run my hand along my slightly enlarged stomach. "It's only barely noticeable, but I'm definitely bigger than I was when I was pregnant with E."

Audrey snorts. "That wouldn't be hard. No one even knew you were pregnant until the very end. You were tiny carrying him."

It's true. I was able to remain at UCLA until March of my junior year, disguising my growing bump with baggy tops until I woke one morning and my belly seemed to have ballooned overnight. I moved in with my parents then and switched to online classes.

Easton Jonathon Lancaster was born at three thirty a.m. on May fifth weighing a teeny six pounds five ounces. You'd never know it looking at him now. He's tall and a healthy weight for his age.

"Earth to Viv. You're in la-la land again." Audrey grins, slouching in her chair in her hospital scrubs.

"I'm blaming my pregnancy hormones this time." I sit down on the chair behind my desk and get comfortable.

"You're glowing, babe. It's great to see. I hated how stressed you were when you were carrying E."

I rub my lips as I contemplate one of the most stressful periods of my life. "I love that I can embrace my pregnancy this time, but I feel guilty that I didn't with E."

"It wasn't your fault."

I burst out a laugh. "Eh, I'm pretty sure it was. I was the slut who slept with two men in two days on two different continents and then freaked the

fuck out when I got pregnant and spent my entire pregnancy stressed over who my baby daddy was.”

“It all worked out perfectly in the end.”

“Thank fuck.” Reeve was ecstatic when I finally announced I was pregnant. I’m ashamed to admit I had known for two months before I told him. It took me that long to work up the courage to say it. Well, that and I was waiting to see if Dillon would reach out to me, but he never did.

He never made any effort to talk to me after I left the pub in Dublin that day.

What a disappointment he turned out to be, but like my bestie just said, it all worked out perfectly in the end.

“I still feel guilty I lied to him,” I admit. A few weeks after I confirmed I was pregnant, Reeve asked me if there was any chance the baby wasn’t his.

I lied and said no.

God, I still feel such horrendous guilt over that.

“If you’d told him the truth, you would’ve taken away his enjoyment of your pregnancy, and maybe you wouldn’t be married to the love of your life with the family and career you always dreamed of living in a house you designed as kids.”

“It doesn’t mean it was right, and what if the baby hadn’t been his?” A full-body shudder works its way through me.

“Don’t do this to yourself, Viv. There’s no point looking back on the what-ifs. Fate brought you back to Reeve and you’re happy, right, babe? You are happy?”

I bob my head. “I am. I love Reeve and Easton with my whole heart. I’m excited to meet the new addition to our family, and I’m excited for this new show I’m working on. The producer even approved me to work from home so I can be around for E. I just have to attend the weekly team meetings at the office. Reeve is shooting in Georgia for the next couple of months. He leaves five days after the Oscars.”

Reeve’s career has been full steam ahead since the *Rydeville Elite* series, and he’s one of Hollywood’s most in-demand and highest-paid stars. The beauty of that is he can pick and choose his roles, and he only commits to two or three projects a year so he can be at home as much as possible. He tries to pick films that pique his curiosity and satisfy his artistic passion and

roles that aren't too far from home. Of course, it doesn't always pan out like that, but we make it work.

Reeve has never broken his promise to always put me first, and we decide everything as a team now, always prioritizing our love and our son. Rather than taking the job I was offered with a leading production company, I set myself up as a freelance writer as it gives me more flexibility. I have been working a lot with Netflix on original content and adaptations, and I've also been writing some books in my spare time. I'm not sure if I'll ever publish them, but they feed my creative soul.

"Speaking of." Audrey kicks her feet up on the table in front of her. "I read an interesting article about this year's Oscar ceremony. Is it true Collateral Damage is performing on that night?"

"Why do you think I've been blowing up your cell all week." Anxiety skates across my chest, like it does anytime I think about the impending shitshow. "They're nominated for best original song."

"What are you going to do?"

"Stay out of their way. The Dolby Theatre is large enough I should be able to avoid him and the other band members. There are tons of industry after-parties, so the chances of us being at the same ones are slim." Reeve has been nominated for best actor, so it's not like I can't be there, especially when he's the favorite to win.

"What if he comes looking for you?"

I pick at imaginary dirt under my nails. "He won't come looking for me. He never has. Why would he now?"

"Maybe you should tell Reeve Dillon is the Irish guy. Just in case you cross paths and Dillon says something."

Reeve knows what went down with Dillon. He asked me a few weeks after I got home, and I told him the important parts without going into intimate details. Reeve never asked his name, and I never volunteered it.

"I'm not going to just bring it up after all this time, Rey! Can you imagine that conversation? Oh, hey, darling. Remember I told you I was in love with the guy I met in Ireland? I neglected to tell you it's Dillon O'Donoghue, lead singer and songwriter of mega-bestselling Irish rock band Collateral Damage. "Terrify Me," the first of their songs to reach number one on the billboard Top 100, was actually written *for* me and *about* me, and I have a video on my cell of him serenading me with it at his brother's wedding. I'm also pretty sure "Hollywood Ho" and "Fuck Love"

were about me too, but who the hell knows why Dillon wrote such vitriol when he's the one who rejected me."

Audrey is the only one who knows about the letter I sent and how I sat in Dublin Airport for hours crying and praying to every deity known to mankind that he would show up. My heart aches, and acid crawls up my throat. "Ugh." I rest my head on my desk. "I can't believe it still hurts so much after all this time."

"You still love him even now?" she softly asks.

"You know I do," I whisper. "I've tried to evict him so many times from my head and my heart, but it never works. I guess I'm destined to love him forever." I rub my temples. "Gawd, I'm a terrible person, Audrey. A terrible wife to still pine after another man."

"You can't help how you feel, and I know you love Reeve fiercely. You're not a terrible wife. You're a great wife, and he adores you. You two have been written in the stars since inception."

I'm not sure she'd say that if she knew I have all the band's songs on my phone and I listen to them repeatedly. I try to avoid watching them on TV because I'm not sure I could disguise the pain and longing on my face from my husband.

Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I go out to our sunroom, lie down on the couch, close my eyes, and cry as I listen to Dillon's husky voice roll over me like one of his possessive caresses. Other times, I go through the photos and videos I have hidden on my phone from my time in Ireland, just because I need to see his face.

It's not healthy.

I know that.

And I feel so disloyal to Reeve, but this soul-deep ache in my chest never goes away, no matter how happy Reeve makes me.

And Reeve does make me happy.

He's an incredibly attentive, supportive, and loyal husband. It took a while for him to earn back my trust, and I kept him at arm's length a lot that first year, out of necessity for my sanity. I couldn't be sure who the father of my baby was, and I wouldn't accept Reeve's marriage proposal or be seen with him in public until after Easton was born and the paternity test confirmed he was his dad.

Even then, I had to think long and hard about my motivations before finally agreeing to marry Reeve. I needed to ensure it was for the right

reasons.

I spoke with a therapist at length, and she helped me to untangle my jumbled emotions. She helped me to understand the complexities of a woman's heart. To accept that it was okay to love Dillon from a distance while promising to share my life with Reeve. I don't regret that decision. Reeve loves me, and I love him, and we're good together, but Dillon will always own a piece of my heart.

"I knew this day would come. I knew I couldn't continue to avoid events where Collateral Damage was playing. It's a miracle I've gone this long without bumping into one of them."

"What if Ash seeks you out?" Audrey quietly inquires.

Positioning my cell against the stack of books on my desk, I sigh as I lean forward. "If she does, it's probably to strangle me. I'm ashamed of lots of things I did that year, but ghosting my Irish bestie is the worst." It wasn't by choice. It was a necessity, but that doesn't make it any easier to live with. I hate I let her down. That she must be wondering what she did to deserve the cold shoulder.

"Don't beat yourself up, Viv. You know you couldn't stay in contact with her while there was a possibility the baby was her brother's kid. At least in cutting her off you weren't lying to her."

"A lie of omission is still a lie, and it must have hurt so bad. I know it hurt me."

I still miss Ash. So fucking much. She's the band's manager, and I'm sensing she might have been behind the change in name. She always thought Toxic Gods was a shit name for a band, but I felt it suited them.

Pictures of her are everywhere, and she travels with the band full-time, just like she told me she would. Her relationship with Jamie seems solid too. News of their engagement was splashed all over social media last year. Ronan had a baby with his Irish girlfriend a few months ago, and, apparently, they are getting married soon. Dillon and Conor are regularly pictured with different women on their arms, and rumors suggest Dillon has an alcohol problem. That pained me to hear, and I wonder who is looking after him. I know Ash must be trying, but she's got her own life to lead, and she can't babysit her brother forever.

I'm not on social media much, having learned that lesson the hard way years ago, but Audrey fills me in on shit she thinks I need to know.

"I wish I could be there with you."

“Me too. We need to plan a vacation soon before I get too big to fit into a plane.”

She rolls her eyes. “Always with the drama.”

We chat about her job, Alex’s desire to start a family as soon as she graduates, and her creep of a stepdad before she has to go. She wishes me luck at the ceremony tomorrow night, and before we hang up, I promise to message her if anything happens.

“Mommy!” Easton comes bursting into my room. “I found more worms.” He holds up a jar of wriggly, writhing creatures, and I clamp my lips shut, rubbing my stomach to ward off my shivers. Ugh. Any kind of wriggly creepy-crawly makes me shudder.

Reeve chuckles, sauntering into the room, looking hotter than sin in his jeans and tight-fitting Henley. “Buddy, what have I told you about bursting into Mom’s office without knocking?” He ruffles his hair before bending down to kiss me, grabbing a sneaky feel of my ass. “You look beautiful, my love. Pregnancy really suits you. I should knock you up more often.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” I semi-joke.

“What does knock you up mean?” Easton asks. His big blue eyes bounce between me and Reeve.

“This one’s on you, babe.” I cross my arms and smirk at my husband, wondering how he’s going to explain this to our inquisitive son.

“**Y**ou have no reason to be nervous, babe. I know you hate the cameras, but you are stunning. Easily the most gorgeous woman in the room and on the planet,” Reeve says, leaning in to kiss my cheek. I’ve been a basket case since arriving at the Dolby Theatre three hours ago, but it’s not for the reasons my husband thinks.

