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STRINGS

RIVER VALLEY REBELS

GABRIELLE SANDS

TAUT STRINGS

GABRIELLE SANDS

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RIVER VALLEY REBELS SERIES

Welcome to the first book in the River Valley Rebels series!

Taut Strings is the story of Adeline, Silas, Abel, Cole, and Ezra. At its heart, it's a story about overcoming failure and fear, and finding love in the process.

All of the books in the River Valley Rebels series will be interconnected standalones that take place in the same world.

Want to stay up-to-date on my future releases and get a Taut Strings bonus scene? See the back of the book for details.

PLAYLIST

Clutch - "Cypress Grove"

Them Crooked Vultures - "New Fang"

Slipknot - "The Nameless"

Jimi Hendrix - "Crosstown Traffic"

Darkthrone - "I Am The Grave Of The 80s"

Pink Floyd - "The Great Gig In The Sky"

Led Zeppelin - "Since I've Been Loving You"

Childish Gambino - "Me and Your Mama"

In Flames - "Bullet Ride"

ADELINE

IT WAS HALF PAST SIX, and the bar was filling up with patrons I didn't want to serve. *Where the hell is Frankie?* This was the second time this week she was late for her evening shift.

"Can I get a Coors Light, darlin'?"

I lifted my eyes to the burly man across the bar and gave him a tight smile.

"Coming right up."

He winked and waved a five-dollar bill before slamming it on the polished wood counter. I hoped that meant he didn't want his change.

At this hour, the bar was in a state of transition. The daytime regulars were being replaced by the evening ones, as well as a crowd of visitors and college students home for the summer. River Valley wasn't a big tourist draw, but we got a few folks coming in July and August for the garden tours of the Tulson Estate. It was a big old mansion built about a hundred years ago, with manicured grounds and impeccable landscaping. At night, the trees were lit with colorful lights, and even I enjoyed going there from time to time. Molly and I had gone to see the lights last week.

The door of the bar swung open, revealing a frazzled Frankie, who gave me an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry," she mouthed.

I shrugged and waved in response. Sure, I was irritated, but I wasn't going to be an asshole to a single mom who was constantly trying to balance a dozen things at once.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the side door behind the bar.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again, grabbing my wrist to give it a friendly squeeze. “The girls threw a tantrum when the babysitter came. I literally had to pry their little fingers off to leave. You’re so lucky that Molly is a functioning adult who can take care of herself.”

I froze. It wasn’t intentional. Just an instinctual reaction to someone implicitly telling me I was lucky to have been left with a teenage sister when our parents died.

Frankie felt the change in me and paled. “Shit.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I don’t know what I’m saying. Of course, you’re not lucky to be left to take care of her. My mind is all over the place, and I’m just being an idiot. I’m sorry.”

I swiped my palm across my face. “Look, don’t worry about it. It’s really okay. I do need to go though, so I’ll see you Monday?”

Frankie bit her lip, looking at me with pity in her eyes. I didn’t need to see that.

“Of course. Have fun at the show tomorrow. You’re going to kill it.”

“Thanks,” I said, this time making an effort to give her a warmer smile. I knew she hadn’t meant anything malicious with her earlier comment, but it had stung, nonetheless. Losing my parents two years ago, being left with a younger sister to take care of, and trying to figure out how to pay for her to go to college next year? Yeah, I sure as hell didn’t feel very lucky.

The sun wouldn’t set for another hour, and I decided to take the scenic route home. Molly was waiting for me, so I sent her a text to let her know I’d be late. I needed some time to think, and I didn’t want to do it at home where my sister always managed to read my worries like they were written with a Sharpie across my face.

My mind went to the letter we had gotten in the mail this morning. Molly’s application for a student loan had been denied after I’d been deemed not a creditworthy guarantor. It shouldn’t have caught me by surprise. I’d missed deadlines on payments for months after Mom and Dad died, too consumed with grief to worry about my falling credit score.

Now I was paying for that careless mistake. My life was a mess. I was twenty-one, with a high school diploma, and a rapidly depleting savings account. Our parents’ life insurance policy had covered us for a few years, but I’d checked the balance a week ago and knew it would barely cover

Molly's first year of tuition, even with the scholarship she'd gotten. In a few weeks, she'd leave for college, and then I'd have a year to figure out how to pay for the rest.

Molly had seen the letter before I could try to hide it from her. She'd said she could defer college for a year, find a part-time job, and take online courses until she could pay her own way. That had earned a strong "Hell, no" from me. I wasn't going to let her make the same mistakes I had, and that was the end of it. Although, Molly was already in a much better place than I'd been at her age. She had applied to multiple schools, been accepted to a few, and picked an option that suited her. And me? I had put all my hopes and dreams into a single institution, only to discover that sometimes things didn't work out as planned, no matter how badly you wanted them to.

I was so sure I'd get in to Julliard. I wanted to study music—to play my guitar and to meet people who loved the instrument as much as I did. My confidence had been enough to convince my parents that it would all work out just fine. But I hadn't anticipated how putting so much significance on one audition would sabotage me.

The rejection letter had hurt my parents almost as much as it had hurt me. It had been an icy knife plunged into my heart. I often wondered how a letter worded so impersonally had decimated me like it did.

I'd stopped playing for six months after that. Couldn't do it. Couldn't touch my guitar. It had sat in the corner of my room, patiently waiting for me to befriend it again. Eventually, I did. It had just never felt the same.

My phone buzzed in the cup holder, saving me from further reliving painful memories. It was a message from Mason.

"Get-together at the pit tonight. Come hang out :)."

I didn't want to text and drive, so I tapped on the call icon to dial.

"Yo, what's up, Ade? You saw my message?"

"Yeah. I'm driving home right now. I just got off work, so I think I'm going to hang with Molly for a bit and then crash. We're still rehearsing tomorrow before the show, right?"

"Sure, that's cool," Mason responded in his easy way.

Mason was our drummer. Four years ago, after college hadn't worked out for me, a few friends had asked me to join their band, and we'd been playing together ever since. Mason was the baby of the group, only fifteen when we first got together, but he was the best drummer in town. He was also getting shipped off to college this year. His parents had threatened to cut him off if

he didn't get out of this town and do something with his life. We hadn't talked about what that meant for the band yet, and I didn't want to be the one to start that conversation.

"Hey, how do you feel about playing a few of our originals tomorrow?" I asked.

"I dunno," he said, and I visualized him shrugging on his end of the line. "I feel like people always like the covers more. You know, songs they recognize."

"I think they'll like 'Green Roses' though." I fingered the collar of my white T-shirt. "It's upbeat and fits the rest of our set. What if we play it second to last?"

"Hmm," he hummed as I waited for his response. I don't know why this shit made me anxious, but it did. I felt like I was always the one pushing the guys to play our songs.

"Yeah, it's a good one. I'm down."

"Cool." I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll chat to Liam and Elly to make sure they're fine with it."

"All right. I'll see ya tomorrow? Come by my place at four, and we can run through the set a few times before we go."

Guilt flooded my mind for a moment. I'd asked Frankie to cover my shift tomorrow so I could focus on the performance. Every time I did stuff like that, I felt a pang of self-loathing. The band was just for fun, a distraction that kept me sane, but with each passing month, I felt more and more like it was a distraction I could no longer afford.

"I'll be there. See ya."

I hung up and gripped the wheel with both hands. We were playing the Barnyard tomorrow night, and in our four-year career as a cover band, this was the biggest venue we'd done. Before we'd gotten the invite to play a few weeks back, I'd thought Liam was finally going to tell us he wanted to quit the band. He had a fiancée and a baby on the way, and he'd been cancelling practices more frequently to pick up more shifts at work. When I told him about the email from the Barnyard, his eyes had lit up.

"The Barnyard, huh? I feel like I grew up in that damn place. Yeah, that'll be cool."

And that had kept the band safe for at least another few weeks. We wouldn't make a lot from the performance, but we weren't playing for the money. We had no grand ambitions for where this was going to go. We just

enjoyed playing music, and we were going to do it until life got in our way.

Seems like it's getting in your way now, doesn't it? a little voice nudged inside my head. Liam was starting a family. Mason was leaving for college. Elly was applying for office jobs. And I needed to start figuring out how the hell I was going to pay for Molly's tuition.

When I pulled into the driveway, the living room lights were already on. It was late dusk, and the mosquitos were out in full force. I ducked inside the house and quickly shut the door behind me, trying to keep the bloodsuckers out. I could never sleep with one of them buzzing near my ear.

"Ade?"

"Hey." I popped my head into the kitchen, following the sound of Molly's voice. She sat at the dining table, a half-eaten sandwich on the plate in front of her. Her long hair was pinned up in a messy bun on top of her head. We couldn't look more different, her with silky straight blond locks, green eyes, and pale skin, and me with a mass of messy black curls and a light tan. Dad was Italian, so I got his genes. Molly was all Mom, the delicate English flower.

I walked up to her and lifted the sandwich to my mouth, earning a half-hearted glare.

"There's some salad in the fridge. I thought you'd want your protein shake, so I picked up some milk from the store."

I grunted in thanks as I chewed on her sandwich. I started hitting the gym regularly in the months after the accident and haven't looked back since. For a long time, I'd felt mentally fragile, but I'd known I couldn't afford to be weak if I wanted to be a good guardian to Molly. Getting physically strong had seemed like a suitable alternative while I slowly processed my grief, especially when the gym owner, an old friend of my parents', had signed me up for practically nothing. It was torture at first, but I'd grown to love it. There was something addictive about lifting progressively heavier weights.

"How are you feeling about tomorrow?" Molly asked, a knowing look on her face.

The thought of performing in front of a decent-sized crowd got my pulse racing. I still always got nervous the night before a performance, but now I knew how to channel that energy into something productive. Performing with Through Azure Skies excited me because I knew the crowd wasn't there to judge us. All they wanted was for us to give them a good time, and I've gotten good at doing just that.

“Fine. We might play an original,” I said, remembering that I had to check with the others about it.

“Cool. Ugh, I wish I could come.”

Molly was seventeen, and the venue was eighteen plus. When I was her age, I had a fake ID, but I wasn’t going to tell her about that.

“I’m sure we’ll play somewhere more family friendly next time,” I said, pulling out a chair to sit by her.

She wrinkled her nose skeptically. “Well, I’ll be eighteen soon enough anyway.” She dropped her gaze back to her phone and started scrolling through her Instagram feed.

“What’s new in the world? Anything interesting?”

Her fingers halted on a picture, and she turned the phone to me. “This picture of Carly blew up today. Three hundred likes! And she only has 500 followers.”

Carly, Molly’s friend, stood between two beefy dudes much older than her. The picture was pretty grainy, so I zoomed in on the faces. The guy on her left was the tallest man I’d ever seen, towering two heads above her and wearing a serious expression. His arms were crossed, showing off his full sleeve tattoos. He had long brown hair and a generous beard that cascaded down his cut off T-shirt. He looked like a sexy Viking, all buff and manly and brooding.

I moved my fingers on the screen to look at the shorter man, who was still a head taller than Carly. The hair on my arms stood as I took him in—the messy head of dark curls, the day-old scruff on his chin, and most importantly, that smile. He had this brilliant grin on his face that threatened to leave all women in its vicinity gasping for air. I suspected Carly’s dazed expression could be attributed to its effect. Something about these guys looked familiar.

“Who’s that?”

Molly looked at me incredulously. “You serious? I thought you’d recognize them right away. They’re members of Bleeding Moonlight.”

I furrowed my brows and studied the image again. “Nah. Really?”

“I thought you liked them,” Molly prodded.

“I used to, but I haven’t looked them up in ages,” I admitted. “They were big when I was in high school. I haven’t listened to any of their recent stuff.”

Molly sighed in exasperation. “You live under a rock. I don’t even like metal, and I know more than that about them. They were working on a new

album after taking a break for a few years, and then one of their guitarists died from an overdose. The funeral was here a few weeks ago.”

She pulled the phone away from me, typing something before flipping it back to me. This time there was an image of four men at a funeral on the screen. They were looking down at something in the ground—I presumed a casket. I pushed the phone away from me, not wanting to let my mind go to the memory of Molly and I standing in similar positions a few years ago.

She continued telling me about the band, oblivious to my reaction. “Carly was at the movie theater last night and bumped into two of them. The bassist and the guitarist. Our group chat is going wild about it. Apparently, they’re super hot in person.”

To be honest, they looked pretty darn good in this blurry pic, too, but I wasn’t going to encourage this fangirl behavior. I stood up to get stuff out of the fridge for my protein shake.

“I don’t get it. None of your friends even listen to metal. Why is this a big deal?”

Molly snorted. “I mean, sure. But they’re famous. And they’re from here. You knew that, right? They’re the most famous thing to ever come out of River Valley. Pay respect where it’s due.”

I chuckled. “Your entire generation is way too obsessed with fame. Don’t even get me started on the Ka—”

“Please don’t.” Molly raised a warning palm in my direction. “You’re too old to ever understand.”

For a minute, our conversation was interrupted by the furious sound of my shake blending. When it finally stopped, Molly asked, “Did you not overlap with them at all? They can’t be that much older than you.”

I sipped on the creamy banana-spinach-flavored goodness, my eyes fluttering shut in pleasure.

“Eww, only you. That stuff is like liquified sand,” Molly commented, scrunching her face in disgust at my reaction.

“That’s only if you get the cheap stuff. This doesn’t taste grainy at all. To answer your question, those guys are way older than me. Pull up that pic again. C’mon, I don’t look that old.”

The photo was back on Molly’s phone in seconds, and she zoomed in close, just as I had earlier.

“I mean...” I took in their handsome faces one more time and reluctantly shut my mouth. Older than me or not, they were two fine male specimens.

The last time I'd hooked up with anyone was a few weeks before I'd become an orphan, and the random college student I'd picked up at a party—Riley? Robby?—looked nothing like these guys.

“Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm going to look it up.” Molly pulled the phone away, and I felt a pinch of displeasure. They were nice to look at.

“Okay, so they're all in their late twenties or early thirties. It says they released their first album ten years ago, so you were in middle school then. Never mind, I doubt you'd have met them.”

They did what I couldn't.

The thought entered my mind like an unexpected breeze. They'd left this place to chase after their dream of making music when they were no more than teenagers. And now look at them—successful, handsome, probably fulfilled artistically. They'd lost someone close to them, but hell, that was life. I wondered if it had been smooth sailing for them from day one, or if they'd struggled. If they ever got discouraged. If they knew how to shrug off a rejection and move on.

I sighed into my glass, now empty. There was no point in letting my mind go there. It would only make me miserable. I'd given up on my dream of a career in music a long time ago, and now there was no time for what-ifs. Now, music was just for fun, a hobby. I'd never let myself take it so seriously again.

After watching a few episodes of an old sitcom with Molly, I was ready to crash for the night, but I still needed to call Liam and Elly.

In my room, I picked up my leather-bound notebook and flipped through until I found the messy scribbled set-list for tomorrow. It looked pretty darn good to me, a mix of classic rock, 90s metal, and some newer stuff. Things that people would recognize and be able to jam to.

I took out my phone, intending to listen to one of the songs I had picked for tomorrow, but instead, my mind drifted back to the conversation with Molly. Bleeding Moonlight. *God, I hadn't listened to their stuff in years.* They'd been one of my favorite bands when I was deep in my guitar obsession, but that was years ago.

I typed in their name and scrolled down to their very first album. The familiar cover image took me right back to when I'd begged my parents to buy the CD for my birthday. When they'd obliged, I'd listened to the album on repeat for a month straight.

It was so long ago that I couldn't name all the songs, but when I pulled up

the song list, I recognized one immediately.

“The Thing About You” started with a harsh guitar riff. It didn’t sound great coming from my phone, so I reached for the green aux cord and hooked it up to my speaker, letting the melody fill the room.

I fell back onto my bed. It really was like traveling back in time. All the memories collecting dust in my psyche shook themselves off and began to dance inside my head.

I’d sit in this very room for hours after school every day, strumming the guitar and fingering chords until my fingers hurt. I’d been so excited when my dad bought me my first electric. It was a Gibson Epiphone, and it had been my most prized possession until I’d upgraded to a Les Paul the year of my audition. Dad would pop his head in when he got home every night to listen to me play, his enthusiastic reactions embarrassing and delighting me at the same time. If I’d known then how little time we had left, I would have played for him more often.

I cleared my throat in an attempt to get rid of the sudden tightness. Thinking back to how my parents encouraged my interest in music always made me emotional. They’d done so without fail—even before I had begun to dream of Julliard. When I was ten, I’d started my first band with Naomi, my childhood friend. I had a kid-sized acoustic guitar, and she got her parents to buy her a drum kit that was more of a toy than an instrument. We’d jam in the garage on the weekends, causing my neighbor, Mrs. Dorin, to complain to my mom about the constant noise. Mom had pacified her with cookies and never asked us to stop.

“The Thing About You” ended, and I sat up, reached for the Les Paul in the corner of my room, and turned on my amp to the lowest level. Even though I hadn’t remembered this song until a few minutes ago, my fingers appeared to have a much finer memory. I’d practiced this song over and over again until I’d been close to perfect. All these years later, the chords and even the guitar solo at the end, came to me with ease. Fuck, it was an excellent song.

I listened to it a few more times, going over the nuances of the guitar and the tone of the vocalist. I wanted to play it tomorrow. Sure, it was a bit heavier than our usual stuff, but Molly was right. These guys were the biggest thing to ever come out of this town of forty thousand people. The crowd would recognize it, and even if they didn’t, it was a damn good song.

I penciled it in right before the original I wanted to play and dialed Liam

and Elly.

Liam picked up first. "Hey, Ade, what's going on?"

"Hello?" Elly's voice sounded a moment later.

"Hey, guys, sorry for calling a bit late. Wanted to run something by you for tomorrow."

"Cool, what's up?" Elly asked.

"Two ideas. You guys remember Bleeding Moonlight? They're a heavy metal band, they're from around here."

"Yeah, of course," Liam said. "They were on the news a few weeks ago. One of their members died."

"Right, so I heard." Apparently, I was the only one tragically behind on all the depressing town gossip. "Molly was talking to me about them today, and I listened to a few of their old songs just now. I think we should play one tomorrow. 'The Thing About You.' It's a good one, and it might be a crowd-pleaser if they're back on people's minds."

"Dun dun dun, duun duun," Elly hummed. "Yeah, I remember that one. It's old, but their newer stuff is way more technical, so this one would work better for us. I'm into it."

"I need to listen to it. Give me a few minutes," Liam said before lapsing into silence. A moment later, I heard the song playing on his end through what sounded like his laptop speakers. My fingers went back to my guitar, fingering the chords along with the music.

"The solo is pretty hard. You think you can take that one, Ade?" Liam asked.

"Yeah, I can lead on this one," I offered, excitement bubbling in my gut. For the band, I mostly played rhythm guitar, given that I also sang on most songs. Whenever I played lead, the instrument weaved deeper into my soul and my mind, demanding more and more of my attention. But I was over that kind of a commitment to something that would never pay off.

"Bass sounds simple enough. We'll need to raise the octave, I think," Elly said.

"And I can do the backup vocals," Liam offered.

"Sounds perfect. We can toy around with it a bit tomorrow at Mason's."

"Cool. Great idea, Ade. I think it'll be a hit with the crowd."

"What was the other thing?" Liam asked, turning off the music on his end.

"I wanted to play 'Green Roses' near the end. Maybe second last? It fits

the mood of the set, and it will be a nice way to break up ‘The Thing About You’ and ‘Crosstown Traffic.’”

“Yeah, we could,” Liam said with little enthusiasm. “Though most people are there to hear songs they know.”

“It’ll be a good bridge though,” Elly countered. “It’s a great tune, Ade. I like what you’ve done with it.”

I chewed on my lip, grateful we weren’t doing this over video call. Like most of the songs I’d written in the past two years, it was about my parents. I didn’t—couldn’t—talk about their deaths very well, but I could package up fragments of my feelings in my music. The lyrics were about love and loss and all the things that don’t pan out like we want them too. I’d written the guitar parts and vocals, and while the band had filled in the gaps, it was my baby. Most of our originals were.

“I think it’s a great song,” Liam chimed in, probably worried I’d taken offense at his initial response. “I’m just, you know, thinking of what the audience wants. But if you want to play it, let’s do it.”

I fingered the tear in my jeans. If we played this song and the crowd didn’t respond well, it would be on me, that was clear enough. But what was the point of writing music if no one ever heard it?

“Thanks, guys. I want to play it. I think it’ll be well received.”

“Sure,” Liam agreed, his voice light. “Sounds like a plan.”

When we ended the call, I collapsed on the bed, a gust of air escaping my lungs. Sometimes these conversations were just like the goddamn college audition. Me trying to share something important with someone who might not give a damn. I don’t know why I kept writing stuff. No one else in the band really cared to do it, but for me, it wasn’t a choice. I just had crap that needed to come out, and when the seed of an idea made its way into my mind, it wouldn’t get the hell out until I planted it into existence. The urge didn’t come all that often anymore, not like it had in my teenage years, but it had never fully gone away.

Not yet, at least.

ADELINE

THE BARNYARD WAS a fifteen-minute drive from Mason's house. We piled into his mom's minivan around eight pm, all of us equal parts nervous and excited. The practice session had gone well, and I felt as confident as I ever had about a set.

The large barn stood like a beacon on the side of the highway, lights strung up all along its edges, making it impossible to miss. We pulled into the parking lot, taking the spot closest to the back entrance. It was a mild summer night, but a vicious breeze made me glad I'd worn my trusty leather jacket.

It was just us tonight—no opening band. A three-hour performance, broken up into two seventy-five-minute sets, with a half-hour break in between. It was nights like these when all my training at the gym paid off. This kind of shit required serious stamina.

Bryan, the Barnyard's manager, stepped outside just as we unloaded Mason's drum set.

"There you are. How's it going?" He gave me a warm smile through his thick gray beard.

"Good," I responded, going in for a quick hug. Bryan had been hooking us up with gigs for years from when he'd worked at the Horse's Hoof, a popular local bar. I knew that our invitation to play here was mostly due to his patronage.

"Should be a hell of a night. It's getting busy already, and it's not even past nine."

"Fuck yeah," Mason said, stretching his hand toward Bryan for a fist bump. "Adeline put together a tight set. We're pretty pumped."

The back of the Barnyard smelled like a typical concert hall—spilled beer, lingering cigarette smoke, and old sweat. I took a deep breath, because I was a weirdo, and to me this lethal combination was better than any cologne. Instantly, I felt at home.

The stage didn't have a curtain, but the lights were dimmed so that when we got up there to set our things up, we were no more than moving shadows. Bryan wasn't kidding, the place was busy tonight. Angry punk rock played over the speakers, drowning out the cacophony of voices. I tore my eyes away from the frothing crowd, knowing that lingering on it would make my heart race. This close to showtime, I had to keep my head on straight.

With soundcheck done, all that was left was a quick pep talk with the band. We huddled in a circle behind the stage.

“Let’s crush it tonight,” I said, looking at all of them one by one. I got a mixture of grins and anxious smiles in response. “It’s a packed crowd, and we’re gonna give ’em a hell of a time. Yeah?”

“Damn right!” Mason clapped his palm against the top of my back. A few more friendly claps later, we were ready to go.

The guys and Elly went out first, grabbing their instruments and doing a final check on my guitar. I had a few seconds for my ritual. It was simple. I cut off whatever thoughts were in my head—any doubts, nerves, anxiety—as if pulling a plug from a wall socket. Gone. I let out a long breath. There. Now I was ready to put on a show.

“Good evening! We are Through Azure Skies. You want to hear some music tonight?”

The crowd cheered in response, and more than a hundred pairs of eyes fixed on me and the band. I loved this moment, the awareness of us here onstage blooming across the sea of faces.

“One, two, one, let’s go!”

We kicked off our set without further ado, jumping into an energetic cover of “Cypress Grove” by Clutch. As we often had to do, we played it in a different key so that my higher voice fit better with the music. I loved putting my own spin on the songs we played. It kept it fun for us and surprised the audience.

The crowd began to move before us, heads swaying to the music pouring out of our instruments. I strummed the chords on my guitar as I sang, liking the sound of my voice tonight. I’d warmed up for a while before we left for the venue, knowing that singing for nearly three hours in one night was gonna be a marathon. The first song ended to enthusiastic applause. So far so good.

“Thank you! Let’s see how you like this next one.”

By the time the break came, my skin prickled with sweat, but I was on top of the world.

“You guys are awesome. Grab some drinks, and we’ll be back in thirty,” I said to the crowd with a huge grin on my face. My gaze found Liam, who’s expression matched my own. We placed our instruments in their stands and walked offstage.

“Damn, these folks are loving it!” Mason said excitedly once we were

well out of sight. “The energy tonight is amazing.”

“Fucking electric,” I agreed. “This might be the best show we’ve ever played.”

“Knock on wood,” Elly said, lifting her fisted hand and making a show of looking for a wooden surface.

I laughed at her and walked over to a small cooler filled with beer and water. I didn’t usually drink when we performed so the alcohol wouldn’t irritate my throat, but fuck it. Tonight, I was killing it on that stage, and a single beer wasn’t going to change that.

Mason collapsed on a torn-up leather couch, his dirty-blond hair sticking to his forehead. He pulled his plaid shirt open to reveal a white tank top drenched with sweat and chugged a bottle of water. “I think I sweated out about a thousand calories out there.”

I sat down by his side. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does.”

“Shit, I think I dropped my phone onstage,” Liam said, looking around before walking back out on the darkened stage.

I pulled out my phone to check for messages. Molly’s name glowed on the screen.

“Own it, sis! Love you! Proud of you!”

I snorted to myself. Of course, my seventeen-year-old sister was telling me that she was proud of me.

Mason peeked over my shoulder. “How’s Mol doing? She excited to come to Northeastern with me?”

I nudged him away with my elbow. “She’s fine, and I’d encourage you to rethink the phrasing of that question. She’s not going there *with* you.”

He responded with an easy laugh. “Technically, I am going to be driving her there. That’s all I meant.”

“Sure,” I said, shaking my head. “And I remember just how eager you were to play driver when I asked. My sister isn’t one of those girls you like to pick up at pit parties, so you better watch yourself.”

A rosy tint appeared on Mason’s cheeks even as he rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, who do you take me for? Mol and I go way back. I’m just excited I’ll get to see her friendly face on campus.”

I nudged him again, harder this time. “Well, if that’s the case, I’m trusting you to keep an eye on her. You’ll be my eyes on the ground.”

He shrugged with a laugh and ruffled my curls that had grown even more

voluminous in the heat of the venue. Before he could respond, Liam rushed back into the room, his face pale.

Something was wrong.

COLE

On the drive over to the venue, for the hundredth time in the past few weeks, I wondered if we'd made a mistake deciding to stick around River Valley after Charlie's funeral. In my mind, it was the lesser of two evils. We could either remain in a place full of painful memories or admit defeat and say goodbye to our band. I wasn't used to making these kinds of decisions, but at the time, I'd been the only one who would.

Ezra leaned his head against the window of the car, his eyes seemingly fixed on the blurry outline of trees on the side of the highway. These days, when I looked at him, I struggled to recognize my old friend. His smiles faded more quickly, as if he couldn't quite hold on to whatever it was that made him laugh. My invitations to hang out sat unread and unanswered on his phone until all I could do was show up at his door. I expected this kind of behavior from Abel, but from Ezra...He turned, and his eyes met mine. I glanced away, unable to deal with the hollow emptiness I saw inside.

I'd seen that same emptiness in Charlie's eyes sometimes, but it had disappeared whenever we came to River Valley. Despite being from Michigan, he had loved this place more than the rest of us combined. Loved might be the wrong word. He'd been obsessed with this town because of the significance it held for the band.

"This is where it all started," he'd often say as we drove past the sign: *Welcome to River Valley. Population 40,560.*

Back then, I'd never thought that this might be the place where it all would end.

I think Charlie had felt like he'd missed out on something important by not being here at the beginning. Whenever we'd come back, he'd wanted us to show him all the spots we'd spent time in growing up. Where we first met. The place that inspired the name for the band. The bar where we first performed. To him, our memories were precious gems, and he'd been an avid collector. We knew he'd want to be buried here. In his death, he'd finally get his unspoken wish and become a part of Bleeding Moonlight's history in River Valley.

"Fuck, I almost forgot this place existed," Silas said from the front seat as the lit-up facade of the venue came into view.

The Barnyard.

It looked exactly as I remembered it. The current manager, Bryan, was an old acquaintance of mine and had invited us to see a local cover band.

“They’re good,” he’d promised over the phone when we’d spoken a few days ago. “They’ve really found their groove in the past year.”

I was desperate to do something fun with the guys to help us find *our* groove once again, so I’d told him we’d be there.

“Charlie loved cover bands,” Silas added as the driver pulled into the parking lot, and I let out a frustrated groan.

“Dude, c’mon. We agreed to keep it light. I didn’t work on convincing Abel and Ezra to finally come out for you to ruin the mood before we even get into the venue.”

Silas grunted something vaguely apologetic.

Abel, sitting on my other side, stayed silent but his lips curved into a frown. Our lead singer hadn’t said much in the days since Charlie’s death. It was like his signature anger, the force that had always been bubbling just below the surface in him, had been replaced with something even more potent. I never thought I’d wish for him to lash out, to snap and say something harsh to Silas, to do anything besides maintaining the silence that emitted from him like toxic fumes.

I knew Abel wasn’t happy being here, but at this point, I didn’t care. Despite agreeing to come to this show a few days ago, he’d tried to flake when we got to his house. It had taken an hour for me to convince him otherwise, and now we were very late.

Was I a fool to hope that tonight might bring back some degree of normalcy? That a simple night out to hear live music could remind all of us why we’d embarked on this journey together more than ten years ago?

Our driver, Leo, parked in front of the venue, and we piled out of the car one by one. I pulled him aside when he got out. “It’s a local band performing for a small crowd. Bryan says there’ll be a hundred people, tops. Having you there will only bring more attention.”

Leo pursed his lips. He doubled as our bodyguard at the insistence of our record label, but I knew that his presence irritated Abel. The singer hated having a handler, which is what he called Leo and any of the other bodyguards.

“I’m supposed to go with you,” he said in a low voice.

I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. He was just trying to do his job, but I knew he’d put Abel even more on edge, and that’s exactly what I

was trying to avoid.

“This isn’t LA, Leo. You’ve seen how calm it’s been these few weeks.”

At this, his frown softened. He knew I was right. “All right,” he responded gruffly. “I’ll be waiting in the car.”

I shook his hand in gratitude and headed in after the rest of the guys.

Inside, the Barnyard was lit with soft-orange lights. Its walls were plastered with old concert posters, and the stage sat empty. We must have arrived between sets. The space in front of the stage was full of people, and I wondered for a second if I had underestimated the size of the crowd earlier. It seemed like this cover band was pretty popular. We weaved our way to the bar to grab some beers, paid, and managed to get closer to the stage before we were recognized by a dude in a Metallica T-shirt and an enormous beard that put Silas’s to shame.

“Hey, sorry for your loss. I’ve been a fan for years. Could I get a picture and an autograph?”

“Thanks, man.” I smiled and shook his outstretched hand before giving Abel and Ezra a nervous look over my shoulder. This was the first time the two of them were meeting fans after weeks of self-imposed isolation in their homes. To my relief, both of them wore expressions that were only a little tense, and as I stepped away from the man, they moved to greet him.

Silas’s hand landed on my shoulder. “He’s still got it,” he said, nodding toward Ezra. Our drummer had always had a way with our fans, and sure enough, within seconds, the fan was chuckling at some joke with him.

We signed the first thing we could find—a paper coaster—and posed for a quick photo. The man thanked us and walked away, only to reveal that a small line had formed behind him.

We shared a quick look and got to work. The faster we managed to sign everything people had for us, the more time we’d hopefully have to enjoy the show.

ADELINE

“What’s up?” I asked Liam, standing.

“Where is Elly?”

“She was just here, must be taking a piss or something. What’s wrong?”

Liam’s brows were furrowed. “Bleeding Moonlight is here. They’re in the crowd.”

I shook my head even as my heart began beating faster. “You sure? How could you even tell?”

“They must have arrived after our first set. They’re just to the left of the stage. The four of them are all here and there’s a line of people waiting for autographs. I recognized them immediately because I looked them up again last night after we talked.”

“Well, that’s awkward,” Elly sounded from behind, her arm leaning against the doorway.

“Yeah. A cover band performing their original right in front of them? Makes me fucking cringe inside,” Liam added.

Mason sat up, leaning his elbows on his knees, his face a mask of concern. “Should we cut it?”

I ran a hand through my hair as my pulse pounded in my ears. I could tell this development was freaking them out, but I wasn’t gonna let this happen. We were on a roll tonight, and this was not going to ruin it. I was the defacto leader of the band, and it was my job to whip them into shape, even though we were just a cover band that no one took all that seriously.

No one but you, said that little voice in my head again.

Placing my palms on Elly’s and Liam’s shoulders, I looked at Mason. “We got this. We’re not changing the set list because Bleeding Moonlight showed up halfway through our show. Hell to the fucking no. Pretend they’re not there. There are over a hundred other people that we’re performing for.” They made me sweat for a few moments before finally nodding in agreement.

Liam let out a long breath. “You’re right, Ade. Let’s do this.”

Despite putting on a confident face for the guys, my insides were roiling. Everything I’d told them was true, but the thought of playing lead guitar in front of the dudes who’d written “The Thing About You” was more than a little mortifying.

When Elly, Liam, and Mason walked out onstage before me, I covered

my face with my palms and took a deep breath. *Just stop thinking. Cut that shit off and be in the moment.*

I saw them as soon as I walked up to my guitar. Four guys in total, with the Viking dude from the picture Molly had shown me towering above the rest. Beside him was a long-haired blond that I recognized as the lead singer. They were constantly moving, blocked by people coming up to chat to them, so I couldn't get a good view of their faces.

Stop it.

Right. I was here to perform, and I needed to get the audience's attention away from these spotlight hogs and back onto my band. I motioned to the soundcheck guy that we were ready, and he lowered the punk rock music.

"How you all doing?" I shouted into the crowd. "Ready for some more music?"

The crowd let out scattered whoops and cheers, quieter than before. From my vantage point up onstage, I could see just how many people were craning their necks to look at the newly arrived celebrities.

Nah, this wasn't gonna fly. I riffed on my guitar, drawing more attention. "I said, are ya'll ready for more?"

The response was louder this time. I grinned at the audience. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the members of Bleeding Moonlight turning to face the stage. "That's what I like to hear. We're Through Azure Skies and this is 'New Fang.'"

We jumped right into our heavier version of the song by Them Crooked Vultures. I loved playing and singing this one, and halfway through, I was nearly back to the high I'd had before. Performing was my drug of choice. There were few things in life that made me feel this alive.

I moved across the small stage with confidence, my shoulders back, and my head up high. In the first hour, I'd tried to conserve my energy, but now I could really leave it all on the stage. If I collapsed at the end of our set, that was fine by me. As long as we left people saying we'd put on a good show.

We finished the song to decent applause and jumped right into the next one. As we played the intro, my gaze caught on the four guys down on the left. Their attention was fixed on the stage. They were all... stunning. The Viking was looking directly at me, his deep-set, hooded eyes appraising as he took me in. Was he assessing my playing? Fuck. I averted my gaze, moving up to the mic for the vocal part.

I didn't glance in their direction again, not when that one look had been

nearly enough to throw me off. I wasn't starstruck, not when I hadn't thought about them in years until last night, but at one point in my life, their music had meant something to me, and that kind of shit stayed deep in your bones.

Halfway through, I paused for a moment to peel off the leather jacket that was sticking to me like second skin. I was working up a real sweat by jumping around and moving non-stop.

When I turned back to the mic, I smiled at the crowd. "We've got Mason on the drums. Liam on guitar. Elly on bass," I said, pausing between each introduction for the crowd to respond. "And I am Adeline. I hope you're enjoying your night."

Loud whistles and whoops came from the left, drawing my attention. The other guy from the photo, the shorter one with brown hair, was giving me a panty-melting grin, clapping above his head. His wild curls were whipping around his head, reminding me of my own. When he saw me looking at him, he wiggled his brows. I tore my eyes away, ignoring the way my pulse sped up, and jumped into the next track.

When we were halfway through the song that came before the Bleeding Moonlight cover, and while Liam did his solo, I racked my brain for what to say. Should I intro the song? What the fuck should I say? If I didn't say anything, would that be even more awkward? Like an elephant in the room. But how was I supposed to introduce it? Do I acknowledge they were right fucking here?

I bit my lip as I strummed my guitar. A moment later, the answer came to me. I'd stick to the plan. When the time came, I gripped the mic, letting the guitar hang off my shoulder by the strap.

"We got three more songs for you. This next one was one of my favorites growing up."

Mason started pounding the drums. Seconds later, Liam and Elly joined in, and the aggressive melody filled up the barn like it was a balloon.

I didn't look for their reaction. The guitar strings were buttery under my fingers as I launched into the melody. I headbanged in time with the beat until it was my turn to sing the chorus.

This song built up to a crescendo, and I let myself get swept away by it. My fingers danced across the strings, the movement pure instinct and muscle memory, and I closed my eyes as the solo began.

I loved performing, being up onstage, singing and jamming, but playing lead in front of all these people was like ascending into the clouds. As I

shredded through the solo, this feeling of being outside of my body spread through me, and I swear I could see myself from some vantage point above. It was fucking spiritual.

The solo slammed to an end, and I crashed back to reality. The crowd was going wild, and in that moment, I knew we were right to stick to our original plan. The final chorus was all me on the vocals, and as I sang the last few lines, I couldn't resist the urge to look at the guys we were playing tribute to.

I saw three grins, three heads bobbing up and down, their fists raised in devil horns. The Viking was headbanging like a mad man, his luscious hair billowing through the air like a flame. But where was the lead singer? He wasn't standing beside the others. I scanned the crowd and spotted him leaning against the bar, a beer in his hand. He was staring at me, a fierce expression on his face. He looked pissed.

The song ended, and the crowd roared in delight, but a cold sensation spread through me. Why was he looking at me like that? Had my playing sucked?

Nah, he was the only one who wasn't clapping. Was I really going to let one guy ruin this for me?

I grabbed the mic, making a point to plaster a pleased expression on my face. "This next one is an original. It's called 'Green Roses.'"

COLE

We got through signing stuff for about five people when we heard the cover band come back on.

“How you all doing? Ready for some more music?” a female voice asked over the microphone.

I cringed at the muted response, fully aware that people were whispering and looking at us instead of the band onstage. Whoever was at the mic seemed to share my thoughts, because seconds later, an aggressive guitar riff forced me to hand the pen back to the girl in front of me.

“Sorry, we want to watch the show. Come find us after?” I said to the handful of folks still around us, and to my relief, they began to disperse. Silas gave me a grateful look and turned to face the stage.

“I said, are ya’ll ready for more?”

I didn’t know who I was expecting to see onstage, but it sure as hell wasn’t her. My breath caught at the sight of the stunning brunette grinning tightly at the audience. I took in the bouncy curls that fell into her face, the lithe shape of her legs under the skin-tight jeans, the sensual curve of her red lips...

Holy shit.

The crowd cheered with more enthusiasm, and I joined it, albeit a bit late.

“That’s what I like to hear. We’re Through Azure Skies and this is ‘New Fang.’”

The song began, and she proceeded to completely dominate the stage. Time blurred and lost shape as I watched her move across the stage with confident ease. Her voice, while pleasant and well developed, wasn’t particularly attention grabbing, but her playing was a whole other story.

She was changing the chords, adding certain embellishments to them that the original lacked, and making the song her own. Despite playing rhythm, she was the more interesting guitarist onstage by a long shot.

I couldn’t look away. I could hear the drummer pounding out a solid rhythm, and the other guitarist jumped into a decent solo, but my gaze was fixed on her, held captive by the gravitational force that seemed to extend from her into the crowd.

When she began the next song, she looked directly at us, her expression tense. I wondered if she was irritated with us for showing up here and

drawing attention away from her band. If she was, I'd be willing to do anything to get her forgiveness. I'd fall on my knees and kiss her feet if that would bring a smile to her face. Her eyes met mine, and then she quickly turned away.

Silas had moved to stand by my side and nudged me. "Dude."

"I know."

The wheels in my head were turning, and I'd bet anything that Silas was thinking the exact same thing.

She could be the answer to one of the two problems that had been swirling above us like vultures over the past weeks. I glanced to my left and saw that Ezra, and even Abel, were watching her intently. Hope, a foreign feeling, swelled inside my chest.

Ezra caught my eye and shuffled closer. "She's good."

I nodded and smiled at him. Behind Ezra, Abel was watching her play, his expression unreadable. I wished I knew what was going through his head.

Despite being occupied with serious thoughts, my dick twitched when she took off her leather jacket and revealed tightly toned arms. I rubbed at my chin, my hands clammy from the adrenaline coursing through my veins. Should I be embarrassed about being this affected by a woman who was more than twenty feet away? I sensed that I wasn't the only one when I noted a slight blush on Silas's cheeks.

She told the audience her name.

Adeline.

Silas and I cheered as loud as we could, Ezra joining us a second later. I whistled to get her attention. My effort was rewarded with an unimpressed look.

Ouch.

Ezra elbowed me with a smirk, and I returned the gesture with a huge grin. He was getting into the show and seemed more alive than I'd seen him in weeks. We headbanged and danced to the music, cheering when the band played some of our favorites.

Silas nearly choked on his beer when a few songs later, she started to play the intro to 'The Thing About You.'

One of her favorites growing up, huh?