My best friend guilt joins my other friend panic, and they take turns punching me in the face.

I know the members of Collateral Damage are about seven or eight rows behind us as I spotted the top of Dillon’s bleach-blond head when we were walking to our seats in the front row. It’s a miracle I didn’t throw up on the spot. I about died when Reeve stopped at the row in front of them to say hello to a few actor friends. Prickles of awareness danced across the bare nape of my neck, and I just knew he was looking at me. The urge to turn around and lock eyes with him was almost insurmountable, but I managed to resist, and thankfully, Reeve didn’t linger too long.

Nerves fire at me from every angle as Collateral Damage takes to the stage. I have no choice but to look at them because we’re in the front row and the camera regularly sweeps our way. Trying to keep a fake smile plastered across my face while my heart feels like it’s being ripped out of my chest is monumentally hard.

Dillon owns the stage like he always does, and it’s hard not to get swept up in the song. They are so good live. Incredibly talented, and I’m very proud of them. I wish I could tell people I knew them when they were a talented local band in Ireland, but to do that would be risky when Reeve

doesn't know. Volunteering that information now, after all this time, would hurt my husband, so I won't go there.

Dillon's laser-focused gaze slides to mine, and I stop breathing. He's got one leg elevated, resting on a speaker, as he makes love to the mic, belting out the lyrics in his unique style.

He hasn't changed much at all. His blond hair is a bit longer, tucked behind his ears, the length resting at his nape, and he has more ink, judging by the designs peeking out from the top of his T-shirt, but that's it. He's still wearing all black. Still wearing his piercings. Still ripped in all the best ways.

He looks hot as fuck and every bit the tormented soul I fell in love with.

I feel Reeve glance at me, as Dillon continues staring at me, but I pretend I don't notice anything strange, smiling and dancing in my seat along with the other guests. Inside, I'm screaming at Dillon to knock it off before he outs us to the entire freaking world. Ro glances my way from behind his drums, quickly averting his gaze when our eyes meet. Conor is in his own little world, as usual, and Jamie sends daggers my direction a couple of times.

I'm sweating bullets under my gorgeous red Christian Dior dress and squirming in my seat like I'm sitting on poison ivy.

"Are you okay?" Reeve whispers in my ear, noticing I'm hella distracted.

I whip my head around to my husband. "I need to go to the bathroom," I lie. "Do you think it would be okay to slip away now?" We're supposed to wait for breaks to leave our seats, but I'll play the pregnancy card if I need to.

"Go. If anyone gives you grief, you let me deal with it. Do you want me to come with?"

"You can't leave, and I'm a big girl. I can make it to the bathroom by myself."

I don't look at the band as I creep out of the auditorium, releasing the breath I was holding when I hit the hallway leading to the bathrooms.

I'm trembling as I sit on the toilet seat after I've attended to business. Seeing Dillon again has rattled me. It's dredging memories to the surface. Memories I've worked hard to bury, and my heart is splitting open again. I dab at the tears spilling silently down my cheeks, praying I can do a good

enough repair job with my makeup to disguise my anguish from my husband.

Tonight is special for Reeve, and he deserves my full attention and devotion. I've got to pull myself together and get back out there to support him.

Why did I have to fall in love with two men, and why isn't it getting any easier? Hurt lances me on all sides and I grip the sides of the stall, begging someone to take the pain away. Needing help, I call Audrey, and she talks me off a ledge like only my bestie can.

Hurrying to the sink, I patch up my makeup, hiding all evidence of my heartache. I don't know how long I've been gone, but I'm sure Reeve is worrying, and I need to get back to him. Smoothing my hair back into its chignon, I admire my gorgeous red gown in the mirror, reminding myself I look composed on the outside even if I'm falling to pieces on the inside.

Stepping outside, I almost take a tumble when I find Dillon waiting for me. One part of me half-expected this. The pain I felt inside the theater watching him up on that stage is minuscule compared to the pain I feel looking at him up close and personal. He drills me with an intense look that takes me back in time. My skin prickles with awareness as he slowly rakes his eyes up and down my body. His gaze is as intimate as it's always been, and my heart pounds wildly behind my rib cage.

Memories flash through my mind.

Rough touches.

Demanding kisses.

Animalistic fucking that never quite sated my thirst for him.

His wicked smile as I screamed when he pulled a risky maneuver on his motorcycle.

His boyish grin as we lay on our bellies peering over the side of the Cliffs of Moher.

His adoring eyes as he serenaded me on my roof the last night we were together.

A sob travels up my throat before I can stop it. Clutching my purse to my chest, I will my hormones to simmer down, telling my wayward tears to fuck the hell off. Heartache plus pregnancy hormones is clearly not a good combination.

"Hey, Hollywood," he says, his raspy voice sounding as choked as I feel inside.

“Dillon,” I whisper.

He pushes off the wall, sauntering toward me with that cocky swagger I’ve missed so much. I’m trapped in his magnetic gaze, rooted to the spot, as he cages me in with his arms. “Vivien Grace,” he murmurs, staring down at me with a familiar hunger in his eyes. “Still so beautiful.” Whiskey fumes fan across my face, and I realize he’s drunk at the same time I realize I cannot be caught with him like this.

Ducking down, I slip out from under his arms. “I’ve got to go.”

“Run away, Hollywood,” he calls out after me, a discernible sneer creeping into his tone. “After all, it’s what you do best.”

I’m tempted to turn around and give him a piece of my mind, but arguing with a drunk Dillon never ended up well in the past.

“There you are,” Reeve says when I reach the end of the hallway. He looks over my shoulder before his gaze dips to mine. “What’s going on?” His brow puckers.

“Nothing. Let’s go. I’ve already missed enough of the ceremony.” I drag him back to our seats, grateful he doesn’t protest or probe further.

Reeve wins best actor, for a low-budget indie film, and everyone in the place is up on their feet applauding him. Well, not everyone, if I had to guess. He gives the most beautiful acceptance speech, dedicating it to me and Easton, and his gushing praise produces more tears.

We drop by a couple of after-parties, but I can’t relax because I’m terrified a drunk Dillon is going to turn up and say something. I’m sorely tempted to use the pregnancy card to get us out of here—knowing Reeve will leave with me—but I can’t do that to him. This is his night, and he deserves to enjoy it. However, my thoughtful husband insists we leave at a reasonable hour, knowing I’ve got to be tired and unwilling to say it.

As my husband makes passionate love to me that night, pouring all his adoration into every touch, thrust, and caress, I feel incredibly unworthy of his love and devotion.

“He’s a total prick,” Reeve rages the next evening when he still hasn’t heard a peep from his father.

“He is,” I readily agree, massaging his tight shoulders. “I can’t believe he hasn’t called to congratulate you.”

Reeve turns, wrapping his arms around me. “Why do I care, Viv? Why do I still let him get to me? It’s not like he’s ever shown me more than fleeting attention, so why do I still need his approval?” Reeve has spent time in therapy dissecting his relationship with his father, but he still struggles.

“He’s your father. Your only living parent. It’s natural to seek his approval even though he doesn’t deserve you for a son. He never has.” I run my fingers through his hair, feathering kisses on his cheeks. I hate to see him hurting, time and time again, over that ungrateful bastard who is little more than a sperm donor. “You are the most incredible father to our son. You are everything to Easton your father is not. You are a far better man than him, Reeve, and I hope someday you will be able to let it go because I hate seeing you tormented like this.”

Reeve kisses me, sliding his tongue into my mouth and holding me close as I run soothing hands up and down his back. I moan into his mouth as he gradually kindles a slow-burning fire inside my body, clinging to him as desire surges through my veins. I wish I could drag my gorgeous husband to bed and ride him to distraction, but it’s almost E’s bath and bedtime, so sexy times with Reeve will have to wait until later.

When we break apart, he rests his forehead against mine, sighing wearily. Pain is etched across his handsome face, and I will strangle Simon Lancaster for putting a dampener on what should be a special time for Reeve. He lifts his head, and steely determination glints in his eyes. “I’m going over there. I’m confronting him. And then I’m cutting him out of our lives. It’s not like he makes any effort with us or his grandson.”

It’s true. Simon Lancaster has little to no interest in Easton. I only invite him to birthdays and Christmases for Reeve’s sake. Easton doesn’t have much time for him, and he doesn’t care. He adores my parents, and they spoil him rotten, lavishing him with attention, love, and far too many gifts. As far as Easton is concerned, his grandpa is Jonathon Mills. Simon Lancaster is an afterthought, as he deserves to be.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” I know it will hurt Reeve, and this should be a happy time for him after his win last night.

“I’m done making excuses for him.”

“I’ll come with you.”

He shakes his head. "I appreciate the offer, but this is a conversation I need to have alone." He pecks my lips. "Besides, you have to stay with Easton. One of us should be here to put him to bed." Lust flares in his eyes. "When I get back, I'm so having my wicked way with you."

I press a demanding kiss to his lips, letting him know I'm down with that plan. "I'm holding you to that, lover."

Picking up my hand, he presses a kiss to the underside of my wrist. "You know I always deliver. Keeping you satisfied is always top of my wish list."

"Love you." I wrap my arms around him, channeling all my love into my hug. He will need it for this conversation with his father.

"Love you too." He eases out of our embrace, softly ruffling my hair. "I'll see you later, beautiful."

"Okay, but call me if you need me to come over." Our house isn't far from our parents, all of whom still live in North Beverley Park.

I'm bathing Easton forty minutes later when Reeve calls. Swiping my sudsy son up out of the tub, I wrap him in a large fluffy towel, settling him on my lap on top of the closed toilet seat as I answer my husband.

"Viv," he croaks, the second I answer, and my heart stops. "I need you."

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" I ask, instantly panicked. Simon has never physically hurt his son. His abuse was more of the emotional, psychological kind, but I wouldn't put anything past that coldhearted bastard.

"He's dead," he blurts.

"What?" I pull Easton into my chest, covering his tiny ears with the towel so he doesn't pick up any of this conversation.