"We need to talk to her after the show," he stated, and I didn't think anyone would disagree with him at this point, not even Abel. She nailed the solo as if she'd been playing this song for years, and my arms pimpled with

gooseflesh. It was always exciting to see a masterful take on our music, and she was utter perfection.

They finished our track to wild applause and launched into an original. I couldn't explain it, but I was sure Adeline had written this song. Something about the way she sang it, as if every word had a hidden meaning, reached right inside me and tugged on my heart.

*“Been walking on a road to nowhere,
Green roses lining my way,
Won't you come and see,
Where the path will take me.”*

What was she singing about? I wanted to discover her, to learn everything there was to know about the life she had lived and the dreams she was chasing. When she announced their last song, I felt a twinge of regret. I really wished Abel hadn't made us miss their first set.

Twisting my head around, I looked for the lead singer, but he was no longer standing with us. How the fuck was he missing this?

Silas caught my eye. “He left during ‘The Thing About You.’ He knows this is a sign.”

The corners of my lips inched up. A sign we'd record this album after all.

ADELINE

“I THINK I’m going to sleep for twenty-four hours when I get home,” Mason commented between gulps of water when we made it offstage.

“Aren’t you supposed to be young and springy?” I asked, fanning myself with my palms. My white shirt was drenched from sweat and the water I’d poured on it once we’d gotten backstage. We needed to get back out there and grab our equipment, but first we needed to catch our breath.

“Nineteen is the new thirty.” Mason laughed.

Liam was texting someone on his phone, probably his fiancée, Vanessa. She usually came to support him, but she was seven months pregnant now and not in the mood for a musty, loud concert hall.

“Okay, I’m going out there, but I want to be tucked into my bed within the hour,” I said over my shoulder, moving toward the stage.

“I’ll be there in two minutes,” Elly groaned from the couch.

The Barnyard was emptying out, everyone eager to get out now that last call had passed. I walked across the stage to my guitar and started unplugging it from the amp.

“Great show,” a deep, pleasant voice sounded from below. I craned my neck to look past the stage and blinked. The grinning guy from Carly’s pic was staring up at me, his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

“Thanks,” I said once I got over the initial surprise of seeing him. His smile grew, and instead of walking away, he placed a palm on the stage and jumped up to kneel in front of me. I stood up and took a step back.

“I’m Cole,” he said, straightening up and offering me an outstretched palm.

“Adeline,” I responded, giving him a firm shake. His palm was calloused and cool. Up close, he was beyond attractive—lean and muscular with a tightly cropped beard and hazel eyes that lit up when he smiled, which seemed to be always. His lips had a perfect Cupid’s bow that I wanted to trace with my fingers.

Get it together, Adeline.

“It was cool of you to play one of our tracks.”

I laughed awkwardly. “We had the set planned a day in advance. I didn’t expect the original songwriters to show up.”

His eyes grew wide, “Oh, yeah, of course. I hope us being here didn’t

intimidate you or anything. If it did, it certainly didn't show. That was one of the best covers I've ever heard."

My cheeks heated. "Thanks," I said and bent back down to finish what I was doing.

"So, you all are from around here?" Cole asked.

"Yeah, born and raised," I said, glancing back up at him.

"Cool, same with us. Hey! Come up here."

I jerked up with my unplugged guitar and looked around in alarm. Two more guys were walking toward the stage, weaving through the lingering crowd and stopping to sign autographs for those that came up to ask.

Shit, where were the rest of my band? I needed some serious backup. I was not ready to chat with the members of Bleeding Moonlight, not when the topic of conversation was going to be our cover. Even though I felt pretty good about how we'd played, the image of the lead singer staring me down from across the floor had made my blood run cold.

The guy I recognized as the drummer was next to jump up on the stage. "Hey, I'm Ezra," he said with a friendly wave. My attention snagged on the color of his eyes—a striking, clear blue that could have been plucked straight from the sky. His sandy-red hair was cut close on the sides but longer at the top. "You guys were great," he said with a gentle smile. "We haven't been back to this place in ages, and it looks like we picked a good night to come."

"Thank you, it means a lot," I responded. Maybe they were just being nice, but getting a compliment from a serious musician was a big deal for me.

"Do you usually do covers? I liked the original a lot, too," Cole said, his right hand scratching at his chest.

"Yeah, we're mostly just a cover band," I explained. "I write a few originals when inspiration strikes, but it's just for fun."

Cole furrowed his brows. "I think you guys have a lot of potential. You really lit up when you played your own song."

I could have hugged Mason when he strutted out from backstage, saving me from responding to that comment. Did I really seem that different playing my own material? Enough for a stranger to pick up on it?

"What's up, guys?" Mason asked, surprise in his voice.

"Hey, man, we were just telling Adeline how much we liked your set," Ezra said, stretching out his palm to him. "I'm a drummer, too," he added. "You nailed the drum track on 'The Thing About You.'"

Mason beamed at the compliment, and I met his expression with an

encouraging smile. He was talented, and I kept telling him he was still young enough to pursue music in earnest. Maybe talking to a professional drummer would get him more excited about the idea.

The two of them began to chat about Mason's drum kit, while Cole and I stood facing each other in momentary silence. He gave me a crooked smile. "Silas, our guitar player, really wanted to meet you after the show. He said you have serious talent."

"Damn right, I did," a deep voice boomed from below the stage, and I turned to face the Viking as he clambered up to us with unexpected grace. He had a long beard that sneaked past the neck of his T-shirt.

When he took a step toward me, I became so distracted by his superhero physique that my worry about what he thought about my playing momentarily moved into the background. He towered over me at a height of at least six four or six five. Trim waist, two boulder-like shoulders, and a wide, pumped-up chest that lightly stretched the fabric of his shirt directly at my eye level. I couldn't help but wonder how he'd look without it on. When I forced my gaze back up to his face, I caught him looking down at my wet white T-shirt. I put my free hand on the opposite shoulder, cursing myself for not changing after the show.

His dark eyes met mine without a hint of embarrassment. "You're a badass player."

Relief swept through me, and I gave him a tentative smile. He really thought I was good?

"What the hell are you doing playing rhythm on most songs?" he asked, completely unaware of how loaded that question was for me.

"It's just what I'm most comfortable with," I responded, my throat suddenly feeling dry.

"I wanted to see you show off. You should lead more," Silas stated in a definitive tone.

"I switch on and off, but I prefer rhythm," I said, my hands flexing at the lie, but this was a stranger who was digging way too deep without realizing it, and I wasn't going to spill my life story to him.

He raised one arched eyebrow, as if smelling the lie, but he held his tongue. "Adeline, right?"

I nodded.

"I liked your take on our song a lot, and we happen to be looking for a session guitarist for our new album. Do you want to come in for a day next

week and give it a go?”

I almost dropped my guitar. Here was this larger-than-life professional musician, checking me out, being sexier than anyone had any right to be, and asking me to help his famous band record an album. Did someone spike my beer earlier?

Cole, who'd been standing off to the side watching this bizarre interaction, jumped in. “Dude, you're like a freight train,” he joked, putting a hand on Silas's arm.

The tall man pursed his lips, but Cole continued, “You must be exhausted, Adeline. Why don't you give us your number, and one of us will send you a text with more details?”

“My number?” I asked in a thin voice.

“Yeah. Like, your phone number,” he clarified, giving me a funny look while pulling out his own phone out of his pocket.

“Right. Right. Um, okay, it's...” I rattled off my number, my head abuzz.

“Cool,” Cole said, the corner of his lips quirking up. “We'll be in touch and let you get back to packing up. It was great meeting you.”

“Yeah, you, too. See you around,” I said, and beelined off the stage.

Liam and Elly were still lying on the leather couch, both of them texting on their phones.

“Guys, what the hell?” I hissed at them while placing my guitar into its case. “You left Mason and I all alone and Bleeding Moonlight came up to talk to us.”

They scrambled to their feet, their eyes wide.

“Shit, were they cool? What did they say?” Elly asked.

My hand gripped the guitar case handle like a vise. “They're still out there on stage if you want to go talk. They were nice enough, said they liked the set. Look, I'm exhausted and...damp. I just need to get home. You okay if I head out and take a cab?”

“Yeah, sure,” Liam said. “Head on out, we'll wrap up here.”

I turned on my heel, grabbed my discarded leather jacket, and pushed through the backdoor leading to the parking lot, desperate for some fresh air to help clear my head.

The temperature had dropped, and I was shivering within seconds. I jogged to a cab parked across the lot, thanking my luck that one was still around.

As I climbed into the back of the car with my guitar, I noticed a male

figure standing alone in the half-empty lot smoking. The cab moved toward him, and despite the tinted glass, I recognized who it was. The lead singer of Bleeding Moonlight. The one who'd stared me down as I sang, and the only one who hadn't come up to talk to me tonight.

EZRA

“Damn it, Silas,” Cole cursed the guitarist as we exited the venue. “Couldn’t you have turned it down a tiny bit back there?”

Stepping off the curb into the parking lot, I took a deep breath and tilted my gaze up toward the stars that covered the night sky like a jeweled veil. There was not a cloud in the air, and even the light emitting from the Barnyard couldn’t dampen the sight. There were a lot of beautiful things about River Valley.

And a lot of ugly things, too.

Silas huffed. “I was speaking my mind. Is that not allowed?”

“Yeah, that’s all you do, speak your mind,” Cole retorted. “Sometimes, a more delicate approach is required.”

I wasn’t sure what they were talking about, but I could venture a guess. The night hadn’t played out like I was expecting, and for some time in there, while we were losing ourselves in the music, I had forgotten all the reasons I wasn’t supposed to be enjoying myself.

It was difficult to stay impartial while watching the thrill of playing music, of bringing chords and words to life, play out across her features. That woman. I knew that I would never forget her face.

I glanced back at Silas and Cole, and some old part of me stirred, suddenly curious. “What happened?”

Cole met my gaze and scratched at a spot in the center of his chest—his nervous tick. How many people out there knew their friends this well? I guess most people didn’t end up in jobs that required them to tour for months within a few feet of a childhood friend.

“Silas asked her to help us with the album,” he said.

Bingo. “She was a fortunate discovery, I’ll give you that,” I told him, keeping my voice neutral. Stumbling onto a talented guitarist just as we were about to give up on ever recording our last album? Some would consider that lucky. Too bad I’ve never believed in luck when it comes to music. At least, not in the traditional way.

In my experience, we made our own luck, and behind every “lucky” break, there were years of hidden work that people were all too willing to disregard. Dozens, if not hundreds, of failed attempts. Months and years filled with rejection that only a few managed to overcome.

That's why when I saw her onstage, I could hardly believe my eyes. We didn't have to work to find her. She'd simply...appeared. Then again, perhaps we'd already paid our dues in other ways.

"It's fine," Cole continued as we approached the parked SUV. "I got her number. I'll give her a call tomorrow and lay out the offer."

"What offer?" Abel drifted from around the car like a ghoul, his hood pulled up and a lit cigarette in his hand. He shouldn't be smoking, it was bad for his voice, but I held back the words that threatened to spill out of my mouth.

I wasn't playing that role anymore. Not for him. And not for anyone else in the band.

The singer wore a tense expression, his gaze darting between Silas and Cole. I hadn't noticed him leave the venue, but I hadn't been surprised to see him gone when the show ended. It seems that whatever effect the show had had on me hadn't extended to him.

"Dude, way to disappear like a goddamn ghost," Cole said, ignoring Abel's question and burrowing his hands in the pockets of his black jeans. "We talked to Adeline, the guitarist of the band. Would have been nice for you to meet her."

Abel's eyes narrowed. "Talked about what?"

The nighttime chill had long since gotten past my cotton T-shirt, but I knew this conversation couldn't happen in the car if we wanted to avoid an accident.

"You know what," Cole grit out. "We can't keep sitting around waiting for you to find someone. How many auditions have you held in the past two weeks?"

Zero. I'd bet anything I was right. When Abel had said that one of his conditions for recording this album was that he would be the one to find us a session guitarist, I knew the recording was unlikely to ever happen. He didn't want to do this with us. He'd said as much, but Cole and Silas wouldn't accept his words at face value.

"However many I deemed worth my time," the singer spit out, his fists curling by his sides.

This was normally where I'd interfere to defuse the situation, to help them see that we all wanted the same thing, that we were on the same team. Instead, I stood watching the scene play out in front of me in silence.

"Well, I think Adeline is more than worth our time," Cole retorted. "She

played our song up there. You would have heard it if you hadn't left."

"I couldn't listen to a botched rendition of a song I wrote."

Silas took a step toward Abel. "That's not true. They played it well."

Abel sneered, but Cole didn't give him a chance to argue. "I agree. You need to let her audition."

My heart rate spiked. Abel didn't take well to people telling him what to do, and this was going to blow up imminently.

After Charlie's death, I'd promised myself that I would take a backseat in the band going forward. I couldn't take that responsibility on anymore. But now, watching as two of my best friends were on the brink of doing something they'd regret, my body seemed to move between them on its own volition.

I stepped forward and turned to Abel, scanning him over. I may not have been as familiar with his idiosyncrasies as I was with Cole's, but I could tell that his temper was a taut string, ready to snap at the slightest of pressure. In the aftermath of Charlie's death, his list of triggers seemed to be constantly growing, so I wasn't surprised he didn't want to listen to one of Charlie's favorite songs played live. But his grief didn't excuse the fact that he'd been leading the guys on for the past few weeks. He must have known that Cole and Silas would eventually demand to take the search for a guitarist into their own hands.

Abel craned his neck to the side, keeping his gaze on Cole over my shoulder. "I don't need to do *shit*."

My palms landed on his arms. "Abel, look at me." After a long moment, the singer turned, his furious green eyes finding mine. "This was always going to happen," I told him in a firm tone. "Your process can't be a black box to the rest of the band. If you let her audition, you can have the final say, but you can't just dismiss someone we all think has potential."

I was giving him a way out, but if he recognized that, it didn't show. His upper lip was still curled in a sneer. "You, too? You're with them on this one?"

When did our band become an-us-versus-them situation?

When you let your bandmate overdose alone in his home instead of taking care of him like you should have.

The sadness came accompanied with sudden nausea. Unable to speak with my stomach churning, all I could do was nod. Abel ground his teeth before shrugging my hands off and getting into the car. When I looked back

at Cole, his expression was grateful. I shook my head. This had been a moment of weakness on my part. The way I felt about this album or this band hadn't changed. Cole, who knew me as well as I knew him, must have read my thoughts, because his face fell.

I'm sorry. But I can't do this anymore.

We climbed into the car, and Cole told Leo to take us to Abel's, signaling that the conversation wasn't yet over. Silas and I shared a look that showed we both knew this was going to be a long night, which was a mainstay in our communication lately. At least Abel didn't argue with our destination. That was a good sign.

A good sign for who? Do you even know what you want anymore?

The drive was silent, the four of us sitting mute while Leo kept the music off. At one point, I opened my mouth to request he put something on, but then I decided that would be admitting to how awkward I felt. How awkward we felt. And I wasn't quite ready to make that admission.

"I'm tired," Abel announced as we pulled up to his house.

"So am I," Cole retorted. "The faster we talk it out, the faster we can crash."

The house was an architectural marvel. A statement of how far Abel had come. He'd once told me that he often dreamed of his foster parents showing up here, not knowing that this was where he lived whenever he was in town. In his dream, they'd crane their necks to look inside, their faces painted with shock at the opulence their foster kid could now afford. He said their eyes would look hollow in the dream, and it was that detail that gave him the most satisfaction.

I shuddered as I stepped inside. His place was always so pristine that I felt like I was ruining some precious piece of art with my presence. Abel caught my subtle reaction and gave me a strange look, but I shook my head and moved to sit on the large U-shaped couch.

"All right," Cole began once we all sat down. "Abel, we got Adeline's number after Silas nearly scared her off by asking her to record the album with us. I'm going to call her tomorrow and ease her into the idea of coming to the studio."

The singer tipped a beer bottle into his mouth while glaring at Cole.

"It will be an audition," he said.

Cole groaned beside me. "Tonight might as well have been an audition. She passed with flying colors. You agreed to record this album because you

know Charlie would have wanted that, but now you're looking for any fucking excuse to delay."

Abel shook his head, but his gaze moved down to the ground. "Not true. I just want the best guitarist we can find. If I'm going to be producing this album, it needs to be on my terms."

"You're the one who wanted to produce it," Cole exclaimed. "We were all fine with working with Jeremy on this one."

We'd had a million versions of this conversation over the past few weeks.

"Charlie had a vision," Abel growled. "Only I understand the vision, so the only way we're making this album is if I have full creative control."

"Aren't you missing the part where she might not even be interested?" I interjected, giving Cole a pointed look. "Maybe Silas wasn't the one who scared her off. Maybe she just won't want anything to do with us."

Cole's back straightened. "Leave that part to me. I'm confident I can convince her to give it a try."

Silas nodded. "She's a talented guitarist. This would be a good opportunity for her."

"Yeah, her *talent* is what got your attention," Abel snapped. "You were all staring at her like she was a piece of prime meat at the butcher shop."

Cole glared at him. "Just because she's a beautiful woman, doesn't mean she's not a great musician."

"So you're not going to flirt with her if she agrees to record with us?"

"I didn't say that," Cole retorted with a sly smirk. "But my future flirting will be no deterrent from us recording a great album."

Abel turned toward me. "And you? Anything to add?"

My thoughts swirled. Abel and I had entered into an unspoken alliance over the past few weeks, both of us driven by a common desire to put Bleeding Moonlight to rest. I didn't have to guess at his motivations—he didn't think there was a band without Charlie. I wasn't so sure, but I had my own reasons to quit.

Still, tonight had loosened my conviction. I wouldn't admit it to the guys, but Adeline had made an impression on me that I couldn't quite shake. I couldn't explain it rationally. I just had this sense that something had brought her to us in this unlikely place for a reason, and dismissing it would be a mistake.

"I think if Cole manages to convince her to audition, we should give it a try," I offered, earning an eyeroll from Abel.

“Fine,” he spit out. “If it’s three against one, I’ll play along. But if she shows up and she’s not up to par, I’m not wasting another day on her. She gets one shot.”

Cole scoffed. “Jesus. With that attitude, I think we’re the ones who are going to get one shot with her.”

“Well, if she can’t handle one day with me, how the hell will she handle a full month?” Abel retorted.

“You will behave, Abel.” Silas’s voice was as sharp as a shard of glass.

Abel’s eyes burned a path across the room before landing on the guitarist. “I’ll do my very best.”

Silas opened his mouth to argue, but I caught his attention and silenced him with a look. I’ve gotten good at knowing when Abel will not be pushed further.

“It’s settled then,” I said, glancing between the guys. With a sharp exhale, Cole turned away from Abel and gave me a curt nod.

He rose from the couch and went into the kitchen. Silas followed him. Abel watched to see if I would, too, and his shoulders dropped a fraction when he realized that I had no plans to leave.

He finished off the last of his beer and placed the bottle on the ground at his feet. “You’ve never liked this place,” he said, leaning farther back into the couch.

I shrugged. “It’s too...cold.”

His brow arched. “I can turn the AC down.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s like a show home. Pristine and perfect. What if it showed more of your personality?”

The beer bottle clanked on the marble floor as Abel rose, apparently ready to retire for the night. “If I did that, you’d never want to step inside again.”

ADELINE

IT WAS past one when I finally made it home from the Barnyard. I placed my things on the floor of the living room and hopped in the shower to wash off the layers of sweat from my skin. The cascading water made for a nice soundtrack to replay the events of the night in my head.

We'd played a show at the Barnyard.

Bleeding Moonlight had showed up.

Silas had asked me to help them record an album.

An astounded laugh burst out of my lungs. What version of reality was this, and how did I get here?

He couldn't have been serious. I wasn't gonna get my hopes up and be all naive about it. The guy had checked me out, so maybe this was his version of a pickup line.

But what if it's real?

If there was even a chance that this was a real opportunity, I'd have to consider it. It would pay, I assumed, although I wasn't sure how well. Probably more than whatever we'd earned tonight.

Could I do it? I had listened to a few tracks off their last album last night, and they were pretty technical. I'd have to put in some serious practice if they wanted me to play songs like that. That meant dropping more shifts at the bar, and given that was the only place that paid me any real money, this had to be worth it. I pressed my palm against the shower tiles, placing my head directly under the shower. The water streamed over my face like a veil.

The most likely scenario was that I was never going to hear from them again. What were they even still doing here? The funeral was weeks ago, and somehow, I doubted they made a habit of spending their free time in River Valley. This all had to be a dumb joke.

I toweled myself off and glanced at the screen of my phone. There were no messages.

Padding to my room, I peeked inside Molly's room. She was sleeping with a small nightlight on by her window. My heart broke at the thought of her leaving so soon and me being in this big house all on my own. It would make sense to sell it and move into a smaller apartment when she was gone, but that was another future problem I didn't want to think about.

Finally making it to my bed, I wrapped the fluffy comforter around myself like a cocoon, and let my thoughts drift to the real highlight of the night. The cheers, the strings under my fingers, and that elusive feeling of being on top of the world.

"I can't believe you didn't even get a photo," Molly said as we sat around the kitchen table for breakfast the following morning. When she chastised me, she sounded just like Mom, her voice all low and clipped.

"My brain was fried, along with my body. I could barely get a sentence out," I explained, recalling my sorry physical state after the show.

"What a missed opportunity," she commented, shaking her head at my utter failure to get any Instagram content with the members of Bleeding Moonlight. "This is why I need to be there next time."

I sighed, my index finger rubbing against my brow. I hadn't told her about Silas's request, and I wasn't planning on doing so. I didn't get any texts, besides one from Liam to tell me that we'd made two hundred apiece last night, so I was confident at this point it had all been a joke.

"I'm going to hit the gym before my shift," I told her, eager to change the topic. "It's Sunday, so I'll be off at nine. Wanna catch a movie afterward?"

"Sorry, I'm having a sleepover at Lauren's. I told you a few days ago."

"Oh, right." I'd been too focused on the show for the past few days to remember. "Well, have fun. I'll see you tomorrow."

The gym was almost empty at one pm on a Sunday. I pushed myself to

get a hard workout in, knowing it would help me feel more normal. I'd woken up this morning with a strange mix of grogginess and confusion swirling in my head. If it weren't for the bizarre interaction with Silas, I would probably still be riding the residual high from the show, but instead, I was off-balance. My eyes kept snagging on the blank screen of my phone, each instance accompanied with an annoying prickle of disappointment. It didn't help that every time a particularly tall guy walked by my bench, my mind jumped to the guitarist.

After a quick shower, I left my damp hair down to air dry while I drove to the bar. Sunday's were usually pretty dead, so it would just be me and Jimmy, the cook, working. I popped by the kitchen to say hello when I arrived and then made my way to the bar.

A small trickle of regulars came in over the next few hours. I was wiping the counter after one of them left when I saw the door swing open out of the corner of my eye.

"You can sit anywhere you'd like," I said over my shoulder, turning to the sink to rinse off the cloth in my hands.

A stool scraped against the ground.

"What can I get you?"

"I'll take a pint of Stella and your real phone number."

I whipped around at that familiar deep voice. Cole sat at the bar, an easy smile stretched across his handsome face. He wore a cut-off band T-shirt, putting his muscled arms on display.

"What?" I asked, dumbstruck by his words.

"The number you gave us didn't work. We've been trying to call you all day," he explained, his eyes squinting under arched brows.

I swallowed. "I'm sorry. I must have said it wrong." Did I really screw that up? It was possible. I hadn't really been thinking straight at that point in the night.

Cole assessed my expression and seemed convinced I was telling him the truth. His shoulders dropped, and he shrugged, like it was no big deal. "Good thing we were able to get in touch with Bryan, and find out you work here. Thought I'd stop by in person so that we could chat."

My head was spinning. He was here to chat about what exactly? I remembered he'd ordered a beer and grabbed the tap to pour him one. His fingers touched mine when I handed the glass to him, and I pulled my hand away as if I'd been burned. I didn't know how to handle this situation.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized again. “Honestly, I didn’t think Silas was being serious last night.” Then I quickly added, “That’s what you want to talk about, right?”

He watched me as he took a sip of his beer, a smile never fully leaving his face. “I could tell he startled you. Silas comes on hard and strong when he sees something he wants.”

Warmth crept up my neck at that comment. I knew he didn’t mean it like that, but the memory of Silas’s overwhelming build did some crazy things to my insides.

“Are you really recording a new album?” I asked.

“Yeah. One of our members passed away recently. We’d finished writing an entire album right before he died, and we’ve decided to go ahead and release it. As a tribute of sorts.”

Despite the even delivery, I could see a flash of pain in Cole’s eyes as he talked about their late bandmate.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” Cole said, taking another long sip of his beer.

“For what it’s worth, I think it’s great you guys have found a way to honor him with your music. I’m sure he’d want the songs to be heard.” I offered him a smile that I hoped looked encouraging.

“I think so, too,” he said, a slight emphasis on the I. Did others in the band feel differently?

“But Charlie was a perfectionist,” Cole continued, “so if we screw it up, he’ll haunt us for the rest of our lives. You know, he joined the band last and didn’t play on our first album. We had decided that we wanted a second guitarist right before beginning to work on the second album, held auditions, and Charlie blew us away. We knew that without him, we’d be a worse band.”

I gave him a soft smile.

“Just like when we saw you last night and knew that we needed you to record this album.”

My face fell. They were so wrong about me. It would almost be comical if it weren’t so sad.

“Look, I am flattered,” I said, raising my palms up before putting them down on the counter in front of Cole. “Praise from you guys means a lot. But I’m an amateur. My own band is on its last legs. We’ve had a lot of fun with it over the past five years, but it’s time for all of us to move on. I have a little

sister who's going off to college, and I need to focus on finding a job that's gonna help me pay for all that."

"We'd pay you to record with us."

"For what, a month of work? What then? You're professionals. I'd need to spend most of my time learning and practicing your songs. That's time I could use to figure out something long-term for me."

Cole rubbed at his chest. "Why couldn't that be music? Recording an album with us would open a lot of doors. We could introduce you to folks in the industry, help you make connections..."

For some inexplicable reason, tears stung behind my eyes as I listened to his arguments. I didn't want to hear this. Didn't want him to plant any ideas about a career in music in my head. I'd done that once before, and all it had brought me was misery.

"You could meet people that you could start a new band with—"

"No, I can't," I cut him off mid-sentence. "I don't want to."

Cole's smile wavered at last. His face became contemplative. "Five thousand a week," he said after a pause. "If it takes a month, that's twenty thousand. What do you make here? Twelve bucks an hour with the tips? I don't know how many hours you work, but twenty grand has gotta be at least ten times that. After you finish with us, you'll easily be able to take some time off to figure out your next move."

I shut my mouth, which had drifted open as he'd talked. Twenty thousand was a lot. That would make a serious dent in Molly's tuition for next year, and maybe I could wait a bit on selling the house. Without that hanging over my head, I could afford to do some serious self-reflection and figure out what the hell I wanted to do with my life.

Cole placed his calloused palm on top of my hand, swallowing it almost entirely. I liked how warm he felt. His corded forearm caught my attention, sending a jolt of heat through me. I had a thing for guys with strong forearms, and Cole definitely fit that description.

Were they really going to pay me, a nobody, twenty thousand for a month of work?

"What do you say? Pretty good offer, isn't it? Good enough to get you to come for an audition tomorrow?"

And that's when my thoughts ground to a halt.

Cole's brows furrowed as he took in my expression. "What just happened?"

I pulled my hand out from under his, dropping my gaze to the ground as memories of my last audition came flooding back. No. I wasn't a frightened teenager anymore. I no longer froze when it came time to perform in front of people. But the word audition still sent my pulse racing, and my heartbeat pounded loudly in my head. I wiped my clammy hands on my jeans behind the counter, grateful that Cole couldn't see.

"Adeline?" His voice was laced with concern.

"I'm sorry. I..."

Was I really going to let this old fear stop me from trying out for a gig that would pay me this well?

"Look, the audition is just a formality," Cole added. "Abel missed a part of your set, so he wants to see you play some more of our stuff. It would just be a day of us rehearsing together. Easy-peasy."

My lungs expanded in relief. A rehearsal? That I could do. "So it's not going to be me, like, playing in front of all of you?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"No, no. Nothing like that. Just a casual day hanging out and jamming together." His smile was obviously meant to be reassuring, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't working.

I let out a long breath. "Okay."

Cole's eyes crinkled as he laughed. "Fuck. Yes."

While I was still processing the rich sound of his laugh, he leaned over the bar, grabbed my face with both hands, and placed a kiss on my right cheek.

His lips were like velvet against my skin, soft and luxurious. I picked up on a lingering scent of cologne on his neck, something like cedar and lavender, and felt the hairs on my arms stand. When was the last time I'd been this close to a man I found attractive? Long enough for a chaste kiss to make my pulse pick up speed.

I sucked in a ragged breath as he pulled away, and judging by the mischievous look in his eye, he had caught my reaction.

"You won't regret this," he said, that smile still dancing across his lips. "You got a pen and paper? I'll write the address of the studio. We start tomorrow at nine am."

"What if it doesn't work out?" I asked after fetching him the items. "Will you guys let me know if I got it by the end of the day?"

Cole shook his head, his curls bouncing from the movement, and he

scribbled the address down in a lopsided script. “I’m confident you’ll do just fine.”

Before I could protest, he stood up from the stool and downed the rest of his beer in two big gulps. My eyes got stuck on how his Adam’s apple moved under the skin of his neck.

“Can’t wait to tell the guys that I was able to convince you.” He slapped a ten-dollar bill on the counter. “Those fuckers had the gall to doubt me.”

I snorted, feeling some of the residual tension leave my shoulders. “You seem like the kind of guy who doesn’t get to hear ‘no’ a lot.”

His expression turned flirtatious. Uh-oh. This was dangerous. “You’ll have four weeks to find out if you’re right about that.”

With a final devastating wink, he turned and left through the creaking door, leaving a lingering scent of cedar and lavender in his wake.

After Cole’s departure, I polished the bar like my life depended on it. There were only two other patrons left, giving me plenty of downtime to process what had just happened.

What the hell was I doing? They were a world-famous metal band, and I was a small-town musician, deemed not good enough even for music school. Even just being in their presence was making me all sorts of weird. Yesterday, I’d ogled Silas, and today, I’d flirted with Cole. He may have done most of the flirting, but I’d definitely been an eager participant. Was I starstruck despite my best efforts to stay chill? Oh God. This was never going to work, and I was going to leave that studio tomorrow utterly humiliated.

When the last customer paid their tab and left, I gave in to the urge and let out a loud groan.

“You okay?” Jimmy asked, peeking out from the kitchen at the sound.

“Yep. Don’t mind me. Just fretting about...life.”

He snickered, smoothing fingers over his thick white whiskers. Jimmy was over sixty, divorced, and retired, and he mostly worked here for the company. I knew he wasn’t gonna let this one go.

“You wanna talk about it.”

It was a statement, not a question. I couldn’t say no, so instead, I picked up a pint glass and began to polish it.

“I just got offered an opportunity to do something with music.”

“Okay.”

“And I don’t know how to feel about it,” I lamely concluded.

He sniffed, his mustache moving up to his nose. “What’s the gig?”

“Helping a well-known band record a new album.”

“Sounds pretty decent. Pays well?” he asked.

“Yeah, it does. But they’ve only heard me play once, and I’m afraid they’re way too optimistic about how good I am.”

“Well, you won’t know that until you try, right? Give it a go, and if it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out. All you’ll lose is a few hours of your time.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. Jimmy made it sound so simple, only in my head, it was everything but. If it didn’t work out, I’d get a confirmation that I still wasn’t good enough. That I’d never be good enough. At least with the current state of things, I could have a rare good day when I played a great show or composed a sweet tune and feel like maybe I wasn’t all that bad.

“Don’t be afraid, Adeline.” Jimmy came up and patted me on the arm. “Whatever happens, you’ll come out on the other side. I don’t want to sound like one of those self-help books, but based on my sixty-six long years, sometimes they say just the right things. It’s the shots you don’t take that come back to haunt you.”

In my experience, the shots you took came back to haunt you as well, but his words nudged something in the depths of my brain. Was I afraid? Was I being a coward?

My thoughts drifted to the tattoo I had on the inside of my biceps.

Courage: the ability to do something that frightens one

When I got it done, I’d told myself I’d never cave to fear again. It looked like I needed to lift up my sleeve and read it one more time.

ABEL

COLE'S MESSAGE glowed on my screen like an accusation.

"Adeline is in. Audition/rehearsal is tomorrow. PLAY NICE."

I didn't play, and I definitely wasn't nice. Cole should know that by now, and I guess Adeline was about to find out.

The thought of sharing these songs with a stranger made my skin prickle unpleasantly. It was Charlie's last work, and we'd both gone through hell and back to write them. None of the guys knew what these notes and lyrics cost me. If I kept my mouth shut, they never would.

Whatever. Tomorrow would be an audition, and one she was sure to fail. I'd relish breaking the inevitable bad news to her and watching her face crumble in disappointment.

From the moment I saw her up on that stage, I couldn't decide if I wanted to fuck her or break her. Maybe it was a bit of both. She was beautiful, but she reminded me too much of myself when Bleeding Moonlight was first starting out. The energy and passion that radiated from her was like a punch in the gut. Everything about her screamed young naive, which was personally offensive to a jaded bastard like me.

It was ridiculous. She was a guitarist in a cover band, for fuck's sakes, and I had two Grammy's decorating my living room. I shouldn't have had any kind of a reaction to someone like her. But then she'd started playing our song, and I'd known I needed to keep her the fuck away from our band.

She sounded too goddamn good, and I was always thinking three steps ahead of the rest of the guys—maybe not Ezra, but he was done playing Papa Bear for now. I knew exactly how this story would play out. Working with a fresh talent like her made people dream, but I knew that for us, those dreams would quickly turn to nightmares.

I couldn't allow the rest of the guys to get ideas. After this album, Bleeding Moonlight was done.

I stood up from the couch and walked toward the floor-to-ceiling sliding door leading out to the backyard. It was raining, and there was something tragic about how the rivulets trailed down the glass, distorting the outside world until it resembled a gloomy impressionist painting. When I slid open the door, the smell of wet grass and damp earth took me right back to a childhood memory. A good one, of which there were not many.

My feet were quickly slicked with dirt and grass as I stepped into the manicured backyard. Yeah, this wasn't quite like hiking the rough terrain along the Huss River, but the sensations felt similar enough. That two-day camping trip had been as close to a vacation as anything I'd had in my first eighteen years of life. A generous local guide hadn't charged a cent for the adventure and had managed to convince my last foster family to let me go. There, in nature, far from the screaming and chaos of yet another temporary home, I'd finally had a chance to dream. I dreamed of many things I didn't have, and having my own home one day was one of them.

There were still moments when I couldn't quite believe this place was mine. My last home in River Valley had been a crumbling two-bedroom bungalow where warm dinners had come a lot less often than the beatings. By then, I'd been old enough to defend myself, but the feeling of not being safe in one's supposed home extended far past its walls.

Not here, though. With nature at my doorstep and songbirds waking me in the morning, I felt a sense of rare peace here. This was my glass fortress, and I ruled as king.

I stepped across the backyard, looking at the tall cypress trees spearing through the sky and letting the rain soak through the cotton fabric of my T-shirt. We had come back here to bury our bandmate, but I knew that in the process, we were burying the band, too.

There was no band without Charlie.

A band needed songs, and I couldn't write a single one without him.

Charlie and I had written every single album together since he'd joined the band. We'd fed off each other, pushing and pulling, breaking and fixing until we made something that lived up to both of our impossible expectations.

I'd been ready to walk away from the band as soon as we said our goodbyes to him, but in a moment of weakness, I'd made a mistake. I'd shared the new material with the rest of the guys.

"This is your best work," Cole had insisted. "We have to record it. He would have wanted us to release it. Charlie cared about the music more than he cared about anything else. If he were watching us have this debate, he would tell us we're all being idiots."

All the things they'd said were true, but fuck... There was as much of me in the new album as there was of Charlie, and there was a reason why those songs were a leap above our previous work. The three weeks we'd spent working together in my LA apartment had been the most mentally and

physically draining period of my life. Charlie always took as much as he gave, but this time, the scales had shifted. He'd drained me in ways I didn't think I could ever explain to another living soul. Our chemistry, always present, had become explosive, destructive to its core. It was a miracle we'd managed to create anything.

Recording those songs would mean reliving all of that.

But Cole and Silas wouldn't let up, and I'd relented. I'd record this album with them, but that would be our end.

I was done touring and performing. I wanted to live in my glass castle and walk in the rain on hot summer nights. I wanted to try and rebuild myself as a songwriter, but if it didn't happen, at least no one would be here to witness my failure.

With that thought, I headed back inside, wiping my feet on the carpet before walking over to pick a guitar off the wall. I tuned the instrument with practiced precision and settled down on a high stool in the kitchen. I strummed through a series of chords that sounded dull to my ears. The rain outside should have been helping, but as the strings vibrated under my fingers, not a sliver of inspiration came.

I dropped my head, trying to push the overwhelming disappointment away. It had been this way for weeks, ever since I'd finally picked up the instrument and tried to compose for the first time since Charlie's death.

Nothing came.

What if I'm not meant to write anything without Charlie?

That question had become a constantly intrusive thought, popping up in my mind on its own volition. The creative process was as much of a mystery to me today as it had been when we first started the band. I didn't know where the songs came from, but I did know that they came a lot more frequently when Charlie was around. His methods had hurt, but they had worked.

I rose and put the guitar back up on the wall. Maybe things would change with time. I would keep trying, because music was all I'd ever known. It was my savior, my language, my first love. I didn't know who I was without it. Still, I felt it drifting out of my reach, inch by inch, the space between us growing with each day.

ADELINE

I woke up the next morning after a restless night of light sleep. This wasn't a good start to my first day of recording, but I was determined to bring my best to the studio.

When Through Azure Skies started playing live years ago, I'd had to figure out how to perform on stage. Back then, my motto was fake it 'til you make it. Even when I didn't have a shred of confidence in me, I would pretend. I'd tell myself I could pretend to be a badass musician, a fierce, self-assured woman who didn't give a shit about what others thought of her.

I needed that persona again today.

I was going to walk into the studio like I owned the place.

Too much?

I was going to walk into the studio like I...comfortably rented the place.

Molly wasn't in her room when I peeked inside. She was probably still at Lauren's, given that it was only eight am. I scrambled some eggs and made myself a protein shake, knowing that I needed to fuel myself properly for today. According to my maps app, the studio was a twenty-five-minute drive from the house, so I ate my breakfast quickly and spent a few minutes trying to figure out what to wear. I wanted to feel good but not try too hard or make it seem like I was trying to impress them. This was work, not a party, and if we were going to spend all day recording, I needed to be comfortable. I settled on a pair of torn mom jeans that were tight around the hips but loose at the knee, and a cropped, sleeveless tank. I dug out a vintage leather jacket that I hadn't worn in a while from the back of my closet, since my other one from the show still needed a serious cleaning.

I slapped some makeup on and ran my fingers through the mop of curls on my head before getting into the car. It was go time.

As soon as I pulled out of the driveway, self-doubts exploded in my head as if they were waiting for just the right moment. I growled at myself like a maniac and turned up the radio. The louder the music, the less I could hear my thoughts.

I double-checked the address when I pulled up to a nondescript warehouse and a nearly empty parking lot. A big SUV stood outside, with a middle-aged guy sitting in the driver's seat, talking to someone on the phone. When he saw me, he rolled down the window and waved.

“Adeline?” he asked as I pulled up to him. “The guys are inside. Go right on in, the doors are unlocked.”

He must be their driver or security. I nodded in thanks and parked a few spots away from the frosted double doors. As promised, the door swung open when I pulled on the handle, and I walked in with my guitar in hand. I didn’t know if they’d have their own instruments they’d want me to use, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to show up empty-handed. My guitar felt like some kind of magic amulet you’d collect in a video game, giving me confidence and protection. I knew it was silly, but I needed all the help I could get.

The front desk looked abandoned, so I padded down the carpeted corridor I hoped led to the studio.

“Hello?” I called out loud and clear. I could hear muffled voices from somewhere down the hall.

A door swung open ahead of me, and Cole stepped out, his curls bouncing around a face that seemed to light up at the sight of me. We had similar hair, I realized. His was darker and much shorter than mine, with looser curls, but the way it hung around his face was familiar.

“Good to see you,” he said, coming up and pulling me into an unexpected embrace. My face landed in the general area of his collarbone, and his head-spinning scent of cedar and something smoky quickly assaulted my senses. I couldn’t mistake how good his strong arms felt wrapped around my shoulders.

“Hi,” I mumbled into his chest. He pulled away, glancing at my outfit for a single heartbeat before lifting his gaze back to my face.

“We got here early because we’re so excited that you agreed to work with us,” he said as we started to walk toward the room.

“Ah. That’s...nice,” I stumbled over my words, unsure of how to respond to that comment. He grinned at me over his shoulder and waved for me to go inside the room ahead of him.

It was a large space split into a studio and a control room, the latter of which was currently occupied by the three other band members. Ezra was talking to Silas, while the guitarist gently strummed his instrument. Abel was sitting in a plush arm chair farther away in the corner, yet he was the first to see me when I entered.

I gave him a tight smile, but he didn’t return it. He wasn’t looking at me with the anger I remembered from the Barnyard, but there was an air of hostility that was impossible to miss. I forced myself to hold his gaze,

unflinching. We still hadn't officially met, something we'd have to correct momentarily.

"Adeline," Ezra called out, and I turned to face him. He looked handsome today in a casual long-sleeve shirt with a *Darkthrone* band logo on it. His blue eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled. "Welcome. How was the rest of your weekend?"