"I found him in his bed. The staff hadn't gone near him all day because they had strict instructions never to disturb him in his bedroom."

"God, Reeve." I don't say I'm sorry because the only emotion I'm feeling is concern for my husband. I know you shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but maybe this is for the best. Perhaps this is the release Reeve needs to finally put his father and his heartless neglect behind him. "I'll be right over. I'll ask Charlotte to put Easton to bed."

After arranging for our live-in housekeeper to take over with E, I rush out of the house, telling Leon, my bodyguard, that he's not needed.

Reeve is one of the most famous actors on the planet, so I didn't object when he hired a team of bodyguards to protect us. We tend to only bring

them when we're going out somewhere in public, and Leon drives me to and from work so he can watch out for me. There are plenty of crazies out there—I know that from personal experience. Unfortunately, we never found the girls who assaulted me, and we never found evidence to charge Saffron Roberts.

But karma came through in the end.

She's a known junkie who has fallen off the wagon several times. There are videos of her losing it, ranting like the psycho bitch she is, and her career is in the toilet because no one will go near her. Her looks have been ravaged by drugs, and she looks like shit. All her so-called friends ditched her, and her sister—her only sibling—publicly exclaimed she has cut ties with her, that she's beyond help. Last I heard, she has resorted to starring in porn to feed her habit.

Maybe I should feel sorry for her, but I don't. Not one little fucking bit. If that makes me a bad person, then so be it. She caused me a world of pain when she tried to ruin my life, but in the end, she ruined her own future.

I have zero sympathy. She brought it all on herself.

The coroner and the cops are arriving at the house as I am, and I hurry up the steps, sliding my arms around Reeve and holding him tight. His arm sneaks around my shoulders, and he clings to me, his whole body trembling. He's as white as a ghost and clearly shocked.

I stay by his side, squeezing his hand, as he gives a statement to the police. I complete some paperwork for the coroner, and we watch from the hallway as his father is led out in a body bag.

Sitting Reeve down on the couch in the main living room, I place a glass of whiskey in his hand, urging him to drink, while I gather the household staff and talk to them about the future. They are shocked but also worried about their jobs, so I reassure them it's business as usual for now, until Reeve decides what he wants to do with the house, and not to be concerned as we will ensure they are all looked after.

Taking Reeve's hand in mine, I lead him outside, placing him in the passenger seat of my car and strapping him in. Tears prick my eyes as I press a kiss to his brow. I hate seeing him like this. He's in a daze, staring numbly into space, and my heart aches for him. Even though they had a dysfunctional relationship, he was still his father, and I know this is going to hit Reeve hard.

A few days later, the coroner's report confirms the time of death, and we learn that Simon died of a massive heart attack around the time Reeve was collecting his first Oscar award.

Even in death, Simon Lancaster is finding ways to fuck with his son.

Reeve flounders in the weeks after his father's death. Technically, Reeve is an orphan now, and his father's passing has raised an almost obsessive need to discover everything he can about his mother and his parents' relationship. Mom and Dad talk to him at length, sharing everything they were there to experience, passing on photos and trying to support him the best they can.

Reeve doesn't cry. He goes about his day, as normal, but he's not himself, and I'm worried. One night, a couple of weeks after the funeral, he finally cracks, sobbing like a little boy, and it hurts my heart. He clings to me with a desperation that pains me. Making love becomes a regular nightly occurrence, not that I'm complaining—hello, pregnancy hormones—but he struggles to sleep a lot, and I'm at a loss how best to help him.

I know losing a parent is hard, but Reeve didn't have a close relationship with his father, and I didn't think he'd struggle this much. When I ask him, he says he's realized he lost the chance to ever put things right, and that kills me because Reeve tried everything to get through to his dad. He seems to have forgotten he was going there that day to cut him off, but I don't remind him of that. I can't relate, and I don't fully understand what's going through his mind, only he's trying to process the loss of a wishful hope rather than the passing of the actual man.

I suggest therapy, and I'm glad when he agrees.

Reeve pulls out of the movie he was due to film, and I take time off to care full-time for my family. Easton is a source of enormous comfort to Reeve. Father and son grow even closer during this time. Holding his family tight is important to Reeve, and we're here for him. My pregnancy is another source of comfort, and Reeve is thrilled when our scan reveals we are expecting a little girl.

Gradually, he returns to himself, but I still encourage him to continue seeing his therapist. Reeve has a lot of unresolved emotions when it comes to his father, and I don't want to see him derailed.

"Carson Park wants to see us," Reeve announces the day after my twenty-sixth birthday. Reeve spoiled me with lavender roses and too many gifts including a beautiful, framed photo of him and Easton and another of

our scan pic. We had a sumptuous meal at our favorite restaurant last night, and my husband spent hours at home worshiping every inch of my body as he made sweet, sweet love to me. It was the perfect way to celebrate, and I'm feeling all loved up today.

"How come?" I ask. "We already know the contents of the will."

Simon left everything to Reeve, including his shares in Studio 27.

Up until his death, Simon was CEO of the hugely successful production company. His second-in-command has already been promoted in his stead. The studio knows Reeve has zero interest right now in following in his father's footsteps, but they have a vested interest in knowing his intent with regards to his inherited investment. The new CEO and a couple of the directors are keen to take the shares off his hands, but I don't like it. I suggested Reeve hold off making any firm decision, as there's no rush. Down the line, he may want to take a more active role, and I don't think he should limit his options.

"I have no clue. He just said there is a matter he needs to discuss. I made an appointment for noon tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll let my boss know I'll be offline for a few hours."

"What's this about, Carson?" Reeve asks the next day after we have taken our seats in the attorney's office.

"Your father trusted me with a personal matter many years ago. He left instructions that after his death I was to tell you the circumstances. I had planned on talking to you the day the will was read, but I could tell you weren't in the right place to hear this news."

"What is it?" Reeve automatically laces his fingers in mine, and I rub reassuring circles with my thumb on the back of his hand.

"There is no easy way to disclose something like this, so please excuse me if I'm blunt."

Reeve nods curtly, and I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this.

"You are aware of the circumstances of your birth and your mother's tragic passing, but you aren't privy to the full facts."

Reeve and I share a perplexed expression. "What facts?" I ask.

"Your mother died during childbirth, but it wasn't giving birth to you."

Shock splays across Reeve's face, matching my own. "What do you mean?"

"You have a twin, Reeve. An identical twin brother."

What in the actual fuck? I'm not sure what I was expecting him to say, but it sure as hell wasn't that.

"What? No? I don't..." Reeve splutters, clutching my hand tight. All the blood has drained from his face. "How is that possible? My father said nothing to me about a brother." He looks into my eyes. "And your parents never said anything about my mother expecting twins."

"Your parents didn't know they were expecting twins, Reeve. One twin was hiding behind the other. It can happen with identical twins where the babies share the same amniotic sac. It's extremely rare, and usually, later scans detect the second fetus, but this was almost twenty-seven years ago, and ultrasounds were not as advanced as they are now. There are examples all over the world where the parents didn't find out it was twins until the delivery. That is what happened in this case."

"What happened to my...twin. Did he die?" Reeve asks. I have jumped to the same conclusion.

Carson links his hands together on the table, fixing Reeve with a sympathetic look. "You were born first, and everything was fine. Your mother held you in her arms and smiled for a picture."

"I know. I have it in a frame on the wall in our living room. It's the only photo I have of me with my mother."

I slide my arm around Reeve's back, instinctively knowing he's going to need it.

"Then they realized there was another baby, and that's when the complications arose. Your mother died on the table, and they had to deliver your twin brother by caesarean section."

"Oh God." I clasp a hand over my mouth, and I can only imagine how traumatizing that must've been for Reeve's father.

"What happened to my brother?" Reeve asks again, and I hear the impatience in his tone.

Carson clears your throat. "I have known your father my whole life, and I have never seen a man love a woman as much your father loved your mother." His eyes soften as he glances at us. "You two remind me of them."

"Carson," Reeve grits out, and a muscle clenches in his jaw.

Screw protocol and societal norms. Getting up, I climb into Reeve's lap, curling my arms around him, holding him close. His body is trembling with the shock of this revelation.

"Your father was holding you in his arms, crying over your mother's lifeless body, when his other son's cries rang out in the room."

"He blamed him," Reeve blurts in a daze. "He blamed my brother for my mother's death."

Carson nods sadly.

"He was only an innocent baby! It wasn't his fault," I cry, and any hint of sympathy I was just feeling for Simon flies out the window.

"He couldn't bear to look at his son knowing it had cost him his wife, so he wanted to get rid of the baby," Reeve surmises, staring off into space, and I fear this shock has plunged him back into a difficult place. Reeve lifts his head, and his pained eyes stare right through me. "He might as well have gotten rid of me too. This explains so much. Deep down, he must have blamed me too."

I'm horror-stricken because in a twisted way that makes sense. Why did Simon hold his sons accountable for something they were not responsible for? Why didn't he cling to them and shower them with love because they were the last gift from his wife? I will never understand.

"My understanding is the medical staff tried to make him see that," Carson continues explaining, "but he was inconsolable and absolutely determined he wanted nothing to do with your twin. He told me all this many years later, and I don't mind admitting I was in complete shock. It's not my place to judge anyone, and I never said it, but your father went downhill in my estimation when he confided that in me. I had thought things were different between you and your father, and it pains me to hear they were not."

"He didn't want me either," Reeve says, his voice dull and devoid of emotion.

"What happened to Reeve's twin?" I ask again because Carson still hasn't told us. I'm terrified he's going to say Simon arranged to have the baby killed because I think that will push my husband to his breaking point. I hold Reeve closer, pressing kisses into his hair, hoping he feels my love.

"Your father arranged for a quick hush-hush adoption."

Thank God. It's the lesser of two evils.

"Does he know?" Reeve asks, rubbing his eyes.

“That’s something you’ll have to ask him. If you would like, I can set up a meeting.”

“You know where he is? You know who he is?” Reeve clutches me with a death grip.

“I do. I can get a message to him.”

“What’s his name? Does he look like me?”

“I have never met him in person, so I can’t say. However, it’s a common misconception that identical twins look identical. Even though they share the same DNA, they aren’t necessarily exactly alike. They can be different in appearance, temperament, or personality, and environmental as well as chemical factors play a part. As for his name, I can’t reveal that until I have spoken to him and gained his permission. Let me reach out to him and see if he would be agreeable to a meeting.”

“Reeve might need a little time,” I suggest because he’s just been dealt some heavy blows.

“I understand and I won’t arrange anything until we have spoken. I will just test the waters.”

“**Y**our guest is here,” Charlotte says through the intercom system. “Leon escorted him to the living room.”

It’s surreal to think Reeve’s twin is only one floor below us.

We don’t know a thing about him other than he seems as keen as Reeve to meet up and he readily agreed to come here rather than meeting in public. I’d surmise it’s because he knows who Reeve is except names haven’t been exchanged yet, per his request.

“Thanks, Charlotte. Does Angela still have eyes on Easton?” I inquire. Angela is our part-time nanny, and she usually only minds E when I have to work. However, we asked her to come over today so we could talk with Reeve’s brother without interruption.

“They are right here beside me, baking cookies for the party,” Charlotte confirms as I massage the corded muscle along Reeve’s shoulder blades. My husband is excited but cautious and more than a little tense.

“Hi, Mommy!” Easton’s cute little voice trickles into the room.

“Hey, E. Bake some extra cookies for me and your little sister.” Easton is super excited to meet his new sibling. He and Reeve sing to my bump every night before his bedtime, and it’s the cutest thing ever.

“Be a good boy for Angela, and I’ll take you out to the playground after,” Reeve promises. Easton has his own personal playground, obstacle course, and treehouse in our backyard, just like we had as kids. It’s easier organizing playdates at the house than going out in public and dealing with nosy assholes and vile paparazzi.

“Yay, Daddy!”

“See you in a while, buddy.”

“Okay! Love you, Mommy! Love you, Daddy!”

“We love you too,” we say in unison, smiling as they disconnect.

Reeve tucks his blue button-up shirt into his black pants. “If our daughter turns out anything like her big brother, we’ll be extremely blessed.”

“That we will.” Easton is an amazing kid, and he’s made parenting him much easier than I expected. “Right, ready?” I peer up at Reeve, smiling softly.

“I feel sick,” he admits, running his hands repeatedly through his hair. “What if he doesn’t like me or he doesn’t want to form a relationship with me?”

I understand his nervousness. In the two weeks since we discovered the truth, Reeve has been knocked off-kilter. It’s one thing entirely to discover the circumstances of your mother’s death weren’t exactly as you’d been told—like finding out your lying piece-of-shit father is an even bigger lying piece-of-shit father—and quite another to discover you have a brother. A *twin*. A part of you out there in the world you never knew existed. Reeve has so many questions and expectations, and I hope he finds some answers today.

Truth is, I’m almost as anxious as Reeve. I know he’s hoping this meeting will go well and he’ll get an opportunity to know his brother, to develop the relationship they should’ve always had. They say twins share a deep connection, and I wonder what it does to them when they are separated, as happened in this case. Will they form an instant bond the second they meet? Or will it no longer exist because it hasn’t been nurtured since birth?

Having a brother in his life would be the icing on the cake for my husband, and I really hope they hit it off. We don’t know the circumstances of his adoption. It’s possible he has other siblings, and this might not be as big of a deal to him. But Reeve is his only flesh and blood, his only living connection to their parents. Surely that counts?

Right now, my husband needs reassurance, and I intend to give it to him. I cup his face, kissing him briefly. “He’s your *twin*. It’s probably been as big of a shock for him as it’s been for you, but how could he not love you? You’re an amazing person, Reeve. A wonderful husband, son-in-law, and father, and I know you’ll be an excellent brother too. If he doesn’t want

to get to know you, that's all on him." I rest my hands on his toned hips. "It's a good sign he's here. That must mean he's open to it." I sincerely hope so because I'm not sure what it'll do to Reeve if his twin doesn't want to have anything to do with him. "Just don't expect miracles. It might take both of you some time to come to terms with everything, but I'm sure it'll work out. You're not just brothers. You're *twins*. That's an extra special connection."

"True." His lips come down on mine, and he kisses me softly and slowly until I melt in his arms. "I know I've been a basket case these past few months. Thank you for putting up with me."

I slide my hands up over his chest. "Reeve. I love you. I love you so much." I peck his lips, winding my arms around his neck. "Supporting you is never a chore. I've just been worried, but I think you're about to turn a corner." I offer him my most reassuring smile. "We should go. We don't want to leave the poor man waiting too long."

I am fascinated to see if Reeve's twin looks like him or if they share any of the same character traits. I've been reading up on identical twins since Carson broke the news, and he was correct. They aren't always identical. While they are born with the same features, they can develop in different ways as they grow. They can have different heights, different builds, different facial traits, and different facial expressions. They can be completely different in personality.

His Adam's apple bobs in his throat, as I grab his hand. "It's going to be fine. Breathe, and remember I'm here with you. This is an exciting moment," I add, wanting to reinforce the most important part of today. "You have a brother."

Anxiety is replaced with cautious elation on my husband's face. "It's surreal."

"It's wonderful."

Please, please, let this go well for him. I offer up silent prayers the entire way down to the living room.

My heart is racing when Reeve stops outside the closed doors, drawing another deep breath and squeezing my hand tight. I'm tingling with nervous adrenaline so I can only imagine how my husband is feeling.

Reeve opens the door, and we step into our plush living room. We usually only entertain guests in here, preferring our informal living room when it's just us.

A tall man stands in front of the window with his back to us and his arms folded in front of his chest. He's wearing a black T-shirt over fitted black jeans and boots. My heart does a funny little jump, and all the tiny hairs stand at attention on the back of my neck. I examine him more carefully, and I can't shake the sense of unease crawling over my skin. His brother has a couple of inches in height on Reeve, and he's broader in the shoulders. His hair is cut similarly to Reeve's. It appears to be the same shade of brown minus the natural blond highlights Reeve has acquired thanks to the Californian sun.

Reeve clears his throat, looking at me with one brow raised in question. He must have heard us come into the room, yet he has made no move to turn around, which is a little rude. Perhaps he's a bundle of nerves too. "Hello," Reeve says so there can be no doubt we are here.

The man turns around and walks toward us. Everything blurs, and it happens as if in slow motion. My heart speeds up, and I hope Reeve doesn't notice how clammy my hand is in his grasp or hear how loud my heart is banging against my rib cage. I am rooted to the spot, staring at his brother in confusion, wondering what kind of mind fuckery this is.

The guy looks like Reeve. He's not exactly identical, but there is more than a strong enough resemblance to easily identify them as brothers. However, that's not why my legs are threatening to go out from under me and my heart is galloping like a racehorse just let out of a gate.

The guy looks like Dillon.

If Dillon had blue eyes instead of green and brown hair instead of blond. He has the same scar over his eyebrow, the same ridge in his nose—from when he got in a fight in school—and identical piercings, and when my gaze lowers and I see the familiar ink on his arms, I know who I'm looking at, but I can't make sense of it.

"I'm Reeve Lancaster," Reeve says. "And this is my wife, Vivien."

"It's nice to meet you both." His husky Irish voice confirms any last flicker of doubt. "I'm Dillon O'Donoghue."

My knees buckle, and I sway on my feet. Nausea swims up my throat, and I think I'm going to be sick. Reeve reacts fast, slinging his arm around my back and holding me upright. "Darling, what's wrong?"

A hysterical giggle lies trapped at the base of my throat. Where do I even start?

Gripping Reeve's arm tight, I cling to his body as shock races through my veins like lightning. My brain is fried. A multitude of questions dances around my head, and it feels like I'm losing my mind. This cannot be happening. What is happening?

Lifting my gaze, I lock eyes on Dillon, and it's disconcerting seeing Reeve's eyes on Dillon's face. How is this possible? Have my eyes been deceiving me? I don't understand. There were occasions when I thought I saw hints of blue in Dillon's eyes under certain lighting, but I never gave it more than a passing thought. Now I know it's because he must have been wearing contacts. But why? This makes no sense.

Dillon's eyes drop to my swollen stomach, and a muscle clenches in his jaw. He didn't look surprised to see me, so either he knew whose house he was visiting or he's pretending. Neither scenario provides any reassurance.

"Viv. Baby. Talk to me." Reeve's alarmed voice breaks through to me, and I snap out of it.

"I'm okay," I croak. "I just got a little dizzy."

"Come and sit down." Reeve guides me over to the couch, and I'm working hard to contain a full-body shiver. I'm super cold, inside and out,

and I can't stop the trembling that emanates from pure unadulterated terror as old fears quickly resurface.

Blood rushes to my head and thrums in my ears, and the voice screaming questions in my head is all I can hear, but I need to get a grip. I need to do damage control until I figure out what the actual fuck is going on. I avoid looking at Dillon because I'm not sure I can look at him without having a complete meltdown.

Reeve helps me sit on the couch, gently pushing my head between my legs. "Deep breaths, babe, and keep your head down. It will get rid of the dizzy spells. I'll grab you some water." Training my eyes on the ground, I inhale and exhale, trying to calm down. I see Reeve's feet moving away. "It's been a particularly stressful time for both of us recently," Reeve tells Dillon. "Stress isn't good for the baby, and I've been trying to get Viv to take it easy, but she's been worrying too much about me."

"Congratulations. This is your second child, right?" Dillon says, and I almost choke on air, emitting a strange gargled sound.

"Shit." Reeve rushes back to my side, setting a bottle of water and a glass down on the coffee table. "Maybe you should lie down upstairs."

"No!" I blurt. "I'll be okay in a minute." There is no way in hell I am leaving Reeve in a room alone with Dillon. God knows what he might say!

"Take a seat," Reeve tells Dillon, pouring water into the glass for me.

Dillon sits directly across from me, and like the coward I am, I keep my head between my legs, pretending I'm still dizzy. I'm sweating bullets, and my brain is rapid-firing questions at me from all angles.

"Drink this, babe." Reeve holds the glass out to me, rubbing his other hand up and down my back.