"Good. Worked a shift at the bar and hung out with my sister." I tipped my chin in the direction of the guitarist beside him. "Hey, Silas."

The tall beast of a man placed his guitar down and stood, his presence filling up the room. He was wearing a black shirt with the top two buttons undone, showing off the valley at the top of his pecs.

I lifted my chin as he came closer. And closer. He placed his enormous palms on my shoulders. "Cole said you seemed nervous when he said this would be an audition."

I swallowed. I was starting to suspect he was always this intense, as if he really was a Viking clan leader, instead of a guitarist in a metal band. "No, it's fine. I mean, I am nervous because I still can't believe you want to try me out in the first place, but of course I understand." I was rambling—nervous in his presence—but I couldn't stop myself. "We both need to make sure it's a good fit."

Silas studied my face with hooded eyes, his long hair almost blending with the texture of his beard. I noticed he had his ears pierced, along with the left side of his nose.

He shrugged. "Just know you won't be auditioning for me. I know a great guitar player when I see one."

My lips twitched in a smile, and I thought Silas's palms mirrored the movement when he gave my shoulders a gentle squeeze. His words, or perhaps the contrast between the lightness of his touch and the strength of his hands, made my chest tighten with affection.

I took a step back, readying myself for this next part.

"Hi, I'm Adeline. You must be Abel," I said, taking a few big steps toward the lead singer and stretching out my palm.

He tilted his head to look up at me. Green, slightly tapered eyes stood in stark contrast to his tanned skin and long blond hair. He had a dimpled chin and cheeks, and his face was clean shaven. The full effect made him look like a goddamn fairy prince. For a moment, something tense ran across his face. Then, just when I started to think he was going to ignore me, he lifted his arm

and grasped my fingers.

We shook hands, staring at each other, both of our expressions carefully schooled to remain neutral. Then we pulled away.

“Nice to meet you,” he parsed out in a flat voice and looked at someone behind me.

Okay then. I turned back to the rest of the guys. “So, how do you want to do this?”

I found out Abel was going to produce this album. He’d refused to cede any creative control to a producer chosen by the label. He told everyone in a curt tone which songs he wanted to work on, and we started to rehearse.

I picked up the first song fairly quickly, playing lead while Silas took the rhythm section. He said him and Charlie used to rotate between the two parts depending on the song, and that we could do the same. If today went well and I got the gig, the idea was we’d spend one week rehearsing, and use the following three weeks to record the album.

A few hours after we started, Ezra and Cole decided to make some changes to the drum and bass sections of the song.

“Why don’t we go into the room next door to keep practicing while they figure it out?” Silas jerked his head toward the door.

“Sure,” I said.

“Abel, you want to come with us?” Silas asked the lead singer, who’d been practically mute all day.

Abel rose from the arm of the couch he’d been perched on and followed us.

The other room was smaller, with just two couches and a stool, as well as a selection of amps littered across the floor.

I plugged in my guitar and started to strum the chords I’d just learned.

“Who wrote this one?” I asked, peering at the music sheet I’d placed on the ground.

“Abel and Charlie. They’re the principal songwriters on all the tracks,” Silas said.

I glanced at Abel just in time to see his expression darken.

It wasn’t my business. I didn’t need to know the background of the album or why they were recording it in their home town rather than at one of the studios in LA they must have used before. I couldn’t resist looking them up last night and had learned a bit more of the band history.

After the release of their first album and the subsequent critical acclaim,

the band had moved to LA. Charlie had been in LA for a few years, hopping between various metal and punk bands. He'd joined Bleeding Moonlight and helped write their second album, which most critics considered their best. After that, they'd released two more, the last one being three years ago.

"You sound real good," Silas told me as I continued my strumming. "The hammer ons during the bridge need a bit of work. Let's try those again."

We went over the section again, with Silas showing me how I could make slight modifications to my technique. I was learning a ton from him. He was an excellent guitarist, one of the best of our generation, and a couple of times, when no one was looking I pinched my thigh to reassure myself that I wasn't dreaming. Of course, I was careful not to show my starstruck awe of him. Of all of them.

"Do you want to hop on some vocals with us?" Silas asked Abel after he deemed my playing close enough to what he was envisioning. "Would be good to hear how it sounds."

Abel looked like he'd rather nail his hand to the wall. Still, he mustered a curt nod and stood up to plug in the mic that was leaning against the wall.

I was curious to hear him sing in person, to find out if he sounded different from the perfectly edited vocal track on the albums.

Silas and I began playing the song, and then Abel opened his mouth and nearly made me forget what I was doing.

*"Scratch your promise into my skin
Tell me all the things I want to hear
Together, we make the sun rise
Over a land cloaked in darkness"*

His voice sounded just as good as it did on their albums, but there was a rawness to it that took my breath away.

Silas gave me a knowing look, as if he could tell I was blown away and that it was a common reaction to hearing Abel sing live.

He sang like it was the last thing he was going to do. Long, elegant fingers gripped the mic, and his eyes drifted closed at certain parts of the song. He looked utterly heartbreaking, and I averted my eyes when my pulse began to speed up.

We finished the song and descended into a stunned silence. At least on my part.

Silas nodded thoughtfully. "I liked that."

I almost laughed at his measured assessment, but I managed to bite my tongue at the last moment to keep quiet. Abel shot me a look and then shrugged at Silas. "Let's go again."

We practiced two more times, each one lifting my mood more and more. I was keeping up with them, improving with every repetition. Maybe this was going to work after all.

"Hey, we're finished," Ezra said, coming into the room. "We were thinking about getting some lunch before coming back and rehearsing together."

"Sounds great," I said, thinking that more food would keep my energy going.

Ezra gave me a warm smile, setting off a traitorous flock of butterflies in my stomach. I was not used to being surrounded by so many good-looking men, and it was as if my libido was punishing me for the two-year dry spell by demanding my attention.

We left the studio and climbed into the SUV, Ezra hopping into the driver's seat. Their driver didn't seem pleased when Cole told him he didn't need to come with us. It seemed like he was part driver, part bodyguard. To me, they looked more than capable of protecting themselves.

My thoughts were only further confirmed when I found myself squished between Silas and Cole in the middle row, their taut biceps pressing against my arms, toned but skinny in comparison.

"You okay? If it's too tight, we can unload the back and pull up the third row," Cole offered.

I shook my head. "All good." I could think of many worse things to be subjected to. "We're not going far, are we?"

Ezra looked at us from the rearview mirror. "How about Annie's?"

I grinned at him, "That's one of my favorites. Her omelets are to die for."

Annie's was a diner off the side of the main highway, a bit of a local institution. I hadn't been in ages, and the thought of having a bite of their spinach and goat cheese omelet made my stomach growl in anticipation.

"We used to go there all the time when we were in high school," Cole told me. "Crazy to think it's still around more than a decade later."

"Things here don't change much," I admitted. "The Crooked Stool, the bar I work at, opened in 1991, and it's still going strong. Coming back here must be like jumping into a time machine for you guys."

Cole nodded in agreement. “We’ve come back a bunch of times over the years, but never for this long. So we’re definitely taking a walk down memory lane.”

“Hopefully, it’s a pleasant walk,” I offered, wondering if they were enjoying their time back here.

Abel scoffed from the front. “The first thing we did when we got back was bury our friend, so yeah, really pleasant.”

Blood drained from my face. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean it like that—” I began.

“Abel, don’t fucking start,” Ezra’s words were loud and almost drowned out mine. The drummer caught my gaze in the mirror, his face twisted in a grimace. To my right, Cole wore a surprised expression that disappeared as soon as he saw me looking at him. Something told me his surprise had more to do with Ezra’s intervention than what Abel had said.

In the span of a few seconds, the atmosphere in the car changed. I cursed myself for the thoughtless comment. Things had been going well so far. Then again, Abel must know I didn’t mean to make light of their situation, so why had he lashed out like that at me?

Whatever. It seemed like the key was to stay focused on the task at hand and not ask too many personal questions. I could do that. I didn’t need to know them well to do my job.

I cleared my throat, and earned a soft pat on the knee from Silas. “Sorry. It’s been a difficult time for all of us,” the guitarist said.

Abel huffed, but I ignored him. Grief was an intimate friend of mine, and I knew better than to push someone who was still deeply entangled with it.

“Of course. I get it.”

Silas pulled his hand away, and I could sense him turning to look at me, but then we were pulling into the parking lot, and seconds later, I eagerly jumped out of the car.

The diner was busy with lunchtime traffic, but we were able to find a booth at the back that managed to fit all of us. This time, I sat on the edge of the bench, Ezra to the right of me, Cole and Abel in the two corners, and Silas directly across. We placed our orders with a young waitress who didn’t seem to recognize the guys, but she nevertheless gave them appreciative looks. A blush colored her cheeks by the time she left to give our orders to the kitchen.

“So, Adeline, tell us more about yourself,” Ezra said as soon as the

waitress was gone. “You said you were born and raised in River Valley? Where did you go to school?”

He smelled like pine up close, but I didn’t think it was cologne. Maybe his detergent or soap? It mixed with another, more subtle, male scent that I couldn’t name, but it made me want to bury my face into his neck and just breathe deeply.

I was a freak.

“Yeah, I’ve lived on Harrows Street my whole life and went to Chestnut High.”

“We lived on the other side of town,” Cole commented.

“You must have gone to Middlemar then?”

“That’s right. How old are you?” the bassist asked, shamelessly trailing his eyes over me.

I raised a brow. “Twenty-one. And you?”

“Fair enough.” He laughed. “I just turned thirty. The rest of the band are around that age. Got siblings?”

“You said you had a younger sister, right?” Ezra chimed in, recalling what I’d told him earlier today. “Cole said she’s going to college soon?”

“Yeah, her name is Molly. She’s going to study business and marketing at Northeastern starting the end of August,” I said.

“You both live with your parents?”

“Here are your drinks,” the waitress said, saving me from answering that question. I didn’t need to get into my life story with a group of men I still wasn’t sure I’d see again after today.

When she left the table, I jumped in to steer the conversation into safer waters. “So you guys want to release the new album this year?”

Cole sipped on his Coke and nodded. “That’s the plan. Now that we’ve found you, we’re hoping we’ll get the recording done soon, and then we can get the hell out of River Valley.”

“Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself?” Abel grit out, his voice low.

Cole shot him an angry look. “Can you not—”

“No, no. That’s okay,” I jumped in. “It’s true. I know you guys might decide against working with me by the end of the day. That’s the whole point of this audition.”

I shifted in my seat, hoping to remove the tension at the table. I wasn’t an idiot. I could see that Cole, Ezra, and Silas were eager to have me onboard, but Abel was a whole other story, and he was the producer. If, at the end of

the day, he didn't like me, his opinion was what mattered most.

Despite what had just come out of my mouth, a cold shiver ran down my spine at the thought of Abel vetoing me. I was enjoying this too much.

"How come you've decided to record it back here?" I jumped in again, trying to change the topic. "Must be a downgrade from your usual setup."

Ezra stirred his water with a straw. "This town was Charlie's favorite place. After the funeral, we talked for a long time about what we should do with the last songs he wrote. We weren't even sure we wanted to record them. But then we realized that Charlie would want his songs heard, and he would've gotten a kick from recording it here—the same studio where we recorded our first album."

I gave him a sad smile. I was starting to realize that not getting into personal territory would be difficult. After all, music was personal. When I wrote, I was laying my deepest fears, thoughts, and regrets bare for all to see. These guys were world-class musicians, and they hadn't gotten to where they were by playing it safe. I knew their music must also be their most sacred truth, and if I was to help them record this album, I might need to wade into the same territory.

Maybe that was a good reason for me to bid them goodbye after today.

"What do you think about the songs we've worked on so far?" Ezra asked me. I was picking up that he and Cole were the more outgoing ones in the group. When Silas spoke, he was a blunt instrument, but he spent most of his time listening and paying attention to those around him. And Abel... Well, Abel just seemed to quietly simmer with anger.

"They're beautiful," I answered honestly. "Intense yet soothing in some parts, like a lullaby." I cleared my throat. "Abel, your singing is incredible."

At this, Abel flicked his gaze to me. The cold expression he wore shifted for just a moment before falling into place again.

"You sing for your band," Silas observed, and I turned to look at him. "Do you enjoy it more than playing?"

I tapped my fingers against the sweating glass of water. "I like to sing and engage with the audience. It makes me feel like a conductor for the rest of the band in some ways, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't find that thrilling. But I've been playing guitar for much longer than I've sang, and... Well, it's just different. I feel great when I sing, but I feel high on life when I'm playing guitar."

"I know the feeling," he responded, giving me a knowing smile through

his beard. I felt like he was undressing me with his intense gaze as I spoke, as if he could peel me apart layer by layer until he could stare directly into my soul.

The food arrived, and we dug in. When we finished, Ezra grabbed the bill, refusing to let me pay for my share, and hustled us back into the car. We picked up where we'd left off, and ran through the two songs about a dozen more times.

"Let's hear what it sounds like on tape," Abel said when we were finished, sending me into the sound booth. Silas sat beside him behind the glass, listening to my playing intently and offering suggestions. After a few tries, Silas waved at me to come out, and we gathered the full band to listen to the recording.

As the sound of my playing filled the control room, I had to stifle a smile. It sounded solid, and I couldn't believe I'd managed to learn the song this well in just a few hours. A lot of that was due to the coaching Silas had so generously provided, and he smiled through his beard when he saw me looking at him.

"Fucking badass," Cole said after the track ended.

"I really like that," Ezra agreed, his blue eyes alight with excitement.

I beamed at them despite myself. I couldn't help but feel a little proud.

"It's not good enough." Abel's words landed like a punch, wiping the smile off my face. The warmth I'd felt from Cole's and Ezra's praise disappeared in a heartbeat.

For a second, you could hear a pin drop.

"What do you mean," Silas bit out. "It sounds great."

Abel stood, crossed his arms, and faced Silas. He didn't look at me. "No, it doesn't. I wrote this song with Charlie. I fucking know how it's supposed to sound, and I'm telling you it's not right."

"Well, why don't you tell us what needs to be fixed," Ezra interjected, clearly trying to diffuse the situation. I looked between him and Abel, starting to feel nauseous.

"I can't fucking spell it out for you," Abel snapped, spreading his arms wide and still refusing to meet my gaze. "There isn't an instruction manual for art. She just doesn't sound like Charlie."

"Of course not. No two guitarists sound the same," Silas said, his voice low and tense. "We're not trying to imitate him. We're trying to record a good album, and Adeline's playing sounded damn good to me."

“It’s. Not. Good. Enough.”

I stood up, clenching my fists when I realized my hands were shaking.

At last, Abel moved his gaze to me. I could see the loathing in his eyes, and that riled me up.

I could understand not being good enough for this. After all, they were professional musicians with a decade-long career behind them. But I couldn’t understand the undeserved anger and animosity this man was projecting toward me for no apparent reason.

I took a step toward him, and whatever he saw in my expression must have startled him, because he took a step back.

“Were you always such a dick, or am I just really good at bringing out that side of you?”

Someone sucked in a loud breath behind me. Abel’s gaze flitted over me, as if unsure of where to land.

“Honestly, I don’t need to listen to this. This is your album. You can record it however and with whomever you like. But if this is how you’re going to interact with people who audition for you, I won’t be surprised if it never gets made.”

I spun on my heel to face the rest of the guys, who were looking at me with a mixture of shock and admiration. “For what it’s worth, I had a great time working together today, but it sounds like I’m not what you’re looking for. Thank you for giving me a shot.”

There. I managed to say that without my voice cracking once, and I was going to leave while I still had my dignity. I crossed the small room in two steps and stormed out the door, even as Cole called out my name, asking me to wait.

I was holding it together, but I didn’t know for how much longer I could keep my disappointment at bay, so I had to get out of there. I wasn’t surprised at how it had turned out. Not really. It was the most likely scenario coming to its painful and expected fruition.

“For God’s sake, Adeline, wait.” A hand gripped my biceps as I was nearing the door to the parking lot. With gentle force, Cole turned me to face him.

“What for?” I asked, keeping my eyes fixed on his chest. “The audition didn’t work out. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. I’m so sorry about Abel. He’s just...” Cole trailed off, running his other hand through his hair. “Can we talk outside?”

Since that would get me closer to my car and thus closer to getting away from here, I nodded.

“Look, this has nothing to do with you or your playing,” Cole said once the double doors slammed shut behind us. It was early evening, and the sky was a bright-pink hue. I was too upset to appreciate its beauty.

“Damn it, this is my fault,” he said, rocking on his heels.

I shot him a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“I should have told you more about what’s going on with the album, but I didn’t think it would be important.”

I waited for him to continue, hating to admit that some part of me was curious to know more.

“Abel doesn’t want to record this album. It’s like he wants to guard these songs for his consumption only, which is selfish as hell, if you ask me. Charlie would’ve wanted people to hear them, and Abel knows that, which is the reason he’s reluctantly agreed to do it. But he’s insisted on producing the record and finding a guitarist himself, and as a result, we’ve gotten nowhere in the past few weeks.”

My forehead grew tense as I processed this new information. “Look, if your singer, songwriter, and producer doesn’t want to do this, I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

Cole rubbed at his chin, shaking his head. “If you’d said that to me a week ago, I would have agreed, but then we stumbled on to you. Adeline, he was lying through his teeth back there. You sounded perfect. I was so worried he’d be an asshole to you all day—”

“Which he was,” I interrupted.

“Yes, of course, but it could have been a lot worse.” He cringed. “Sorry, I know how terrible that sounds. I’ve just seen him in all of his moods, and today was far from the worst. When we were rehearsing, I saw his eyes light up. When he forgot that he was supposed to be hating this, he was focused and determined. It reminded me of how he looks when we do well in the studio.”

I sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t work with you on this if one of your band members, arguably the most important one in this case, doesn’t want me here.”

Cole shifted his weight between his feet. I felt bad for him now that I knew how hard he was obviously trying to make this album happen. “I know. Can you please just give me some time to talk some sense into him? One

more chance before you give up on this?”

I rubbed my eyes, knowing that my mascara would probably smear. I was past caring. “I don’t know.”

“It’s no excuse, but Charlie’s death has done a number on Abel,” Cole said. “Of course, we were all hit hard. We had no idea he had a problem with drugs. But Abel and him were incredibly close, and without Charlie... Well, it’s like Abel lost the one person who’d kept him grounded all these years.”

I stared at the ground. If what Cole was saying was true, then the problem didn’t lie with me. I wasn’t the one fucking up.

A heavy weight slid off my shoulders as I processed everything he’d said. This was Abel dealing with his grief, and I happened to be collateral damage. I thought back to the times I’d done the exact same thing after my parents died, screaming at the people at the funeral parlor, hanging up on my relatives, even giving Molly the cold shoulder at times. If this was what the rest of the guys were dealing with, I wasn’t going to be the one to give them even more shit.

Cole let out a long breath. “Adeline, can you look at me?”

His hand sneaked under my chin, lifting my face to his. I knew I had tears in my eyes by now, and Cole flinched when he saw them.

“Fuck.” He swept his thumb over my cheek, as if wiping away the tears that hadn’t yet fallen. My spine tingled in response.

“Say something,” he asked.

This was most likely going to be a massive mistake.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay. Talk to him, and if he’s fine with it, I’ll keep working with you. But he can’t talk to me like that again.”

Relief flooded over Cole’s face, and he dropped his hands back down to his sides. “He won’t. I promise you that. Thank you.” He crossed the distance between us and pulled my body into a fierce hug. As he held me, my tension slowly unraveled. “Thank you for giving us another chance. You don’t know how much this means to me,” he said, his lips moving against my hair. “I’ll message you tonight,” he said, pulling away but letting his fingers linger on my arms for a second longer.

It wasn’t until I got home that I realized I had forgotten my guitar at the studio. I’d never forgotten my instrument anywhere before. It was as if fate was telling me that I wasn’t yet done with the four men.

SILAS

WE HAD SPENT over ten years together working through creative differences, living in close quarters, practically breathing the same stinking air. In that time, I'd never resorted to physical violence, but as I watched Cole run after Adeline, I thought the day might have finally come.

Abel stood where she'd left him, his palms squeezing the desk behind him so hard his fingers had turned white. The only thing stopping me from throwing the punch was the flash of regret that crossed Abel's face as he took in my and Ezra's expressions. It was like he knew exactly how much of a shithead he was being, but he just couldn't stop himself.

Why is he doing this?

That question had been on my mind a lot over the past few weeks. His behavior didn't make sense in the context of everything I knew about him. Abel was a complicated man, but like the rest of us, he believed in a few simple truths.

Music was purpose.

This band was a brotherhood.

We were stronger together than we were alone.

Charlie's death couldn't change that, could it? It would be like an earthquake making gravity no longer work. Disasters, devastation, loss—they were companions to life, but they didn't invalidate any of its fundamental rules.

I ran a hand across my face, forcing the fury back from the center of my thoughts. Then I looked at the singer and shook my head, unable to hold back my disappointment. "Talk."

He rolled his eyes. The fucker rolled his eyes.

"I feel like I've said plenty."

"Good for you. Generally, when people speak, they aspire to make sense. Since you haven't made a single coherent point yet, I'm hoping there's more."

Abel pursed his lips. Ezra sighed, flicking his gaze between the two of us. The fact that he had tried to keep Abel in check on the drive to lunch hadn't gone unnoticed by me. He was finally coming back to himself. I wish I could say the same about Abel.

"She's too young. We need someone more experienced."

“Bullshit,” Ezra countered, saving me from screaming the same thing. “She’s better than most of the guitarists that open for us.”

“I don’t like her energy.”

God, he was infuriating. “Elaborate.”

Abel wouldn’t look at me as he said, “She is just too...enthusiastic. I don’t want to work with a fan.”

You’d have to stand outside the building to not smell the bullshit. “It’s a bad thing that she likes our music? Would you prefer she hate us?”

Ezra scoffed incredulously. “I’m starting to think there’s something seriously wrong with your head, Abel.”

The singer pushed off the table, getting into Ezra’s face. “How quickly you changed sides,” he hissed. “All it took was a hot piece of ass.”

Unintimidated, Ezra stared down at Abel. “Actually, I remembered that there are no sides.”

I heard Cole enter the room behind me and signaled to him with my palm that he should stay out of this.

“We all know what you’ve been doing, Abel,” Ezra continued. “You haven’t been auditioning anyone. You can’t say you’ll do this album and then lead the rest of us on. I may not be as enthusiastic about recording it as Cole and Silas, but I know it’s the right thing to do for Charlie. This album will be made, and Adeline is perfect for it.”

Abel ground his teeth, the muscle in his cheek fluttering.

I looked over my shoulder to see a soft smile on Cole’s face. This was the Ezra we knew. I was so done with the quiet zombie that had replaced him since the funeral.

Cole cleared this throat. “Well, despite the embarrassing outburst, Adeline said she’d be willing to give us another chance. You can’t disrespect her again, Abel.”

“I’d be perfectly happy to never speak to her again.”

Ezra, reading murder in my expression, crossed the room and gripped my right wrist. “Calm down,” he grit out in a low tone.

“Abel, you are not the only person in this band,” Cole stated, his jaw tense. “We all thought that today was a success. Unless you have a convincing, objective reason as to why we can’t continue working with Adeline, we’ll have to revert to a vote, and we’ll win.”

The tension inside of me eased. Thank fuck Cole was willing to spell it out to Abel. We’d been walking around him on eggshells for weeks, and it

was past time we stopped. After all, he wasn't the only one who'd lost a close friend. He wasn't the only one who was hurting.

Abel let out a huff of air, his nostrils flaring. "Wow. What were you saying about there being no sides, Ezra?"

A crease appeared between Ezra's brows, which is how I knew that even his infinite patience was being stretched.

He ignored Abel's attempt at provocation. "Like Cole said, give us one real reason why she wouldn't be good."

Abel let out a bitter laugh, but I knew he had nothing.

"Fine. Whatever." He reached for his backpack and stuffed his laptop inside. "I'm done with this conversation. I agreed to record this album, so I'll fucking record it. Then we can be done with all of this for good. I look forward to the day."

His words hurt, but I swallowed the pain down. He'd told us as much already. He'd said he wanted to break up after this album was done, but I hadn't believed it. Now, with the cold bitterness in his tone, I was starting to think he really meant it.

Cole blocked Abel's path out of the room with his arm. "You need to behave. She doesn't deserve to be treated like this, and I can tell she'll walk right back out if this happens again."

They held each other's gaze for a long moment before Abel gave him a barely perceptible nod and left.

"Fuck me," Cole moaned, sinking down into a chair. "The only good thing about this situation was the look on Abel's face when Adeline told him off."

I snorted. "I was this close to punching him out. Never thought it would come to this. Ezra, I don't know how the hell you stayed so calm."

The drummer laughed. It was a tired sound that scraped against my heart. "He's still hurting."

"So are we," I countered.

"I know."

Cole sniffed. "She killed it today."

"She really did," I agreed. "I know it was our first day rehearsing, but she fit right in."

I still couldn't believe the events of the past few days, or how lucky we'd gotten with finding Adeline. She played with an intensity I hadn't seen in a long time, even among professional musicians. There was something special

about her, something that made being around her infinitely alluring.

My thoughts drifted to how her lips curved when she smiled, how her arms flexed when she dove into a solo, and how her hips seemed to glide when she walked. Everything about her grabbed at my heart and tugged it in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

"I need to message her," Cole said, standing up. "I think I'm going to head home."

We all got up and started to pack up our things. My gaze caught on Adeline's guitar in the studio. She must have forgotten it in her rush to leave. She must have been really upset, because musicians rarely left their instruments behind.

I patted Cole on the back as we exited the studio, while Ezra stayed behind to work on a drum part. "You did well today handling the situation."

Cole groaned, cracking his neck from side to side. "It's exhausting. I don't know how Ezra did it all these years. Calling the shots, taking care on the business side, diffusing conflict. I'm a poor imitation, and if this is how it's going to be, I don't know if I can keep it up."

I understood him perfectly. Ezra was a natural leader—thoughtful, charismatic, kind. We had a manager, but Ezra was the real glue of the band, keeping us in sync and making tough decisions when no one else would.

"He's coming back," I said. "You saw him today."

Cole nodded. "It's a start. I just wish he'd talk to me, you know? We've known each other for over twenty years, and I've never seen him like this. I've asked him so many times to open up to me, but he won't say anything, just that he's grieving. But I think it's more than that."

I scratched at the back of my neck as we neared the SUV. Abel must have left in a cab, something I was sure Leo didn't appreciate.

"Do you think he blames himself?" I asked Cole, careful to keep my voice low.

Cole's shoulders slumped at the question. "Don't we all to some extent? If we had acted differently in the months leading up to it, maybe we would have picked up on some of the signs."

"We did what we thought was right," I told him firmly. "If we didn't put that space between us, we would've been broken up six months ago."

"And now we'll be done in a month," Cole muttered, lifting his face to the sky. "We bought seven months with that decision and lost a life."

I shut my eyes at the brutal calculus he laid out. When had things gotten

this fucked up?

COLE

My phone pinged with Adeline's response as I got out of the SUV in front of my parents' house.

"I'm glad you were able to talk things out. I'll be there tomorrow."

The grin stayed on my face as I pulled open the screen door to the smell of my Mom's cooking. Chili and cornbread. I nearly moaned in delight. There was nothing like a homemade meal to end a long day.

A really long fucking day.

I walked through the house and out to the backyard. My dad, Sirius, was wearing his favorite Pink Floyd T-shirt, reading and smoking a joint while my mom, Emma, was dressing a salad.

"Hey!" she said, looking up with a smile. "You look like you had a good day."

"Good, bad, just the usual shit show."

My dad snorted before passing me the joint. If Ivy, my sister, were here, she would have said something snarky about it, but she lived in LA now with her fiancé. A fiancé I wasn't all too fond of.

"How was the new guitar player?" my mom asked. I had filled her in on Adeline the night before. My parents and I were close, which made me feel like an anomaly among the guys. Mom and Dad were old hippies and had never had an issue with their son joining a band while still in high school and using it as an excuse to skip out on college.

"She was incredible. We spent the day rehearsing, and she picked it up really quickly. The songs were pretty technical, too. We were all impressed. Now, we just have to hope she'll survive an entire month sharing a studio with the four of us."

My mom studied me with a knowing look. "Look at you, singing praises. She must be someone special."

I sucked on the joint before passing it back to my dad. "I think so. What have you guys been up to?"

Dad shrugged, tearing his eyes away from the book in his lap. If I had to guess it was probably some psychedelic spiritual manifesto. "I cleaned up the vegetable garden, and your Mom did some painting. She found your old work in the back of the closet in the guest bedroom."

"They're gorgeous paintings," my mom said. "Maybe you want to take

them with you to LA when you head back.”

I rubbed at a spot below my collarbone and looked off to the strawberry patch in the back of the yard. The last time I painted, I’d been engaged. Most of those paintings were of her.

Amy.

A shiver threatened to run through me, but I held it down. It had been years, but the thought of looking at those paintings still made me feel hollow inside. It would be like looking at physical evidence of what I’d once felt for a woman who’d betrayed me.

Who’d stolen from me.

Who’d told me nothing but lies.

I should’ve burned the paintings, but I knew Mom would throw a fit. She’d say that pain sometimes birthed the most beautiful art, and I couldn’t disagree with that statement, despite hating the fact that it applied to me in such a personal manner.

“Nah, I’m good. It’s just old junk,” I murmured before turning back and sitting down at the set table.

The vegetarian chili tasted as good as it smelled, and I allowed myself to sink into the comforting sensations of cumin, paprika, and other spices. The cornbread was soft and fluffy, with a bit of a grainy feel.

“So, Ivy’s pregnant,” my mom stated calmly.

The cornbread turned to ash in my mouth in the span of a second. “Come again?”

“She’s six months into the pregnancy, and she was too afraid to tell you herself, so she asked us to break the news.”

My spoon clattered on the wooden picnic table. “I honestly don’t know what to say.”

Dad’s gaze met mine. “I’d imagine congratulations are in order.”

“Just to make sure, the asshole is the father?”

“If by ‘asshole’ you mean her fiancé, then yes.”

I was going to kill that fucker.

“Before you say something you’ll regret,” my mom interjected, raising her palm to silence the words halfway out of my mouth, “we should let you know we visited them in LA a few months ago and had a lovely time. I don’t know what he was like when you met him all those years ago, but I can assure you that he is a perfectly decent man who is very obviously in love with our daughter.”

“Decent?” I barked. “I highly doubt it.”

My dad sighed. “Cole, Ivy is twenty-two. She’s not a child anymore. I can appreciate that as an older brother you feel protective about her, but I can assure you she’s well taken care of.”

My thoughts raced to the image of my sister and that bastard backstage at our show all those years ago. There was no way a guy like that could change enough to be suitable for her. Finding out they were dating threw me for a loop, and when they got engaged soon after, I told Ivy she was making a huge mistake. She countered by saying I could forget about seeing her until I learned to accept her fiancé. I wasn’t worried, sure their engagement would fall apart just like mine, but it’s been almost a year since that conversation and now she was pregnant.

I shook my head. “I’m going to visit her. I need to see this for myself.”

My mom pursed her lips. “I thought you’d say that. Ivy will be pleased to see you, I’m sure, but you have to promise to keep an open mind. Listen to their story.”

“I saw how their story started,” I snapped. “I was right fucking there.”

“Well, then you should be happy that your decision to bring her on tour resulted in her meeting the love of her life. Because that’s what he is, Cole. Whether you like it or not.”

Suddenly, my appetite was gone. I knew my parents were smart people and fully believed in the validity of what they were saying, but they weren’t there in the beginning. They hadn’t seen this fucker put his hands on my younger sister while I was supposed to be watching over her.

The chair scraped the ground as I stood up.

“I’m done,” I said and saw their faces fall.

“Cole—”

“I just need to process the news,” I cut my dad off. “I’m sure I’ll be thrilled for her very soon.” I sincerely doubted that.

My bedroom was on the second floor, and I lay down on the bed to stare at the ceiling. My gaze caught on the triangular scrap of paper that was taped up there, and I immediately knew what it was.

Years ago, there’d been a picture taped there. A photo of me and Amy on stage during the last show of our tour. I’d proposed to her that night, and that picture was the only one we’d taken that evening. When we came back to River Valley the following week, we’d stayed in this room and in this bed for so much time that she’d joked I should tape something interesting to look at

on the ceiling. I'd taped up that photo of us, telling her that I wouldn't mind waking up and going to sleep seeing her beautiful face.

A month later, I'd torn the photo down.

ADELINE

I RETURNED to the studio the next day empty-handed. The SUV wasn't in the parking lot, but there was a white Jeep, a truck, and a Tesla. Something told me the Tesla belonged to Abel. Beautiful and untouchable.

The guys were waiting for me in the studio when I walked inside. After some scattered greetings, Cole shot a look at Abel, and the lead singer rolled his eyes. He stood up from his chair and took a few steps toward me, his green eyes fixed on me with a focused intensity. A part of me was curious what words had been exchanged after I had left the day before. Then again, another part of me was sure it was none of my business.

He cleared his throat, as if steeling himself for the words that were about to come out. "I apologize for yesterday," he said in a neutral voice. I couldn't read him, couldn't even hope to know if he was being sincere or not, but I held his gaze, nonetheless.

"Your playing was fine," he added, blinking a few times and making me notice the lush fullness of his lashes. "I'd like to keep working together."

It wasn't a flaming endorsement, but at least now he'd gone on record saying that he was fine with me being here. If I'd had more pride or other gigs on the table that paid twenty grand, I might have sneered at him and walked out. Instead, I gave him a terse nod. "I accept your apology."

Something closer to a grimace than a smile fluttered across his face. Without another word, he moved his attention to the guys behind me.

"I want everyone ready to roll in two minutes," Abel barked. "We're not

leaving for lunch until you're able to nail this next song."

Abel set a frantic pace over the next two days. He wanted to start recording the following week, which seemed incredibly ambitious, and this upped the pressure on me to learn the songs quickly.

I asked Ezra what he thought about our progress when we began to pack up on Wednesday night. "I think we're on track," he said. "We have three more songs to rehearse by the end of this week. Feels doable."

Over the past few days, I'd gotten a chance to know him better, and we'd built an easy rapport. He wasn't an open book like Cole, or gruffly direct like Silas, but he answered my questions without hesitation and seemed to enjoy working together. He smiled often, but I thought there was something sad hidden in the depths of his eyes.

Cole came to stand by us, drawing me out of my thoughts. "Adeline, do you want to grab dinner with us?"

"Thanks, but I should head back," I said to him with an apologetic smile. "I haven't spent much time with my sister, and she's leaving in just a couple of weeks."

"Why don't you bring her?" he offered. "We can all go home to drop off our stuff and then meet at the Italian place on the east side."

That all sounded great, except for the fact that I hadn't exactly told Molly what I'd been doing this week. I knew she'd blow this out of proportion, thinking it was going to be my big break or some other nonsense like that. I didn't want that pressure, but at the same time, I hated lying to her. I'd been telling her that I was spending my mornings at the gym and then working more shifts at the bar.

"What do you think?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows in a way that made me laugh. Cole was easy to get along with.

"Okay, I'll see if I can drag her out. She'll want a picture with you guys. She nearly killed me when I told her I didn't get one at the show."

Cole smiled, and my eyes caught on the perfect shape of his lips.

"And you haven't gotten one with us during the past few days, either. We'll have to fix that tonight." He looked back over his shoulder. "I'll go tell the guys, they're always so goddamn slow getting out of here."

"Okay, I'll see you in about an hour."

“You are doing what?” Molly gaped at me when I filled her in on my new gig.

“And you kept it from me? This is huge! Oh. My. God. My sister is going to be a rock star!” she shrieked, her palms coming to press against the sides of her face.

“Molly, no,” I said, even though I couldn’t help but laugh at her over-the-top reaction. “This. This right here is exactly why I didn’t want to say anything. It’s just a short gig to help them record one album. Don’t make it a whole thing.”

“But it is a whole thing, Ade. They are huge. I mean huge! You need to start an Instagram account right now and document the process. You’ll have a hundred thousand followers within a few weeks. That’s your platform right there,” she said as she followed me into my room.

I huffed. “Look at you, little miss marketing queen. What are they going to teach you at Northeastern if you already know everything? And no, I am certainly not documenting anything. I’m pretty sure they’re trying to keep this whole album on the down-low for now. So don’t say a word to anyone, okay?”

She groaned, as if keeping it a secret would bring her serious pain. “Okay, I’ll stay quiet, but...oh my God!”

“You said that already. Now calm down, go change, and meet me by the door in ten. We’re going to all have dinner together.”

“Together?” she whispered. “You mean me and you? Or do you mean...”

“You and me and the band. Please don’t scream.”

Molly slapped her palms over her mouth and failed to stifle her excited squeal.

“And I already checked, you can get a picture. Just one. Now go. Hurry.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the car driving to the restaurant.

“What are they like?” Molly asked, fidgeting with the collar of her T-shirt. “Are they nice?”

“They’re just people, Molly,” I responded with a shrug.

“C’mon, give me a little more than that.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay. Silas is a little quiet, but he’s sincere and encouraging. He’s been coaching me a lot, since we’re both guitar players, and it’s been incredible to learn from him. Cole is funny and easy to get along with. He’s the kind of guy that everyone likes immediately. I’m still getting to know Ezra, but he strikes me as kind and levelheaded. He has a

more mature air to him compared to the other guys. And Abel is...a brilliant singer. He's producing the album."

She hummed in response. "And which one is the most attractive, in your opinion?"

"Molly!"

"Oh, please. Don't even try to tell me you haven't noticed you're surrounded by four really, *really*, good-looking men. Come on, Ade. Nothing wrong with a little innocent crush."

I bit my tongue. Sure, there was nothing wrong with one crush, but how about three? A part of me was glad Abel was acting cold to me. At least that helped me ignore the way my entire body reacted to him when he sang.

"It's a job, Molly. Not a hunting ground."

She snorted. "Fine. Anything else I should know?"

"Don't bring up Charlie, the member who died. They're still grieving him," I explained.

"Got it," she said, and I knew she did.

A ringing bell announced our arrival at the restaurant. I scanned the rows of tables covered in checkered red and white table cloths, topped with delicate jars of olive oil and crushed chilies. The smell of baked dough wafted through the restaurant, two huge clay pizza ovens being the likely culprits.

"Over here!"

Cole waved at us from a round table in the corner of the dining room. His dark curls somewhat tamed and slicked back behind his ears.

"Hey, guys," I greeted them as we got to the table. "This is my sister, Molly."

Molly gave them a shy wave, her usually outgoing demeanor dampened by her nerves.

"Hey," Ezra said, giving her his best disarming smile. "We've heard so much about you from Adeline."

"Yeah, she's been spilling all your dirt, so you know, tonight is the perfect chance for payback," Cole joked. The mischievous bastard.

"Don't listen to him. And don't trust a word he says," I advised, guiding her to an empty chair between Cole and Ezra before taking the last free seat between Silas and Abel.

"All right, quick introductions," Ezra said. "The brooding giant is Silas. He doesn't look it, but he's harmless. Just keep your eyes on your fries—he's

been known to eat a truly astounding amount from other people's plates."

Molly stifled a laugh, and I could've kissed Ezra in that moment for trying to make her feel more comfortable.

"The one on your left is Cole. He snuck onto the tour bus one night, and we've never been able to get rid of him."

"If by snuck on, you mean you begged me to start a band with you and told me you'd never find another bassist who sounded as good," Cole retorted, "then yeah, sounds about right."

Ezra shook his head at the bassist and then continued. "This is Abel. He..." Ezra trailed off as if trying to figure out the most appropriate thing to say about the enigmatic lead singer.

"He can introduce himself," Abel said, glaring at Ezra before pinning his gaze on Molly.

My palms were clammy. In that moment, I wished I'd asked Abel to play nice with my sister before agreeing to come to this dinner. I could deal with his attitude and biting comments, but the thought of him being cruel to my sister made my blood run cold. The urge to protect her was so strong, I was about to jump out of my seat and do God knows what.

To my shocked relief, Abel sounded perfectly cordial as he said, "Nice to meet you, Molly. I don't try to be a comedian because I know I don't possess one funny bone in my body. Unfortunately, the same can't be said about my bandmates. I also sing and write our music."

She smiled back at him. "You know, I think Adeline could learn a thing or two from you. Sometimes her attempts at being amusing are truly cringe-worthy."

I narrowed my eyes. So much for needing to protect Molly.

"Hey, you're not supposed to throw me under the bus in front of my new coworkers," I grumbled.

"Nice to meet you all," Molly said, rolling her eyes at me. "It's really cool that you're working with my sister."

"Hey, it's been a ton of fun," Cole said. "Your sister might not be funny, but she's a badass guitarist. And she knows how to put Abel in his place, which might be even more impressive."

I barely suppressed a wince as Abel shot Cole a dark look.

Molly remained oblivious. "You know, I've been telling her for years that she can have a career in music if she wants to, but she's never listened to me."

“And why’s that?” Ezra asked.

I scowled at Molly from across the table, but she ignored me. “It all started when that stupid music school didn’t—”

“That’s enough, Molly,” I cut her off. Jesus, she’d warmed up to them quickly enough. “Look, the waiter is coming back, do you know what you want to order?”

“We ordered a bunch of stuff already,” Cole said, glancing between my sister and I. “Thought we’d share everything. You ladies okay with family style?”

“Yeah, that’s great. I hate deciding on what to order, I always just want to try everything,” Molly agreed, casting Cole a shy smile.

Moments later, a waiter was at the table with the appetizers they had ordered.

“Could I get a beer?” I asked him, needing to take the edge off. Molly was talking to Cole about something, seeming completely at ease, and now I was the one feeling awkward. My interrupting her hadn’t gone unnoticed, and I wished I hadn’t made it so fucking obvious that I didn’t want her to keep talking.

Silas’s palm landed on my knee under the table, swallowing it whole. The friendly gesture sent a thrill up my spine. I turned to look at him, my brow raised in question.

He was looking at me with a contemplative expression, his eyes darker than normal. I wondered how many drinks they’d had before we arrived.

“You okay?” he asked under his breath, giving my leg a gentle squeeze.

“Fine,” I answered, enjoying the sensation of his hand on my skin a lot more than I should. “You?”

“Great. You’re picking things up quickly.” He pulled his palm away, sending shivers down my thigh.

“Yeah, I have to if we want to start recording next week.”

Silas shrugged. “It won’t be a problem. A lot of the techniques repeat throughout the songs, so now that you’re getting used to them, it should be smooth sailing.”

“Why didn’t you just record the two guitar tracks yourself? Clearly, you’re more than capable of playing them.” This question had been needling at me ever since I saw how proficient Silas was at playing both the rhythm and lead parts.

“It’s not just ability that matters. It’s also a matter of style. Charlie and I

had two very different sounds and that's a big part of what made us stand out. Him and I complimented each other well, just like I know you and I will too."

Our conversation was silenced by Ezra clinking on his beer glass with a butter knife. I saw that my beer had arrived as well.

He jumped right into his impromptu toast. "Been a long fucking time since we've done something like this," he stated in his smooth voice as he looked around the table. "To new friends, new albums, and new dreams." He looked directly at me as he said the last part.

We clinked our drinks together and drank to his toast. A few moments later, the mains arrived.

The conversation began to flow once again, and when the entire table laughed at some joke from Cole, the sound fresh and easy, I caught Ezra's sky-blue gaze from across the table. His smile no longer seemed sad.

"Molly, Adeline told us you're going off to college soon. Studying marketing, I believe?" Cole asked my sister.

"Yep."

"What are you planning on doing after you graduate?" He frowned. "Jesus, I sound old."

Molly giggled. "I want to be a social media manager, or maybe a talent manager down the road. I think it's fascinating how people are now able to connect and grow their fan base online through new engagement channels."

Silas sipped on his beer, somehow drinking half the glass in one go. "That stuff didn't even exist when we were getting started."

She grinned at him, "Well, you managed to figure it out eventually. Or your team has. You guys have over ten million followers on your band page. That's impressive. Abel has...what? Two million?"

Molly looked at the singer sitting across from her, waiting for him to respond, and again, I was gripped with this fear that he was going to be nasty to her. Instead, he shrugged and said, "Almost three now. It's all due to our social media manager, Christina. She understands the strategy inside out." After a moment, he added, "Do you want me to introduce you two? If you have any questions or want to get career advice, I'm sure she'd be happy to help."

My jaw dropped. Who the hell was this, and what had he done with the jerk who'd yelled at us over the past two days about not playing well enough?

Molly beamed, her eyes literally sparkling. "Oh my God, that would be

amazing. I'd love to chat with her."

Abel smiled, and I discovered that this made the dimples on his cheeks even more pronounced. "Cool, give me your email, and I'll set it up."

While Molly scrambled for a pen in her purse, Abel's eyes locked on mine, as if he were gauging my reaction to this personality change.

The smile I returned was wobbly and uncertain. Over the past few days, I had begun to assume that Abel was cold toward everyone. That it was his personality, rather than a personal dislike of me. Now, I wasn't so sure.

An uncomfortable feeling swept through me. The guys were talking to Molly, but I was deep in my own head, going over every interaction we'd had in the past few days. Abel had said no more than a handful of words to me while we worked together, and when he had said something, it had usually been a curt comment about my playing or instructions on what we were doing next. I didn't think him capable of the generosity he was now showing Molly, because he sure as hell never showed it to me. What had I done to make him dislike me so much?

Rubbing at my nose, I forced myself to once again pay attention to the conversation. I wasn't going to let this affect me. I sure as hell wasn't going to go out of my way to get Abel to like me as a person. As far as I could tell, I hadn't done anything bad to him, so if he had an issue with me, that was his problem.

The table was cleared for dessert, and Molly took the opportunity to get her Instagram-worthy shot.

"Could we stand up and take it with the wall as the background?" she asked, pulling out her phone and waving it around to find the perfect angle.

The guys, so obedient to my seventeen-year-old sister, stood up and arranged themselves in a row.

"Give me the phone, Mol. I'll take it."

My sister handed me her phone before taking her place in the middle, flanked by Abel and Ezra.

I took a few pictures, despite telling Molly she'd only get one.

"Okay, now you gotta get one with us and Adeline. She told us you've been on her butt for not taking one at the show," Cole said.

"Yeah! Get over here, Ade."

I switched spots with Molly and handed the phone back to her.

"Stand a little closer," she directed, waving her hands for emphasis.

We squished together until I could feel both Ezra and Abel pressed up

against my entire sides. Ezra curled his arm around my waist, while Abel snaked his around my shoulders. I glanced at the lead singer to find him looking at me, his face mere inches from mine. His long eyelashes fanned across his cheeks when he blinked.

Why couldn't this man who seemed to hate me be a tad less attractive?

"Look here!" Molly said, and I flicked my attention back to her, plastering a smile on my face.

A minute later, we were sitting back down and digging into the tiramisu.

"By the way, Molly," Ezra told her when we were halfway through dessert. "I know we're keeping Adeline away from you during your last few weeks at home. If you ever want to swing by the studio, you're more than welcome."

"Thanks, I may take you up on that," she answered. "When she's not with you guys, she's at the gym or at the bar, so I need to try to get as much time with her as I can somewhere."

"You work out?" Silas asked, glancing at me.

"Yeah. Helps me clear my mind," I responded with a shrug.

Molly laughed. "Don't let that overly casual response fool you. Adeline's a gym rat. She says it's her church. I say she goes there to ogle the hot guys."

I wanted to kill my sister. Instead, I gave her a tight smile that I hoped was effective at communicating how dead she was going to be when we got back home.

"To be fair, I'm sure they're all ogling her, too," Cole chirped, and I turned my attention to him.

He sat leaning back in his chair, a devious smirk on his face, and leisurely surveyed whatever he could see of me.

I grew warm under his examination. I liked my body. It wasn't too muscular but was well defined and most importantly, strong. Sure, the look wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but I didn't train so that men would find me attractive. Still, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little proud of the results of my hard work.

Trying to will my growing blush away, I said the first thing that came to mind. "If any of you guys ever want to train before or after one of our sessions, let me know. I could always use a partner."

"How about tomorrow?" Ezra immediately asked.

I hadn't expected any of them to take me up on the offer this quickly. Clearly, I'd misjudged.

I nodded at the drummer, keeping my expression carefully neutral. “Sure. Let’s meet at eight.”

By the time we bid the guys goodbye and got into the car to drive home, it was almost nine. Relief swept through me, like I’d just finished a final exam and knew there’d be no more classes on Monday. I hadn’t realized just how much tension I’d been holding all evening until it bled into the air around me and disappeared.

“That was so fun,” Molly gushed, scrolling through the pictures she’d taken and labelling the ones she liked the most. She was animated, her eyes bright in the reflection of the glowing screen.

I put the car in Drive and began to pull out of the lot. “Next time, if there is a next time, could you try not to embarrass me?”

She snorted, obviously not threatened by my tone.

“I couldn’t embarrass you in front of those guys if I tried. Ade, they’re all crushing on you. Hard.”

I furrowed my brows, trying to remember if my sister had had an opportunity to sneak some alcohol at dinner. “What are you talking about?”

My peripheral vision dimmed as she tapped the phone off and lowered her hands into her lap. Something about the movement struck me as particularly serious.

“They were staring at you all night, Ade, looking away when they thought you might catch them, then drifting right back when your attention was elsewhere. It’s like you have some kind of a gravitational pull on them.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I dismissed. “You’re imagining things.”

I could feel her looking at me, trying to read something in my face. “You didn’t notice it because you were too focused on making sure I didn’t tell them too much about who you are. Next time, pay attention and you’ll know exactly what I mean.”

I bristled at her calm, assured tone. “They’re my coworkers, Mol. My employers, actually. They don’t need to know all that much about me, and I didn’t appreciate you volunteering information like it was yours to give. It’s not professional.”

“Why are you trying to draw this firm line between them and you? People make friends at work all the time. People get married to their coworkers, for God’s sake. Our parents worked together right out of college and were married a year later. Half the people at their wedding were coworkers who felt responsible for getting them together. Mom showed me pictures from the

wedding and pointed out the crying office manager who set them up on their very first lunch to go over some reports. You're being weird about this. I think I know why, and it has nothing to do with you wanting to be professional."

Sometimes I forgot how shrewd my sister could be. It was easy to classify her as a typical Gen Z teenager, obsessed with appearances and likes and online popularity, but beneath the superficial outer layer, she held a deep understanding of people and the world around her. I didn't know if it was instinctual or a result of what we'd gone through, but she'd managed to surprise me many times.

"You're overthinking it."

"I'm not," she countered. "You see something in them that scares you. They are what you could've been if you hadn't given up on your dream after a single rejection. Not only that, I think you're starting to realize you can still choose to pursue that dream, but the prospect of putting yourself out there again terrifies you. So you're keeping your distance, treating it like any other job. Pretending it's not fate sending you a message."

I kept my mouth shut, not knowing what to say. I wanted to tell her she was wrong, that she'd misread things, but I couldn't do it. I felt at home in the studio, much like I did inside a concert venue. Despite the tension with Abel, I was thoroughly enjoying working with the guys, and spending all day making music. Was I worried about getting used to this? About filling my head with old dreams that hadn't panned out once and were unlikely to ever pan out? Yeah, I was. But that was because I was smarter now than I'd been at seventeen. Being chosen for this four-week project was just a lucky accident, and lucky accidents didn't translate into a career that paid the bills.

And if fate was sending me a message, how was I supposed to interpret the fluttering sensations I got when Ezra smiled at me, or when Silas taught me something, or when Cole pulled me into a friendly embrace? What about the goosebumps that erupted over my skin whenever Abel's intense gaze landed on me? If fate was doing anything, it was playing some messed-up mind games with me.

Molly sighed at my silence, and there was something akin to pity in the sound. "Don't be so quick to cut them off, Ade. All I'm asking you to do is to give them and yourself a chance."

That night, I lay in bed, staring at my ceiling and the faded glow-in-the-dark stars I had stuck up there when I was thirteen. My phone buzzed on the

nightstand beside my head. It was Molly sending me the pictures from the dinner.

I clicked on the first thumbnail. She had taken a shot before we were ready, when Abel and I were still looking at each other, and the rest of the guys stood angled in our direction. My breath hitched in my chest. I couldn't read their expressions, but there was something possessive in their body language. Their attention was all squarely on me.

What if Molly was right? What if they were interested in me?

No. That was a possibility I could *not* allow myself to explore. This gig was too important, I needed that twenty grand, and I was enjoying the process way too much to jeopardize it by doing something stupid. As I began to drift off to sleep, another thought flickered inside the darkness of my mind.

If I felt like being stupid, who would I even choose?

ADELINE

IN THE MORNING, Ezra showed up at the gym seconds after me, just as the clock ticked past eight. He wore a loose hoodie over what looked like a tank top, and shorts that stopped mid-thigh, sparing very little of his muscled flesh from my sight.

I had to have a pep talk with myself in the mirror in the locker room. *Forget about what Molly said. They're not crushing on you. You're the first woman to ever work with them on an album, so a curious look here and there means absolutely nothing. Don't stare at his ass. Don't stare at his thighs. Above all, don't stare at his crotch, no matter how it bulges from beneath his shorts.*

Ezra was waiting for me at the squat rack. His hoodie was off, and the arm holes of his tank top were cut low enough for me to see the muscles running up his ribs and the taut outline of his side abs.

Dear God.

“Do you need to warm up?” he asked, giving me a friendly smile.

“I jogged around the neighborhood this morning before coming. Let's just do a quick warmup set before loading up.”

We squatted with the bar before starting to put on more weight for each set. I was weak. I stared at his excellent glutes while I spotted him. Then, when we moved on to the leg press, I couldn't help but appreciate the striations in his calves. He wasn't bulky, like many of the roid-bros at the gym, but his body was tight and defined in all the right places. He looked like he could fuck for hours standing up, holding all of my weight on him.

I groaned at that thought, earning a curious glance from him. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just getting a bit sore,” I lied. “I think I'm ready to wrap up after the next set. It's almost nine.”

By the time we finished, I was a sweaty mess, as was typical for leg day. We collapsed onto a big mat and started to stretch.

“Want me to help?” Ezra asked while I was doing pigeon pose on the ground.

The thought of his hands on me made my thighs clench.

I should say no.

“Sure.”

A second later, two warm hands were pressing down on my lower back, pushing me deeper into the stretch. It felt divine, the perfect blend of pain and pleasure. I groaned for the second time in an hour, earning a chuckle from him. “Flip onto your back.”

I did as I was told, and he kneeled by my side, lifting one of my legs and hooking it in front of his shoulder. His reddish hair was messy, and a strand was sticking to his forehead. He looked delicious.

“Where did you learn this?” I asked, my eyelids fluttering in pleasure.

“Thailand. I spent a few months there when we weren’t touring a few years ago. Took a course in Thai massage,” he explained, while inching my leg farther up.

“That must’ve been nice to live in a foreign country for a while.”

“It was one of the best things I’ve ever done,” he said. “Being away from everything allowed me to really relax. During those two months, I was only responsible for myself, and I felt so light for once.”

I forced my eyes open to meet his gaze. “Do you feel responsible for the rest of the guys?”

In the quiet moments during our rehearsals, I’d often see Ezra staring out into space with a sorrowful expression, as if something had taken him out of the present moment. He wore that same look on his face now, and I could tell he was looking at me without really seeing me.

“Ezra?” I asked gently.

He blinked and saw me once again. “I do. They’re my brothers.”

Slowly, he lowered my leg and came over to the other side. “Abel is our front man onstage, but behind the scenes, I fell into some kind of a leadership role when we first started.”

“I can see why,” I told him with a smile. “You have a knack for it.”

The corners of his lips turned up. “What do you mean?”

“You just seem to have a calming presence over the other guys. They listen to you. I think they’d be tearing each other’s heads off without you,” I told him.

His fingers traveled down to my thigh, rubbing my quads with firm strokes. I had to bite back another moan.

“I can see how playing that role could get exhausting, though,” I added after a moment, thinking about how I felt something similar at times when it came to Molly.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I just feel like I... Well, you’re probably going to

think I'm an awful person for saying this, but sometimes I just want to stop playing that role. Then, when things go wrong with the band, maybe I won't feel so goddamn guilty about it."

Ezra finished with my right leg, and I propped myself up on my elbows to look at him.

"I don't think you're an awful person at all. In fact, I've felt that way myself before."

"With Molly?"

I swallowed. Did I want to tell him about our situation?

"It's admirable that you're trying to help your parents pay for her education," he continued, and I bit back the truth I was about to share with him. "Taking that on must feel like a lot."

He curled his fingers around my calf and started to massage it, earning a hiss from me.

"Yeah. Well, it's the right thing to do."

Ezra nodded, keeping his focus on his hands. I plopped back down on the mat and tried to keep my brain from turning into mush. Despite the heavy topic, his hands were working magic on my body, and heat was pooling between my legs. He switched to my other calf, and I bit my lip, telling myself that getting turned on in the middle of the gym floor was completely inappropriate.

"You're really tight," he noted at some point, and I blubbered something incomprehensible in response as my mind definitely went *there*.

When Ezra's face hovered over mine, I was sure he could make out my blush.

"Done." His cheeks also wore some color, but that must be from the workout we'd just done.

As we walked toward the change rooms, a young woman stopped Ezra and asked him for an autograph. She gave him admiring looks as he signed inside a notebook she produced before asking for a hug.

"I'm all sweaty," he explained with a rueful smile.

"Oh, I don't mind," the fan assured him. I couldn't hold back a snort, and Ezra gave me a dark look in response.

"I'll...see you outside," I told him and rushed to the shower.

When I came out, Ezra stood by the door with two smoothies, and I burst out laughing at the embarrassed expression on his face.

"She's never going to wash that shirt again," I told him as he handed me

one of the drinks.

“Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do to please the fans.”

“I think you underdelivered over there if you were looking to really please her,” I teased, earning a gruff laugh in response.

“So does that happen often to you guys?” I asked him as we walked through the parking lot.

“It’s not so bad here. River Valley is small enough, and people are used to seeing us around every few years. In LA, it’s definitely crazier. We’ve had people follow us to our homes, or burst into hysterics when they meet us, which can get messy. We like interacting with fans and always try to take the time to chat and whatnot, but sometimes it does get a bit intense,” he concluded.

“Poor you,” I said in a mocking voice, “having to deal with all those nubile fans throwing themselves at your feet.”

He laughed again. “It’s a tough life.”

I noticed he didn’t deny that it did happen, and I felt a pang of irrational jealousy. He was a rock star, for fuck’s sake. Of course he slept with groupies. Even if he weren’t a famous musician, his looks alone would ensure his bed never got too cold.

When we made it into the studio to begin working on the second track, the rest of the band was already there.

“You guys have that post-workout glow,” Cole commented. “It’s not too different from Ezra’s post-coital glow, actually. You are coming from the gym, right?”

I choked on my smoothie. Ezra came to my aid by slapping me on the back.

“Jesus, Cole. You want to kill her? Adeline’s not used to your dirty mouth.”

“If you want to get more familiar with it, Ade, just let me know. It takes appointments, especially with beautiful women.”

Thankfully, I had recovered enough to respond to that myself. “I’m sure you’re all booked up for the rest of the year.”

Cole grinned, “I’ll clear my calendar for you.” His hazel eyes zeroed in on me, and the devilish grin on his lips set fire to my insides.

“Are you going to flirt all day, or are we going to play some music?” Abel snapped in an irritated voice, and I turned away from the bassist. After my morning with Ezra, how the hell was I now also turned on by Cole?

The next song we rehearsed quickly proved to be challenging. The bridge had a rapid arpeggio that I kept messing up, and I was getting increasingly frustrated.

Abel had spent the past half hour watching me like a hawk, which only added to my irritation. He hadn't said anything, but that somehow made it even worse. I was sure he was judging me silently, probably trying to figure out how to fire me without the rest of the guys getting up in arms about it.

When it came time for lunch, I volunteered to pick it up with Silas. I needed a break to clear my head and let my fingers rest. Sometimes stopping and coming back to a difficult track was what it took to get through it.

"The studio is closed tomorrow," Silas told me as we pulled up to a drive-through.

"How come?" I asked, pulling out the scrap of paper where we'd written down everyone's orders.

"They're doing some maintenance."

I rattled off the order, and we moved to the other window. "Shit. I wanted to come in early tomorrow to keep practicing."

Silas dug in his pocket before pulling out a credit card and handing it to me. "Here, put it on our expense account. If you want, you can come over, and I'll help you work on it at my place. I had an extra bedroom soundproofed a few years back so that the neighbors wouldn't complain about me playing at all hours of the night."

I couldn't very well pass up on some one-on-one coaching from Silas. He was a good and patient teacher, and every time he offered me feedback, it made me a better player.

"That would be awesome." I glanced at him while waiting for the cashier to return the card. "I have a shift at the bar at six pm, but I can come in the early afternoon if that works for you."

"Let's plan for one pm?"

"That works great. Are you sure you want to spend your day off helping me?" I asked, not wanting him to feel like he owed me anything. "I can keep practicing on my own if you just want a day to chill."

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want to do it," he said, and I believed him. Silas seemed completely at ease with himself. There wasn't one disingenuous bone in his body and I couldn't help but admire that about him.

We returned to find Ezra bickering with Abel about some changes he wanted to make to the drum track. As soon as Cole saw us, he rolled his eyes

and came over to help unpack the food. “This is what happens when you leave us on our own, Adeline,” he said, tearing into his sandwich.

Soon, Ezra and Abel joined us, and we proceeded to eat in heavy silence.

“Any plans for the weekend?” I asked, trying to lighten the surly mood in the room.

“I’m going up to LA to see my sister,” Cole said. “She’s pregnant, due in a few months.”

Abel watched him carefully. “You finally going to make up with her fiancé now that they’re having a kid together?”

Cole sniffed. “I’m going to try, although that asshole better be on his best behavior.”

“What’s the story?” I asked.

“Well, when we first met him on tour, years before him and my sister officially began dating, he was a strung-out man-whore. We’re a pretty open-minded bunch, but he took it to the next level.”

“He’s a musician?”

“Yeah. He used to play with Ritual Disruption. Despite being a musician myself, I’m still biased against my little sister dating one.”

I stopped chewing my turkey sandwich for a moment. Ritual Disruption used to be super famous before they broke up a few years ago. Yeah, I could see Cole’s point. I’m not sure I’d be too thrilled if Molly brought home a rocker boyfriend.

“Anyways, he’s reformed now,” Cole said with air quotes, “but I’m still not sure I can stand the thought of that piss stain being with my little sister.”

“Cole might have given him a bloody nose at one point,” Ezra added.

I grimaced, finding it hard to imagine Cole in a fight. He seemed so laidback most of the time. He must’ve been absolutely furious. “Well, best of luck with that. What about you, Ezra? Sticking around town?” I asked before taking another bite.

“Yeah, I’m going to chill around here. Maybe go pay a visit to my mom. What about you, Adeline?”

“I’ll be at the bar both evenings. I managed to convince the owner to give me the weekend shifts while I work with you guys,” I explained.

“You’re still working there? I thought you’d quit now that you have this gig. Aren’t we paying you enough?” Silas asked, neatly folding his sandwich wrapper before putting it back in the takeout bag.

“You do,” I rushed to answer. I didn’t want them thinking I was unhappy

with the more-than-generous salary they were paying. “But I’ll need to find work when we finish the album, so I didn’t want to quit only to have to look for another job in a month. Plus, I don’t mind it there. The regulars tip well, and the college crowd generally stays away.”

Abel put his half-eaten sandwich down on the desk and leaned back against the wall. “So you really don’t want to work in music?” he asked, surprising me. “That’s what your sister said last night.”

I sucked on my top lip before meeting his gaze. “I just don’t want to have unrealistic expectations. How many people want to be musicians? How many people actually succeed? I’m supporting myself and my sister, and I can’t risk our livelihood for a pipe dream.”

Abel’s eyebrows pinched together. “Don’t your parents help support Molly?”

Oh fuck. I’d walked right into that one. I’d been so taken aback by Abel speaking to me without any obvious snark in his voice, I hadn’t fully processed what I was saying.

Four pairs of eyes fixed on me, waiting for the answer I could no longer avoid giving.

“They passed away.”

Despite my efforts to stay neutral, my throat tightened as I uttered the words. I watched as their expressions shifted through varying degrees of shock. I let out a breath and looked down at my feet.

The typical reaction of someone finding out that Molly and I were orphans was a recalculation. A re-indexing of all our earlier interactions to label the tells they didn’t pick up on before. Maybe that’s why we always seemed a little sad when we thought no one was looking. Maybe that’s why Molly seemed a bit mature for her age or why I hadn’t had a boyfriend in years.

When the process was complete, their faces would become a mask meant to convey sympathy. But I saw it for what it was. Pity.

“I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say anything?” Silas asked, forcing me to look back up. He was slouched on a rickety chair that seemed like it was made for a child when contrasted with his size. The strange thing was that his face hadn’t become a mask of pity. None of the others had, either. Instead, they were looking at me with something that seemed a lot like respect.

I shrugged, letting my hair fall into my face from behind the ears. “Not a topic for casual conversation, really.”

“How long ago?” Abel stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“About two years. They got T-boned by a drunk driver.”

“And you didn’t send Molly to live with some relatives?”

I narrowed my eyes at Abel. “Are you kidding me? She’s my sister. I wouldn’t let anyone else take care of her. She’s my blood.”

What I didn’t say is that for a moment I’d considered doing exactly that. The shame made my cheeks prickle.

Abel was looking at me with a thoughtful expression I’d never seen on his face before. It halted my own turbulent emotions like someone had pressed pause on a remote control. I gazed into his green eyes, seeing the real Abel for the first time, and in that moment, I suspected we had a lot more in common than I’d initially thought.

“Fuck,” Cole swore, interrupting the connection between the singer and I.

“Exactly. Fuck,” I said. “But hey, life goes on. Molly and I are fine now. Our parents worked in insurance, so we’ve been living well enough on the money that they left us, but it’s not going to last forever. That’s why I gotta find something solid in the next few months. Something that pays decently, has benefits, security. You know, all that boring crap that music isn’t going to give me.”

“You think that’s what your parents would have wanted for you?” Silas asked in a low voice, and I clamped my mouth shut.

My parents... Well, they probably would’ve told me I was an idiot for giving up on music, but they weren’t here, were they? After the Julliard fiasco, they’d kept trying to get me to pick up my guitar, and when I did, they constantly told me I was meant to be a musician, despite the failure that had brought me to my knees. They’d died before they managed to convince me.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I told Silas while looking down at my food.

It was Abel who ultimately changed the topic. “Let’s wrap up. Cole, Ezra, I hope lunch is going to inspire a better performance out of you two. The rest of you can go practice in the room next door. We’ll meet back here to rehearse all together for an hour before we go.”

SILAS

I was thirty-one years old, and by now I should have been able to squash the thing that was building up inside of me as I watched Adeline rehearse the fourth song on the album.

We were sitting in the small rehearsal room down the hall, just the two of us, after Abel had instructed us to leave the studio. Adeline's earlier admission about her parents was still at the forefront of my mind, illuminating parts of her that up until now had been hidden.

Life had dealt her a crappy hand, but she was clearly more than capable of handling her business. She was a fighter, and I didn't want to insult her with pity. No, instead, I wanted to worship her, for her strength, her beauty, her talent, and most of all, her heart. Because it took a fuck load of heart to do what she was doing for her sister. Putting two and two together was easy now. She loved Molly and would work her ass off to give her a good life, even if that meant sacrificing her own dreams in the process. My reverent intent wasn't unique. I had seen it in the eyes of my bandmates, too.

I was pretending to listen to her playing for the purposes of providing feedback, but instead, I was noticing things like the way her wrists moved when she changed between chords and the soft movements of her lips as she hummed the melody.

A few thick curls hung over her forehead, casting shadows into her eyes, and my hand itched to move them behind her ears and feel the smooth skin of her face. This growing infatuation was becoming a problem. I thought she might be aware of my intense study when she lifted her gaze to mine, but instead, she simply asked, "How was that?"

"Perfect," I replied. She narrowed her eyes slightly, as if she didn't quite know if to believe me.

I wasn't lying. I also wasn't just talking about the song.

"Can we play it again together?"

She was a hard worker, and I could tell she was rehearsing at home whenever she wasn't in the studio. That was the only way she could've gotten this good in the span of four days. As long as I could help her with the one song giving her trouble when we practiced tomorrow, we'd be able to start recording next week—a fact that might actually put a smile on Abel's face.

“Of course.”

She smiled at me, and I picked up my guitar without tearing my eyes away from her face, carefully cataloguing the curve of her cheeks and the way her cool-gray eyes seemed to grow warmer when she wore this expression.

I really had to stop staring.

Why hadn't she done more with music prior to her parent's death? She had mentioned to me a few days earlier that she'd been playing since she was ten years old, which explained her level of skill with the instrument, and also that Through Azure Skies had been together for four years. Why settle on playing in a cover band? Was it ambition she lacked?

A thrill ran through me when I noticed her eyes flicker across my form before a light-rosy color appeared on her cheeks. This was one of the benefits of being observant. I picked up on people's thoughts and emotions by studying their body language.

Did she find me attractive?

The possibility emboldened me, and I allowed my eyes to slowly drift over her body, before meeting her gaze once again.

She swallowed and looked back down, beginning to play the intro of the song.

Maybe I should've been able to squash whatever this was, but the simple truth was that I didn't really want to.

When I got home from the studio later, I dropped my keys on the kitchen island and pulled out my smartphone. There was a message from Katya, one I'd gotten earlier today but hadn't yet opened.

“Hang out tonight?”

I ran my hand over my beard, noting absently that it was time for a trim.

Did I want to see her? I rarely turned down her invitations when I was in town, but something about the prospect of another mindless fuck made my chest grow heavy. I'd wanted something more for a long time now, but my track record seemed to land only on the two extremes—casual hook ups that had no future, or infatuations so intense that people were scared away.

At least, I hadn't attempted to propose since that one time years ago.

Sending a response I knew would disappoint Katya, I shoved the phone in my pocket and grabbed a beer from the fridge, the ritual of popping the cap off and tossing it into the bin providing a small comfort.

My feelings for Adeline landed firmly in the intense infatuation category,

despite only knowing her for about a week. To add to the problem, I could tell the rest of the guys were into her, too. The past few months had been the most difficult we'd ever experienced as a band, and I didn't want to introduce another point of tension, but I'd never been good at keeping my feelings buried. This was already off to a great start.

The phone buzzed along my thigh, and I saw it was a call from Cole.

"What's up?"

"Hey, man. I need to kill a few hours before my red-eye to LA. Can I come over?"

Oh, right. I had nearly forgotten that Cole was about to have a showdown with his future brother-in-law across the country.

"Sure, but I'm only offering beers, not sharp weapons. I'm not going to aid and abet your vendetta."

Cole snorted. "Fine. I'll have to drop by Ezra's for that. Anyways, see you in ten."

A knock sounded fifteen minutes later, and I pulled open the door to reveal a surly looking Cole with a small suitcase at his side. He strode in, dropped the bag on the floor, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and collapsed onto the couch.

"Make yourself at home," I said, earning a glare.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill that motherfucker."

I walked over to the armchair and sat across from him. "I'll give you three. Your sister loves him. He's been clean for years. You're really more of a lover than a fighter."

Cole let out a drawn-out breath. "I'm not saying any of those things are false, but—"

"Oh, and they're having a kid," I interrupted. "One that probably wants to have a father."

The bassist ran a hand over his face. "Fuck. I'm going there to make peace with him, aren't I?"

"Get that sentiment tattooed somewhere on you at the airport so you won't forget it."

He gulped down his beer. "Well, at least my parents will be happy if I come back to them with news of a truce. They've been too careful with me these past few weeks, treating me like I'm fragile or something. This fucking place, man... I love it because it made me who I am, but I also hate it. There are too many memories I don't want to be thinking about. Being here puts me

on edge.”

I nodded in agreement, knowing exactly what he meant. We’d all lost things here.

“The rehearsals have been going really well, don’t you think?” he continued. “Three more weeks, and then we’ll be out.”

Shifting in my seat, I gave Cole a look.

“What?”

“I’m not really rushing to leave,” I said.

He looked confused for a quick moment before a grin settled on his face.

“You, too, huh?”

I shrugged.

“There’s something about her that I can’t quite figure out, but I’ve never felt an energy like this before,” Cole said, scrubbing at his chin. “I feel it, man. I know Ezra does, too.”

“Even Abel,” I added, which made the bassist frown.

“You think so? I can’t really tell if he’s warming up to her.”

“It’s because you don’t pay attention. He looks at her like she’s something he wants to devour.”

Cole’s expression turned thoughtful. “We’ve never had a woman we’re all interested in.”

“Well, I’m not stepping aside for anyone. Let the best man win.”

He met my words with a contemplative look. “Or we could all win if you stopped being so greedy.”

I scoffed. “Dude, I’m not like you and Ezra.” I knew they shared women and enjoyed it, but I’d never understood the appeal. Thankfully, over the past ten years, we’d gravitated toward different kinds of people.

Until Adeline. To her, we were drawn like moths to a flame.

“Why do you guys enjoy it so much?” I asked Cole, suddenly curious.

He rubbed at his chest. “It’s hard to explain. Why do certain things turn us on more than others? There’s something incredibly hot about pleasuring a woman together in ways she may not have experienced before. It also takes the pressure off. I think for Ezra, that’s a big thing. He’s spent his whole life taking care of people. When we’re both with a woman, it gives him permission to get out of his head and just enjoy it. Does that make any sense?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it does.” Hearing him describe the experience was stirring something new in me. We’d never talked about it in detail before.

“Don’t you ever get jealous, though?”

“Not with Ezra,” Cole said definitively. “I’d never do it with some random guy, but I trust Ezra. I know he’s got my back, and we can talk through whatever we need to. Just like with you and Abel, when he’s not being an asshole, that is.”

“But what if the woman decides she likes one of you more than the other?”

Cole chuckled. “You’re really thinking it through now, aren’t you? When we’ve done it before, it’s mostly been on tour, so it’s never gotten that far. It’s never turned into a steady thing, you know? But look, I don’t like to spend time thinking about what-ifs or trying to talk myself out of doing something that excites me. All I’m saying is that with you guys, I know that whatever happens, we can figure it out together. Don’t get me wrong, the past few weeks have tested that belief, but I remain an optimist. And I think this thing with Adeline and us could be...intriguing,” Cole concluded with a smile.

Did I want to compete with my best friends for her attention? Or was I willing to push myself outside of my comfort zone? Cole’s point about taking the pressure off resonated with me. During moments of self-reflection, I sometimes thought the intensity I brought to my romantic relationships was because I felt compelled to give my partner everything. If I didn’t, I was afraid they’d leave and find it somewhere else. But what if we were all focused on meeting her needs? Wouldn’t that work out better for everyone?

Cole was studying me with an amused expression. “I should be leaving, but watching you question your beliefs is too entertaining,” he said. “I wish you could see your face right now.”

I stroked my beard, ignoring his chirping. “The thought of doing something like that with anyone but you guys feels completely wrong, but you’re right. We’re brothers in everything but blood. Maybe it could work if it was just us. Do you think she would be...” I trailed off, thinking back to how she’d looked at me earlier today.

“Interested in something unconventional? I’m not sure. The smiles, the lingering looks, the absolutely insane chemistry we all have with her in the studio? She’s hard to read, but I’d like to think all those things mean something. Still, we have to tread carefully. Can’t forget about the power dynamic, either. I definitely wouldn’t want her to feel like there’s some fucked-up pressure for there to be more.”

He was right of course. “And Abel?”

Cole shook his head. “Whatever you’ve observed, he won’t admit to himself that he likes her. He’s got shit to figure out, and we need to let him.”

“It might get messy,” I observed, “if he’s not on board.”

“What did I say about what-ifs?” he asked, getting up. “And anyway, we’re getting ahead of ourselves given that we don’t know where Adeline’s head is at.” Plucking his suitcase off the ground, he added, “We need to let her take the lead, but we also need to show her that we’re open to it. Maybe you can hint at something when you see her this weekend?”

Suddenly, I felt nervous. “Because I’m the king of subtlety? Ezra is way better at that shit.”

Cole shrugged. “Well, you’re seeing her first, so give it a try. Just make sure to take it easy.”

Famous last words.

ADELINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I skipped breakfast and went straight to the gym. It had been almost a week since the performance in the Barnyard and I decided to call Liam on my drive over to catch up and see when he wanted to rehearse next.

He picked up on the fourth ring. “Ade?” He sounded rushed, and I could hear his fiancée talking to someone in the background.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Van’s folks are visiting up for the weekend. Give me one second. I’m going to find a quieter place to talk.”

“Okay.”

I could imagine him walking through the house, and the click of a door being shut sounded over the line.

“Give me strength to survive this week,” he said in a low voice.

I snorted. “Why are they here? Helping to get the baby’s room set up?”

“Yeah, and babyproof the entire house. They’ve been on my ass since they arrived an hour ago about retiling the bathroom. Now Van, who’s never said a word about the tiles, is nodding like it’s the smartest suggestion she’s ever heard.”

I stifled a laugh, “Hang in there. They’ll be gone soon enough and maybe Van will forget all about the tiles.”

“Can only hope you’re right. Anyway, what’s up?”

My question about our next practice suddenly felt inopportune. I decided

to cushion it with some news first. “You know how Bleeding Moonlight came to the show last week?”

“Not something I’m likely to ever forget. We chatted to them for a little bit after you left. They were really cool, and they said they liked our set.”

“Right. They asked me to help them record a new album, as a session guitarist. We’ve been working on it for a few days now.”

There was a silence on Liam’s end, and I fingered the wheel nervously. “Liam?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just...wow. That’s incredible, Ade. You must’ve really impressed them.”

I sucked in a breath. “I guess so. I’m learning a ton from them, even in just the past few days. When do you think we can get together next? I have some ideas for covers we can rework.”

“How long is this for? I’m guessing you’re pretty busy while you’re working with them. Did you quit your gig at the bar?”

“Oh no,” I said. “This is just for a few weeks, so I dropped a shift and swapped with Frankie to work weekends. My schedule is more intense now, but I can make time for practice. Don’t want us to get rusty, right?”

“Right. Well, look, it’s a little bonkers on my end, and the in-laws are here all through the next week. Why don’t we plan to get together sometime next weekend? Maybe in the early afternoon if you’re at the bar in the evening?” There was something measured in his tone that I didn’t like.

“Okay, that works.”

“It will be good to chat about our plans for once Mason leaves,” he added as an afterthought, but I knew it was anything but.

“Yes. We do need to talk about that,” I conceded.

“All right, I gotta go back and make sure they don’t plant any ideas about the kitchen in Van’s head. Talk soon?”

“Good luck,” I said with a smile and hung up.

I’d expected all of the unspoken implications in that conversation, but I couldn’t help but feel disheartened anyway. I knew that Liam would likely want to quit before the baby came, and Mason’s departure was the perfect excuse. We were losing our drummer, and looking for a new one would involve too much work for any of us to comfortably take on. Still, this band was my lifeline, an IV that kept a part of me alive, and without it, the last link to my identity as a musician would die.

By the end of my first week working on Bleeding Moonlight’s album, I

already knew that parting ways with the musicians in three weeks would be hard. Without *Through Azure Skies* waiting for me on the other side, I suspected I was setting myself up for a spectacular crash.

Silas lived in one of the few condominiums in town. I was greeted by an aging receptionist who looked at my ID for a few seconds before waving me into the steel-paneled elevator. The low-pile carpet smelled like it had just been cleaned.

I got off on the top floor and made my way to the penthouse unit at the end of the hall. The walls were painted with abstract motifs that caught me off guard with their intended trendiness. River Valley was not a trendy place by any means, although with more people moving outside of the cities, maybe that would change over the next few years. I wondered how that would impact the price of our home, and if I would be better off not selling it right now.

My thoughts were interrupted when the door to Silas's unit swung open before I even knocked. Then they disappeared altogether.

Silas was shirtless, with broken-in jeans that hung low on his hips, revealing a prominent vee leading toward a place I had no business being curious about. His long hair was still wet from a shower and drops of water crawled down his muscular chest and well-defined abs. The tattoos on his right arm bled all the way over his shoulder. Were those dragons?

My tongue may as well have been sticking out of my mouth. Craning my neck to look at his face was one of the hardest things I've ever done. When I finally made my way there, his eyes shone with an amused satisfaction.

"Hi," I squeaked in a pathetically thin voice.

"Come on in. The security guard gave me the heads-up you were on your way."

He turned around, giving me a perfect view of his enormous back. The way his muscles rippled under his skin reminded me of a mountain lion stalking his prey.

I took my shoes off while keeping my guitar close to me and then followed him into the open-concept kitchen. I expected the place to feel modern, like the hallway outside, but it was decorated in a cozy vintage style.

“Nice place.” I swiveled my head around, noticing how the art prints on the walls and the teal color of the crushed velvet couch and armchair all fit together. This wasn’t a hodgepodge of random belongings. Someone had put some thought into making this place feel like a home.

“Thanks.” Silas grabbed a T-shirt from the back of a stool and tugged it on. I couldn’t tear my eyes away as I watched his smooth movements.

“I’m kind of into interior design,” he added before moving to open the fridge. “Do you want some water? Beer? Soda?”

“Water’s great, thanks. So you put all of this together?” I asked somewhat incredulously.

“Is that so hard to believe?” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“No, of course not. I just figured you’d be too busy with touring and recording. I guess I didn’t think you spent a lot of time here,” I said, accepting the glass from him.

“I got this place when the building was being just built. Four years ago, I think? I worked on it a room at a time, buying furniture and decor online so that it would get here when I was in town,” he explained, leading me to the couch.

I realized I loved his voice. It was like top-shelf whiskey—deep, smooth, and complex. I wanted him to keep talking, so I asked him about the print hanging across the room from us, a medley of chains thrown against a brick wall.

“What does it mean?”

He laughed, a rich, booming sound that made my toes curl against the woven rug beneath my feet.

“I don’t know. I don’t believe that art has intrinsic meaning. The experience of looking at art adds to the piece itself. We bring our context, our past experiences, our emotions and view the art through all those personalized lenses,” he explained.

I considered his words, finding truth in them. “I would agree with that. So I guess a better question would be what do *you* see in this picture?”

He looked at the print, tilting his head slightly to one side. “I see a message about the barriers we face each day. Some of them are impenetrable, while others have gaps and holes. How good are we at telling which are which? How often do we underestimate our ability to break through them?”

Looking back at the print, I did what I always did before a show, and let my thoughts go. I wanted to see what would come to me on instinct rather

than through rational analysis.

“I see someone straining to break free. The chains are taut against the surface, almost digging into it...as if they’re being pulled on from outside the frame. Anything can be chained and bound, no matter how strong it seems.”

Potent light from the afternoon sun streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating amber streaks in Silas’s warm-brown eyes when I turned back to look at him.