Wiping my sweaty palms down the front of my summer dress, I lift my head, ignoring Dillon, and focus on my husband. My hand visibly shakes as I take the glass from Reeve, and I almost drop it. Reeve's brow creases with fresh concern. "Perhaps we should call the doctor." He wraps his hand around mine, helping me to drink. Then he places his other hand against my brow. "You don't feel too hot, but you're a little clammy."

"I'm feeling better now. Stop worrying." Shucking his hand off, I grip my glass more firmly, taking sips of water and purposely avoiding looking at my ex.

"Are you sure?"

“Yes.” Grabbing Reeve’s arm, I place it around my shoulder, snuggling into his side, hoping his body warmth will heat up my ice-cold limbs. “I’m sorry I derailed your meeting. Talk to your brother.”

Let me freak out in silence while I try to figure out why Dillon is here. I just need to survive this ordeal and then call Audrey. I’m deliberately not thinking about the most pressing question, because if I go there now, I’m liable to pass out stone-cold.

Charlotte enters, depositing a tray with tea, coffee, and cookies on the coffee table. I spot the curiosity on her face as she looks at both brothers, but she remains discreet, leaving as quickly as she arrived.

“Would you like something to drink?” Reeve asks Dillon, gesturing with his hand to the tray and the bottles of water sitting on the side table. “I can get something stronger, if you like?” If I wasn’t pregnant and it wasn’t only eleven a.m., I would be demanding vodka.

“Coffee is fine.”

“Why do I get the feeling I know you from somewhere?” Reeve asks Dillon, as he pours coffee into a mug.

I clamp my lips shut, saying nothing. Reeve doesn’t know I listen to the band’s music or I saw them perform tons of times on stage while I was in Ireland, so I can’t be the one to tell him without rousing some suspicion.

“I’m the lead singer for Collateral Damage,” Dillon confirms, taking the mug from his brother.

His twin.

Oh my God. How did I never realize it? I knew Dillon’s birthday was in January, but he never said the date. There were occasions when I felt a familiarity around him that was odd, but I never stopped to analyze it. Then again, who would? I was on a different continent, Dillon is Irish, I had no idea he was adopted because no one told me, and we had no idea Reeve had a brother back then. Why would I have gone looking for meaning behind that familiarity?

Dillon looked totally different with his bleach-blond hair and green eyes, and he wasn’t as tan back then. With his ink and piercings, his bulkier frame, additional height, and the little facial differences like his dimples, he didn’t look identical on the surface. But I slept beside him. I knew every inch of his body. Surely, I should have noticed something? Now that I reflect on it, the way he used to tilt his head to one side and rub the back of his neck is so like Reeve.

The clues were there, and I never picked up on them.

I feel like such an idiot until I remember Audrey met him too and she didn't notice any resemblance either.

"Yes! That's it," Reeve exclaims, pulling me out of my inner monologue. "We saw you perform at the Oscars in February, didn't we, Viv?"

"We did." I force a smile on my face.

"Congrats on your win, by the way," Dillon smoothly says. "I loved your acceptance speech."

I sink a little lower in the couch. To anyone else, it would appear Dillon is sincere in his compliment. But I know it's bullshit. I want to throw him out of my house, rewind to two weeks ago, and tell Carson Park not to tell us anything. That secrets are best left to die with their owners. Because there is no scenario where this ends well.

"Thanks. I'm sorry things didn't go the band's way that night," Reeve says. Collateral Damage walked away empty-handed, but it's still an enormous honor to be nominated for such a prestigious award.

Dillon shrugs, but I notice a muscle clenching in his jaw, and it's clear Reeve inadvertently hit some kind of nerve.

Reeve drums his fingers on his knee, a telltale sign he's nervous. "So, you grew up in Ireland? Viv spent some time there, and she loved it." He smiles at me while my pulse throbs in my neck as liquid adrenaline courses through my veins. If Dillon is going to say anything, it will be now.

Dillon eyeballs me, and he has a pleasant smile on his face, but it's as fake as mine. Reeve glances between us, his brow puckering in confusion.

"I did. Ireland is great," I say, snuggling in closer to Reeve, wishing I could bury my face in his shoulder and cry my eyes out.

"Did you like growing up in Ireland?" Reeve asks him, his shoulders relaxing a little.

"It was good. I grew up on a farm with my adopted parents, three brothers, and my sister."

Reeve's eyes pop wide. "Wow, so you have brothers and a sister. That must've been nice."

Dillon smiles, and it's the first genuine smile I've seen on his face. "Yeah, it was cool. Things were fairly wild growing up as teenagers in Ireland."

“Are you close to them?” Reeve asks, and I know he’s internally gauging where he’ll fit in Dillon’s life while I’m trying to figure out how to extract Reeve from this mess before he gets hurt.

“We’re a close family.” Dillon smiles as he looks pointedly at me, but this one doesn’t meet his eyes. “I’m especially close to my sister, Ash. She manages the band. And my younger brother Ro is our drummer.”

Ground, gobble me up now.

I swallow thickly over the messy ball of emotion clogging my throat, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Are you okay?” Reeve asks, tightening his arm around my shoulders.

“I’m fine.” I fake the biggest smile while it feels like my heart is breaking anew. Sitting here is excruciating on a variety of levels, but sitting across from the other love of my life and pretending like I don’t know him, like we don’t share tons of incredible memories, is tearing strips off my heart.

I don’t know why Dillon hasn’t said anything or what his motives are for being here, but the longer I sit here with the knowledge I have, the more painful it becomes. I’m close to cracking.

How can I keep who Dillon is to me from Reeve? If he is to form any relationship with his brother, I need to tell him about Dillon and me. How do I do that? And if I tell him, what will it mean for their relationship? What will it mean for ours? And what about Easton?

Oh God. The smile drops off my face, and I almost suffocate on the pain crawling up my throat.

Reeve opens his mouth, to ask me if I’m okay, I assume, and I need to redirect this conversation ASAP. “Did you know?” I blurt, looking at Dillon. “Did you know you were adopted?” *Why didn’t you tell me?* “Did you know who your bio parents were?”

“My parents told me I was adopted when I was six, so I’ve always known. I toyed with the idea of finding my birth parents as a teenager, but I didn’t pursue it.” He quirks a brow, and his brow ring lifts with the motion. “Why would I? I have the most amazing family. I didn’t need to find the parents who abandoned me.”

“Our mother didn’t abandon you,” Reeve says. A host of different emotions is splayed on his face, and I know this is a lot to process for him. “She died giving birth to us.”

“So I’ve just discovered.” Dillon scrubs his hands down his face.

“You just found out too?” Reeve asks, sitting up straighter.

“It’s been such a shock.”

I regard Dillon warily, trying to figure out if he’s being honest or lying.

“I know.” Reeve nods, biting on his lip. “Simon was wrong to do what he did to you. To us.” His voice breaks, and I reach out, threading my fingers in his. Dillon’s eyes track every touch, making me feel self-conscious. “It’s just another reason in a long list of reasons why he was a shit dad.”

Dillon leans forward on his elbows. “You didn’t get along?”

Reeve shakes his head. “No. He might have kept me, but it was in name only. He could hardly bear to look at me sometimes.”

Dillon looks to the ground, and his knee jerks up and down. When he lifts his head, after a few beats, he looks calm and composed, and I’m immediately on guard. He smiles at Reeve. “Well, he’s not here now, and there’s nothing to stop us from getting to know one another. Brother to brother.” His eyes dart briefly to mine. “Twin to twin.”

“I would really like that,” Reeve says, oblivious to my mini meltdown.

What the fuck is Dillon playing at? Is he serious about getting to know his brother? Did I genuinely mean so little to Dillon that our history doesn’t matter at all and that’s why he’s not mentioning we know one another? I shouldn’t care about that. Not if it means Reeve has a chance of getting to know his twin, but what kind of relationship will they have if it starts on a lie? Like I said to Audrey recently, a lie of omission is still a lie. The bigger issue is, I know something Dillon clearly doesn’t, and that knowledge could change everything. I need to keep my son away from him, at least until I investigate the situation and what it might mean.

I chew on the inside of my mouth, thoroughly confused and scared. My head is such a mess right now, and I don’t know what to do. Where to go from here. This is so bad.

“I would also really like it if you’d accept half of my inheritance,” Reeve says, and I’m a little surprised he brought that up already. We have talked about it, but I didn’t think he would mention it today. “It rightfully belongs to you.”

“I don’t want anything from that man,” Dillon hisses, digging his nails into his thighs. “And I don’t need his money anymore.”

Reeve gulps. “It’s not just money. There’s some property and shares in Studio 27. You don’t have to decide now. We can talk about it again.”

“I need to go,” Dillon says, standing abruptly.

He’s pissed; that much is clear. Relief threads through me as I just want him out of my house. At some point, I’m going to have to speak to him, but not now. Not when I can’t think straight. I can’t leave it for too long though, in case he decides to tell Reeve, but I need at least twenty-four hours to try to wrap my head around the implications of today’s monstrous reveal.

“You can’t stay a little longer?” Reeve’s disappointment is clear on his face, and I want to cry.

Fuck you, fate.

Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.

“We have time booked in the studio, and the guys are already waiting on me. But let’s meet up at the weekend, yeah?” Dillon steps in front of Reeve, his anger now firmly hidden behind a wall I’m accustomed with. “It was good meeting you.”

“I wish we hadn’t lost so many years.” Reeve stands, and the strained look of anguish on his face almost undoes me.

In a super surprising move, Dillon pulls Reeve into a hug. “We have plenty of time to catch up,” Dillon says, fixing me with an ugly sneer I haven’t seen in years.

All the blood in my body turns to ice as I stare at the man who still owns part of my heart. He—

“Daddy!” Easton bursts into the room, dashing toward Reeve. My heart stutters in my chest, and I can scarcely breathe over the knot of anxiety blocking my airwaves. “I made extra cookies for my sister. Look!” He holds out a napkin with two cookies as Reeve scoops him up into his arms.

“Yum.” Reeve chuckles as cookie crumbs sprinkle over his shirt when Easton waves his hand around.

“Who are you?” Easton asks, fixing his wide-eyed blue gaze on Dillon.

I clamp a trembling hand over my mouth as Dillon stares at Easton. His intense penetrative gaze is one I’m familiar with, and I don’t like how it’s fixed on my son. I want to move, to take Easton out of the room, but shock has rendered me immobile. I can’t speak over the horror of this moment. Where the fuck is Angela? I’m going to string her up for letting E out of her sight.

“This is your Uncle Dillon,” Reeve says when Dillon doesn’t reply.

“Cool! Is he coming to my birthday party tomorrow?” Easton innocently asks, and I feel the ground opening underneath me.

“Tomorrow?” Dillon says, finally finding his voice. It sounds off, and goose bumps sprout along my arms. “I thought your birthday was in June?”

Oh fuck! He already suspects, and now he knows. Panic whirls through my veins, and it's a miracle I don't puke on the spot.

Reeve chuckles. "The media thinks it's June because we manipulated them into believing that, but he was actually born five weeks earlier."

I can almost see the cogs churning in Dillon's brain as he calculates the dates. "Why would you do that?" he asks, sounding and looking dazed.

Intense pressure sits on my chest, and I can't breathe. I can't move. I can only sit and watch it unfold in complete and utter shock.

"We've had issues with the paparazzi in the past," Reeve says. "The last thing we want is them hounding us every year on Easton's birthday. This way, we get to celebrate without them breathing down our necks. Win-win."

Dillon stares at me, genuine shock splayed across his face, and I can't take this a second longer. I stumble to my feet. "I don't feel so hot," I tell Reeve. "I need the bathroom." I don't wait for him to reply, rushing out of the room.

I barely make it to the nearest bathroom in time. Crouching over the toilet bowl, I vomit repeatedly while tears stream down my face. I retch until there is nothing left in my stomach, and it mirrors the pained hollowness I feel everywhere. I flush the toilet and slump against the wall, running my hands back and forth across my swollen belly, struggling to understand how my life could be so perfect one second and then everything falls to shit the next.

None of the heartbreak I've endured in the past comes close to how I'm feeling right now. I stand to lose everything, and I'm beyond terrified. Fresh

panic slaps me in the face, and I clamber to my feet. I shouldn't have left the room! What if Dillon has said something to Reeve?

I rinse out my mouth and wash my hands. I'm drying them on the towel when the door opens, and Dillon slips silently into the room.

My heart thrashes frantically around my chest. "You can't be in here!" I shriek.

"We need to talk," he says in a clipped tone. His lips pull into a half-sneer as he flips the lock on the door. "Don't worry about your *precious husband*. He's upstairs getting cleaned up. Easton threw up over both of them, and I said I'd come to check on you."

"Oh my God. Is Easton okay?"

"He probably ate too many cookies though Reeve thinks he might have the same tummy bug you have." He barks out a harsh laugh. "Except we both know why *you're* feeling sick."

"Why are you here?" I cross my arms over my chest, as if that will ward off the trembling stealing over my body.

"I came to meet *my twin*."

"Why? And quit with the bullshit, Dil." His scathing tone tells me all I need to know. Whatever that was in the living room was all an act.

"Ah, there she is." He walks toward me, and I back away. "My fiery little ballbuster. I was beginning to wonder if Reeve had knocked all the life out of you."

I thrust out my hand. "Stay away from me."

He laughs, twirling his finger around a lock of my hair as he crowds me against the wall. Or he tries to. It's a little difficult to do with my pregnant belly in the way. Dillon looks down, and tension bleeds into the air. I rub a protective hand over my stomach, feeling a need to shield my unborn daughter from whatever vitriol this man is about to spill. Slowly, he raises his head, pinning me with ocean-blue eyes I still can't get over. "Is this one Reeve's, or is there a possibility it's another man's too?"

"Fuck you!" I slap him across the face. "I'm faithful to my husband."

He smirks that annoying smirk I used to love to hate. Leaning in, he presses his mouth to my ear. "But is he faithful to you? That's the million-dollar question."

"What?" I blurt, momentarily blindsided until I realize he's just fucking with my head. "Reeve loves me, and he loves our family. He wouldn't do that."

“But he did before, Hollywood, or do you have a selective memory?” He winds his hand around the nape of my neck, putting his face all up in mine. “You know what they say, once a cheater always a cheater.”

I shake my head, glaring at him. “Not Reeve. He made mistakes, but he made up for it, and we got past it. He’s loyal to me, and I know you’re just messing with my head.” I shove at his shoulders. “Take your hands off me.”

“No.” He twists my hair, yanking it around his fist and tilting my head up. “Did you conceal Easton’s real birthday to hide him from me?” he demands.

“No,” I truthfully reply. “I gave birth to him at home, and I didn’t venture outside for the first few weeks, because I wanted to shield him from the media. Reeve and I weren’t officially together, and I’d hidden my pregnancy, so—”

“So I wouldn’t find out,” he says, cutting across me.

I could lie, but what’s the point? I know where this is leading. A shuddering breath flees my lips. “Yes. I wasn’t sure who the father was, and I wanted to wait until I had the paternity results before saying anything to Reeve or you.”

“Would you have told me if he was mine?”

I nod. “Yes. That was my plan.”

His nostrils flare as he glares at me. “Liar!”

“I’m telling the truth! You can ask Audrey.”

He rubs his thumb along my mouth, and I jolt as a rush of sensations skates over my skin. I have been trying to deny the hum of electricity crackling in the air, because I’m trying to deny the existence of our connection, but one little touch from him ignites a flame inside me I can’t extinguish. “That’s why you cut Ash off.”

“I didn’t want to, but I didn’t want to lie to her either. I knew if she found out I was pregnant she’d ask me if it was yours. If I told her, she would tell you.” I hang my head, unable to look at the disgust on his face. “I’m ashamed I did that to Ash. I love her like a sister, but I didn’t see I had any other option. I contacted her after Easton was born, after the paternity test confirmed Reeve was the father”—I whisper that last part because we both know that is no longer proven—“but she didn’t take my calls, and then they started bouncing back, and I knew she’d blocked me.”

“I’m pretty sure that was the day we discovered you’d gotten married and had a baby without telling her or me,” he grits out. “Look at me,” he

snaps, and I swing my eyes back around to his. “I couldn’t give two shits about your lying ass, but I do care to know if that little boy is mine.”

“Why?”

“Because he could be my son!” he yells.

“Keep your fucking voice down!” I hiss. “He could still be Reeve’s.”

“Or he could be *mine*. That test you got proves nothing because our DNA is the same. We need a specialized test with samples from both of us to prove paternity conclusively, and I want that test taken ASAP.”

My chest heaves. “How do I explain this to Reeve?” I cry.

“Not my fucking problem,” he snaps.

“This isn’t just my problem. It’s yours too! He’s your *brother!*”

“He’s not my brother,” he growls. “Shane, Ciarán, and Ronan are my brothers. Reeve is just the selfish prick I shared a womb with.”

I gasp at the venom in his tone and the hatred on his face. Tears leak out of my eyes, and my heart hurts for my husband. Obviously, everything Dillon said back there was bullshit. “How can you say that?” I thump his chest. “It’s not Reeve’s fault Simon Lancaster was a twisted fuck who blamed *both* his sons for what happened to their mother! Reeve didn’t know about you until two weeks ago! He grew up with a father who couldn’t give a shit about him, and if it wasn’t for my family, he’d have been all alone.”

“Save your bleeding-heart crap for someone who gives a shit. FYI. That’s not me.” He grips my chin, and I flinch at the look of loathing in his eyes. “That prick has taken everything from me, and I think I’m owed a little payback, don’t you?”

Certain things slot into place in my head. “You knew! You’ve known the truth for years.” My stomach lurches wildly, and I dry heave as the reality of the situation dawns on me in full technicolor horror.

“I was seventeen when Simon Lancaster found me and told me the truth.” Dillon releases me, stepping back, dragging a hand through his hair. “He said I murdered my mother and I was lucky he’d given me up for adoption because he couldn’t bear to look at me and he’d most likely have killed me if he’d taken me home.”

I raise a shaky hand to my mouth. How could any man say that to his son? Simon Lancaster was a monster, and I’m fucking glad he’s dead. I know this must have gone down around the same time Ash tried to kill herself, and I can only imagine the pain Dillon was in. Irrespective of our

present situation, I would never wish that on him. My heart aches for him, and my body longs to comfort him, like I would have done in the past.

But this isn't the past.

And it's obvious Dillon isn't the same Dillon.

He's twisted with anger and rage, his judgment is clouded by the things he mistakenly believes, and that makes him wildly unpredictable. Especially when he seems to be channeling most of that rage unfairly in Reeve's direction.

I can't let him destroy my husband. Whatever agenda he has, I know he's focused on hurting Reeve and I'm not letting him do that. Right now, my priorities lie with my husband and my son. Protecting them from pain is my focus. "Why did Simon contact you?" I ask.

Dillon rubs the back of his neck as pain flares in his eyes. "He offered me one million dollars to sign an NDA so the world would never find out I was Reeve Lancaster's secret twin."

I stare numbly at him, sure my ears must be deceiving me. "Why?"

"He was protecting the son he loved!" he spits, and I'm dumbfounded again. "He said Reeve was going to be a massive star and he couldn't have skeletons in his closet. He wanted to make sure I would never come forward. That I would never seek out Reeve. That I would slink away in the shadows and pretend like I was invisible."

"Jesus, Dillon. That is heartbreaking. But I'm telling you now, Simon wasn't protecting Reeve. He was protecting himself. He knew he would've been outed as a monster if the truth was revealed. I hated Simon when he was alive for what he did to Reeve, but I absolutely despise him in death."

"For what he did to *Reeve*?!" Dillon shoves his angry face in mine, and I protectively cradle my stomach, reeling from the poison spewing from Dillon's mouth.

It's as if I never knew him at all.

What happened to the troubled broken boy who opened his heart and showed me the sexy sweet soul hidden underneath? I see none of that boy in the man who stands before me now, radiating anger like it's an entitlement. "Reeve had everything! He grew up wealthy in L.A. with every opportunity handed to him on a silver platter."