“I think I see that, too,” he said while watching me. His voice was slightly hoarse, and I let this new version of it wash over me. We were sitting close enough for me to pick up on his scent—subtle hints of leather and spice. I wanted to reach for a strand of his drying hair and curl it over my thumb.

Instead, I leaned back and cleared my throat. “Should we get started on the song?”

We grabbed our guitars and entered the second bedroom, which Silas had converted into his music room. The walls were lined with soundproof panels, the gray foam rippling in jagged waves. A two-person love seat was propped against the far wall, along with two folding chairs and a guitar amp by its side.

Silas pulled out a second guitar amp from below a wooden shelving unit and dragged it to the other side of the loveseat.

“Let’s get you plugged in.”

Once we were all set up, he began to lightly strum the intro portion of the second song. I watched him in wonder, noting how he made the complex melody seem so simple to play.

“Show me what you’ve got.” His gentle smile pierced right through my heart, making my insides flutter.

I played the song for him in its entirety, noting the parts I was still screwing up.

“Let’s work on the bridge,” Silas said, coming over to sit beside me on the loveseat. His left hand reached for mine, covering it on the neck of the guitar.

“You’re gripping too hard when you get to the fast part. Remember to keep the hand relaxed.” He pulled on my palm, digging his finger into the center and massaging it in circles.

I didn’t dare move. The air was suddenly hot and heavy in the small space. When Silas let go of my hand and moved back to his chair, I let out a quiet breath, feeling sweat start to pool at the small of my back.

We went over the bridge over and over again. Whenever I began to feel frustrated, Silas offered words of encouragement.

“You’re so close, Adeline. It’s going to sound just perfect after a few more tries.”

His absolute confidence in my ability to nail these parts made my insides feel like mush. When I finally got the bridge down, I wanted to leap out of my seat and pull him into a tight hug.

Instead, I settled on giving him my biggest smile. There was chemistry between us, and hugging him, feeling the contours of his flawless body against mine, might have made me combust. I couldn’t risk that. Getting involved with him would only lead to heartbreak and confusion. After all, he would be gone in three weeks. They would *all* be gone in three weeks.

Silas wore a triumphant expression. “Great work. Let’s play together now and see how we both sound.”

We dove into the song, the melody and the rhythm parts tangling together like old lovers. The song was called “Mid-flight,” and I thought the name was apt, because I really did feel as if I was flying. I soared through the parts I had just learned, amazed at how easily they came to me now.

When we were done, I gaped at Silas. I couldn’t believe how good a teacher he was proving to be.

“That was incredible.”

He nodded, looking at me with a similarly stricken expression. I tried to puzzle out how he was feeling in that moment. Moved? Inspired?

Slowly, he placed his guitar on a stand before reaching for mine. Our fingers brushed in the handoff, the touch sending electricity up my arm.

Our eyes met again, and this time, I knew exactly what I was seeing in them. I knew, because it was what he was seeing in mine.

Desire.

I needed to put some space between us. I stood up, but he mirrored my movements, inadvertently blocking my escape. He reached for my face. Calloused fingertips made contact, stroked my cheek, my jaw, before tracing my lips. I was frozen before him, dazed.

What are we doing?

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, gently, as if I were made of precious glass. Everything inside of me rocked. This wasn’t a kiss that hinted at a casual hookup. This kiss was trying to communicate things I wasn’t ready to hear, and it scared the shit out of me. All of my confusing feelings

toward Silas and his bandmates rose up in my chest and threatened to erupt.

As Silas's palms cradled my face and his soft, full lips moved against mine, my mind screamed at me to do something other than just stand there. It seemed important to show him that he couldn't kiss me like *that*. I crushed myself against his hard chest and deepened our kiss in an act of resistance. This was all this could be—a temporary madness fueled by raw desire that didn't mean a thing.

Before he could respond, I tore myself away, out of his reaching hands and his soft touch. Panic flooded my veins. "What the hell?" I hissed at him and ran out of the room. He followed.

"Adeline, wait. I don't know what happened. I thought—"

"You thought wrong," I interrupted. "I work for you. You can't just touch me and kiss me whenever you'd like. I'm not one of your groupies," I seethed, hating myself more and more with every word I said. Some part of me knew that I was projecting, taking my own confusion and fear out on him, but what else could I do? Admit that I was drawn to him and all of his bandmates in ways that didn't make any sense?

My gaze dropped to his bare feet on the carpet, I was unable to meet his eyes.

"Why did you kiss me back?" he asked.

"I...I don't know. I didn't mean to," I whispered. There was a long pause.

"Okay," he said. I could hear the confusion and hurt in his voice, and it killed me. "I'm sorry. I misread the situation. Of course, I know you're not a groupie."

At last, I lifted my eyes to his. The amber lines were gone. His expression was hard, his brows tense. I knew two things. I'd hurt him, and I needed to leave right away.

I grabbed my guitar out of the music room and packed it into its case. "Thank you for your help."

He climbed onto a stool by the kitchen counter, the one his shirt had been draped over, his back toward me. "Sure, no problem."

"I'll see you Monday," I said under my breath and walked out the door.

After work, I got home and locked myself in my room. My acoustic guitar

stood perched against an old plastic stool, and my fingers itched to feel the rough vibration of the strings beneath them, but I was afraid to touch it. Afraid to hear what would come flowing out of me.

The kiss had shifted me off my axis. I tried to remember what chores I had intended to do, but it was as if the rational part of my mind had been wiped blank. I was spinning out, unbidden thoughts and visuals overflowing the confines of my brain and making me feel as if I were about to fall over the side of an unknown abyss.

Only after closing my eyes and putting on my headphones to listen to some music did I manage to step away from the edge. My name was Adeline. I had a sister and no parents. I was helping a famous metal band record their new album. After we finished, I'd go right back to my old, boring life, and eventually all of this would seem no more than a dream.

Despite grounding me, the affirmations felt hollow. Why had I let Silas kiss me? His every touch leading up to it had been a question I'd ignored. I had no answers for him or for myself. I could have stopped him, but I didn't. Instead, I'd lashed out and put all of the blame on him.

The shame was so visceral that I had to bury my face under my covers and scream into the mattress, the sound low and guttural.

EZRA

“EZRA, I FUCKED UP.”

Silas’s worried voice burst through my phone. I had been watching a new sci-fi show on Netflix, and his call caught me off guard.

“What’s going on?”

There was a pause.

“I kissed Adeline.”

I swore and sat up on the couch. “I’m guessing by your tone that it didn’t go in the direction you were hoping for.”

He groaned, and I could almost hear him pacing across the floor of his apartment. “She asked me what the hell I was doing and told me she isn’t a groupie that I can just kiss.”

Shit. My mind was already spinning, but instead of thinking up ways to get Silas and us out of this mess, my thoughts were squarely focused on Adeline and whether she was okay.

“Silas, what the fuck, man?”

“It’s always the same fucking story with me, isn’t it?” he bit out. “I guess the conversation I had with Cole on Thursday just got this idea in my head, and then I thought she was giving me signals when we were working—”

“What conversation with Cole?” I interrupted.

“He didn’t tell you? He came over before his flight, and we talked about how we all seem to be into her, and maybe that was something we could carefully explore.”

I leaned back, my eyes fluttering closed. This really was a mess.

“If this is your understanding of the word ‘carefully’, you need to pick up a dictionary. Let’s rewind. Am I understanding you correctly? You’re proposing we *all* pursue Adeline? At the same time?”

“Yes. But, I may have blown whatever chance I had with her.”

“I’m sorry, I’m still not quite there. *You’re* interested in this idea? I didn’t take you for a guy who shares.”

He sniffed. “Cole explained it to me, and... Well, it kind of makes sense. Specifically, with us and Adeline. I don’t know, man. She’s different.”

It’s funny how after knowing someone for over a decade they still had the capacity to surprise you.

“Do you disagree?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

“Oh, she’s definitely different, I’m just shocked you’re considering what Cole is suggesting. He really *can* talk someone into anything.”

“We’re all attracted to her. Why fight amongst ourselves when we can join forces?”

That was a really simple way of looking at it, but sometimes it was the simplest argument that was the most illuminating.

“And anyway, I thought she may feel the same...until she ran out of my apartment. She kissed me back initially, for just a second.”

My eyes flicked open. “Wait, she kissed you back?”

“Yeah, I was trying to take it really slow...”

That, I found hard to believe.

“But she pressed right up to me, took me by surprise, before literally running away. She was upset, and I feel awful. I apologized, but I was so fucking agitated and confused that I don’t think it came off as very sincere.”

I sighed into the phone. “Okay, I’ll handle it.”

“I’m not sure if you should bring it up directly. It might just make it worse,” Silas said. “Fuck. I can’t believe I misread her so badly. I’m usually good at picking up signals.”

I mulled this over. Did she push Silas away because she wasn’t interested? Because she was worried about complicating their working relationship? Or because of something else? I wondered if she was drawn to us the way we were drawn to her...and if that confused her. The arrangement Cole and Silas had discussed was so far out of the ordinary... There was no way Adeline could be thinking about it in the same way.

“I won’t bring it up, but I’ll tell her you’re an idiot if she mentions it first,” I said to Silas.

“Okay. Thanks man. I really do feel like a piece of shit.” He paused for a long moment. “So what do you think about the idea?”

“It’s...” I trailed off, trying to find the right word.

“Cole used the word ‘intriguing.’”

I scoffed lightly. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“We’re all affected by her. It’s weird. Something dislodged inside of me the moment I saw her on that stage, and it’s only grown.”

“You’re still an idiot for acting on your feelings,” I quipped, not wanting to let him off the hook. “It’s pretty fucking unprofessional. But, yeah, I know what you mean. There’s something special about her, and I’d be more than willing to experiment if she showed any interest. That said, this stops now.”

We're not making any more blatant moves unless she does. You think you can keep yourself in check for once?"

Silas sniffed. "Yes."

"Good. All right, I'm going to try to check in with her tomorrow. Please don't do anything insane like showing up at her house in the middle of the night."

Silas couldn't even protest that because it had happened before.

"I won't. I'm going to order some takeout, eat, and call it an early night. I've done enough damage for one day."

Ending the call, I hung my head and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms.

This day really had gone from bad to worse. My morning had started with paying a visit to my father in his nursing home. That place repulsed me as much as it seemed to delight the people in the ads plastered on every wall of the reception area. They all looked so happy to be locking their parents away and having someone else take care of them.

I, on the other hand, felt like the shittiest son in the world.

My relationship with my dad was complicated, but we had gotten to a good place by the time I had to leave home to start Bleeding Moonlight's first tour. We had a few solid years before he started to deteriorate.

My twin sisters were a few years younger than me and had been in their second year of college when it started to get bad enough that we couldn't leave him home on his own. It wouldn't have been fair to ask them to come back, and the band had toured non-stop during those years. So I did the only thing I thought made sense. I signed the papers for Shan Valley Nursing Homes, a luxury facility for the elderly. My dad had moved in a week later.

Now, whenever I came back to River Valley and saw him, those goddamned posters taunted me. Each time I said goodbye, I felt just like one of those disingenuous models, hiding all the pain and guilt behind an insincere smile.

I had failed him, just like I'd failed Charlie.

Standing up and grabbing a glass of water, I pondered if I was going to fail the rest of the band.

It would have been so much easier to take a step back and let the dominoes fall where they may. If Abel got his wish and we broke up, I'd be free of this responsibility over them that had felt like a noose around my neck ever since Charlie's death.

It was my decision to put some space between Charlie and the rest of us. I thought I was protecting the rest of the guys from his negativity, his bleak outlook on the world, but instead, I'd simply isolated him from the people who could've helped him.

My gaze landed on the photo of us I had framed above the couch. It was from a *Rolling Stone* photoshoot a few years ago. Charlie's face stared at me, his lips in a smirk I'd seen a thousand times.

"You were always smirking at the world, Charlie," I whispered. "You'd tell us how much you hated everything but act like you were above it all. I didn't know how badly you were hurting, friend." My eyes drifted shut. "I didn't know."

I knew the band needed me now. Was I willing to walk away solely in hopes of protecting myself?

My mind jumped to Adeline. She hadn't walked away from her sister. She was one of the most courageous people I had ever known.

You should tell her that.

Despite the bombshell from Silas, I was glad I now had an excuse to seek her out tomorrow. The idea of spending time together with her lifted some of the darkness in my head. Calling now would be too obvious, but I had a feeling I knew where I'd find her tomorrow morning.

I also needed to have a talk with Cole when he came back from LA. Getting Adeline to consider what him and Silas had dreamed up required a subtle touch, something our guitarist completely lacked.

Thankfully, I knew just what might work.

ADELINE

The next morning, I trudged back to the gym, needing an outlet for the uncomfortable emotions still swirling in my mind. As I made my way between the various pulley machines to the bench press, I spotted a familiar head of hair.

Ezra was in the middle of a set, and I waited for him to finish before coming up to say hello.

“Look at what the cat dragged in,” I said to him, looking for any hint he’s heard what had happened with Silas and me.

His lips pulled back into a charming smile, showing off his pearly whites. His forehead was wet with sweat, and he grabbed the towel slung over his neck to wipe himself off.

“You inspired me to come more often,” he said, drawing a shy smile from me. There was nothing off in how he was acting and looking at me, and I allowed myself to relax.

“How’s your weekend going so far?” he asked, standing up from the bench and coming closer. I caught a whiff of what must be his sweat, and my thighs clenched at the musky scent.

I gave him a brief rundown of my session with Silas, obviously omitting the kiss, and shared a few factoids about my evening at the bar.

“What are you doing after this?” he asked as I lowered myself to take his earlier spot on the bench.

“I was just gonna hang out at home. I have a few hours before my shift starts.”

“Want to go for a walk with me? I wanted to visit a couple of old haunts,” he offered while I used the opportunity to appreciate the brilliant blue of his eyes.

I knew that if I went home and sat alone for a few hours, I would undoubtedly replay yesterday’s events in my head. After doing that for most of the sleepless night I’d just experienced, I was ready to be done with self-loathing.

“Sure. Let’s meet in the lobby in an hour or so?”

Ezra insisted we drive in his Jeep with the top down, so I left my car in the gym parking lot after he promised to drop me off there when we were done. It was around noon, four hours until my shift was due to start, and the

air was filled with the smell of honeysuckle and the indescribable scent of the sun.

“Perfect weather, that post-workout feeling, and a beautiful woman by my side. Could this day get any better?” he joked and shot me a mischievous look as we sped onto the highway.

Pleasure surged through me at his words, but I tried to play it off by swatting him on the shoulder. “No flirting, or Abel will feel it with his sixth sense.”

Ezra laughed, and the sound was nearly swallowed up by the wind. “You’re probably right. If he calls, we can ignore him.”

“He can’t yell at us to get back to work on the weekend,” I added.

“I think he’s just jealous at how easily someone like Cole can get people to like him.” Ezra shot me a curious look, “And are you falling for Cole’s charms?”

“Please, I’m your coworker. I’m immune,” I joked, feeling blood rushing to my cheeks. I wasn’t about to tell him that I was falling under the charms of all kinds of people.

“Hmm, share your secret with our roadies, because the immunity certainly never extended to them.”

Lucky roadies.

“I don’t want you to think Cole is some kind of a life-long player,” Ezra rushed to add. “I’ve known the guy since we were kids, and I’ve seen him settled down before.”

It was hard to imagine. Cole had this wild streak in him, that defied being tamed. Whoever the girl was, she must have been very special.

“Oh yeah? Was it serious?” I knew I was being nosy, but I couldn’t help myself. I was growing more and more curious about all of them with each passing day. What events in their lives had led them to grow into the men they were now? The desire to discover more had only intensified after I’d told them about my parents. It felt like we had crossed into the deep end that afternoon, and I wanted to spend a bit more time there before swimming back to safety.

Ezra sucked on the inside of his cheek in thought. “Yeah, you could say that. But she wasn’t right for him. It blew up in the end, but it was for the best.”

“And what about you? Any serious girlfriends?” I asked, not feeling right about prying further about Cole.

“Not really. It’s hard to maintain something real when we’re constantly on the move. We don’t know where we’re going to be next year, fuck, next month, even. There aren’t a lot of women who understand what it’s like to be in a successful band and the sacrifices we have to make to continue making good music.”

We took an exit labeled “Crossbow Drive,” and a memory from two years ago popped up in my mind.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Gravehurst Park. My old high school, Middlemar, is just on the eastern border, and Cole and I used to come here almost every day after school to hang out. It’s beautiful in the summer.”

We pulled into the parking lot and got out of the Jeep. To the left of us was an ornate stone arch engraved with the words “Gravehurst Park” at the top and marred with pink graffiti tags on its sides. Once we passed through the arch, a concrete path ran a dozen or so feet ahead of us before veering off to the left.

“You’ve never been here before?” Ezra asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

“Not in this part, but my parents are buried in the cemetery to the north,” I admitted.

Ezra’s arm landed around my shoulders, pulling me into his firm chest as we continued to walk. I usually hated these sorts of comforting gestures at the mention of my parents’ deaths, but then he said, “So is Charlie,” and I understood that maybe the touch was as much for him as it was for me.

He let go of me after a few minutes and pointed toward a bench nestled between two enormous oaks just off the path.

“Cole and I smoked our first joint on this bench. Years later, we came back after our first tour and scratched the initials of the band on the back. I wonder if it’s still here.”

We walked around the bench and knelt side by side to examine the wooden panels. After a moment, I spotted the faded letters. *BM*. The paint covering the top hollow of the B had peeled off.

“When you guys started, it was just you and Cole?” I asked as we started back on the path.

Ezra nodded. “Cole and I grew up together. Our families knew each other, and we were in the same class all through grade school. We met Silas in high school, after his family moved into town, then Abel in twelfth grade.

He'd hopped between foster families for years and could've easily been placed in another shithole, but it was like the universe conspired to bring him here to us just when we were looking for a singer."

I froze for a second, shocked to hear this revelation about Abel's past. Ezra noticed the pause in my step and waved toward a fallen tree trunk to our right. We sat down, our thighs touching.

"I didn't know that about Abel," I admitted.

"He doesn't like to talk about it, and it isn't my place to share too many details, but I thought you should know. I've noticed things haven't exactly warmed up between you two, and I just want you to know it's more complicated than him being a regular ass."

"I don't think that about him," I insisted. "I just assumed it was all because of Charlie. I know what it's like to lose someone close to you, and how grief makes you become someone you don't recognize. I wouldn't judge someone who's going through that. Not when I've been there myself."

Ezra patted my knee, and the warmth of his touch seeped through the fabric of my black leggings. "I am grateful for that. We all are. Even Abel, in his own strange way."

"Have you always been like this?" I asked. "Watching out for the rest of them?"

Ezra laughed, but there was something uncomfortable about it. "I guess so. I've always been the de facto caretaker for the people around me. I grew up with two younger sisters, and my mom was sick for most of their childhood. I had to step in and help out."

"Did she recover?"

Ezra lifted his arm to shade his eyes as the sun journeyed out from a white cloud and washed us with its bright light.

"She died when I was eighteen from cancer. I remember the day it happened and worrying so much about my father. When she got sick, my pops started to fade. It was as if he wanted to stay as close to her as possible, and the only way to do it was to step away from us the way my mother was forced to. He wasn't a bad dad, but he loved my mother too much. I really thought he'd off himself once she was gone, but seeing her cold body on the bed jolted something in him. Maybe he realized he didn't want that for himself after all. At least not yet."

The hairs on my arms rose. It was hard to reconcile the measured man sitting beside me with a boy who had to live through that.

“That sounds like an incredibly hard experience to go through.” I found his hand and laced my fingers with his. His eyes trailed down his arm until they landed on our intertwined hands, and he gave me a soft squeeze.

“It was and it wasn’t. We all struggle, don’t we? Everyone gets their own flavor of it, that’s all. My father snapped out of it just in time for me to leave the family home and start on this crazy adventure with Bleeding Moonlight. Like Abel, the timing was just right. I was in a place where I felt comfortable leaving my sisters in his care while they finished school, although I still felt guilty about it for years after. I was practically their parent at that point, and even though they were supportive, it wasn’t easy to let go.”

I let out a long breath. “I feel the same way about Molly. Like I’m part parent, part sibling, part friend. It’s confusing as hell.”

Ezra turned and smiled softly. “She’s a sharp girl. I don’t think you have to worry about fucking that up.”

Only I did. I worried about it all the goddamn time. That’s why I’d spent the past two years prioritizing her over everything else in my life.

“So who’s easier to take care of, your sisters or the guys?” I teased him, trying to lighten the conversation.

He responded with a deep laugh. “They both come with their own set of challenges. Still, with the guys, we’ve mostly been on the same page. My sisters on the other hand...Dear God. You would understand if you met them. They moved away years ago, but they visit Dad from time to time, so maybe one day you’ll get a chance to witness what I managed to live with.”

He tugged on our intertwined hands, pulling me to stand. “Let’s keep going. I want to say hello to Mom before we leave.”

It dawned on me then that when he’d said on Thursday that he wanted to visit his mother, he’d wanted to go to the cemetery. Between the two of us, we knew four people buried here, a number that felt much too high.

As we walked down the path, making our way deeper into the park, Ezra didn’t let go of my hand. I knew I should pull away, that this felt too personal, but after the conversation we’d just had, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. He’d shown me something I didn’t think many people got to see, and choosing self-preservation in this moment would be unconscionable.

The wrought iron gates of the cemetery peeked out between the tall cypress trees as we continued our journey. For a moment, I was afraid the cemetery would be locked, but the gates swung open with a sad creak when Ezra finally let go of my hand to pry them open.

His mom was only a minute away from the entrance, and when we got there, he kneeled to brush away the leaves and the loose ground that had collected on her grave marker.

Selena Flint
Beloved wife and mother
To have been loved by you is to have lived
1958-2008

I tried to imagine what Ezra's mother had looked like. Did he get his blue eyes from her? Or his sandy-red hair? How much of her still lived in him?

I moved a few paces away, giving him some privacy, and looked in the direction where my parents had been laid to rest. I hadn't visited them since a few months after their death. For a while, I'd come here every week. In the darkness of the night, after my late shifts at the bar, I'd drive here, climb the fence on the other side, and sit between their identical graves until the mosquitos became too much or the chill got into my bones.

Ezra's form cast a shadow over me, his expression pensive. His eyes trailed my exposed arms before narrowing in on something. I glanced down and saw my tattoo was peeking out just as he reached for my wrist and lifted my arm.

"Courage: the ability to do something that frightens one," he read aloud, tracing the lettering with his thumb. I hoped he wouldn't notice the goosebumps appearing on my skin.

He arched his brows at me in a silent question.

"A reminder for myself," I explained.

"I don't think you need it. You're already one of the bravest people I know."

My heart pounded like a hammer in my chest as his eyes flicked back up to meet mine. I saw him open up before me like a tattered book that held the most vivid images inside. He pressed his thumb down lightly on my wrist where my pulse was racing.

Slowly, he placed my arm back down and cleared his throat. "Do you want to go to see your parents?"

The last time I'd seen the graves was a few days before I'd gotten the tattoo. I shook my head. "Molly and I are meant to visit before she leaves, and she'd be upset if she knew I went on my own."

He didn't press the issue, and we turned to go back the way we'd come.

We exited the cemetery and then took a different path through the park, passing an old playground with a rusty swing set, a half-empty sandpit, and an old wooden shed.

He stopped to study the area. "This was in much better shape a decade ago."

I moved past him to get a better look at the shed. It was big enough for a car to park in.

"Now that's a relic from the past," he said behind me, his voice laced with something mischievous. Now it was my turn to raise my eyebrows at him.

"Cole and I lost our virginities in that shed to Ainsley Turner," he admitted.

"Did you plan to do it in the same place?" I joked.

"It was at the same time, so we didn't have much choice," he clarified, obviously watching my face for a reaction.

"Your first time was a...threesome?" I stuttered over my words, shocked.

He gave me a nonchalant shrug. "It wasn't planned. Just kind of happened."

"How old were you?" I asked, still processing this new bit of information.

"We were both seventeen and had been competing for her affection for months. She was a senior with this bright-red hair that seemed insanely exotic to our teenage minds. One summer evening, she invited us for a walk. We had no expectations, but when we got to the shed it was clear what she intended to do with us. We were happy to oblige, even if we didn't really know what we were doing at the time."

My laugh was strained. Ezra's story was playing out vividly inside my head and making my skin prickle with delicious heat. I wasn't a stranger to experimenting in bed—back when I still had a sex life—but I'd never done anything like *that* before. Still, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't considered it on occasion. Having two guys entirely focused on me? Especially when the guys looked like Ezra and Cole? Jesus. Ainsley Turner was kind of brilliant.

"Of course, we've had a lot more practice since," he added casually, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"You and Cole...together?" I asked, my mouth dry.

He smirked provocatively. "That night definitely kicked off a certain... preference."

I was more aroused than I'd been in years. How often *had* they done it? I wanted to ask so many questions, but I knew that doing so would get us into decidedly dangerous territory. Satisfying my curiosity wasn't worth complicating my feelings toward them even further.

Tearing my eyes away from Ezra, I tried to think of unsexy things, like the dirt beneath couch pillows, kitchen ants, and bar patrons puking outside of the Crooked Stool.

He closed his hand over my wrist. "I didn't mean to get you all flustered," he said in a low voice, and I forced myself to meet his gaze, if only to prove I was not nearly as affected as he thought.

He chuckled at whatever he saw on my face. "Come on. I intend on keeping my promise to get you to work on time."

ADELINE

ON MONDAY, I waited for Silas outside the studio. I had messaged him the previous night and asked to meet an hour before the rest of the band got there. Now that some time had passed since the kiss, I was eager to clarify some things and make sure we could continue working together without any awkwardness.

The rest of my weekend was either spent at the bar, hanging out with Molly, or repeatedly masturbating in my room. The thought of Cole and Ezra sharing a woman had sent my libido into overdrive, and even after rubbing about a half dozen out, I still wasn't feeling back to normal.

Why did he have to share that particular bit of information with me? Something that had once been just a fleeting erotic fantasy was now all I could think about. To make matters worse, sometimes Silas, and even Abel, joined Ezra and Cole in my thoughts. Clearly, the tension between the singer and I wasn't enough to dampen the physical attraction I felt toward him. I was like a teenager going through puberty—restless, horny, and on edge. All of this spelled out serious trouble.

Silas pulled up in his truck, snapping me out of my reverie. I was sure I was wearing a tell-tale blush, and I ran a hand through my hair in a pathetic attempt to appear casual.

“Hey,” I called out to the big man when he got out, and he returned my greeting with a brisk nod. He was wearing a gray bomber and fitted black jeans that flattered his muscular legs. I let out a long breath, steeling myself for the upcoming conversation.

“How was your weekend?” I asked and then bit on my lip.

He took me in, his eyes quickly taking inventory of my bike shorts, white T-shirt and vintage jean jacket. Then he looked away, and my stomach dropped.

“Fine, except for a pretty embarrassing situation with someone I work with.”

Silas being Silas was not one to beat around the bush.

“Did you kiss someone else you work with, or are you talking about me?” I tried to joke to lighten the mood, but his serious expression made it clear he didn't appreciate the attempt.

After a moment, he sighed. “Adeline, I want to apologize. I was out of

line.”

Raising my hand, I stopped him from continuing. “No, I’m the one who should be saying sorry. I’m a mess. I shouldn’t have lashed out at you like that.”

He crossed his arms, brows furrowing. “So did I just completely misread you? You’re not interested in me?”

I struggled to come up with a response. Of course, I found Silas attractive—I wasn’t a corpse. I also looked up to him as a guitarist. He was intense but good-hearted, blunt but thoughtful. I liked him *too* much, which was exactly the problem. Anything between us would have a depressingly short lifespan of three weeks. I also had no idea how opening Pandora’s box with him would affect my feelings for the rest of his band mates. What if I couldn’t let go of them? What if I thought of Cole or Ezra or Abel while I was kissing Silas? Saying *that* truth was impossible, but I didn’t want to feed him lies again.

“This gig has been nothing short of a miracle for me,” I started to explain, choosing my words carefully. “If two weeks ago, someone had told me I’d be recording an album with a world-famous metal band that I admired, I’d drive them to the mental institution myself. I feel as if I’ve been swept up by a whirlwind, but I know I have to stay anchored to the ground. Silas, you are incredible in so many ways, but after this month ends, you’ll still be living that same glamorous life, and I’m going to have to go back to normal. It will be hard enough as is to say goodbye to you guys, to the studio... Starting something with you will make it even more complicated. I’m sorry, but I can’t do that right now.”

At last, the guitarist’s face relaxed an inch. “Okay, I get it.” When I gave him a thankful smile, his expression became contemplative. “Why are you so convinced this entire experience is just a blip in your normal reality? How can you be sure it’s not the start of something new?”

My tentative smile faded, and I looked at the ground. “I just am, okay? I’ve long given up on trying to have a career in music, and as thankful as I am to be doing this with you guys, I’m not naive enough to think this somehow boosts my chances of succeeding in a field few ever do. I’m too old and saddled with too many responsibilities to waste my time on silly dreams.”

When I lifted my face, his hazel eyes were indignant. “I think you’re selling yourself short.”

Before I could respond, Ezra's Jeep pulled up beside Silas's truck with him and Cole inside.

I turned and greeted the new arrivals, letting Silas's last statement linger in the air without a response.

"He was a completely different person," Cole told me as we got set up at the studio. "I wouldn't have recognized him if I saw him walking in the street."

I smiled, glad his tense weekend at his sister's in LA had gone better than expected.

"So you'll be going back there more often in the future?" I asked.

"When we go back, yeah, I'll be paying them more visits. Now that I'm reasonably sure he isn't going to break my sister's heart, I've finally started to get excited about the baby. I'm going to be an uncle soon!"

His grin almost made up for the sharp pang of sadness I felt at the mention of them leaving River Valley when this recording was finished.

Abel introduced a new arrival as we were about to begin—Kyle, the sound engineer. He was going to be working with us on the recording for the next three weeks. He was a slight man who seemed a little intimidated by the band. I greeted him warmly since I'd been in a similar position only a week prior.

We began by running through a few songs from last week. After the extra practice session with Silas, I was able to nail my parts, and Abel seemed pleased, complimenting my playing with a curt, "Good job." Maybe I was turning a corner with him after all.

For the rest of the day, we focused on laying down the rhythm guitar and drum tracks. The whole day was incredibly productive, and I couldn't believe we were well past dinner time when I finally looked at the clock.

"Let's order in. Abel, why don't we head to your place for dinner?" Cole suggested.

Abel grunted in agreement before going to grab his things from the vocal booth. As I moved to pack up my guitar, Cole nudged my shoulder. "Adeline, you're in, right?"

I shook my head. "I should get back to Molly, she's probably lonely at home."

“I guarantee you she’s spending these last few weeks before college catching up with her high school friends.”

I arched a brow at him. “And you’re an expert on this how exactly? You didn’t even go to college.”

He laughed, a playful sound that never failed to disarm me. “Just a hunch. Why don’t you text her? If she’s really at home, invite her to join us.”

My stomach growled, and a part of me dreaded trying to put together a dinner with whatever groceries we had at home. I’d been so busy last week that I’d bailed on my usual grocery-store trip on Sunday. Instead, I’d used the time to relax and do nothing.

“Okay, let me check with her,” I conceded and pulled out my phone. Cole flashed a triumphant grin.

“Hey, you waiting for me for dinner?”

Moments later, her response arrived. *“I’m at Carly’s with a few other girls. I already ate. Sorry :(”*

Cole, apparently not a fan of personal space, leaned over my shoulder to see what she’d written.

“Told you,” he whispered, his breath tickling my ear. A shiver ran down my spine at his closeness, and my thoughts immediately returned to Ezra’s story. I nearly groaned with frustration. I had managed to forget about it for the duration of the recording session, but now the images were flooding back.

I stepped away from him, feeling flushed. “Okay, you were right.”

Cole winked, and minutes later, he began placing an order for Thai food over the phone.

Since we’d driven to the studio separately, I got Abel to text his address to me and hopped into my car. On the drive over, I got a call from Mason.

“Yo, Ade! Liam told me about your gig with Bleeding Moonlight. What the hell, dude? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I know, I suck. It’s honestly been a whirlwind, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it,” I admitted.

“I’ll bet.” Mason let out a boyish laugh. “Although I’m pissed as hell you didn’t say anything to me, I’m really happy for you. What’s it like working with metal legends?”

I paused for a moment, looking for the right answer. “It’s intense, but really rewarding. Every day, I’m worried I’m not going to be good enough, but so far, they’ve been willing to help me with parts I’ve found challenging.”

“So you’re getting along with them? I’d expect some wild personalities.”

“Some of them are a handful, for sure,” I responded, thinking of Abel and his frequent moods. The more time I spent around him, the more I wanted to peel back the prickly layer and see what was inside. “But I really can’t complain. It’s a short gig, but I’m getting paid more than fairly.”

“Good, ’cause you’re fucking worth it. It’s about time you owned it,” Mason said, and I scowled at the phone.

“You know, it seems like everyone is on this mission to inflate my confidence, even when I never asked for any help.” I was getting tired of being told that my opinion of myself was wrong. I knew who I was better than anyone else, thank you very much.

“Well, maybe you should listen to everyone for once,” Mason fired back. “Hey, Liam told me we’re meeting up this weekend. I just want to tell you that if you want to keep playing, I’m game. Northeastern is a three-and-a-half-hour drive from here, but I’m not going to let a bit of distance ruin things for everyone. I can come back for practice on the weekends and make it down here for shows. I was thinking I could even look for venues around the college and beg the managers to let us play.”

Hope flared in the darkened corners of my soul. If the band could survive Mason’s move, maybe I’d be fine once I finished this recording. Things would go back to the way they were, I’d find a better job, and I’d still be able to indulge myself on the weekends.

Of course, this all still depended on Liam and Elly, and whether they would be willing to get on the same page.

“Have you talked about this with the others?” I asked.

“I floated the idea to Liam, and he said I’m an idiot. That I’ll be way too busy with classes and friends to come back here. But, I’m not convinced. All I’m saying is if you wanted to make a case for sticking together, I’ll back you up.”

I nodded to myself. Despite my personal desires, I could hear the truth in Liam’s words. Although I never went to college, I knew that going away for school had a way of changing people. When my best friend, Naomi, left three years ago, we’d clutched onto each other with teary eyes as we said goodbye. We promised to stay in touch, but weekly phone calls had soon turned monthly. Then quarterly. In the past year, we’d sent the occasional text and had a brief talk on her birthday, but our friendship was a shell of what it once was. I didn’t hold it against her, and if she came back to River Valley next

summer instead of working an internship, I'd be glad to see her, but I knew from experience that college brought new friends as much as it helped you forget old ones.

"Okay. Let me think on it," I said. "I'd love to keep going, but I don't want to pressure anyone into doing something that would feel more like an obligation than fun. I'll text you the day before we meet with them so that we can come up with a game plan."

"Perf. Have fun with the boys this week!" Mason clicked off before I could respond.

I was having fun with them. Maybe a bit too much fun considering how hard my imagination and vibrator had been working.



Abel's house was a dream. A two-story piece of modern art nestled at the end of a long driveway lined with cypress trees that reached toward the sky. I got out of the car and gaped at it, not even caring about Cole's amused laugh as he glanced back at me to see why I wasn't moving.

Of course, Abel was rich. All of them must be. I just never considered exactly how rich.

The house looked like two enormous boxes, the top one turned at an angle on the bottom one. The windows were coated with something that prevented me from seeing inside. That was handy since the facade of the second floor was floor-to-ceiling glass.

I walked on the stone-paved path toward the main door—a single giant piece of rough gray slate. Like those fancy cheeseboards they sold in Home Goods, only four times as thick and... Well, door sized.

Someone's steps sounded behind me, and I turned to see that Abel had caught up.

"Your house is stunning," I told him. "I've never seen a place like this."

"Thanks." He shrugged and waved for me to go in. Ezra, Silas, and Cole were already inside.

The interior of the house was just as awe inspiring. Long, straight lines and a color palette of black, moss green, and warm wood brought different aspects of the space together. I followed Abel to the second floor, where the kitchen and the living room were, and placed myself gently on one of the

kitchen stools, afraid to move anything out of place.

Silas seemed to have no such reservations, flinging one of the cupboards open and pulling out five beer glasses that clinked on the granite countertop.

Abel, happy to let Silas play the part of the host, grabbed an acoustic guitar from the wall and collapsed on the U-shaped couch in the living room. He started to strum a melody I hadn't heard before, and I left the kitchen to come over to him.

He glanced at me when the couch dipped as I sat down, but he didn't stop his playing. It was a loose melody, and he played the same part again and again, making subtle changes and humming along.

"Are you writing something new?" I dared to ask when he placed his hand on the strings and looked out the enormous window.

His expression was pensive, and a muscle that ran along his neck fluttered when he began to talk. "No. It's an old song we never released. I've been revisiting it to see if there's something there. I've had...trouble with new material lately."

He strummed the guitar a few more times, then lifted his gaze to me, brushing his long hair behind his ear to reveal more of his face. The green of his eyes matched the moss-green peppered throughout his house, I realized. The color held so much depth and pain and longing that when I saw it, my breath caught. *What does Abel long for?*

"You haven't felt inspired?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I try not to force it. Not that I could even if I wanted to. It used to be that inspiration would just hit me during the most inopportune times—when I'm cooking, running, sleeping... But it's been a while. My muse has been staying away."

I hummed in agreement, eager to keep the longest conversation we'd ever had going. "It's the same with me. I've always thought that inspiration can't be forced to appear, although sometimes I wonder if it's just a convenient excuse for not being more disciplined. What if one day my muse stops her visits? Will that be the end? Or can I negotiate with her for a bit more time?"

The corner of his lips rose by a few millimeters, but it may as well have been an earthquake if measured by its impact on my heart. "If you find out, I'd be very curious to know."

I stared at that goddamn corner, and as he studied my face, the air between us became charged. His right arm was slung over the guitar, while the other held the neck in a loose grip, and I took in the long, elegant fingers

of his hand. What would those fingers feel like curled around my neck?

“Food’s here,” Silas called out, breaking the tension between Abel and I. We stood up, and with one cautious look at each other, we made our way to the rest of the guys.

After three spring rolls, one pad thai, and a papaya salad, I felt like I was about to give birth. The beers that Silas and Cole kept pouring me didn’t help. At first, I protested, telling them I still needed to drive home after this, but they insisted they’d call me a cab when I was finally ready to leave.

We played some card games at the dining table before migrating to the couch, where I ended up being nestled between Ezra and Cole as Abel flicked through Netflix in search of a movie.

My buzz and the proximity of the two gorgeous men was putting me in a mood. Again, for what must’ve been the hundredth time in the past two days, images of Cole and Ezra writhing over a naked woman flashed before my eyes. The woman looked suspiciously like me, and she was thoroughly enjoying whatever they were doing to her.

I pressed my thighs closer together, a pathetic attempt to relieve the pressure building between my legs. Cole sat to my right, his legs slightly spread and stretching his jeans just enough for me to see how muscular his thighs were. His arm was resting on the couch behind my back. I leaned in an inch closer, and picked up on a subtle smoky smell.

“Do you smoke?” I asked him.

He dipped his chin to look at me, his face mere inches away from mine. “No. Why do you ask?”

I blushed. “You just have a smoky smell.”

His lips stretched into a lazy grin. “Are you getting a good whiff?”

I punched his thigh, earning a half-hearted protest in return.

“If you must know my secret, it’s the beard oil,” he said, his eyes still shining with self-satisfied amusement.

I wonder how his eyes would shine right before he buried himself in me.

This was getting out of control.

Ezra, either being totally clueless to my current arousal, or determined to make me implode, placed his hand on my left thigh and gave it a squeeze.

“What about me?”

I pulled on my lip, trying my hardest to maintain some composure.

“What, you want me to sniff you?”

“You sniffed Cole,” he said in a jokingly accusing tone.

Okay, so this is actually happening.

Rolling my eyes, I turned my body to him and leaned toward his neck, knowing his scent would be the strongest there.

“Mmm,” I hummed while I breathed him in with my eyes closed.

“Something fresh, like pine and lavender.”

Satisfied with my answer, I sat back, noticing that Ezra’s hand was still firmly on my thigh and that his blue eyes seemed a shade darker than before.

My skin flashed hot, and when I whipped my head around to see what was taking Abel so long, I saw he was no longer looking for a movie. He was watching me and Ezra, his expression tight with something I couldn’t quite decipher.

I sucked in a breath and flicked my gaze to Silas in the other armchair. At once, I felt guilty for flirting with Ezra and Cole after I had just rejected Silas. What the hell was I doing? The last thing I wanted to do was create problems within the band. This morning, I had convinced myself that starting anything with the guitarist would only leave me hurt, but now I was thinking about his two friends in a manner that was decidedly more than just friendly. It must have been my buzz and their history—after all, a threesome was unlikely to lead to anything serious, but even still, imagining sleeping with both of them was something I had to put an end to.

I forced myself to study Silas’s expression. To my surprise, I didn’t see any anger or jealousy there. Instead, his brows were furrowed as if he was trying to figure something out as he watched the interaction between me and his fellow band members with his signature intensity.

I shivered involuntarily and gave Abel a pointed look. “What are we watching?”

ABEL

You. We're watching you.

I tore my eyes away from Adeline and picked some comedy on Netflix before proceeding to completely ignore it.

Having her in my house was unsettling.

Having her in my head was even worse.

She's my blood.

Those words had ricocheted through my skull like arrows ever since she'd told us about her parents. They'd speared through old memories, pinning them to the forefront of my mind.

In my experience, blood didn't mean much. My father walked out on me and my mom when I was still in diapers, leaving her trying to wade through the depths of her addiction. She eventually drowned in a sea of needles and heroine, when I was nine.