"No, Dillon. You've got it backward." My eyes plead with him to see reason. To see the truth that is so blatantly obvious to me. "You are the one

who was truly wealthy. You have a loving family who adores you. You cannot place a value on that.”

“I refused to sign the NDA at first,” he says, staring absently at the wall, as if I haven’t spoken at all. “Instead, I changed my appearance because I wanted to look nothing like that arrogant selfish wanker, and then I thought of different ways I could make both of them pay. I raged for years, plotting how I could make it happen, and then you landed in my lap.” His lips curl up at the corners as he stares me in the face with cold, cruel eyes.

All the blood leeches from my body. He laughs as I stare at him with a fresh wave of horror. Pain slices across my chest, cutting soul-deep.

“It was the perfect plan of revenge. Reeve had taken everything from me. Now it was time to take something from him. Something so precious he would never recover.” He brushes his fingers across my cheeks as silent tears pour down my face. “Yes, Hollywood. I purposely set out to steal your heart, and you fell for it hook, line, and sinker. It was almost too easy to make you fall in love with me. My greatest triumph was when you told me you loved me in front of everyone. I guess acting must run in my blood.” His dry chuckle is like a dagger straight through the heart.

“Aw, don’t cry, Vivien Grace.” He smooths my tears with his thumb, smirking, and I slap his hands away. “It didn’t quite go according to my plan. You were supposed to return to him broken and used up. You weren’t supposed to get a happy ever after, but this is even better.”

“Don’t do it,” I croak. “Whatever it is you’re planning, don’t do it. It won’t make you feel better.”

“I beg to differ.” Leaning into me, he nips at my earlobe. “You’ve done me a massive favor, Hollywood. Thank you for being a stupid slut and running straight back into his arms. This time, I will take everything from him—his son, his wife, his reputation, his sanity. By the time I’m done with both of you, you’ll wish you were dead.”

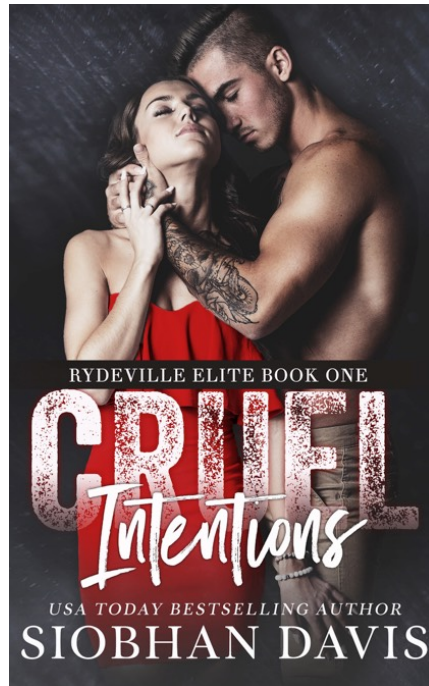
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Trent, Charlie, and my twin, Drew, rule the hallways of Rydeville High with arrogance and an iron fist. I execute my role perfectly, hating every second, but they never let me forget my place in this world.

Everyone obeys the rules. They have for generations. Because our families have always been in control.

Until Cam, Sawyer, and Jackson show up. Throwing their new money around. Challenging the status quo. Setting hearts racing with their gorgeous faces, hot bodies, and bad boy attitudes.

Battle lines are drawn. Sides are taken. And I'm trapped in the middle, because I made a mistake one fateful night when I gave my V-card to a stranger in a blatant F you to my fiancé.

I thought it was the one thing I owned. A precious memory to carry me through each dark day.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Because the stranger was Camden Marshall, leader of the new elite and my perpetual tormenter. He hates me with a passion unrivaled, and he won't be the only one. Fire will rain down if the truth is revealed, threatening alliances, and the power struggle will turn vicious.

My life will hang in the balance.

But I'll be ready, and I'm not going down without a fight.

The complete trilogy is FREE TO READ in Kindle Unlimited.
Download *Cruel Intentions* [here](#) OR Download the *Rydeville Elite Box Set* [here](#).

Turn the page to read a sample.

CRUEL INTENTIONS - SAMPLE

PROLOGUE

Waves crash against the empty shore, summoning me with invisible arms, and my feet move toward the icy water as if I'm pulled by a string. I'm numb inside. Hollowed out. And I just want to put an end to this... charade that is my so-called life.

I never remember a time in my seventeen years on this earth where I had free will. Where every aspect of my life wasn't controlled and mapped out.

And I'm done.

Done with the mask I've no choice but to wear.

Done with the elite crap I'm forced to participate in.

Done with that monster who calls himself my father.

I want out, and the turbulent sea offers me salvation. I scarcely feel the deathly cold water as it swirls around my ankles like the tempting caress of a destructive lover. My silk robe offers little protection against the bitter wind whipping my long dark hair around my face, and goose bumps prickle my skin in everyplace it's exposed.

I walk farther into the water, my body shivering and shaking as the wild waves lap at my calves. An eerie voice echoes in my mind, urging me to stop.

Imploring me to go back.

Pleading with me not to give up.

Suggesting my world is about to change.

I ignore that taunting voice, tilting my head up, surveying the crescent moon in the dark nighttime sky, casting strangely shaped shadows on the land below. My ears prick at the sound of splashing behind me, and my heart beats faster as adrenaline courses through my veins, but I don't turn around.

"Hey. Are you okay?" a deep masculine voice asks from close by.

I'm standing knee-deep in icy-cold water in the middle of the night in minuscule clothing. Does it fucking look like I'm okay? My snarky alter ego

mentally responds to his question, but I remain mute. I can't summon the energy to speak or to care what the stranger thinks of me.

I just want him to go away. To leave me alone. To at least give me this.

But no such luck.

He wades through the water, his darkened form brushing against my arm as he moves around me, positioning himself directly in my line of sight so I've no choice but to look at him.

A flicker of warmth enters my chest as I stare into sultry brown eyes that are so deep they're almost black. The glow from the moon casts a shadow around his form, highlighting his masculine beauty in all its glory. He's wearing low-hanging cotton shorts and nothing else. His bare chest is an impressive work of art that speaks to incredible dedication in the gym. His cut abs are so sharp they look painted on. But it's the tattoos on his chest and lower arms that grab my attention. None of the guys at Rydeville High would dare ink their skin. It wouldn't fit the reputations they've so carefully cultivated or suit their obnoxious parents' plans for their futures. The elite wouldn't dream of lowering themselves to something so provincial.

This guy is an enigma, and the first sparks of curiosity ignite inside me.

My eyes trail up his delectable torso, refocusing on his face. He's watching me carefully. Absorbing my gaze like he wants to bury deep inside me and figure me out. My fingers itch to run along the fine layer of scruff adorning his chin and jawline. To mess up his hair which is styled long on top and shorn close to his skull on both sides. A craving to explore his chiseled cheekbones, and to taste his full lips, hits me out of nowhere, reminding me I'm still very much alive.

I can't ever recall having such a strong, physical reaction to a guy upon sight. None of the guys back home have affected me so potently, except for Trent—he makes my skin crawl with the barest of looks—but this is the complete opposite.

One glance from this stranger heats my blood and stirs desire low in my belly. I cock my head to the side, intrigued and aroused, my previous self-destructive mission all but forgotten.

We don't speak. We just stare at one another and an electrical current charges the small space between us. My body emerges from its semi-comatose state, and I'm equally hot and cold. A shiver works its way

through me, and I wrap my arms around my slim frame, desperately trying to ward off the biting cold air clawing at my pale skin.

“You need to get warm.” The stranger extends his hand. “Come with me.”

I wrap my hand around his without hesitation, and we tread through the water back toward the shore. His callused palm is firm against my skin, sending a flurry of fiery tingles coasting up and down my arm. We don’t speak as we emerge from the sea, walking across the clammy sand toward a small wooden cabin in the near distance. I hadn’t noticed it when I first arrived because I had singular focus.

A thin stream of smoke creeps out of a narrow chimney, and I watch the cloudy spirals with fascination as we walk hand in hand toward the neat wooden structure. In the distance, a sprawling mansion occupies prime real estate, the property submerged in darkness at this late hour.

He pushes open the door, stepping aside to allow me to enter first. A blast of heat slaps me in the face from the roaring open fire, and my body relaxes for the first time in days. The cabin is small but cozy and welcoming. The main room contains a compact kitchen with a stove, sink, and a long counter with three stools. On the right is a three-seater couch positioned in front of a coffee table and a wall-mounted TV over the fireplace. A side room suggests a bedroom with en suite bathroom, and that’s the extent of the space.

My bedroom is bigger than this entire cabin, but it isn’t half as inviting.

A bright rug resting atop the varnished hardwood floor, the soft colorful throw on the couch, and an abundance of vibrant cushions injects a comfortable, lived-in feel. The old bookcase tucked into the corner between the wall and the door is crammed full of books, DVDs, and mementos, creating a homey atmosphere. The only light is from the flickering flames of the fire and an old-fashioned lamp on top of the coffee table.

He shuts the door and steers me in front of the fire. On autopilot, I raise my palms, relishing the heat as it wraps around my chilly skin. He moves around behind me, but I don’t turn to look. I stand in front of the fire, allowing it to thaw my frozen limbs and fracture the layer of ice surrounding my heart.

“Sit down,” he commands in that rugged voice of his, draping a blanket around my upper body.

I sink to the ground without a word, tucking my knees into my chest as I peer at him. He drops down in front of me, gently uncurling my legs, drawing one into his lap as he dries my damp skin with a soft blue towel. We stare at one another as he dries both my feet and legs, and that same pull from before pulses between us, rendering some invisible connection.

“I feel like I know you from somewhere, yet I’ve never seen you before,” I admit, eventually finding my voice.

He stalls with his hands on my feet, piercing my gaze with his intense chocolate-colored one. “I know,” he says after a few beats.

When he tosses the towel aside, I move closer to him, sitting up on my knees with my body resting on my ankles. I keep my eyes locked on his as I reach up and touch the shorn side of his head, my fingers trailing over the velvety soft hair, tracing the edge of his skull tattoo. It was too dark outside to notice it, but now, I’m even more intrigued by this elusive, hot stranger who appeared out of nowhere to rescue me.