My aunt didn't want me. My grandparents were dead. I was tossed into the foster system, and saw more families where blood was often an excuse to do unspeakable things to each other.

It was kind of sad that her decision to selflessly support her younger sister had elevated her to a completely new level of goodness in my mind. It was hard to hate someone you thought was genuinely good.

Her feet tapped on the carpeted floor as she watched the movie. She was sandwiched between Cole and Ezra, and a faint blush still colored her cheeks. She looked gorgeous, even in the unflattering glow of the flatscreen TV that was playing a movie I was still ignoring.

She must know by now that she was commanding most of our attention whenever she was around. I knew the guys well enough to understand what the lingering looks and the whispered words when they thought I couldn't hear were all about.

Adeline was penetrating their armor, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what they were planning, and I was too proud to ask. Cole and Ezra had been undressing her with their eyes for most of the night, seeming completely undeterred by each other's obvious intentions. I knew they'd shared in the past, so I suppose that wouldn't be too out of character, but I sure as hell hadn't expected the lusty looks from Silas.

Had they discussed some arrangement?

A pang of jealousy rocked through me. Why the hell hadn't I been involved in that conversation? Hadn't I earned my place in whatever they were scheming with her?

I crushed that thought like an empty beer can. No, I didn't need to be a part of their mess. Whatever form it took, it wasn't one that had a happy ending.

And I'd had enough bad endings to last me a lifetime.

Then why did you open up to her earlier?

I sighed to myself, closing my eyes. I knew that the guys thought this house was a vanity, but for me it was more than that. Growing up, shelter was the only true leverage the foster families had over me. The prospect of living on the street had terrified me as a child, even when my mom was still alive, because I knew we were always one notice away from eviction. I didn't want to be homeless, and that's why I'd never been brave enough to run away.

When I finally made enough to afford a house, I wanted to make a statement. To myself, to others, to all the people from my past that I hoped I'd never see again. My wealth was abstract, my success intangible, but this home was unarguably real.

I designed it to project the Abel I wanted others to see. It was imposing and sleek. It kept people on their guard, even made them nervous.

But when I saw Adeline turning in place and taking everything in, I suddenly felt like the real me was disappearing out of existence and being replaced by a fraud. The urge to show her there was more to me than this had been overwhelming.

"Do you want to put something else on?" Adeline's voice sent my eyes flying open.

Her face was a mask of concern. I shook my head and moved to get up. "I'm fine."

I felt her gaze trained on my back as I walked toward the kitchen to grab some water. When I turned off the tap and turned around, she was standing by the fridge.

I raked my gaze over her, taking inventory of the way her jeans cinched at her narrow waist, noting the steady rise and fall of her chest.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, keeping her voice low. The couch faced away, and I knew the others couldn't see or hear us over the TV.

"I said I'm fine, didn't I?"

Her eyes narrowed. “Back to this again?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, leaning against the counter behind me.

She sighed. “Look, we don’t need to be friends. We don’t even need to like each other. But I’m getting tired of you treating me like an enemy combatant. The glares, the one-word answers, the snippy comments... I know you don’t give a shit about me, but I think my playing will be better if I get a break from the constant hostility.”

Her gaze flickered down, as if she were afraid to hear my response, and I felt like an utter asshole.

Was it fair of me to treat her like shit because I was afraid of the effect she might have on the rest of the band? That she might push them to want to keep going when I was categorically against it, because I knew that without Charlie, I was as good as done as a songwriter?

No. It wasn’t fair. But life wasn’t fair, and by now, she should know that. Still, I supposed I could give her a bit of a break. Placing the glass down on the counter, I lifted her chin with the tip of my finger, and she sucked in a breath through parted lips. Something about that sent blood rushing straight to my dick. I ignored it and dropped my hand.

“If it improves your performance, I suppose I can play nice,” I said, noting the fullness of her bottom lip. I wanted to sink my teeth into it.

When I met her gray eyes once again, they had a hard look to them. “Great.”

Who was being snippy now?

We stood awkwardly for a few more seconds before she spun on her heel and walked back to the others. Her ass looked great in those pants, and as I watched her sit once again between Ezra and Cole, I felt that pang of jealousy again.

Was my armor cracking as well?

ADELINE

Abel's comment about being nice to me if it improved my performance pissed me off more than it should have. I'd asked him for as much, hadn't I? So, why did I expect him to play nice for any other reason?

Maybe it was because he'd finally started to open up to me when we'd talked about writing music. Too bad it hadn't lasted.

I left shortly after, coming home with every intention of going to sleep, but after an hour of restless tossing and turning between my cotton sheets, I climbed out of bed and buried my face into my palms.

Something was eating away at me, and I couldn't pinpoint exactly what. I felt unbalanced. Off-key.

I slipped one hand inside my underwear, thinking it might help take the edge off. Immediately, images of Ezra's and Cole's hard bodies flickered on the edges of my imagination. What would it feel like to have both of them inside of me at the same time? I groaned as my fingers sped up, despite knowing that I needed to stop. The more I indulged myself, the more I craved the real thing.

Is that all you crave? Abel's voice rang through my head.

I know you want us there, too. That one was Silas's.

My eyes sprung open. I jerked my hand away. How could I possibly be fantasizing about all of them? Even Abel, who was still being a complete jerk.

I stood up, more on edge than ever, and paced the length of my room. No, I had to find another way to get some peace of mind. Suddenly, a telltale itch appeared in the tips of my fingers.

This, I could work with.

I rushed to pull on a pair of jeans, and grabbed a T-shirt off the back of my chair. My muse had decided to pay a late-night visit, and I was desperate for some company.

With my guitar in tow, I jogged to the car, sticking my keys in the ignition and cracking open my guitar case to make sure the studio keys Ezra had given me at the end of last week were still there.

Twenty minutes later, I arrived at my destination. Having never opened the lock by myself before, it took me a few tries, but I managed to get in.

Light seeped through the small tinted window on the door to the control

room.

I hesitated to open the door. Who could be here at this hour? What if it was an intruder trying to steal the recordings, someone who wouldn't think twice about stabbing me to death?

While these morbid thoughts ran through my head, the handle moved, and the door swung open. I jumped back, my heart in my throat, only to see Abel standing in a loose T-shirt and wearing a befuddled expression.

"Adeline?" he asked, perturbed. "What are you doing here?"

I clutched my chest, still feeling my heart race. "Holy shit, you scared me. I wanted to write, and my sister is sleeping at home, so I thought I'd come here."

He scanned my appearance with a tired gaze. "Looks like our muses coordinated their visits."

I followed him into the room and took in the surroundings. A guitar rested against the leather couch in the control room. Loose, unlined pieces of paper spilled across the smooth surface, messy writing scribbled across some of the pages.

"You're working," I concluded. "I should leave. I don't want to interrupt your creative process."

He gave me a long look and shook his head. "Stay. I haven't gotten very far."

I shifted my weight between my feet, unsure. Was this him sticking to his new commitment of playing nice?

He waved for me to take a seat and I gave in. "Hey, I never thanked you for being so cool with Molly. It meant a lot to her."

The couch sank under his weight, causing some of the papers to slide to the ground.

"It was nothing."

"Not for her," I insisted.

He dismissed me with a shrug, grabbed his guitar, and strummed a few chords. "You want to hear what I've got so far?"

"Absolutely."

He picked up the papers and tamed them into a neat pile before pulling out just two sheets and placing them on the ground at his feet.

As the melody filled the air around us, I closed my eyes. The music had a dreamy feel to it, and I immediately liked it. It sounded different from the album we were recording, but there was a common essence that was hard to

define. Something that fans of the band would undoubtedly recognize as part of their signature sound.

I don't think I breathed as he played. I was too afraid to do something that would cause him to stop. The chorus ended, and the melody abruptly unraveled under his hands.

I open my eyes to see Abel furrowing his brows. "I don't know where to go from here," he muttered in a ragged voice.

Something scratched at the corners of my mind, and before I knew it, my guitar was splayed across my thighs. I fingered the chords until I got the right ones and began to play his song back to him.

Abel leaned back, listening with his forehead still furrowed. As I finished the chorus, I kept going, building on where he had trailed off, letting my subconscious lead. Something that sounded like a decent bridge started to form, but then I lost it.

The lead singer sat up, his cheeks rippling as he hummed the next part of the song. I listened to him intently while trying to pick the right notes on my guitar.

"Play that bridge again with the next part," he instructed, and I did as I was told. "There's something there."

"I think so, too," I agreed. Electricity ran beneath my flesh, a sensation I recognized from whenever I was hitting my stride during songwriting.

The grin I was wearing seemed to encourage Abel. "What if we change it slightly to this?"

Bit by bit, we excavated the song from whatever alternate universe all works of art inhabit before someone brings them across. I'd never made the journey with another person before. It was exhilarating and unsettling at the same time, and as the minutes ticked on the clock, I started to see Abel in a new light.

His usual coldness was gone, replaced by an elite-athlete level focus and what seemed like a childlike curiosity at times. Whatever pretense we had between us, evaporated as quickly as early morning fog. I understood then that songwriting was how Abel communicated. He may have been closed off in normal circumstances, but when he wrote music, he put all of himself on display.

When he finished playing what I thought sounded like an excellent chorus, he abruptly stood and put down his guitar.

"This is shit."

I looked at him aghast. “What are you talking about? It’s great!”

His eyes narrowed. “I need you to be honest.”

“I am being honest,” I insisted. “It’s a great beginning. Some parts need polishing and refinement but that’s okay. It doesn’t need to be perfect yet.”

He looked at me in confusion and then settled back down.

“Charlie would always...tear my work apart.”

Saying that cost him something. I could feel it. His green eyes were fixed on a spot on the ground and I waited for him to continue.

“He’d tear it apart and make it better, but he’d never like anything I wrote on my own.”

“You wrote Bleeding Moonlight’s first album,” I reminded him gently. “It was praised by the critics.”

“But our second album is considered our best work,” he said. “I’m not complaining about Charlie’s process. Clearly, it worked. I just... Well, I’m surprised you like the song.”

He lifted his eyes to mine, and I saw that mask slip again.

“You and Charlie were very close?” I asked.

I didn’t expect him to respond with a humorless laugh. “Is that how you’d describe someone who knows every single one of your buttons? Even the ones you try to keep carefully hidden?”

I frowned in confusion. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

He shook his head, more to himself than to me. “Few people do. Charlie made me a great musician. Sometimes, when we’d be writing together, he was more a force of nature than a human being. His magnetism, his energy... In the studio, he was a fury of inspiration. And now, without him—”

He choked on the unsaid words and straightened his spine. When his eyes met mine, they were cold once again.

“It’s late, and I need to get at least a couple hours of sleep before we’re all back here.” He stood up and placed the guitar down.

“Abel, wait—”

“I’m very tired, Adeline,” he interrupted. “Tired enough to seek validation from a rookie guitar player. Forget about tonight, and forget what I said.”

The sting of his words was as violent as the slam of the door.

ADELINE

TUESDAY MORNING STARTED off with Abel greeting me with a curt nod and making no mention of our late-night meeting. I spent half the day trying to puzzle out where we stood with each other. I gave up after realizing he seemed determined to ignore me. Despite him urging me to do so, I couldn't forget what had transpired in the studio last night. I'd enjoyed writing with him as much as I'd hated the subsequent fallout.

On Wednesday, Cole surprised me with an invitation for dinner at his parent's house, and it turned out that Ezra was invited as well. That's how we ended up driving over together in the drummer's Jeep after wrapping up at the studio.

"They're excited to host the two of you," Cole said as we sped through a neatly landscaped neighborhood. "My mom's been bugging me about bringing you over ever since I told her we have a new guitarist helping us with the album."

"Are you close with your parents?" I asked.

He turned in his seat to look at me. "Yeah, I've been staying with them since coming back here, and Ezra spent half of his childhood at our place. They nearly killed me when I told them I was thinking of booking a hotel for the month. So here I am, thirty years old and living with my parents."

Cole's house was a whimsical two-story colonial-style home located on the other side of town from where Molly and I lived. It probably would have looked regal if painted white, but instead, murals of plants and various flowers covered the facade.

"Wow, this place looks cool," I commented.

"Yeah, my mom's a painter, so she did most of this herself," Cole explained, earning a surprised gasp from me. It must have taken a lot of time to get something like this done.

We climbed out of Ezra's Jeep, and moments later, a woman emerged through the front entrance, waving at us with enthusiasm.

She had jet-black hair, a few shades darker than Cole's, and as we got closer, I noticed a familiar curve to her lips. She must have been Cole's mom. Her big, easy grin confirmed my suspicion. She looked just like him when she smiled.

"Ezra! Good to see you, my boy." She pulled the drummer into a tight

hug, before leaning back and scanning his face. “You look much better than the last time I saw you a few weeks ago.”

“Thanks, Em. I’ve been going to the gym more often.”

I blushed at that, remembering him saying I had inspired him to do so.

“And this must be Adeline?” she asked, peering over Ezra’s shoulder at me.

Ezra stepped aside, and I walked up to Cole’s mom, giving her my best smile and stretching out my palm.

“Nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me,” I said.

She glanced at my outstretched hand and spread her arms wide. “I’m Emma, or Em. We’re huggers here.”

Apparently, that was another thing that ran in the family.

Emma led us through the house and out to the backyard where a gray-haired man was grilling something on the barbecue. His head turned when he heard us approach, and my eyes widened when I saw he had what could only be a joint sticking out of his mouth.

“Jeez, Dad, you couldn’t wait for us before lighting up?” Cole chided in a light voice that told me this behavior wasn’t particularly out of the norm.

“You know I find it calming to smoke while I grill,” he drawled, putting the joint on the ashtray on the table to his right, and moving to greet us.

“Adeline, what a beautiful name,” he said after introducing himself and giving me another signature Abbott hug. “Are you named after anyone?”

“My great grandma, who I unfortunately never met. When I was born, my mom thought I had her eyes.”

“Ah, how nice.” He nodded, moving to pick his joint back up. “We wanted to find a name with history like that for Cole, but when he was born, his energy was truly one of a kind, so we settled on a name that didn’t have roots in our past.”

Cole winced. “I should warn you that won’t be the last time you’ll hear about energies tonight. My parents have never left the counterculture. Don’t even get them started on the therapeutic properties of psychedelics.”

I grinned at him. “I’m starting to understand so many things about you.”

“Oh, I’m sure tonight will be a revelation.” Sirius Abbott chuckled. “Ezra, why don’t you pour us some wine. The food is almost ready.”

It turned out Cole’s parents were vegetarian, so Sirius had grilled us a mountain of eggplant, corn, and artichokes marinated in some kind of a tangy sauce.

I couldn't help but like Cole's parents, who seemed as free-spirited as their son. They told us stories of Cole's childhood. Ezra had become a prominent presence in Cole's shenanigans after they had met and started hanging out.

"I always thought Cole would be a painter," Emma said, looking at her son with obvious fondness. "He has such talent for it. But music called to his soul, and of course he'd be a fool not to listen to his calling."

I glanced at Cole. "I didn't know you painted."

He shifted in his seat as if uncomfortable. "She's exaggerating. I've only ever dabbled."

"He helped paint the mural on the house when he visited us the summer I was working on it," his mom interjected. "And I had found at least a dozen of his works hidden away a few weeks ago. Cole, you should show Adeline your pieces. They're quite beautiful."

"I'd love to see them," I said, immediately curious. "What kind of stuff do you paint?"

Cole looked down at his lap, and I frowned. He definitely looked uncomfortable now, which didn't happen very often. I shot Ezra a questioning look, but the drummer didn't react.

"Mostly people," Cole finally answered in a clipped tone. "But I haven't painted in years, and I don't have any plans to resume, so maybe you two could stop talking about things that are no longer a part of my life."

The air had grown suddenly cold. Cole's mom pursed her lips and resumed cutting her eggplant, while his dad took a long sip of wine.

What was that all about?

The silence hung for a moment too long before Ezra decided to come to the rescue.

"I forgot that congratulations are in order. You're going to be grandparents soon," he said, tipping his glass in the direction of Cole's parents.

Just like that, a smile bloomed across Emma's face. "Yes, thank you. We are thrilled for Ivy. Cole just came back from a visit and said that she's doing great, right, hon?"

To my relief, Cole seemed to be ready to move on from the earlier moment of tension. "Yeah, it's still surreal to think my baby sis is about to have a kid, but she's doing well." Then he added more reluctantly, "Her fiancé waits on her hand and foot."

Emma was beaming. “I couldn’t be happier to hear the two boys have finally made up. The aggression coming from this one was just unbearable. I had to burn sage every day after telling him about Ivy’s news.”

Cole rolled his eyes even as a smile tugged on his lips. “The horror.”

We wrapped up the dinner and moved on to dessert, a decadent tiramisu that had more than just a little kick from the rum.

Cole’s parents asked me about how I was enjoying working with the band before inquiring about Through Azure Skies.

“Cole told us all about how they discovered you,” Emma began. “We used to go out to local shows a lot more often when we were younger, but in the past few years, we’ve become homebodies. Maybe we can come out the next time you play.”

I forced a smile. “Definitely, that would be great.” I didn’t mention that the band’s future was more than a little uncertain.

When it was time to clean up, Emma told me to relax and got Ezra to help her and Sirus. “You need to tell us about how your father is doing,” I overheard her saying to the drummer as they headed inside. Cole stood up from the table and walked over to the edge of the patio, looking out at the dense forested area at the back of the backyard. I walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

He quickly turned to look at me, his expression carrying a hint of bitterness. “Yeah. I’m sorry about earlier. It’s just that my mom has been on my case about doing something with those paintings ever since I’ve gotten back, and I’m tired of hearing about it.”

“Why don’t you want to do anything with them?” I asked in a low voice.

He lifted his face to the sky, closing his eyes. His profile was stunning—straight nose, a slightly pointed chin, and strong cheekbones that begged to be kissed.

When his hazel eyes landed back on me, my skin rose with goosebumps at the intensity in his expression.

“They’re all paintings of a woman I once loved more than anyone else. It was a consuming, destructive kind of love. When I was with her, I treated her like she was the only thing that mattered, and I hurt a lot of other people as a result. During those months, I had pulled away from the guys, even from Ezra. They tried to warn me, told me that she wasn’t good for me, but I didn’t listen.”

He crossed his arms, and I waited for him to continue. An uncomfortable sense of doom was building inside of me. This wasn't a story with a happy ending.

"I asked her to marry me and brought her home to meet my parents. We spent most of our time in bed. When we weren't making love, I'd paint her. A painting for every day she was here. The day she betrayed me, I was working on painting number twelve."

My breath caught in my lungs. I wanted to reach out and comfort him, but instead, I stood frozen in place.

Cole shifted on his feet, his gaze once again back on the forest.

"She was married the whole time we were together. We met after a concert by accident, and what was meant to be a one-night stand turned into something more. I paid for her to come on tour with us and gave her money so that she didn't have to return to a job she hated back home. She saw it as an opportunity to pay off her husband's gambling debt. But it wasn't enough, so eventually, she started spilling private details about me and the guys to gossip outlets. Our manager had suspected it and tried to talk to me about it, but I categorically refused to listen. It all came to a head when the husband showed up here at my parents' place, apparently tired of having his wife being gone and demanding she come back to him."

His humorless chuckle was as cold as ice. "Even with him here, I refused to believe it. That's how far gone I was. Then my mom emerged from the front door holding Amy's purse open to show me that it was full of her jewelry that Amy had taken. Amy finally lost her poker face and started screaming at my mom."

I closed my eyes in shock and chewed on my lip. A wave of sadness swept through me, but it was quickly replaced with blinding anger at the woman who could do something like that to Cole. He didn't deserve that kind of pain.

"I'm so sorry, Cole," I whispered when I was sure my voice wouldn't crack. "I can't imagine how difficult that must have been for you."

His jaw tightened. "I hate being here—back at the house where my life crumbled right in front of my eyes. And those goddamn paintings..."

"You should burn them."

At that, he whipped around to look at me, his eyes wide.

"That's *exactly* what I want to do."

"I'll light the fire," I offered, nudging him with my elbow. His expression

grew tender, and he threw his arm over my shoulders, pulling me into his chest.

“Thanks, partner,” he said, the sound muffled by my hair that must be tickling his face. I curled my arm around his waist and squeezed him back.

“You know, we never told you what you smell like,” he said, and I lifted my chin to look at him. Our faces were inches apart. There were gold flakes in his eyes.

“What?” I asked with a smile even as heat crept up my neck.

“Like gardenias. Mom used to take me and Ivy to the botanical gardens when we were kids, and I would bury my face in those shrubs while Ivy screamed that I would get bugs on me.” He chuckled as he recalled the memory, and I felt the vibration in his chest. “It smelled so sweet and fruity, just like candy. I think I tasted it once, and the taste was not at all like the smell.”

He ran his thumb down my shoulder, leaving goosebumps in its wake. “But I have a feeling you’d taste just as sweet as I imagine,” he said in a low voice, and his gaze dropped to my lips.

My breath hitched at his words. My body buzzed with tension even as the logical part of my brain screamed at me to relax. This was Cole, and he was a flirt. He was just trying to rile me up. But there was nothing teasing in his gaze, nothing remotely dishonest.

Ezra and Cole’s parents returned to the patio, their voices bursting the moment. We quickly untangled our arms from each other.

“Hey, guys,” Ezra called out. “Emma and Sirius want us to play for them in the garage. You up for it?”

Cole raised his brows at me.

“Sure,” I said, glancing between Ezra and him.

The usual smile was back on Cole’s face, and he offered me his arm. “C’mon. Time to be the entertainment.”

We played a few songs to the enthusiastic reception of his parents, who requested a bunch of classic rock as well as a small preview of the new album. Eventually, they bid us good night and headed back into the house, leaving the three of us in the garage.

I placed the guitar down and walked over to a bookshelf full of records, curious to see Cole's collection.

"My dad started putting it together before I was even born," the bassist explained, coming to stand by my side. "There's a lot of sixties and seventies rock—stuff I grew up on."

I pulled out *Led Zeppelin III* and showed it to him. "This is one of my all-time favorites."

Cole grinned as Ezra came to look over my shoulder at the record. "Me, too," the bassist said. "Should we play a song from it?"

"Mmm, what's your favorite?" I asked.

"'Since I've Been Loving You'. I listened to that song on loop for weeks at a time."

"God, that's a good song," I agreed.

Ezra hummed his appreciation beside me. "Let's do it."

Placing the record back on the shelf, I grabbed the guitar and strummed a few of the chords.

"Cole, why don't you sing?" Ezra asked, surprising me.

"I didn't know you sing," I said to Cole.

He returned a shy smile. "Sometimes."

We switched spots so that he could be closer to the mic. I'd been singing on the songs we'd played so far today.

"Kick us off, Adeline," Ezra said.

We launched into the song, and the decadent melody filled the small space of the garage.

When I first heard this, I thought it was the sexiest song ever written. The lyrics were so melancholy and heartbreaking, but the melody was pure sin. A lethal combination.

Cole started to sing. He had a powerful voice that reached higher than I would have expected—a perfect fit for this song.

I closed my eyes as my fingers moved across the fretboard, allowing myself to focus on the sound.

Images came unbidden to my mind. Wrists held down by strong hands, bodies tumbling between sheets, lips writing messages across bare skin. The sweet torture of an orgasm just out of reach. That's where my head went when I listened to this song.

It was pure sex.

The realization hit me when I was already too far gone.

I shouldn't be playing this with them, but we were halfway through and stopping now would be a crime.

The earlier abstract images were quickly turning into a scene that could only be described as erotic. In my mind, we were tangled together, their strong hands moving down my flat stomach, closer and closer to the spot that ached for their touch. The fantasies I'd indulged in over the past few days were becoming tactile. I felt Cole and Ezra everywhere—my breasts, my lips, my neck, my hips—and my skin burned in their wake. But I was greedy—when had I become so greedy?—because soon it wasn't just Cole's and Ezra's hands on me. It was all of them, every single one of the four beautiful men that had charged into my life and changed everything.

Torn between keeping my eyes closed or opening them to see two of the very men that were intruding my thoughts, I began playing the solo. When I shifted my stance, there was an unmistakable dampness between my legs. Could a song give you an orgasm? I didn't know, but I thought I was about to find out.

A drop of sweat trickled down the valley between my breasts as I rolled my head back. I was burning up, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the garage. My breathing was heavy, my clothes too tight. And still, I played, the music being both my torturer and my anchor.

The solo ended, and I dared to open my eyes. Cole was fixated on me as he began to sing once again, his gaze never once straying from my form. Ezra was glistening with sweat, the flexed muscles of his arms on a tantalizing display as he tore into the drums. When he saw me looking at him, he didn't smile, but rather leveled me with a hungry look that nearly caused me to stumble back.

Fuck.

This song should come with a warning not to be played with people you're not currently or imminently fucking.

I was nearly panting by the time we were done with the seven-minute performance. When the music finally stopped, a loaded pause descended.

There was no fucking way they didn't know how worked up I was.

Carefully, as if afraid that any sudden movement would cause the garage to combust, I lifted the guitar off by its strap. Ezra and Cole shifted, the tension in the room easing by the smallest amount.

I cleared my throat. "That was great. It's getting late, so I think I'll be heading home."

Ezra reluctantly turned to face Cole, reminding the latter about his role as a host. He jerked as if snapping out of a trance.

“Let me call Leo and get him to drop you off,” Cole offered, pulling off his bass and digging in his pocket for what I presumed was his phone.

“Thanks,” I said, pulling at the neck of my shirt to stop it from sticking to my skin. “I’m going to use the bathroom.” I spun on my heel and left the garage.

In the bathroom, I tried to calm myself by taking deep breaths. How had they managed to get so deep under my skin? Every interaction felt like an escalation to something I couldn’t even begin to understand. This little episode? How was I supposed to move on?

I’ve never felt this unbalanced, this confused about anything before in my life. Even after my parents had died and I struggled to find the strength when it came to become Molly’s guardian, some part of me had always known the right thing to do. But now, I was dealing with emotions that were tearing me into a million different tempting directions.

I splashed some water on my face and clutched the edge of the sink.

This was a job. Nothing more. If I kept my focus on doing what I’d been hired to do, surely, nothing could go that wrong.

COLE

I watched as Adeline beelined back toward the house and shot off the text to Leo. Ezra sat behind the drums, his expression dazed.

“What just happened?” he asked, scratching at his cheek.

“Dude, it was so far beyond description I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

My pants felt awfully tight, and I was grateful that Adeline had seemed too dumbstruck to notice the situation I was nursing by the end of the song.

“Was it just me, or did she seem as affected as us?” Ezra asked while running his fingers through his hair.

“I think so,” I agreed. I’d noticed the way her neck had shimmered with sweat and how she’d looked at us when she opened her eyes after crushing the solo.

I’ve always thought that music was a sort of divine magic, even before I’d listened to Jimi Hendrix while tripping on acid. A good song could find its way into your soul and show you hidden truths about yourself. A chorus, a few verses, and a bridge could put you through an emotional wringer as much as it could heal a broken heart. Music was energy, it was power, and it had certainly showed something to the three of us just now.

“Maybe she’s starting to consider it,” I said. “The kiss with Silas, the hints we’ve been dropping, and now this. She must be picking up on the fact that we’re interested in her, and that we’re not exactly competing with each other for her attention.”

“We’re playing with fire,” Ezra muttered, shaking his head. “If she makes a move, we’ll be goners. She’ll own every piece of us, and there won’t be anyone who can pull us out. Are you willing to take that risk?”

I considered his words for a moment. “This kind of fire won’t destroy. It’ll change and mold us into something new. It will transform.”

And we were due for a transformation.

Ezra left close to midnight after we spent another hour talking about Adeline, my sister’s pregnancy, and how well the new album was coming along. We

hadn't caught up like that in a long time, and it felt good to be slowly getting my best friend back, but I was still nervous this improvement was temporary. I badly wanted to talk to him about the band's future, but it felt still too early for that.

I washed the dishes from dinner and headed toward my room. The guest bedroom was on the first floor, just to the right of the staircase that led up to my bedroom, and as I passed by the door, I stopped.

Ezra was getting over his demons and playing a more active role in the band once again. Wasn't it time for me to conquer my own?

I knew I couldn't keep existing in this space between two worlds. One where I had moved past what had happened, and one where I still agonized over the memory of Amy's face when the full truth had finally come out.

I gripped the copper handle and twisted until the lock clicked. The door eased open under my touch. This room was a picture of generic hospitality, quite unlike my parents' usual aesthetic of rainbow colors and fractal patterns that made you feel like the summer of love had never ended. I supposed they'd toned it down in here to try to keep their wide variety of guests comfortable.

The walk-in closet was positioned in the right corner of the room, and something about the closed door leading to it seemed awfully menacing. I shook my head and crossed the space in a few big steps. There was a monster hiding in there, but it no longer had claws.

I could make out the paintings stacked against each other on the floor even before flicking on the light, but when they became illuminated, a sense of relief swept through me. I didn't expect that being here and looking right at them would take away their power, but somehow, this simple act had done exactly that.

Reaching for the canvas closest to me, I flipped it around and stared at a face that...Well, it might as well have been the face of a stranger. The feelings I'd been so afraid would rise right to the surface if I'd ever looked at these paintings again never came.

I reached for the other paintings, flipping them over and lining all eleven around the perimeter of the closet. My gaze drifted over each one, but even their combined impact was no more than a quiver in my gut. It could have also been the fact that I'd had too much fiber at dinner.

Footsteps sounded behind me and I glanced over my shoulder to see my mom in her nightgown—an enormous Grateful Dead T-shirt that reached past

her knees.

“So you finally made it back here.” I could hear the sad smile in her voice. “How does it feel?”

“It feels like...nothing, actually.”

She came up to stand beside me and threaded her arm through mine. “You know, I think I had misremembered what these looked like. They’re not your best work.”

I snorted out a laugh. “I thought you liked all of my art. Even the watercolors I stuffed in all your purses as a kid before the paint had dried.”

Her laugh was rich with memories. “I’m not saying these are awful, just that I know you’re capable of so much more. You have a lot of love to give, Cole. When you find someone who deserves it, that’s when you’ll produce your best work.”

“Nice prophecy, Mom.”

“You know, I’ve been shown things throughout my life,” she responded, ignoring my jab. “And I’m good at reading energies. We never talked about Amy’s because I knew you’d never listen to me back then, but I sensed there was something off about her from the moment we met. It was this cloying sweetness that nearly choked up any room she was in. Delicious and addicting at first, but ultimately deadly.”

She quieted and looked around at the paintings. “What will you do with them?”

“I don’t know. I was going to burn them in the backyard but now I don’t feel like its worth the effort.”

She made a clucking noise. “You’d ruin the grass. I can put them out on the curb during garbage day if you’re really ready to say goodbye.”

I patted her hand. “That works for me. Thanks, Mom.”

Her hand landed on my shoulder, and she tugged until I was facing her. “I’m glad you’re moving on, son.”

“It’s time.”

Her smile was gentle. “It sure is. And I think I know what finally pushed you to this realization.”

“Let me guess, something to do with energies,” I quipped.

“You can joke all you want, but my sense has never failed me. I think it was that beautiful girl you brought home today. Her energy is layered, but her foundation is pure healing light. No wonder both you and Ezra are so drawn to her.”

I blushed. My mom might be a hippie, but I had no intention of talking to her about my and Ezra's mutual desire for Adeline. That was a step too far, even for my family.

"She is...quite special," I offered in response to my mother's knowing look.

Upstairs, my bed wasn't made. I hadn't bothered with it this morning since I'd been in a rush to get to the studio on time. For all the three albums we'd recorded together, I'd never been this eager to show up for rehearsals, but of course, everything was different this time. This time, we all arrived early, every single day, and got to work without much argument.

Adeline couldn't know this, but the reason this album was going so smoothly had fuck all to do with any of us. It was all her and the effect she had on us.

The transformation had already begun.

ADELINE

WE WERE in a good rhythm and had finished recording the fourth track by the end of the day on Friday when I got a call from Frankie.

“Adeline! Oh, thank God, you picked up. Phoebe came down with a fever this morning, and it looks like I’m going to need to take her to the hospital. I just called everyone, and no one can cover for me. You’re my last hope.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “You start in thirty?”

“Uh-huh, until midnight. I can take your shift tomorrow if you want. I’ll be able to get a babysitter for then.”

I pressed the phone between my shoulder and my ear and started to pack up. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

Cole picked up on my conversation and twisted in his chair to look at me.

“You are a godsend. Thank you so much.”

“No problem. I hope Phoebe feels better. Text me later to let me know, okay?”

“Of course. Thanks again!”

I stuffed the phone into the back pocket of my jeans and checked to make sure I had all my things.

“What’s up?” Cole asked, his brows furrowing at my rush to leave.

“I need to cover for someone at the bar,” I explained. “My coworker’s kid got sick.”

He scratched his head. “I almost forgot you were still working there. Hey, maybe Ezra and I will stop by. We were planning on hanging out tonight.”

“Sure,” I responded absentmindedly, halfway out the door. “Bye, guys, see you on Monday,” I waved at the rest of the band and left.

I got to the bar five minutes before Frankie’s shift was due to start and discovered the place was a disaster. Apparently, a conference in town had wrapped up in the early afternoon, and all the attendees had decided it was a perfect opportunity for a Friday happy hour. I had to shove my way through a sea of khakis and checkered shirts to get to the bar. Melanie, the bartender who worked the day-time shift, had had no time to restock, and to top it off, one of the kegs needed to be changed.

Stuffing my things into a locker in the back, I scrambled to get everything back in order, while also helping Melanie close out some of the tables that were ready to leave.

“I’m so glad you came in,” Melanie whispered, her peroxide-blond hair pulled back in a loose pony. “I was this close to strangling that guy in the blue suit for calling me ‘babe’ this entire time.”

I shuddered. “The absolute worst.”

An hour later, half of the conference crew left, and the place was starting to feel like a typical Friday night at the Crooked Stool. Two college-aged girls walked in, sporting long extensions, fake lashes, and crop tops. They gave me friendly smiles and sat down at the bar.

“Two margs, please,” the brunette ordered. “Extra salt.”

“You got it,” I responded and reached for the margarita mix.

“What’s the scene here like on Fridays?” the redhead asked, briefly looking up at me from her phone. “Does it get any busier later?”

“Yeah, usually there’s a bigger crowd after eight. It was packed about an hour ago with middle-aged dudes wearing lanyards, but I’m guessing that’s not the crowd you’re looking for.”

The brunette snorted. “No, thanks. Any guys that are cute and not twice our age?”

“They can be twice my age if they’re hot,” her friend interjected. “You know, salt and pepper, DILF vibes, that kinda thing.”

I laughed as I went to grab their glasses. Is this what my life would’ve been like if I’d gone off to college instead of staying home and working here? Maybe I’d be hitting up bars on Friday nights with my best friend instead of working at one.

“If you’re lucky, we might get some college guys who are home for the summer. The regulars are all... Well, let’s just say they’re not of the DILF variety.”

The girls grabbed their drinks. “Well, we’ll hang out for a while,” the redhead said and took a sip of her cocktail. “Oh yum, these are good.”

“Thanks.” I winked at her and made my way to another customer.

70s rock was playing on the radio, and a pool game was starting up in the far end of the bar. The ambient soundtrack was starting to pick up in volume—clinking glasses, bursts of laughter, and a cacophony of voices. Like some kind of Pavlovian response, my mind started to drift, letting my body’s muscle memory handle the process of taking and making orders.

“All right, it’s eight-fifteen, and we’ve got slim pickings,” the redhead complained forty-five minutes later.

I gave her a distracted smile while I made two old fashioned for the table

by the door. “You ladies want another round?”

The brunette spun her head around, taking in the patrons one more time. “Nah, we’ll close out.”

I carried the two drinks around the bar. “Let me just drop these off, and I’ll be right back to give you your bill.”

The door to the bar swung open at the exact moment I placed the glasses down. Two excited gasps came from behind me as I lifted my eyes to the newcomers.

“Mmm, that looks good,” Cole purred, examining the two cocktails I had just delivered. “Could you make that for me with three cherries, doll?”

I swatted at him with my towel, and Cole nearly stomped on Ezra’s toes as he tried to jump out of the way.

“Is that how you treat your customers here?” Ezra joked, sidestepping around Cole and pulling me into a hug.

“Only the ones that call me doll.” I gave Cole the side eye.

The guys followed me to the bar, completely oblivious of the two women’s excited whispers as they stopped a few feet away from them.

“It’s busy here tonight,” Ezra commented, glancing around.

“Yeah, it’s been kinda mad. I probably won’t have much time to hang out with you guys, I’m the only bartender for the evening,” I said with an apologetic look.

“Don’t worry about us,” Cole said. “We can entertain ourselves, and I kinda wanted to see you in your element.”

I snickered. “It’s like one step above watching paint dry, but to each their own. So old fashioned? Three cherries?”

Cole winked. “You got it.”

Sending the guys off to a table, I got started on their drinks.

“Hey, bartender!”

I turned around, seeing the two girls looking at me expectantly.

“Oh, crap, I’m sorry. I forgot your bill.”

The redhead’s eyes bulged. “Forget it! We’re not leaving *now*. You’ve been holding out on us, girlfriend! Who the fuck is that?”

Her friend had turned around on her stool and was looking at Ezra and Cole, fanning herself with her palm.

The fierce surge of jealousy that coursed through me as I put the situation together was a shock. I glanced between the women and the guys who had just settled into a booth, suddenly at a loss for something to say.

“Well?” the brunette asked, looking at me over her shoulder. “What’s up with those two hotties? Are you dating the blondie who gave you a hug?”

That, I could answer easily. “No, he’s just a friend.” Something in me wanted to correct her and tell her that his hair was in fact a light shade of red, but I knew that would be a ridiculous thing to say. “They’re coworkers actually.”

“They work here?”

“No, my other job,” I clarified.

“Please tell me it’s a male strip club.” The redhead was now fixing her hair in the reflection of a small pocket mirror.

“Nothing that exciting, I’m afraid.” I was pretty sure these two weren’t big metal fans, and I wasn’t about to blow the guys’ cover.

“They’re not like serial killers or anything, right?” the brunette asked.

“The Jon Snow look-alike could stick a knife in me, and I’d say thank you,” the other retorted. I couldn’t help but laugh at the comment.

“No, they’re not serial killers.” I knew I was giving them encouragement to approach the guys, but who was I to stop them? What I’d said was true. Cole and Ezra were my coworkers. I had no claim to them, no right to feel this coldness in my heart as I watched the two women climb off their stools and prowl toward the guys’ booth.

A few minutes later, I was bringing over their old fashioned, telling myself to play it cool.

That lasted all of two seconds once I saw the brunette clutching Ezra’s arm, and the redhead practically sprawled over Cole’s thigh. The guys looked somewhat amused with their new guests, and I noted that neither of them were pushing the girls off.

“Here you go,” I bit out, my voice sounding curt to my own ears.

A hint of alarm appeared in Cole’s eyes as he took in my expression. He opened his mouth to say something but didn’t get a chance to before I spun on my heel and marched back to the bar.

The sharp anger coursing through me was completely irrational, but despite knowing that, I still opened the next order of five beers with way too much force. The bar sounds I’d found calming before, were now loud and infuriating. What right did I have to be upset? None. And yet an intense feeling of possessiveness over both of them was threatening to swallow me whole.

I didn’t drink on the job very often, but I could see no way of making it

through the remaining three and something hours of my shift without a drink. I threw back a shot of whiskey before focusing my attention on a regular who appeared at the bar.

“Hey, is that two of the Bleeding Moonlight boys cozying up to those chicks?” he asked, looking at the booth.

“Sure is.” Apparently, I was done with protecting their identities. Maybe if a bunch of the patrons turned out to be huge fans, the guys would get inundated with requests for autographs and leave.

“Huh. I heard they’re still in town. Didn’t think they’d come out anywhere without a bodyguard, but I guess they’ve stayed down to earth. We raise ’em well in River Valley, don’t we?”

I glared at Jim or Jack. “Sure do.”

“Well, we’ll just leave ’em alone, won’t we? The boys deserve a night where they can be normal people and meet some ladies at a bar. Our secret, eh?” He winked at me, his lopsided grin revealing yellow teeth.

Shrill female laughter erupted from the guys’ booth.

“Uh-huh,” I pushed his whiskey toward him before going to the back to turn up the music.

Ezra stood at the bar when I came back out. “Can we get a round of G&T’s?”

“Sure.”

“You doing all right?” he asked as I lined up four glasses side by side.

“Peachy.”

“Then why won’t you look at me?”

I blinked once. Twice. Then I met his gaze.

He blanched at the look in my eyes.

“I’m fine, just tired.” God, why couldn’t I be better at pretending that I didn’t care about what was currently playing out in front of me? And why *did* it bother me so much?

Ezra frowned as he noticed me shoot a gaze at the booth. “You know they came to us, right? We told them we’re not interested, but we thought we’d at least have a round together to soften the blow.”

I sniffed. “I’m not sure why you’re telling me this. Both of you are single, so I have no qualms about you hooking up with those two. They seemed nice when I was chatting to them earlier.”

Ezra’s hands curved over mine when I pushed the first two drinks towards him. He held on tightly, not letting me out of his grip.

“I’m telling you this because you’re shooting lasers out of your eyes, and you weren’t when we first came in. It’s a reasonable guess that your change in mood has something to do with the girls coming over to us.”

I huffed. “Well, reasonable or not, you’re wrong. Why would I have a problem with two pretty women throwing themselves at you?” I tried again to jerk my hands away, but he only squeezed them tighter.

“You tell me.”

The blue of his eyes was a storm, and I was in its center. I let out a shuddering breath, and at last, he let go of my hands, his expression contemplative.

I averted my eyes, unable to withstand the tension crackling between us. “Let me help you with those.”

We walked to the booth, a drink in each of our hands, and this time, I forced myself to study the redhead that was still stuck to Cole. The way her thigh was pressed against his jeans, the lustful look on her face, the hand that played with the fabric of his shirt.

I wasn’t angry at her.

I just wanted to *be* her.

The realization slammed into me.

“Can I get you anything else?” I asked, my throat suddenly dry.

“We’re fine, thanks,” the brunette responded without looking at me.

I walked back to the bar in a trance.

I wanted them. Fuck it. I was done denying the desire that had been building up over the past few weeks. The fantasies I replayed in my head were never going to be enough, not when I knew I had a shot at the real deal.

It was just sex, after all. It didn’t have to be complicated, and maybe by actually doing it, the compulsive need I’d been battling ever since that walk with Ezra would disappear.

The rest of my shift went by in a daze. Ezra stayed true to his word, and after they had finished their round, the two girls stood up and left—but not before giving both of the guys hugs that seemed much too tight and way too long to me.

The guys got another round, and this time, I managed to summon a real smile when Ezra came up to the bar. His shoulders seemed to relax a little at that, and he watched me make the G&Ts in easy silence.

They got up to leave at around ten thirty and came to the bar to bid me goodbye.

“Thanks for taking care of us tonight,” Cole said as he paid both theirs and the women’s tab. “I was right. It was fun watching you in action, even if you seemed a little...tense at times.”

I flushed. “Yeah, sorry.”

He wrote in a one hundred percent tip.

My protest died on the tip of my tongue as he added, “Nah, I get it. Trust me, we noticed every single dude who checked you out as well.”

He signed the bill and lifted his dark eyes to mine, daring me to read the message that they held.

I held my breath, unable to respond.

He blinked, and then he was just regular Cole once again. “See you soon.”

“Bye,” I said weakly, waving at both of them as they turned to walk out the door.

ADELINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I didn't give myself a chance to second-guess my decision. I texted Ezra as soon as I woke up.

"Can you meet me for a coffee in about an hour? At Brews?"

My phone buzzed with his response.

"Hey. Yeah, sure."

The fact that he didn't ask why didn't slip by me. I wished I could read his mind.

"Can you bring Cole with you?"

The flashing dots taunted me. He started typing something then stopped. Then typed again for almost a minute before stopping. The final product was a repetition of his previous response.

"Sure."

I groaned into my pillow, waves of anxiety rippling through me and making my gut churn. I was about to ask them something that could theoretically ruin our relationship. Without a doubt, it was highly unprofessional. Molly was right, I guess I didn't care that much about being professional after all.

I was going to ask Cole and Ezra to have a threesome with me.

What were the chances they'd agree? They'd both flirted with me nearly since the first day we met, and last night, Cole had strongly hinted they were interested. Then again, all of that could have been just them teasing. Maybe they were done with that sort of thing. Maybe it was something they only did on tour when the raw adrenaline of performing and the endless nights and days on a bus surrounded by other men made them want to let go in excessive ways.

I was extremely nervous, but the hard truth was that if I didn't get this *need* out of my system, I didn't think I was going to survive the next two weeks. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the four of them. My insides would turn to liquid fire, my brain to mush. I hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in nearly a week, which made it harder to focus during the recording sessions, and that wouldn't do. Asking Cole and Ezra to do this seemed like the safest way to get my head back on track. I knew they'd see it for what it was—just a casual hookup.

I slapped my cheeks in an attempt to halt the massive freak out I was on

the brink of having. I had forty-five minutes for me to get ready, and I needed to look good for once.

My closet was a mess, and it took me ten minutes to find the sleeveless V-neck top I had in mind. It was made of a thin black fabric that clung to me like a second skin.

I pulled it on and tucked it into my favorite pair of gray high-waisted jeans.

Twenty minutes later, my hair and makeup looked pretty good, and I ventured outside of my room.

“Date?” Molly asked, checking out my outfit.

“No, just meeting up with some of the guys for a bit,” I said, bending to pull on my over-the-knee boots and conveniently hiding my face from my sister. The face I was irrationally sure screamed exactly what I was about to do.

Molly bit her apple with a crack. “Uh-huh.”

“You going to be okay over here?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. I’m going to Target with Carly to buy some stuff for our dorms. We’ll probably grab food at some point at the mall.”

My shoes finally on, I straightened up and half-turned toward her. “Okay, great. Here’s a hundred bucks if you want to get some clothes too, or whatever.”

“Sweet,” she drawled, suspicion lacing her voice.

“Okay, bye!”

Before I could hear her response, I was out the door, gunning it toward the car.

My breathing was erratic, my palms sweaty on the wheel. I drove to the coffee shop on autopilot, nearly rear-ending a car at a red light. I still wasn’t sure I’d be able to get the words out when the time came.

A bell rang above my head as I opened the glass door of Brews and scanned the well-lit interior for the two men I was equally eager and terrified to see.

A few groups were huddled around rectangular tables, sipping on mugs of coffee and sharing slices of chocolate cake. Two young boys were playing with toy cars in a bean-bag-covered kids’ corner. My gaze drifted until I saw the two men sitting across from each other at a small table by the window, their edgy appearances at odds with this family-friendly place. I stifled a hysterical laugh. Leave it to me to have this conversation in a pastel-colored

coffee house.

I pulled my shoulders back and took a deep breath. Maybe I could just pretend this was another performance, and all I had to do was force the distressing thoughts out of my mind.

Ezra stood up once he saw me approaching and pulled his chair in, clearing the path to the cozy window nook between the two of them.

“Hey.” He smiled and planted a kiss on my cheek as I squeezed by him. “How’s it going?”

I leaned over the table to give Cole a quick hug. “Good. The weather is great today, isn’t it?”

For what must have been the first time since we’d met, we spent a good five minutes on small talk. I was enthusiastic. I was stalling.

A waitress came by our table to ask if we wanted anything. “A latte for me, please,” I said, nibbling on my lip as the guys put in their orders. Something akin to tar was slowly roiling inside my stomach.

As soon as the woman left, both of them turned to face me with curious expressions.

“So,” Ezra prodded gently, “was there a particular reason you wanted to meet with us?”

I wrung my clammy hands under the table as my anxiety became personified, screaming in a high-pitched voice inside my head. *Don’t do it! You’ll ruin everything!*

“Ade?” Ezra asked, his brows pulling together in mild concern.

I sucked in a breath, and nodded gravely. “Yes. I wanted to talk about something.”

They stared at me expectantly. I took another deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*

“Ezra, remember that walk we took in the park?” I lowered my voice, feeling my heart pound against my ribcage like a jackhammer.

“Sure.” He nodded.

I shot Cole a look, gauging his reaction. There was a small wrinkle on his forehead. “Remember what you told me about Cole and you?”

Ezra bit his lip, as if trying to figure out what I meant.

“You know.” My throat was as dry as sandpaper. “You two, your high school crush, and the shed.”

He bit his lip harder.

“Here you go!”

I jumped in my seat as the waitress returned with our drinks.

“I’ve got a cappuccino, a mint tea, and a latte. Anything else I can get for you?”

“We’re great, thanks,” Ezra answered smoothly, his focus never drifting from my face.

I was sweating in every place a human could possibly sweat, but there was no turning back now. As the waitress’s steps faded, I finally spit it out, unable to take the torture any longer. “Look, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. It’s driving me nuts. And when I saw you two with the girls at the bar yesterday, I just... Ugh, fuck.”

They were staring at me, but I was too inside my own head to even attempt to read their expressions. “Will you do it with me? Both of you?”

The silence that followed was pure agony. What came next was even worse.

Cole let out a rumbling chuckle. “Can you believe how nervous she is?” he asked Ezra, his voice laced with amusement. The noise of the coffee shop faded into the background and my mind roared in panic.

What have I done? I’m an idiot. I’m a goddamn idiot.

I sprang out of my seat, ready to abort this mission.

Two hands landed on my shoulders in unison and pressed me back down.

Anger and embarrassment surged through me. “It’s fine. If you don’t want to do it—”

Ezra’s fingers landed on my thigh. “Adeline, calm down. Of course. Of course, we want to.”

“You’re too much, darling.” Cole leaned in, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Did you really think there was any chance of us saying no? To you?” His fingers brushed an errant lock of hair off my face. “Do you know how often I’ve imagined you splayed naked beneath me?”

My mind struggled to process their words, but my body seemed to get the meaning immediately. Heat bloomed between my legs and travelled down my inner thighs. “Oh,” I breathed out, leaning back in my seat.

As my vital signs began to drop back down to normal levels, it finally hit me. They’d agreed. This was happening.

What followed was a rapid exchange of glances. Cole looked at me with a sexy grin, his eyes filled with a hunger that made my nipples pucker. Ezra was rubbing circles on my thigh, a knowing smile on his face. Excitement was building inside me, but the blissful relief I felt at their agreement was

short lived. I was about to live out a wild fantasy, and I'd been so consumed with worry about asking them, I'd spent little time thinking about what would come next. I cleared my throat. "Should we talk about how it's going to go down? Put some rules in place?"

Ezra's laugh was tense. "Maybe we should head back to my place for that part."

I arched a brow at him. "Why not talk about it here?"

Cole bit on a knuckle and let out a muffled groan. "This seems like a family establishment." He grabbed my hand away from my mug, pulled it under the table, and pressed my palm against the hardness straining against his jeans.

There was not a single cell in my body that didn't react to that.

"Oh," I said faintly, as he dragged my palm back and forth, letting me feel his entire length. When I looked back at Ezra shifting in his seat, I sensed he was in the same predicament.

Cole let my hand go. "If we want to leave this place without mortifying the children, we need to start talking about decidedly unsexy things."

Fifteen minutes later, after we'd touched upon the highlights of cleaning lint out of a drying machine and stubbing a toe, we were ready to go.

Ezra dropped a twenty on the table, and we hurried out the door, grinning at each other like fools.

Before I made it to my car, Cole clasped my wrist, pulling me flush against him. "You're driving with me," he said against my cheek, his voice thick.

My eyes fluttered closed as his other hand landed on the small of my back and pressed me against his firm body until there wasn't enough space for a sheet of paper to slide in between us. Being this close to him made me feel drunk. "I can't leave my car here. We'll drive separately and meet at Ezra's place." I forced myself to pull away, missing the contact immediately.

Ezra pulled up beside us in the Jeep. "I texted you the address, Adeline. See you there in ten."

That's how I ended up with only ten minutes to collect myself for the next part. Everything was moving at a breakneck pace, and I felt like a giddy teenager on prom night. My mind kept replaying the looks on the guys' faces back in the coffee house. Their feral, unchecked desire had been focused entirely on me, as if I were an antelope, and they were two lions ready to tear me apart. Maybe I should be a little scared, but instead, all I felt was a dark

thrill at living out my fantasy with them.

Ezra's house was a ranch-style one-story home, and by the time I pulled into the wide drive-way, his Jeep was already there. I turned off the car and sat there for a few seconds, suddenly hit with another wave of nervousness.

A knock on the window jolted me out of my thoughts. I flung the door open, and Cole helped me get out before pulling me into his arms once again.

"Don't psych yourself out of this, Adeline," he said, his lips no more than an inch from mine. The gold in his eyes glimmered, and in the brightness of the afternoon, I could see a dusting of light-brown freckles across his cheeks.

"I won't," I promised. "I want this."

His lips curled, emphasizing the perfect Cupid's bow. "And I want you. Badly. You have no idea, Adeline. I've wanted you since the moment I first saw you."

He looked at my mouth, and I stopped breathing. The world around us ceased to exist as he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine.

I'd imagined kissing him so many times, but as I tasted the mint tea on his tongue, I quickly came to the conclusion that my imagination had been severely lacking. In my mind, I'd never felt like this—like I was drowning. His scent, his taste, his touch—all of my senses were flooded with him, and I knew this moment would be forever seared into my memory. His hands moved into my hair, keeping my face firmly in place as he continued to devour my mouth. I wondered if he was also drowning in me.

I arched my back, pressing myself against him, but he pulled away reluctantly and rested his forehead against mine. "Let's go inside before Ezra gets too jealous. We'll get right back to this after we've discussed all the rules."

Oh, right.

The rules of the threesome we were about to have.

Cole gripped my hand as he led me inside the house. When Ezra saw us come in, he immediately saw my flushed lips and narrowed his eyes at Cole.

"I was wondering what was taking you so long."

He crossed the room in three wide steps, until he was standing before me. "Sampling appetizers before the main course?"

"You could say that," I said, my face melting into a grin. "The first was delightfully succulent. I wonder how the second one will taste."

Channeling confidence I didn't know I possessed, I linked my hands around Ezra's neck and pulled him into a kiss. His eyes widened in what I

hoped was pleasant surprise, and a heartbeat later, he was wrapping his arms around my lower back. As we deepened our kiss, he trailed his hands lower, until his fingers were sinking into the flesh of my ass.

He groaned into my mouth, setting every part of me on fire. “Whatever we need to talk about, we should talk about it fast,” he said against my lips.

I turned my face to Cole, who was leaning against the kitchen counter and watching us with a smirk.

Ezra released his hold on me and went around the kitchen counter, opening the door to his fridge. He pulled out a bottle of tequila, poured three shots, and placed them on the kitchen island between us.

“Okay, Adeline. Why don’t you start?”

I gripped the marble kitchen counter, using it for support. “What happens here today stays between us.” The other guys couldn’t know about this, especially Silas. How would I ever be able to explain why I was doing this? I doubted he’d be sympathetic to my overly active libido and the fact that I felt like I was going insane because of how attracted I was toward all of them. He’d probably wonder why I didn’t just “get it out of my system” with him, and flinging Cole’s and Ezra’s sexual history in his face felt like a low blow.

And Abel? I could already see the disapproving grimace he’d wear if he ever found out. Whatever credibility I’d built would be quickly erased. He’d close off completely, and the thought of losing our rare moments of connection tugged painfully at my heart.

Ezra nodded, “If that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want this to affect our working relationship,” I said, looking between the two of them. “No special treatment and no funny business while we’re at the studio.”

“Don’t worry, we’re good at compartmentalizing,” Cole said with an amused smile.

“And this is just going to be a one-time thing.”

“That’s where we’ll agree to disagree,” Cole said, narrowing his eyes at me. “If after today you don’t want a repeat performance, we haven’t done our job well. Right, Ezra?”

“Absolutely,” the drummer nodded, fixing me with a determined gaze.

I clamped my jaw shut. A repeat performance was definitely not part of the plan, but it seemed pointless to argue about that now.

“What else?” Cole prompted. “Are we using condoms?”

“I’m on the pill, and I’m clean.”

“So are we,” Ezra said. “We went to get tested together when we got here, and we haven’t slept with anyone since.”

I thought it was cute they were so in tune with each other’s sexual health. “No condoms then.”

Cole ran a hand through his hair and let out a long breath.

“Anything off-limits?” Ezra asked, directing the question at me.

They may be confident in their ability to persuade me to do this again, but I was more skeptical. After all, my original intent was to do it once and move on. If this was my only chance to experience some of the things I’d been imagining, there was no point in holding back. “I’m game for anything.”

The dark glint in Ezra’s eyes almost made me regret those words. *Almost*. Still, I knew I was safe with them, and they would push my boundaries only as far as I wanted them to.

I reached for my shot glass and lifted it in a silent salute. There was nothing more to discuss, and the air in the room thickened with anticipation. The kitchen island separating us from each other was the only barrier left to cross.

We tossed the tequila back at the same time and clinked the glasses down.

Ezra didn’t waste a second. He prowled around the counter, grabbed my hand, and led me down the hall to another room. I could hear Cole’s steps behind us.

The door opened to a large bedroom with a king-size bed, neatly made with white sheets. Glass doors to the right opened directly to the pool in the backyard. At the foot of the bed was a long bench, and this is where Ezra sat me down.

I took in the men before me. They were beautiful opposites. Cole was dusk, with his black curls, deep-hazel eyes, and tanned skin. Ezra was dawn, blue eyes light like the morning sky on a perfect summer day. His hand reached up to scrub at his clean-shaven jaw as he allowed his gaze to wander over my entire body.

I was exposed, vulnerable, and unbearably turned on.

“Take off your clothes,” I commanded, suddenly needing to take control. I could do this if I was in control.

The slowness of their movements as they complied was the sweetest type of torture. My toes curled as their shirts hit the carpeted floor to reveal the perfect bodies that hid beneath.

They looked like such *men*. Not at all like the boys I’d been with in my

earlier years. I suppose that between nineteen and twenty-one, boys grew into men, but my self-imposed celibacy had made me miss out on this transformation.

Ezra was slightly more muscular than Cole, even though Cole stood a few inches taller. I wanted to run my nails down their hard chests and lick the ridges between their perfect abs—some primal part of me demanded that I claim my territory. Of course, thinking of them as mine was a dangerous illusion triggered by the hormones currently raging within me.

Just one time, I reminded myself.

Their pants came off next, and I discovered that they both favored boxer briefs, which did nothing to hide the shape of what was hard and ready underneath.

I crooked my finger, summoning them closer. They moved until they were near enough for me to reach over and cup their tight balls through the fabric of their underwear.

Squeezing gently, I marveled at how they both sucked in harsh breaths. Ezra's fingers landed on my cheek and then dipped into my mouth, his eyes silently telling me what he wanted me to do. I sucked on his fingers, moving my hands up until both of their hard ridges were twitching in my palms. The anticipation of having them inside my mouth, inside my cunt, inside any hole they wanted to use was making me squirm on the soft surface of the bench, the friction not nearly enough to relieve the ache between my legs.

Ezra's fingers left my mouth with a pop, and I licked my lips, trying to capture anything of him left behind. *Enough playing*, I thought. My fingers slipped behind the bands of their underwear, and I pulled until at last they sprung naked. Their cocks pointed at me, alert and demanding. Cole's was thick and dark, the head almost purple and glistening with precum. Ezra's leaned slightly to the right, with neatly trimmed red curls at the base and prominent veins running up the shaft.

I felt a rush from seeing them bare while I was still fully dressed. These powerful, desirable men were held captive by me, awaiting my direction. I reached for their cocks, lightly tracing the undersides with the tips of my fingers, watching their lower abdominals contracting, and letting their needy hisses caress my ears.

The boxers were bunched around their thighs and I leaned closer to tug them all the way down to their feet before lifting my eyes back up. Ezra's mouth was parted, his eyes hooded and dark. "Please," he urged in a raw

whisper.

They were done playing as well.

At my nod, they moved immediately. Cole lifted me up to my feet, his fingers creeping under the edge of my shirt and pulling it over my head. He stared at my breasts, palming them both through my bra and making me gasp at the contact. His mouth descended onto mine, and the kiss sucked all of the air out of my lungs. *He wants to claim me, too*, I realized.

Growing annoyed at the barrier between us, he pushed down my bra until my breasts spilled over the top, and at the same time, a pair of hands worked on the zipper of my jeans. Ezra was kneeling down behind me, methodically getting me out of my remaining clothes.

Soon, I was standing before them in my black lace panties and a bra that was half off. Ezra circled me, his gaze sparking fires across every inch of my skin.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmured.

Cole hummed his agreement, his tongue darting over his lips. “You’re going to be the death of us, you know?”

“Hopefully, you’ll manage to stay alive for the next bit,” I joked, earning myself a firm slap on the ass from the drummer.

Ezra stopped behind me, his mouth hot against my neck as he nibbled and sucked on the sensitive skin below my ear. His hand journeyed over my underwear toward my center, where I knew he’d find the Pacific Ocean.

“Fuck,” he grunted into my ear when he felt the wetness between my legs. “So ready for us.”

“I’ve been ready for days,” I admitted, eliciting a desperate groan from the drummer.

Cole’s hand replaced Ezra’s, and he brushed my clit with the heel of his palm, pressing into it gently and making my knees go weak. Ezra pulled my back into his chest, the heat of his body enveloping me. “What’s your number?” he murmured over my skin.

I furrowed my brow. “My number?”

Cole gave me a long kiss, his hand casually rubbing circles over the wetness seeping through my underwear. “How many times do you want to come before we stop?”

Now it was my turn to swear.

Ezra’s length pressed against the valley of my ass as he reached around to pinch a nipple. “Your number, Adeline.”

“Two,” I hissed, thinking I was already halfway to my first one.

“I think you gotta dream bigger, darling.” Cole dropped to his knees in front of me. “Why don’t we aim for three for this first time?”

No coherent words were possible when he pulled my panties aside and dipped his tongue into my cunt. I looked down. His wild curls danced against my skin like black fire, and I was going to burn alive.

Ezra helped me stay upright while Cole worked some unholy magic on my pussy, his tongue darting across every nerve ending in a perfect dance. When the first orgasm started to rage through my entire body, I ground myself on Cole’s face, clutching his hair for dear life.

“Fuck,” I croaked as Ezra lowered me back on the bench. Suddenly, their number didn’t seem so ambitious after all.

I reached for their cocks, stroking them while trying to recover and remember what planet we were on. Ezra pushed on my shoulders, urging me from the bench to kneel before the two of them, and I gladly complied. My tongue trailed the underside of his ridge, before doing the same to Cole. I took turns sucking them off, switching when their groans got too frantic.

“Get on the bed,” Cole commanded, burying his fingers in my hair and pulling me up.

I crawled across the covers, swaying my ass back at them and reaching back to take my bra fully off.

“Turn around,” Ezra said.

I turned to bare my chest to them fully, feeling another rush of heat between my legs when I saw their hungry gazes.

Cole walked around the bed and sat down with his back against the headboard. “Get over here and do that thing you just did with your ass.”

I climbed between his legs, running my hands down his rock-hard thighs before lowering my mouth on his cock and lifting my butt up. The bed moved behind me, and a heartbeat later Ezra’s palms were kneading my behind. He fisted my underwear at the waist, then tore it off with a jerk, making me gasp from the brief flash of pain.

The pain was forgotten when he pressed himself against my entrance. “I want to see you take Cole’s cock to the back of your throat as I plunge into your tight cunt.”

Holy shit.

Cole’s fingers tangled in my hair, and he put soft pressure on the back of my head until I’d taken all of him in my mouth.

“Good girl,” he whispered, stroking my cheek with his other hand. That was Ezra’s signal.

I groaned against Cole as Ezra buried himself in me, my eyes fluttering from a deadly mix of arousal, pain, and pleasure.

“Fuck,” Ezra groaned. “So wet and tight.”

Cole moved my head up and down on his length as Ezra began to rock into me from behind. When the drummer reached around to play with my clit, I squeezed Cole’s thighs so hard I was sure my nails would leave permanent crescent scars.

It didn’t take long for me to get to orgasm number two, and Cole lifted my face to capture my mouth as I spasmed uncontrollably around Ezra.

“So goddamn perfect,” he said, his eye shining with lust. “I could watch you come for the rest of my days on this earth. When I look at you, it’s like I’m looking at something infinite.”

His words resonated through me. I tugged him closer for another kiss as Ezra pulled out. Something heavy was building up in me, and I knew it wasn’t another orgasm given I was still riding the high of my second one. This was supposed to be a casual, mindless fuck, so why did it feel like something more?

Ezra collapsed on the bed beside Cole and pulled me into his lap until I sat straddling his hips, my breasts grazing against his face. He found a nipple, sucking and flicking the hard bud without breaking our eye contact.

“Do you want both of us inside of you?” Ezra asked when he moved from one breast to the other, his cock twitching against me at the question.

“Yes,” I breathed, my heart rate picking up. It had been so long since I’ve had sex *there* that I could barely even remember how it had felt.

Cole lifted himself off the bed, and came back a few moments later armed with a small bottle of lube. “Lift your ass back up for me, darling.”

I licked my way down Ezra’s chest until I had my lips wrapped and moving around his cock while Cole slowly pushed a finger in my ass. It felt tight and a little uncomfortable at first, but when the bassist started to once again play with my clit, I felt the muscles relax.

One finger became two. Then three. I was pushing against Cole’s hand by now, feeling the beginnings of the third orgasm tease my inner thighs.

“You’re ready,” Cole breathed, giving my ass a firm slap. Ezra pulled me closer to him until his length was in line with my entrance. He grasped my face with both of his hands, his eyes gentle despite being feverish with desire.

“And you were worried we wouldn’t want this. I’m so fucking glad you didn’t let your worries win.”

I smiled breathlessly at him, and something that felt a whole lot like affection swept through my body. When we joined this time, it was slow. I sank onto him inch by inch, the whole time staring into his impossibly blue eyes and allowing myself to drown in their depths.

When Ezra was fully sheathed in me, I felt Cole prod at my ass, his cock slicked and ready. His fingers ran down my spine as he smoothly pressed inside, stretching me to accommodate his generous size.

“Oh fuck,” he moaned, his voice a broken rasp.

I gasped at the foreign sensation of two men penetrating me at once, their hard lengths making me feel deliciously full. They waited until I nodded before starting to move.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head at the mind-melting pleasure. The mere thought of doing this had made me climax within minutes, and now that I was experiencing the real thing, I didn’t think I’d last more than thirty seconds. Feeling both of them inside me took me right to the edge.

Despite Cole’s earlier words, I felt very finite in that moment. I knew exactly where I ended and they began. But as they pumped into me at the same time, their hot, damp bodies writhing below and above me, all thoughts disappeared. It was then that something clicked inside my empty mind. Not a thought, but a deeper understanding. Alone, I was finite, but together, we became infinite.

Even as my orgasm threatened to erupt across every cell of my body, tears pricked at the back of my eyes. I wasn’t thinking, but I was feeling entirely too much. I was no longer in control of anything, and it terrified me.

Ezra slowed down when he saw the change in my expression. “What’s wrong?” he panted, his biceps flexing as he squeezed my waist with his hands.

Cole halted his movements at the question.

“I’m— I’m feeling too much,” I admitted, a tear spilling down my cheek.

Ezra’s expression softened as his fingers brushed at my face. “Don’t fight it, Adeline. Let it all go. We’ll be there with you on the other side.”

There was something so true in the tone of his voice and the shine of his eyes, that I nodded and did exactly that.

I ground on them and allowed myself to let go. We slammed into each other until all of my barriers broke and I collapsed on top of Ezra, moaning

and shivering as the best orgasm of my life rippled through me.

Moments later, Cole let out a loud groan and bit my shoulder as he came inside my ass. Ezra followed soon after, pumping into me as he rode his own high, his head thrown back and mouth parted.

I trailed the drummer's lower lip with my thumb, mesmerized by how his flawless features changed in ecstasy. Even with this, my fantasy didn't live up to the real thing.

Their cum dripped down my thighs when we finally untangled from each other minutes later and I crossed the room to the en suite bathroom to get cleaned up. My legs were wobbly, my muscles as sore as if I had just done a hard workout.

I was startled by my reflection in the mirror. Was it the lighting or did my eyes shine brighter? There was something different about my skin, my face... I was flushed with a rosy glow, but it wasn't just that. I felt different. More alive, more real.

Cole appeared behind me and looked at the reflection, his eyes aglow with curiosity.

"Didn't I tell you there would be a repeat?" He kissed my shoulder. "Tell me that's not a woman who has found something she likes."

Something I liked? That was a grossly inadequate way of describing what I felt at the moment. I was like a junkie who'd just gotten the first fix of the drug that would ruin her life. Whatever I'd hoped to get out of my system had only buried itself deeper, and now I was faced with the unenviable task of ripping it out without a single painkiller. I thought back to Silas and Abel. What would they think if they knew what we had just done?

What would it have been like if they had been there with us?

My hands shook at the thought. Ruined. I was ruined. Even now, after having been fucked by two of their friends, I was still thinking of the other two men.

I leaned back into Cole, defeated, and let a sigh escape my bruised lips. His arms wrapped around me as he continued to trail light kisses across my skin, oblivious to the turmoil I was battling inside.

"What about you?" I asked, my voice no more than a whisper. "Did you find anything?"

He lifted his chin to meet my gaze in the mirror. "Everything I've ever searched for."

ADELINE

I WAS NESTLED between the two of them in Ezra's bed, my head in the crook of the drummer's arm, and my legs tangled with Cole's. Both of them were softly stroking my skin, their tender affection acting as a soothing balm to my fractured soul.

"I'm starving," Ezra mumbled into my hair. "Should we order something before you have to go to work, Adeline?"

"I have the evening off since Frankie switched her Friday shift with me."

"Does that mean we can keep you for the evening?" Cole's voice was eager and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Let's eat together, but then I need to head home. I'm meeting with my band tomorrow and I need to think through some stuff."

"What's going on?" Ezra asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing important."

"I don't usually prepare for unimportant things the night before," Cole said skeptically. "Does it have anything to do with the impending breakup you mentioned when I was trying to convince you to work with us?"

I craned my neck to look at him. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a freakishly good memory?"

He poked the tip of my nose, a gesture so familiar that it made my heart hurt.

"Why don't we get dressed and have you tell us all about it?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but Ezra covered it with his palm. "C'mon, we've been in a band for a long time and have seen every kind of drama come and go. Let us help you."

He had a point, and to be honest, I could see the benefit of getting an impartial opinion on the state of Through Azure Skies.

Pushing off his chest, I looked at him and Cole. "Okay, but if the advice sucks, I'm asking for a refund."

Cole laughed and pulled me into his chest. "I hope we can pay you back in sexual favors."

“So let me get this straight.” Cole was perched on a kitchen stool, his chopsticks hovering over a box of Chinese food. “Mason is heading off to college next weekend and will be a three-hour drive away from here. Liam has a kid on the way and has been hinting he no longer wants to play. And what’s up with Elly again?”

“Nothing in particular,” I said. “She’s been looking for a new job for a while now, but I think she’s down to keep playing as long as her new gig doesn’t require her to move elsewhere.”

“And what about you? Where do you stand?”

I let out a long breath. “I’m not sure. On one hand, this band was always just about having fun. It’s never been anyone’s priority. We made it work around our lives, not the other way around. So if I were to insist we keep going, that would kinda be implying a change in the dynamic. A change I’m not sure everyone is on board with.”

“Okay, and on the other hand?” Ezra prompted.

“On the other hand, we had our biggest show ever at the Barnyard when I first met you guys, and I thought we kinda killed it.”

Cole nodded as he chewed. “Sure did.”

“It was a great show,” Ezra agreed. “It was clear you guys have been doing this together for a long time. You were in sync, anticipating each other’s moves, looking totally natural. It takes years to get there.”

“Right,” I said, putting my takeout box on the kitchen island. “Which is why it would be such a goddamn shame to break up just as we’re finding our stride.”

“You don’t think Liam will feel the same way?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I think he’s enjoyed our time together, but as the pieces of his life fall into place, the band might be one that no longer fits. I know that for Mason and me, music isn’t something optional. We need it in our lives like we need blood in our veins. That’s why Mason is willing to drive for three hours each way to make practice. But I don’t want to limit his opportunities in college, either. He’s bound to meet people who could play with him there. So it really all just comes down to me and the fact that I’ll hurt the most if we break up. Isn’t it selfish of me to be worried for myself at the expense of what’s best for the rest of the guys?”

Ezra and Cole looked thoughtful as they listened to me. When I finished, Ezra reached over to place his palm on top of my hand.

“No, I don’t think it’s selfish. Do you know how many times we’ve had

to rely on others in the band to pull us through tough times? We've been on the verge of breaking up close to a dozen times."

My eyes widened. "Really?"

Cole gave Ezra a strange look as he confirmed what the drummer had shared. "Oh yeah. Some were more serious attempts than others, but bands disagree and fight, Adeline. It's part of the normal lifecycle. What's kept us together all these years is the fact that one or two people have always stepped up and been courageous enough to remind us why we do what we do and what we can yet accomplish."

Ezra looked off to the side, as if uncomfortable. "Cole's right. You can't control how the rest of them will react, of course, but I think you owe it to them and to yourself to say what you really think."

My tattoo itched on my biceps, as if in support of their words.

"And I gotta say, I think the whole this-is-just-for-fun thing is bullshit." Cole focused back on me, his expression serious. "I didn't see four people fucking around up onstage when we watched you. I saw a real band who were only held back by the fact they didn't want to play original material. You wrote that one song you played, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know what's wrong with that song?"

I furrowed my brows. "What?"

"Absolutely fucking nothing. Keep writing and playing stuff like that, and soon enough people will be begging for that over the covers."

This was too much for me. "We're not trying to become the next big thing, Cole. Trust me, we are not cut from the same cloth as you guys. But I hear you about speaking my mind to the others. You're right. At the very least, I can make my opinion on it clear, and maybe that will sway them."

"Good. But I'm right about the other thing, too."

I stared at my food, moving pieces of orange chicken around with my chopsticks.

At the end of the day, I knew that if I didn't try to give Through Azure Skies another chance, I'd regret it. The thought of not playing with anyone after the album with Bleeding Moonlight was over made my chest feel hollow.

I plopped my box on the counter and stood up, feeling a new sense of determination. "Thanks guys. Tomorrow, I'm going to try to convince them to keep going. Wish me luck."

Ezra's eyes crinkled as he smiled. "You got this. Call us afterward, okay?"

"Will do," I said, walking up to Cole to hug him goodbye.

"Oh, hell no, we're not going back to that." He pushed me back by my shoulders. "At least not when we're in private." He smirked before crushing my lips against his, his hands traveling down to my hips.

I pulled away breathless and turned to see Ezra watching us with hooded eyes. He reached his palm out to me. "Let me walk you out."

Grasping his calloused hand, I walked out of the house, where the quotidian sight of my car seemed completely at odds with the day I'd just had.

I exhaled heavily and turned to Ezra. "Look, today was amazing, but I'm still not sure if I want to do it again."

His forehead wrinkled as he waited for me to go on.

"I... Let's just say the whole thing didn't feel nearly as casual as I thought it would."

His expression softened as he squeezed my hand. "It didn't feel casual for me, either. Or for Cole."

"I would never want to do anything to jeopardize the album. If we keep doing this and things get complicated... If the other guys find out—"

Ezra dropped my hand and cupped my face with his palms. "Is that what you're worried about? Adeline, the album wouldn't exist if it wasn't for you. And Silas and Abel— Look, we won't say a word, but if they find out, I promise you Cole and I will handle it. For once, stop worrying about everyone else. Be selfish and do what *you* want."

I wanted them, that much was clear to me. If my life were a book, today would be a major plot point. What had started as living out a sexual fantasy had turned into something so much deeper that I couldn't see the bottom from where I stood. Our relationship had shifted, irrevocably so, and this new intimacy was intoxicating. It had been so long since I'd had anything like that in my life.

"Everything will be just fine," Ezra insisted.

Pulling out of his reach, I averted my eyes. I was less certain about Abel's reaction, but I was confident that Silas would not be "just fine" if he ever found out. I wanted to get Ezra's advice, but something held me back from telling him about what had happened between the guitarist and I. I felt like an idiot. The intensity of my feelings toward Silas had scared me away from

him, but what about my feelings for Ezra and Cole? After today, I wasn't sure they were all that different.

I needed to go home and process everything.

"Let me think about it this weekend, okay?"

Despite still wearing a concerned expression, Ezra nodded, probably sensing it was in everyone's interest to give me some space. Reaching up on my toes, I gave him a peck on the lips before getting into the car.

It was dusk by the time I got home. Molly was watching TV and munching on a big bag of pre-popped popcorn that had some kind of a sugary coating.

I plopped down on the couch beside her and reached into the bag.

She whined in protest. "I thought you didn't like this one."

After a few chews, I made a face. "That's disgusting."

She snorted in laughter. "That's what you get for stealing my snacks."

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and before I could stop her, she leaned in to sniff my shirt.

"You smell like *man*," she concluded, her eyes squinting in suspicion. "I'm picking up on hints of 'badass', 'smoking hot', and 'plays in a famous band.' Did I get that right?"

My skin turned crimson. Molly's face broke with a triumphant grin.

"Well done, sis!"

"Nothing happened."

She laughed. "You are the absolute worst liar. We both know it happened, so don't waste your breath on the denials. The question is, will you share the details?"

I groaned. "No. There are no details to share. Especially not with my seventeen-year-old sister."

"Okay, well that's super lame, especially because my birthday is like a month away, but fine. I'll let you enjoy the aftermath for a bit before pressing you for more information," she said with a wink and turned back to the sitcom on TV. "By the way, you might want to comb your hair after your next tumble between the sheets. If that's not sex hair, I don't know what is," she added in a casual voice, eliciting another pained groan from me.

As I shuffled to my room, I could only thank God that her nose couldn't distinguish the fact there were two different scents on me.

That night, my mind drifted from replaying particularly juicy moments from the afternoon to agonizing over what I needed to do over the next two

weeks. I couldn't decide whether I should take up Cole and Ezra on their offer of sleeping together again. It was tempting, but I was afraid of the mess it could lead to. I couldn't stand the thought of Silas looking at me with pain in his eyes, or seeing Abel with disappointment in his. My feelings for them aside, I looked up to these men. I loved making music together, and the thought of us losing our groove in the studio made me want to curl up into a tight ball and cry.

Since Bleeding Moonlight had entered into my life, I'd been bombarded with emotions that I've long tried to avoid. After that disastrous audition and the collapse of my biggest dream, I had convinced myself I was a nobody. A nobody with no expectations or aspirations for the future. Living this way may not be fulfilling, but it was comfortable. Safe.

With Mom's and Dad's passing, I'd had to change my outlook so that I could be a good guardian for Molly. That was why I had decided that after she left for college, I'd finally look for a decent job I enjoyed. I suppose that was a kind of aspiration, but I wasn't putting my heart and soul on the line for it. I'd been able to avoid doing exactly that for nearly four years, then Bleeding Moonlight had stormed in and destroyed everything I'd ever known in their wake.

The fortress I had built to protect myself was crumbling, one rock at a time. I was going to try to convince Through Azure Skies to keep going, to show them just how much our little cover band meant to me. I had begun something I didn't fully understand with Cole and Ezra, and I had no idea how I'd proceed. Most significantly, I was recording an album with a world-famous band that was starting to sound really damn good, and if I allowed myself to take advantage of this opportunity, maybe I could keep doing what I loved even after Bleeding Moonlight left.

No, a cold voice sounded in my head. Don't go there. Don't let yourself dream any bigger. Stay in your lane and remember that you are nobody.

I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. I guess it was going to take more than one incredible threesome for me to let my demons go.

EZRA

Cole was leaning against the kitchen counter with a shit-eating grin when I walked back into the house.

I couldn't blame him. It was like we'd gone to bed the night before Christmas expecting a toy truck and gotten a Ferrari.

It had happened. Adeline had made her move. And it had been better than anything we could have ever dreamed of.

"Your face can't look like that when we get back to the studio on Monday," I told him. "You might as well be screaming what happened."

Cole's head fell back as he laughed. I hadn't seen him this happy in months, and I smiled in spite of myself. "I'm serious."

He was shaking his head and still chucking as he made his way to the couch. I followed behind him.

"I'll do my best," he said. "But how can we not tell Silas about what happened? I was the one who proposed we all go after the same woman. And now that she made her move with us, we're going to cut him off?"

"We agreed to let her take the lead," I reminded him. "Silas knows it can't work any other way. She has to choose him, just like she chose us. All we can do is show her we're open to it."

Cole rubbed the back of his head. "Fine, but even without us saying anything, Silas will figure it out sooner than later. You know how he watches people. I'm sure we'll slip at some point, and he'll see it all spelled out in our body language."

Leaning back into the armchair, I crossed my legs at the ankles. He was right. Silas was like a detection dog when it came to sniffing out our secrets. He either figured things out himself or we grew so tired of his inquisitive gaze that we spilled everything just to get him off our backs.

But we couldn't do that now. Not when Adeline still wasn't convinced that this could work.

"We have two weeks left in River Valley," Cole said, nudging me with his foot. "I hope she can let go of her fears and that we can enjoy this time together."

The thought of our impending departure was like a bucket of cold water spilling over my head. "Are you still thinking of leaving as soon as we're done?"

I knew that initially Cole had been eager to leave, but I couldn't imagine saying goodbye to Ade in two weeks time. It wasn't enough.

"I guess we could stay for a bit longer, but our life is in LA, while hers is here. We'll be saying goodbye sooner rather than later."

"You can't speak for us as a unit anymore," I stated. "After this recording, we'll be free agents."

A shadow passed over Cole's face, and he leaned forward, placing his elbows on his thighs. "We need to talk about that."

I realized I'd just brought up the conversation he'd been carefully preparing for over these past few weeks. My throat tightened as I nodded at him to continue.

"I don't want to give up on us," he began. "We just told Adeline all about how she should fight for her band, but we're giving up on our own? It's not right."

Charlie dying hadn't been right, either, but it had happened anyway. His face flashed in my mind—lips curled in a smirk I knew too well. I was relieved when I realized that the debilitating guilt I usually felt whenever I thought of him had dulled slightly.

"I don't know," I told Cole and saw the pain reflected in his eyes. In that moment, looking at my friend of twenty years, I knew the dam was about to burst.

I let it.

Dropping my face into my palms, I began to sob. A moment later, Cole pulled me into a tight hug.

"I was the one who told him to give us space." All the words I'd kept unspoken since Charlie's death now spilled out. "I told him he needed to work through his issues on his own before he brought the rest of us down. He had gotten so negative, so aggressive during those months that all the air was sucked out of the room every time we were together."

"Ezra, you did what you thought was right for all of us. We tried to help, but he wouldn't let us. He was pushing all of us away even before you said anything. And no one knew about the drug addiction. If we'd known, we would have stayed by his side until he checked himself into rehab."