The tattoo is in the shape of a cross, and I wonder if the symbolism means something personal to him. All I know is it’s sexy as hell, and my body naturally responds to him, arching in closer.

He pulls my hand away from his head, pressing a feather-light kiss to the sensitive skin on my wrist, and I feel his tender touch all the way to the tips of my toes. His gentle touch is in direct contrast to his edgy look. With his defined abs, bulging biceps, and ink-covered tan skin, he looks like the quintessential bad boy every girl gets warned about. “Why were you out there?” he asks, keeping his gaze locked on mine.

I could lie, but I’m tired of all the lies.

I’m tired of saying what’s expected and pretending to be someone I’m not.

“I didn’t want to feel anymore.”

There’s a pregnant pause as he stares at me, no doubt wondering if I meant that sincerely. “What would you have done if I hadn’t spotted you?” he inquires, still trying to puzzle me out.

I shrug. “Kept walking most likely.” Allowed the sea to claim me as I’d originally intended when I’d given Oscar, my bodyguard, the slip, and driven here.

“Who are you? What’s your name?”

I cup his face, deciding on the truth again. “I’m nobody. I’m invisible. I don’t exist except to obey their commands.”

A slight frown creases his brow. “If you’re in trouble. If—”

“Don’t.” I cut across him. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Silence engulfs us for a few beats. “What do you want?” he asks, his voice dropping a notch, sounding wholly seductive, although I’m unsure if that’s on purpose or not.

“I want to feel something real,” I reply without uncertainty. “I want to let go of these chains that bind my body. To feel like I’m in control even if it’s only an illusion.” My eyes stay locked on his, and electricity crackles in the air again.

He rakes his gaze up and down the length of my body, his heated stare lingering on my chest as my nipples harden. His eyes flit to my mouth before he licks his lips and drags his gaze upward. His eyes bore into mine, and butterflies scatter in my chest, my heart beating faster and faster as my body heats in a whole new way. “I can help with that.”

This time, there’s no doubting his intent, and my core aches with need. My gaze drills into his eyes, projecting my acceptance and permission.

Nodding slowly, he pulls me onto his lap, circling his arms around my waist. “Are you sure?”

I bob my head. “Please make me feel alive. Make me feel like me. Remind me why I should live.”

It’s crazy.

I don’t know him.

He doesn’t know me.

But I feel more hopeful in this moment than I have in years.

Slowly, he brings his face to mine, brushing his lips against my mouth. I close my eyes as my body sags in relief. Snaking my arms around his neck, I angle my head as he caresses my mouth with his luscious lips. His kiss is unhurried and worshipful. His mouth moves leisurely and seductively against mine, and this kiss is unlike any I’ve ever experienced before.

Trent kisses with years of pent-up anger and aggression behind his punishing lips, and it makes me feel dead on the inside. This stranger’s tender kisses unravel the knots that usually twist in my gut, breaking through the walls that cage my heart, allowing warmth and pleasure to invade every single part of me.

I meld my lips and my body to his, straddling his hips and gasping as his hard length nudges against the softest part of me. He rocks his hips

gently in expert, measured movements, and a burst of desire shoots through me, overtaking logic and warning and common sense.

I shouldn't be doing this here with some guy I don't know.

It would enrage my father, my twin brother, Drew, and my fiancé, Trent, if they saw me, but that thought only spurs me on, strengthening my resolve.

He stands, holding me to him, and I tighten my legs around his waist as he walks toward the bedroom. Our mouths never separate as he lowers me to the bed, and we gradually shed our outer layers.

I've never been naked in front of any guy before. Trent repeatedly tries to strip me bare, but I enjoy denying him. Now, I spread my legs for this beautiful, rugged stranger, with no hint of nerves or vulnerability, admiring his gorgeous body as he pulls a condom out of his bedside table and rolls it over his impressive length.

We don't talk, but words are redundant. He settles between my thighs, bringing his hot mouth to my pussy, and I almost lift off the bed as he devours me with his tongue and his fingers, quickly bringing me over the edge.

No man has ever done that to me before, and the pleasurable sensations coursing through my body are wholly new. When I come down from the best orgasm of my life, he climbs over me, kissing me passionately as his hands caress my small breasts. His roughened fingers tweak my nipples like he's plucking strings on a guitar, rolling them skillfully until they're taut peaks, and it's not long before I'm writhing in need again.

He positions himself at my entrance, stalling to look at me. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asks, and another little chip melts off the block around my heart.

No one has ever cared to ask me what I need or what I want, and tears prick my eyes at the obvious concern in his eyes.

"Yes. I want to do this with you."

His eyes are glued to mine as he slowly inches inside me. He stops halfway in, sweeping his fingers across my cheek. "You're so beautiful." He nudges in a little more. "And so tight." He flexes his jaw, and I can tell he's exercising caution. When he pushes in a little more, a sharp sting of pain jolts through me, and I wince.

His eyes pop wide as he holds himself still. Shock splays across his face. "You're a virgin?" he splutters.

A sly smirk slips across my mouth. "I was."

"Fuck." He leans down, kissing me so sweetly I feel like crying. "You should've said."

And have you change your mind? Not likely.

Thoughts of losing my virginity to that psycho Trent were part of the reason drawing me to the sea tonight. I've been holding him off for years, but with the wedding approaching, I know I can't hold out much longer.

Denying him that victory only adds to the joy of this moment.

But it's way more than wanting to one-up Trent.

I want to give my body to this gorgeous stranger.

To enjoy this one night where I can take something for myself before returning to the gilded cage I live in.

"It doesn't matter," I say, bucking my hips up in encouragement. "I want this with you. Right here. Right now. Nothing has made so much sense in a long time."

He inspects me for so long I fear he will pull out and change his mind, but then he pushes the rest of the way inside me, and I swallow my cry of pain. He peppers little kisses along my neck and my collarbone, gently kneading my tits as he slowly rocks back and forth inside me. "I'll go slow until it doesn't hurt anymore," he whispers across my now overheated skin. "And if you want me to stop, I will."

"I don't want you to stop," I say, threading my fingers through the longish dark strands of hair now falling over his strong brow. "Keep going."

He makes love to me then, only picking up his pace when I confirm it no longer hurts, but he's never rough, completely attentive to my needs, and he brings me to a second orgasm as his own climax hits.

I'm sprawled across his warm body, a few hours later, listening to the comforting beat of his heart, watching his chest inflate and deflate in slumber, wishing I could stay here in this little beach cabin with this beautiful stranger for eternity.

But I know that's only wishful thinking. A fantasy I can't entertain. Bringing anyone into my life risks theirs, and that'd be a poor way of rewarding this man who has given me a night I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Although I hate to leave him like this, it's for the best.

He can't know who I am or understand the implications of what we've just done.

Reluctantly, I ease out of his warm bed and his life, feeling a pang of overwhelming sadness as I get dressed, preparing myself to leave him behind. He looks peaceful in slumber, like a tattooed guardian angel, arriving at the perfect moment to help put things in perspective.

If I'd followed through tonight, they would have won, and I know my dead mother wouldn't want that for me.

I'm stronger than that.

I might be a pawn in a game I don't want to play, but that doesn't mean I can't win.

I need to strategize.

To plan my victory so I can escape the tortured future lying in wait for me.

Determination surges through my veins, and I smile adoringly at the beautiful man who has given me so much more than his body. "Thank you," I whisper, blowing him a kiss. I wish I could taste his lips one final time, but I don't want to wake him. It's better that I leave like this.

My hand is curled around the door handle when I spy a pencil and sketchpad on the coffee table. Without stopping to second-guess myself, I tear a strip off the end of a blank page and pen a brief note.

You can't possibly know this, but you saved my life in more ways than one tonight. You have reminded me why it's important to survive. Given me the strength to fight for what I want. And you have given me a precious memory I will hold close until my dying breath. Thank you. A.

As I close the door and head back toward my car, back to a life I despise, I know I'll be reliving this special night every day for the rest of my life.

But I had no idea that sleeping with this stranger would set certain things in motion. Things that couldn't be undone. And I certainly had no idea that I'd come to hate him and desperately resent giving him my virginity.

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GLOSSARY OF IRISH TERMS/SAYINGS

The explanation given is in the context of this book. Also includes pronunciations.

Aisling – female Irish name. Pronounced Ash-ling.

Aoife – female Irish name. Pronounced Efa.

Birds – women

Black stuff – Guinness

Blow-in – outsider/new kid on the block

Catriona – female Irish name. Pronounced Cat-ree-na.

Ciarán – male Irish name. Pronounced Kirawn.

Deadly – cool

Dragged up – brought up/raised

Fake knockers – implants/fake boobs

Fecking – freaking

Full stop – period/end of

Hound – player/manslut/manwhore

Howya – hello

Is not on – not accepted/not cool

Leaving Cert/Certificate – state exams you sit in 6th year of secondary school (senior year of high school)

Lift - elevator

Looker – good-looking

Micheál – male Irish name pronounced Mee-haul

Missus – wife but can also mean girlfriend/female partner

Mot – slang for girlfriend

Motorway – highway

On tenterhooks – waiting nervously for something to happen

Plastic tits – implants/fake boobs

Sláinte – Irish for cheers (when having a drink)

Slow coaches – slow poke

Swanning around – going around/walking around

The jacks – toilet/bathroom

The Liffey – River Liffey in Dublin

Tracksuit bottoms – sweats/sweatpants

Trinners – Trinity College Dublin/TCD

Trousers – pants

Trying it on – making a pass

Wanker – prick/asshole/jerk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author **Siobhan Davis** writes emotionally intense young adult and new adult fiction with swoon-worthy romance, complex characters, and tons of unexpected plot twists and turns that will have you flipping the pages beyond bedtime!

Siobhan's family will tell you she's a little bit obsessive when it comes to reading and writing, and they aren't wrong. She can rarely be found without her trusty Kindle, a paperback book, or her laptop somewhere close at hand.

Prior to becoming a full-time writer, Siobhan forged a successful corporate career in human resource management.

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