"I just can't help but think that my actions were what broke the camel's back."

I pushed Cole away slightly so that I could look him in the eyes when I said this next part. "That's why I took a step back. I don't want to make any

decisions for the group anymore, not when it means I'll be responsible for their outcomes. If something happens to the rest of you, I won't be able to handle it."

Cole rocked back and sat down on the floor at my feet. "You're my best friend, and I love you, but you're also an idiot. You are an incredible leader for the band, but we're all adults, and if you ever made a decision that didn't make sense, we wouldn't follow you like trained puppies. If we did, that's on us, not on you. No one, not even Abel, who's taken this harder than Silas and I, blame what happened with Charlie on you. Not one bit. I can't even say we've forgiven you because there was nothing to forgive. You need to be kinder to yourself, just like you'd be to me if our positions were reversed."

I allowed his words to settle over my soul. I knew one honest conversation wouldn't fix everything, but some part of me still felt lighter as a result.

"Fuck, man," I huffed, steeping my fingers in front of my face. "When did shit get so goddamn hard?"

"You're making it harder than it needs to be, my man," Cole said, rising from the floor and moving back to the couch. "We are musicians. Making music isn't the hard part. The opposite is. What the hell are you going to do if we break up? You've got a backup plan? I sure don't. The rest of them don't. We need to talk to Abel and get ourselves back on track."

I hoped he was right, but I also knew it was a tall hill to climb. Abel's wounds ran deep.

"This recording process has been healing for me." Cole sniffed. "It's helped me deal with some of my personal shit."

I studied the sour expression on his face. "Amy?"

"Yeah. I know it was a while back, but some part of me was still bitter, and I just couldn't let go of it for the longest time. The other day, I finally looked at the paintings I had of her—my "love letters"—and it was like looking at a piece of greasy sandwich paper. You know it held something good at one time, but now it's just trash. I had talked to Adeline about it right before, and seeing how she reacted to the story made me realize I'm ready to move on."

"I'm happy for you," I told my friend. "It was time to end that chapter."

"I know. And I also know that the same is not true for us. This experience has given us a second wind. I'm so fucking grateful for Adeline, because I really think she's playing a huge part in bringing us together and making us

work so well. I don't want to walk away from the band when the last song is done."

I didn't want to walk away from it, either. We were a family. I'd lived through my ultimate highs and lows with these guys, and I didn't know who I was without them.

"Okay, let's talk to Abel. I think we should take a few days away from this place," I said, a plan slowly taking form in my head. "Maybe changing up our environment will help Abel see what Bleeding Moonlight could look like without Charlie."

Cole hummed. "Like a camping trip? Remember the last one we took together?"

Oh yeah, I remembered that fiasco pretty well. Still had scars to prove it.

"Yeah, but let's not play a game of who can jump over the biggest fire this time around. Just good old-fashioned time outside in nature. We'll exhaust him with a long hike and then start talking about the future. He's always most receptive to ideas when he's physically spent."

"I like it. Let's plan for next weekend, although that means that we'll miss out on a weekend with Adeline."

It was nearly enough of a reason for me to scrap the whole idea, but I forced myself to think with my big head instead of my little one.

"We can't give up. We have to try to convince him that Bleeding Moonlight has a future."

Cole nodded. "He's still behaving like a bastard, but not as bad as I thought he'd be given we're recording an album so important to him. Maybe he's coming around on his own."

"Who knows what's going on inside his head." I shrugged. "Honestly, when he was loud and angry, at least he was easier to read. His silent glares are a lot more ominous."

"He doesn't glare at Adeline, though," Cole noted. "He says rude shit, but when he looks at her, especially when she's not looking, there's something... more thoughtful there."

I scrubbed at my chin. "If only he'd been less of a dick right from the beginning, he could have been a part of our conversation about her."

Cole shrugged dismissively. "Too late for that. Plus, he's not going to charm her with a few secret looks. But I wonder if we should invite her on the trip. She might help keep him civil."

I shook my head. We couldn't rely on Adeline to fix all of our problems,

not when we were only a few weeks from leaving her and this place. If we were going to continue as a band, we had to be sure that we could do it with just the four of us.

And whoever we'd eventually need to find to fill Charlie's role.

ADELINE

THE BAND PRACTICE WAS CANCELLED.

Liam texted our group chat that the in-laws were staying through Wednesday, and that he couldn't bail on them. Cold disappointment washed over my skin, but I knew he wasn't stalling intentionally. Still, this Friday, Mason would be driving himself and Molly to Northeastern, and we were running out of time.

Mason suggested we meet at six pm on Thursday in his garage, and we all agreed to that plan, given it was our one last option.

I'd have to leave the studio early that day, since we usually worked past seven, but I knew the guys would understand.

When I went to make breakfast and told Molly that I was free until my shift at the bar, she gave me a nervous look.

"What?" I asked while throwing a banana into the blender.

"Can we go to see Mom and Dad? You promised we could visit before I left."

I hated how thin her voice sounded, because I was the reason why it did. She knew I didn't like going there, and over the years she had nearly given up on asking me to come with her. Of course, she didn't know that the reason I hated that place was because it was a constant reminder of how close I'd once been to giving up on my responsibility to her.

Putting the lid on the blender, I turned around. "Of course. I'm sorry I've been forgetting about it."

For once, that part was true. With everything going on in my life, I'd forgotten that Molly and I had agreed to go see them. In fact, despite my best efforts, I hadn't spent as much time with my sister as I would have liked, and in five days, she would be leaving.

She frowned at the look on my face. "Oh, no. I'm not trying to guilt-trip you or anything. I'm not mad."

I scrubbed my head. "I haven't been around enough, have I? Between the album and the bar—"

Molly lifted her palm up. "Stop right there. First of all, I'm almost eighteen. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"You're not a legal adu—"

"Uh, uh, uh!" she cut me off. "I'm not finished. My second point was

going to be that you would be a friggin' idiot not to take absolute advantage of this gift from the universe. Ade, if you wanted to move into the studio for the entire month, I would bring the boxes. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I will not let you ruin it for yourself by worrying about me." She huffed. "Do you know how bad I feel for making you sacrifice the last two years of your life just so that you could take care of me?"

My eyebrows pinched. "What are you talking about? I didn't sacrifice anything."

"You don't even have the decency to harbor any lingering resentment, do you?" Molly asked, flinging her arms out. "Instead of going on dates, you were picking me up from dance classes or supporting us by working at the bar. Instead of going out drinking with your friends, you were watching movies with me on the couch. Instead of letting yourself chase your dream of becoming a musician, you pushed me to pursue my own."

"I'd given up on that dream long before what happened," I rushed to correct her, but she shook her head.

"What I'm trying to say is that you've done enough for me over the past two years to last a lifetime. You don't need to do that anymore. The only thing that's helping me not shrivel up under the weight of my eternal debt to you is this album. Seeing you do this for yourself right as I'm about to leave is the best goodbye gift you could have possibly given me. Don't you dare feel guilty about it. Don't you friggin' dare."

I listened to her, stunned. In the past two years, she had never given me a hint that she felt that way. Tears welled in my eyes.

"You don't owe me anything," I croaked, pulling her into a hug. "You're my sister. You're the one who taught me to be brave. What the hell am I going to do when you're not here?"

She rubbed my back. "I'm going three and a half hours away, not flying to the Moon," she spoke into my shoulder, her words coming out muffled. "You'll see me so much that soon you'll be insisting I get my summer internship somewhere farther away."

Crying and chuckling at the same time, I leaned back to look at her face. "I love you, Mol."

She scrunched her nose. "Love you, too, but honestly, you still smell like the hot dude from last night, and I think I'm gonna need those details on the drive over."

Not a chance in hell.

“You’re sounding unusually good today,” Abel said after I finished recording the rhythm track of their fifth song on Monday.

I ignored the implied insult in that sentence. “What do you mean?”

“That’s the first time you got it perfect on the very first try.”

“Week number three.” I shrugged. “I’m getting the hang of it.”

Cole, sitting on the couch in the control room, sucked loudly on the straw of his iced latte. “Did you get some practice this weekend?”

“No. I was busy,” I said, giving him my most innocent look.

His lips stretched into a grin, and Abel looked between us, his face darkening with suspicion. “I’d ask if Cole was giving you some tips, but I know there is no way in hell he could teach you anything about your instrument.”

Cole bounced a foam stress ball against Abel’s chest. “Asshole.”

I laughed at them. It was past seven, and I was eager to get some dinner at home.

“Hey, how was your Through Azure Skies practice yesterday?” Ezra asked, recalling our discussion on Saturday.

“It got cancelled,” I said as I zipped up the guitar case. “Liam’s future in-laws extended their visit, so we’re going to meet up on Thursday evening. That reminds me, are you okay if I leave just before six that day?”

Ezra wore a small frown when I looked up. “Yeah, of course. So you haven’t talked to them yet about continuing together?”

“Nah. It’s okay, though. We’ll talk on Thursday.”

Silas gave me a questioning look. “What’s going on?”

“We’re trying to figure out if we can keep playing together after Mason leaves for college. I’m going to try convince them it’s a good idea, as per Ezra’s and Cole’s encouragement,” I told him.

The guitarist glanced between the two of them. “First time I support someone following their advice.”

“You guys are being such haters today,” Cole called out. “What is it? Jealous of how good my hair looks or something?”

“Nah, just your annoying good mood,” Silas fired back.

I turned away, not wanting my face to accidentally reveal my thoughts. Today had been one of the most productive recording days we’d had, and despite not wanting it to be so, I couldn’t help but think it had something to

do with what had happened on the weekend.

I hadn't been home for two hours when I got a text from an unknown number.

"I'm going back to the studio to write tonight."

It must be Abel. The text caught me by surprise, given his abrupt departure from the studio after our first and only late-night session.

"Okay?" I texted him back. Was it an invitation? An FYI in case someone showed up at his house in the middle of the night and found that he wasn't there? I wasn't going to assume he was inviting me to come. No, if he wanted me there, he'd have to spell it out.

"You coming?"

I read out the response in his voice in my head, seeing the cocked brow and arrogant stance. A part of me was annoyed at how intently he'd pretended our last session had never happened. He'd shown me a glimpse of the pain he bore only to shut right down moments later. Maybe that was easy for him to do, but for me, writing together was pure intimacy. I couldn't turn it on and off like it was no more than a bath faucet.

But he was still grieving, and yes, that did make me want to give him a pass. My muse hadn't visited me since that one night, so I didn't have high hopes I'd be able to write anything. But I could keep him company while he wrote if that helped him.

"See you at 10."

I got to the studio before Abel. The motion-activated lights in the hallways clicked on one by one as I made my way to our recording room. Remnants of our earlier session—scattered guitar picks, empty coffee cups, snack wrappers—had been taken by the cleaning staff, and the control room struck me as unusually cold. I was only wearing a heather-gray T-shirt on top, and by the time Abel walked through the door, I was rubbing my arms to get rid of goosebumps.

His hair was twisted in a bun at the nape of his neck, revealing the full

contours of his face. Beneath an unzipped hoodie, he wore a wrinkled white T-shirt, but neither this detail, nor the fact that he looked like he'd just woken from a nap detracted from his otherworldly beauty. When our eyes met, I sucked in a breath.

"Hey," he said, running his gaze over me before shrugging off the hoodie and handing it to me.

"Oh, no, I'm okay," I said, pushing his hand back.

"Just take it. You're covered in goosebumps." He tossed the item at me, and I caught it instinctively.

I blinked at him and pulled the hoodie on. It was still warm and smelled like him. "Fine. Since we're making observations, you look tired."

"I haven't been sleeping well. Which is why I'm up doing this." He opened his arms and gestured to the room.

The bags under his eyes seemed to grow more prominent. I had initially missed that detail, distracted by how undone he looked.

Seeing him like this was intimacy, I realized. However badly he'd been sleeping, he always looked collected and ready to go during the day. This side of him—part weary, part uncertain—didn't come out around the guys, but he was making an exception with me.

My stomach fluttered at the thought. Fuck. I just slept with two of his friends in an attempt to exorcise these kinds of reactions, yet here I was, as affected by Abel as ever.

He studied me for a moment and then pulled out his guitar.

"I worked some more on the song from before."

He began to play the familiar melody. I was surprised to hear he hadn't changed much of what we'd written before, but he had filled in some of the gaps that had remained at the end of our last session.

I started to strum along, making mental notes of a few spots I thought could use some reworking.

"What do you think?" he asked me hesitantly when the song finished.

"I think it's really good, Abel. It feels...honest."

I thought I saw a flash of satisfaction on his face, but it was gone before I could be sure.

"It still needs work. What parts sounded off to you?"

I opened my mouth, then changed my mind and pinched my lips. "Look, it's your song. Any further feedback from me would be just stylistic preference."

The line between his lips tightened. “You wrote almost half of it. You are the song’s co-writer. If we release this, your name is going to be in the credits, so you better get onboard with all that quickly and cut the bullshit.”

My brows inched together. “I wish you would have told me that when we started on this.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m not thinking about shit like that when I’m writing. Neither should you. Are we making art here, or are we having a business meeting?”

“Fine. Let’s keep going,” I blurted out. What were the chances of them ever using this song? The rest of the band hadn’t even heard it yet. Still, I bristled at his sharp words. At how he seemed to have no patience for my concerns.

I played him my suggestions, and he seemed receptive to most of them. The irritation I was nursing fell away as I focused fully on the music, and I thought I could see some hardness shedding from him as well.

It sounded like a real song, and most importantly it sounded like Bleeding Moonlight. Somehow, with just the two of us, we had managed to get the sound right, and as we played through the track over and over again, pride warmed my chest.

Abel surprised me with a rare smile. The sight of it was electrifying and raised the hairs on my arms. His green eyes flickered, and just like before, the barriers between us lowered in a temporary truce.

He began to sing.

*“We are shattered pieces no one would call whole
Together, we become
A grotesque work of art
Feeding on each other’s misery*

*Sons of broken homes
Left to no one
Born of nothing
We create our kingdom of ruin, crushed hearts, and broken
bones*

Is this love or hate?

*The lines are blurred
Pull back the skin and check the wounds for answers
You won't find them here*

*Sons of broken homes
Left to no one
Born of nothing
We create our kingdom of ruin, crushed hearts, and broken
bones”*

My jaw went slack as an unexpected understanding spread through my mind. Abel had revealed something to me. Something I didn't think anyone else in the band knew.

“Abel, I...” My voice dried up. Did I have a right to ask?

He was watching me, waiting. The walls were still down.

“Were you and Charlie together?” I expected him to deny it, to shut me out, but he simply sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded.

“The rest of them don't know. The thing between me and Charlie, it was...unstable.”

My head began to spin. What did this mean? Was Abel gay? Bi? Why would he keep his relationship with Charlie a secret from his closest friends?

He moved to put down his guitar and then changed his mind and pulled it closer, as if it were a shield. I recognized that instinct as something I often did myself.

“Charlie thought that to write great music, one had to feel the full range of emotions. He said it was no wonder some of the greatest musicians relied so heavily on drugs to feed their creative energies. Drugs helped create extremes, but I was always categorically against them, having been raised by an addict. So Charlie made me feel in other ways.”

His voice trailed off to a whisper. Pain was radiating from him, still fresh and potent. The backs of my eyes prickled as my own emotions threatened to overwhelm me.

“He'd call me names, tell me my work was shit. He was verbally abusive for days on end, isolating me from the outside world, and I'd let him, because somewhere along the line I started believing that without it I couldn't make music. When I got close to my breaking point, he'd flip a switch and become compassionate and kind. He'd bring me back from the edge and show me that

in my despair I had managed to create something great.”

I reached for his guitar and tried to pull it gently away, but he moved out of my grasp. “It was that heady mix of contrasts that got me hooked on him.”

I got the sense that telling me all of this was a compulsion he couldn’t resist.

“I’d tell him that I loved him, and he’d humor me, never rejecting me outright, but never giving me a clear answer. Some days, when we were working on this album, we’d spend most of the day in bed. He’d be loving, almost tender. He’d make me think we were finally together, only to ignore or scream at me the next day. He knew how to play me like an instrument.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I watched him try to remain composed.

“When I found out he was dead, my heart broke. It’s still broken. He was the first man I ever loved, and maybe he’ll be the only one I ever will love. But a part of me was also glad.”

“Abel, I’m so sorry. It sounds like he was awful to you,” I said, sniffing. This time, when I tried to lift the guitar away, he let me. I put it to one side and kneeled by his feet, placing my hands on his knees, ready to accept the pain he was sharing.

Abel’s hand found my cheek. “I never thought I’d write another song after he died. I didn’t write anything new until that night we met here. Who would have thought you’d be the one to show me I could still be do it,” he said in a low voice.

His index finger trailed the ridge of my nose. “Maybe, I should have known. You and your unbelievable talent appeared out of nowhere and swept all of them away. I think I knew it before they did. I saw you, and I could tell that you would make them fall in love with music all over again, and I hated the whole thing. Hated how you’d make them want to keep going. I tried to be contrarian, to resist, to deny...”

He slid down from the couch to the floor before me, his legs bracketing my frame. My hands slid from his knees to rest on his thighs, and our faces were less than half a foot apart. The air was charged.

“But I can’t deny it now,” Abel breathed. “We just wrote a song together.”

The intensity of his attention on me was almost too much. His eyes, his goddamn eyes, were so magnetic that I didn’t think I’d ever be able to look at anything else again without feeling like something was missing. He searched

my face for something and if I knew what it was, I would give it to him a thousand times over.

“You don’t even understand the power you have over us all,” he said.

We were inching closer, my heart hammering louder and louder in my ears.

“I don’t have anything,” I whispered. “I’m a nobody.”

“You’re becoming somebody to us.” Lips parting, he slid his gaze to my mouth.

The door behind us flung open, and I scrambled away, scared out of my mind by the sudden sound.

Kyle, the sound engineer stood in the doorway with his arm wrapped around a young woman. His eyes widened as he took in the tableau before him. “Shit! I’m sorry. I was sure the place would be empty now.”

“It’s okay,” I rushed to assure him, but my words came out ragged. “We were just...wrapping up.”

The woman by him stood there with her mouth agape. “Oh my God. Are you Abel Donovan?”

Abel’s face went from startled to annoyed to his normal unreadable expression in the span of a few seconds. “Yes,” he admitted reluctantly.

“I’m such a huge fan,” the woman squealed, and I took in the band T-shirt and leather pants she wore. The shirt wasn’t Bleeding Moonlight’s but it was another metal band. “Can I get an autograph? And a picture?”

The woman dug for something in her purse, and I hurried to put my guitar back in its case. As I turned to leave, Abel and I shared a look. His mask was back on. Whatever warmth I’d seen in his eyes only moments earlier was gone.

Tonight, things between us had changed. I just wasn’t sure if it was for better or for worse.

ABEL

Be nice to the fans. Be nice to the fans.

The chant had been playing on loop in my head for the past ten minutes as Kyle's date insisted on getting about a million pictures with me before asking me to sign on the upper curve of her right tit.

Have fun staring at my name while you're fucking her tonight, Kyle.

The sound engineer seemed almost as pissed about this development as me, his blatant attempt at impressing the redhead had gone horribly wrong. I supposed she was impressed, just not with him.

Finally, there was a break in her long monologue about how much she loved our last album, and I used the opportunity to tell her I needed to head home.

Kyle insisted on walking me out.

"Hey, Abel, can we keep this between us?" he asked, his tone laced with barely disguised frustration and flavored with a hint of fear. "I know I probably shouldn't have brought her here, but she really wanted to see the studio, and I thought it would be a good way to end the night."

"Who the fuck am I going to tell?" I turned on him, pissed about the interruption and no longer constrained by the presence of a fan. "The studio manager? If I were you, I'd be less worried about him and more worried about me. Pull that shit again, and you're gone. And don't even think about fucking her in there and getting your fluids all over the couch. Understood?"

His face had gotten progressively redder as I spoke, and he gave me a jerky nod when I finished. "I'm so sorry. I'll get her out of there right away."

Without saying goodbye, I got into my car and drove home, irritation coursing through my veins.

Despite taking it out on Kyle, I knew it wasn't just his little visit that pissed me off. It was everything preceding it, and how I no longer felt like I knew what the fuck was going on.

I had just written a song.

This thing that had been hanging over me, the fear that I could no longer write, had finally budged, so why wasn't I ecstatic?

The answer came quickly. It was because I'd just spilled all my dirty little secrets to someone I was supposed to be staying away from.

The rush from composing with her had clouded my mind. I couldn't

believe how well we worked together, how effortless it was. With Charlie, song writing had been war. With Adeline, it was peaceful surrender.

What was I supposed to do with this new knowledge? In less than two weeks, we'd no longer be working together.

In fact, I'd no longer be working with anyone at all.

At home, I realized my hoodie was gone. I hadn't taken it back from Adeline, and the thought of how it might smell like her after she had used it made me not want it back at all. Everything about her was intoxicating—her scent, her face, her body, and her talent, and I couldn't afford to turn into a drunk.

I had to stay away, but today I'd done the exact opposite, and in the moment, it had felt so fucking good.

Guilt gripped me like a vise. What kind of a sick bastard was I? Charlie had died less than two months ago, and even though whatever there'd been between us had been troubled, I had loved him for years. My grief and my feelings over his death were a densely tangled mass, impossible to unravel and understand.

Why hadn't I seen how deep his issues ran? In those last few weeks, the rest of the guys had wanted space from him. They couldn't deal with his toxicity, so they tapped out, but I couldn't afford to do that. I wanted to write, and I'd believed with my entire being that I could only write with him.

He was so volatile—so angry—while we worked together. I felt his pain, but my attempts to comfort him were pushed aside with vitriol that threatened to seep into my veins and kill me like slow-acting poison. Still, while the guys had no way of seeing what was going on with him, I was right there on the front lines. And I'd done absolutely nothing.

The more time I spent with Adeline, the more confused I became. Now that I knew I could still write music, my conviction to break up the band was wavering, and I didn't know what to do with that.

I tore off my clothes, littering them across the floor before collapsing onto the bed. A feverish chill ran across my skin, and I immediately thought of Adeline rubbing her arms as I walked into the studio today.

She'd looked at me with a mixture of apprehension and fascination. I liked how her big gray eyes widened when I said something undoubtedly rude. The rapid rise and fall of her chest when she got angry. The way she sucked on her bottom lip when she was concentrating on a tricky guitar solo that I told her she couldn't nail.

I shouldn't notice these things, but I did, and as my hand drifted toward my hardened cock, I couldn't deny the attraction I felt.

She was undeniably beautiful, and the thought of being inside of her made my hand pick up speed. Would she feel as soft around my cock as her skin had felt beneath my hand today? Would she gasp and shiver when I pushed my way into her tight cunt? Or would her nails leave marks down my back?

I came with a grunt, hot cum spurting over my hand, and imagined Adeline lapping it off.

So what if I was attracted to her? If I wanted to fuck her? She didn't mean anything to me. Not like Charlie did. With her, it was purely physical. The things I'd revealed tonight? A simple moment of weakness. Maybe if I'd talked to the guys about Charlie and I earlier, I wouldn't have opened up to her.

Where did all of this leave me? I could tell the rest of my band was into her as well. Judging by the satisfied expressions Cole and Ezra had worn most of the day, something may have happened between them already. I didn't know if Adeline was open-minded enough to sleep with both of them, and I didn't give a shit.

Or at least I shouldn't.

Still, my traitorous mind went there. If she was willing to screw those two while we were working together, maybe she'd be willing to add me to the rotation?

Of course, only for the sole purpose of getting this craving out of my system.

I pounded my fist on the pillow in frustration, feeling no better than a petulant child. I was Abel fucking Donovan. Why was I pining so hard for her?

No, I was better than this. All I had to do was get through two more weeks, and then I could forget Adeline and her beautiful, expressive eyes.

ADELINE

I SPENT the next day distracted, tired from the lack of sleep and confused about what I had learned from Abel.

I couldn't believe the rest of the guys didn't know about his troubled relationship with Charlie, but I knew it wasn't my place to talk to them about it. That was Abel's story to tell, and he had shared it with me before doing so with his oldest friends.

I suspected I knew why. He communicated best through music—his guard had lowered when we'd really gotten into the process—and I wouldn't be surprised to find out that he'd never intended to reveal his secret to me. It just happened. Music had a way of making honest people out of us.

Halfway through the day, Cole asked if we could talk outside. I followed him down the hall, my eyes catching on how his toned back flexed beneath the fabric of his T-shirt. He cast a look over his shoulder at me and winked, easing my thoughts. We came outside, and as soon as the door slammed behind us, his hands found my waist. He pressed me against the wall of the studio, leaning in close.

“Tell me there will be more.”

I reached up and buried my fingers in the softness of his hair. His eyelids fluttered in pleasure before he forced them open, pinning me with his heated gaze.

“Tell me, Adeline. If you say you don't want it again, you'll need to make me believe it. If I sense the slightest hesitation in your refusal, I won't back down. We won't back down.”

I trailed my fingers from his hair down to his cheeks, his short beard, his soft lips. He let me touch him, his expression unwavering, with only his heavy breaths giving me an indication of the effect I was having on him.

Why should I deny myself this? There was joy and pleasure for all three of us in this arrangement, and a distraction for me. When we were together, I didn't think about the difficulties of my life or what would come next after they left. I simply felt and lived in the moment, unburdened and exhilaratingly alive.

I sighed. “You're sure this won't affect the recording process?”

A curl fell into Cole's face. “It might, but only for the better. I don't think you understand how much you've done for us by just being here. We've

never worked together this well before.”

Abel’s words flared in my memory. *“I could tell that you would make them fall in love with music all over again, and I hated the whole thing. Hated how you’d make them want to keep going.”*

What did he mean by that? I’d been so absorbed by the revelation regarding Charlie, I hadn’t had an opportunity to truly process those words.

Cole continued, oblivious to my thoughts. “There is something here. I know you feel it, too.”

Of course, I felt it. I’d felt it enough to initiate this whole thing, and despite my subsequent protests and denials, I didn’t think I was strong enough to walk away.

“I’m worried about what would happen if the others find out,” I confessed, still hung up on how Silas and Abel would react, and even more confused about my feelings toward the singer after last night. We had almost kissed. I knew he’d been emotional and upset, but what was my excuse? If he knew I’d slept with Cole and Ezra, would he still want to kiss me?

The corner of Cole’s mouth inched up. “If the others find out, I think their first question will be to ask if there’s room for more. Whether that’s a problem or not is...entirely up to you.”

My eyes widened, and my pulse hammered in my ears. Was he implying what I thought he was?

Cole held my gaze, daring me to consider the meaning of his words.

Room for more. He believed Silas and Abel would want to join us in this...arrangement. And what about me? What did I want?

I shut my eyes, forcing myself to focus on the answer that suddenly seemed a lot easier to give.

This thing between Cole, Ezra and I... Once was never going to be enough.

“Okay,” I said, biting my lip as I watched Cole’s face light up. “Let’s keep going. I know we’ll have to say goodbye soon, but I want to enjoy the time we have left.”

He pulled me close, kissing my ear and then my neck, before finally finding my lips. “Thank fuck,” he said with a grin when we finally broke apart. “You know how to make a guy nervous.”

I laughed, but some unease still lingered. Cole must have noticed, because a wrinkle appeared between his brows. “Is there something else?”

My mind sifted through Abel’s words over and over again, until a terrible

suspicion made my stomach twist.

“What are your plans for the band after this album?”

My suspicion was confirmed by how Cole’s face immediately grew pale. He took a step back and asked wearily, “Why?”

“Abel said something to me earlier. He implied you didn’t want to keep going.”

Cole let out a heavy breath. “Most of us do. But Abel wants to break up the band. It was one of his conditions for recording the album.”

The world tilted under my feet, a sense of dread curling inside me like a spring ready to be let loose. “Why on earth would he want that?”

The answer appeared in my mind as soon as the question left my mouth. Because he didn’t think he could write again. He had told me as much.

But he was wrong. We’d written a song together. Did that mean he would change his mind now?

“He doesn’t think there’s a band without Charlie. But hey, don’t worry. We decided we’re going to talk to him about it. We’re going to go camping this weekend and see if we can convince him.”

I sighed in relief. “Good. You can’t break up. This new material is amazing, and I know you have so much more in you to give. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Cole’s lips curved into a gentle smile. “Adeline, you’ve done so much already. Ezra was ready to walk away until we began to work with you. This weekend, after you left his place, we had a long chat. He finally opened up to me about what he’s been struggling with, and we were able to figure a lot of things out. Plus, we’d be hypocrites if we told you to fight for your band if we weren’t willing to fight for ours.”

It was hard for me to fathom that I had anything to do with helping Bleeding Moonlight move forward, but both Cole and Abel had said as much. I knew Abel wouldn’t lie about it, or say it just to flatter me, no matter how nice he had promised to be. I’d thought I was the one taking things from them in this whole arrangement, from recording the album to this thing with Cole, Ezra and I. Opportunities, experiences, pleasure. But maybe it was time for me to acknowledge I was giving things to them as well.

“You’re becoming somebody to us.”

Abel had said those words to me earlier. Now, I was starting to believe them.

On Thursday, Mason and I sat in his garage waiting for Liam and Elly to arrive for practice.

I was wearing a blue button-up shirt for the sole purpose of covering the hickey on my neck. The past two evenings, after we were done recording, Cole, Ezra, and I had gone back to Ezra's house where they'd made my body come apart in ways it hadn't before. I'd never flirted with desire the way I'd done in these last two days. The anticipation of the evening had kept me in a constant state of arousal in the studio. All it took was a hungry look from one of them to make me leak into my panties and squirm in my seat.

"Are you blushing?" Mason asked, twisting and leaning over to look at my face. "You look red."

I scooted away from him, the leather couch responding with a squeak. "It's just hot here. You're radiating heat."

"Ah, sorry," he said with a bashful grin. "A cold beer might help?"

As he went inside the house to retrieve it, I cast my gaze around the space as if I hadn't already committed most of it to memory from all the time we'd spent here. Mason's gleaming drum kit rested on top of a patterned carpet. The fabric was worn but still retained its color. The wall across from the couch was lined with wide metal shelves containing dozens of meticulously labeled boxes.

Tools, Gift Wrap, Hooks and Door Knobs, Painting Supplies.

I shook my head as he walked back in and handed me a beer. "You're a freak, you know that, right?"

Mason followed the direction of my gaze and laughed. "What? The boxes? I'm a neat guy. Is that a crime?"

"No, but it might be a precursor to you committing one. You're nineteen. It's unnatural."

He tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch. "Organizing puts my mind at ease. Before I went to work on this place, coming in here was anxiety inducing. Shit piled on top of more shit."

I snorted. "Sounds like our garage."

"A mess is not good for the soul. I'm telling ya. Once I fixed this spot up, I started to sleep better."

"Your future college roommate has no idea how lucky he is."

"Eh, don't know about that. I'm gonna be on his ass to keep his part of

the apartment clean.”

Mason was going to live on campus for the first year, just like Molly. Unlike me, he’d be able to see her every day if he wanted to.

“How’s Molly doing?” the drummer asked, as if he could read my thoughts. “She ready to move tomorrow?”

“Yeah, she should be wrapping up her packing now.” The thought of seeing her room empty was nauseatingly sad. I clutched my beer harder. “Please drive carefully tomorrow. Keep her safe for me.”

I wasn’t normally afraid of cars or driving, even after the accident, but the anxiety I felt about her leaving had been spreading for days, and I had begun to worry about everything.

Mason patted my knee. “I’ve got her. Nothing’s going to happen.” After a moment, he added, “Well, on the drive, that is.”

I jerked my head to look at him. “What are you scheming?”

Mason wore a devilish smirk. “Not scheming. Just sensing an opportunity.”

At the end of the day, Molly could do a lot worse than Mason. He was a good guy, despite being a neat freak. I didn’t think it would work out between them—they were both too strong willed—but I wasn’t really going to try to stop anything from happening. After all, my sister was a smart girl, and I trusted her to make her own decisions.

A car honked outside the open garage door, and we stopped our conversation to see Liam and Elly get out of Elly’s car.

She was sporting a new buzzcut, while Liam looked a bit worn out—likely still recovering from the recently departed guests. We greeted each other warmly before grabbing the available seats scattered throughout the garage.

“So,” Elly drew out the O, her eyes giddy with excitement. “How’s it been working with Bleeding Moonlight? What dirty secrets of theirs can you spill?”

“Yeah, we haven’t heard nearly enough from you about that,” Mason agreed.

I tried to dismiss their curiosity. “Honestly, it’s a lot of work. We get in at nine and usually leave after seven. But I’m learning a ton from them, so I really can’t complain.”

“Yeah, yeah, obligatory boring stuff.” Elly rolled her eyes. “What are they like?”

I shifted in my seat. How could I describe them without giving away what they had begun to mean to me?

Still, I knew they wouldn't drop it until I told them something. "They're surprisingly normal, at least in the studio. It's a job for them—more glamorous and fun than other jobs, but they don't mess around."

"Maybe not when they're recording," Mason shrugged. "I'm sure they let loose when they're on tour."

"Have they hinted about you working with them beyond the one album?" Elly asked.

"You're seriously overestimating my abilities if you think they'd do that."

"You're being modest." Elly waved me off. "You're much better at playing than you are at spreading gossip. Seriously, there's nothing juicy you can share?"

"Well, Cole's sister is engaged to one of the guys from Ritual Disruption," I offered, hoping this would be enough to satisfy her curiosity.

"Damn! Which one?" Mason asked.

"Not sure, Cole just mentioned it in passing."

"Interesting. But they're really just normal? No crazy quirks? No penchant for drama?" Elly pressed.

My mind immediately jumped to Abel, but I wasn't going to gossip about the complicated lead singer. "All of them are incredibly talented, and they have a really strong bond with each other. They have a high bar for what we're doing, so that can cause some tempers to rise, but I completely get it. If I were ever recording my own album, I'd want it to be perfect, too."

"Sounds like you're really getting along," Liam said. Did he sound a little tense?

"Getting any ideas for your own songs?" Mason nudged, distracting me from Liam. This was my opening to steer the conversation to the main topic at hand.

"Even if I did, what good are they if I don't have a band?" I asked, looking at all of them. "I've been thinking about Mason leaving and what that means for us. Look, I'm just going to put all my cards on the table with you guys."

Liam shifted his feet, his expression growing serious as he waited for me to say my part.

"We just had the best show we've ever played. And I know that's not just me being delusional—the guys from Bleeding Moonlight agreed. They loved

our performance, our dynamic as a band, and they even thought our original was solid. I know we're getting older and life is getting busy, but I think we should try to find a way to keep playing together. Mason already told me he's willing to drive back here to practice every couple of weeks."

"I don't know, Ade," Liam said, crossing his arms. The other two looked to him. As I suspected, at the end of the day the decision would be in Liam's hands. If I convinced him, the others would get on board. "The show was a good way for us to end things with a bang. We were able to keep to a good practice schedule leading up to it, but that's just not going to be possible anymore. I think we need to quit while we're ahead."

"I hear you," I said in a conciliatory tone. "And I agree we'd have to work smarter if we keep going. But I really think we have created something special here, and stopping when things get a little tough feels... Well, it feels like giving up."

I knew I'd said something wrong when Liam's face darkened. "It's not about things getting a little tough. It's about us moving on with our lives. I have a kid on the way, and I'll readily admit that if I have to choose between practicing with a hobby band and being a dad, it's going to be the latter, all the way."

Irritation prickled at me. "Why does it have to be either or? Why can't it be both? Look, I have a world-class band telling me we have something good here. Doesn't that assessment count for something? Shouldn't that give us some confidence that maybe this can be more than a hobby band?"

At this, Liam's expression became incredulous. "Is that where your head is at now? You want to chase stardom? Ade, c'mon. I know I don't have time to waste on pipe dreams, and frankly, neither do you. You have a sister to take care of. Bleeding Moonlight are probably just saying that to you because they're trying to get into your pants."

Mason and I jumped up from our seats in unison.

I was seething. "When did you become such an asshole? You think the only reason they'd encourage me is because they want to sleep with me?"

Mason came to stand between us, the hard set of his jaw telling me he was pissed as well. "Okay, let's all chill out."

"No. I'm not going to chill out," I snapped.

"I saw how they were looking at you at the show," Liam said, flinging his hands up. "They were smitten with you playing their own song to them on that stage. Of course you're talented, Adeline, but there are talented starving

artists all over the country. I know you're too smart to let a bunch of rock stars past their prime convince you otherwise."

I sneered at him. "They are far from being past their prime."

Liam's chuckle was humorless. "Please. Their last good album was from like five years ago. I know you're trying to sell them as being straitlaced, but their guitarist died from a goddamn overdose."

I'd never wanted to punch anyone in the face this badly. "I have no idea who they were in the past, and frankly, I don't care. All I know is that they're real musicians who care about their music, who care about their bandmates, and who sure as shit don't knock each other down like you're trying to do to me."

"I'm not trying to knock you down," Liam said, his cheek twitching. "I'm trying to bring you back to reality. We have always been on the same page about this band. Always, until now. You work with a famous band for what—three weeks? And now you think we have a chance at making it big? That's not how it works. If you want to chase after it, be my guest, but I want no part of it."

Angry tears filled my eyes. I whipped to look at Elly, who sat on the chair with a straight back and shell-shocked look on her face. "And you? Are you in or out?"

Elly swallowed. "I'd keep going if everyone else was down, but without Liam... We'd have to find someone to replace him, not to mention spend a ton of time getting them ramped up, and all that with no guarantee that we'd jam well with them... I'm sorry, Ade."

Mason pursed his lips when our eyes met, his frustration and anger barely contained. I didn't need to ask for his opinion. Without a guitarist and a bassist, there would be no band.

My eyes flickered shut. It was over.

"Ade, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said some of those things." Liam's tone was conciliatory. It was easy for him to be conciliatory now that he'd won.

"Yeah, but you did." I stood up and picked up my guitar to leave. "Mason, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Ade, c'mon. Don't storm off like that." Liam stood up and grabbed my arm. I shook him off and got into my car. Maybe I'd be ready for a reconciliation in a few weeks, but right now, I just wanted to get out of here.

The three of them watched as I pulled out of Mason's driveway. Disappointment tore through me at the realization that this had been our last

practice, and we hadn't even touched our instruments. Through Azure Skies had ended with a bang, just not the kind any of us had hoped for.

I typed out a text to Cole and Ezra as I was going to sleep that night, but then I remembered they were going camping first thing the following morning. I erased it because I didn't want them to worry about me or insist on meeting up before they left.

My sleep was restless. I woke up feeling as tired as I'd been the night before, but Molly was leaving in a few hours, and I had to get up to help her get ready.

My mood was somber as we packed up the last of her clothes in a big suitcase. Finally, Molly pulled me into the living room and demanded I tell her everything that had happened.

"That sucks," she concluded after I finished. "I wish I could've been there to kick him in the nuts for saying that shit to you."

I pulled on my lip, and Molly frowned.

"Don't tell me you believed the guys only praised you to get into your pants. You know that's nonsense, right?"

"Yeah, yeah." I waved her off. In truth, I wasn't so sure. In my anger, it had been easy to initially dismiss his words, but now they'd marinated in my brain overnight and taken root.

I had already slept with Cole and Ezra when we had the conversation about the band, but it was true that they were still trying to convince me to keep doing it. But I knew their characters by now, and I didn't believe it was possible for them to lie like that to my face. After all, they thought I was good enough to record this album with them. Why was I letting Liam get under my skin?

Years of thinking you're not good enough, that's why, a little voice whispered in my head.

I shook it off. There was no point in thinking about all of this now. Regardless of whether Ezra and Cole meant what they said, Through Azure Skies was over. It was time for me to come to terms that in a few weeks, I'd likely never play in a band again.

A honk from the front yard snapped me out of my reverie. Molly went to

open the door to wave hello to Mason, and we grabbed a few boxes of her stuff for the car.

“Hey, Mol,” he greeted her with a big grin, taking the box out of her hands. “You excited? I got a sick playlist for the drive. I hope you’re contributing snacks.”

She nudged his arm with her little fist. “Obviously.”

I could see she was holding back a smile. Mason might find a receptive audience in her after all.

Molly rushed past to get more stuff while I placed my box in his trunk.

“You okay, Ade?” he asked, his brows furrowed. “That was some bullshit last night.”

“Yeah. But it’s done. I knew that breaking up was the likely outcome, I just didn’t think Liam would go off like that.”

Mason ran a hand through his messy hair. “Honestly, I think he’s jealous.”

I arched my brow. “Doubt it.”

“I’m serious. He was our lead only because you didn’t want it. You’ve always been a better guitarist than him. Then the whole Bleeding Moonlight thing happened, and I think it just woke the green fairy.”

That didn’t make sense to me. “He’s never taken our music seriously, so why would he care?”

“Sometimes people dismiss things because they’re afraid of putting in an earnest effort only to end up failing.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, partially because his words hit home for me as well. Maybe Liam and I weren’t so different after all when it came to music.

“Whatever.” I shrugged, eager to move on. “Mason, I hope you find a group of people you can continue playing with at college,” I said, tugging him to face me. “You’re so young and so talented. Don’t give up, okay? Don’t be like Liam or me.”

His lips inched up. “I won’t give up on me if you don’t give up on yourself, ’kay? And for God’s sake, you’re only two years older than me. Hardly a grandma.”

We loaded all of Molly’s stuff and stood at the end of the driveway, the moment for saying goodbyes finally upon us.

Mason gave me a hug before jumping in the car to give Molly and me a moment.

I wrapped my arms around my sister. “I’m going to miss you so much. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

She squeezed me back. “You mean like sleep with a rock star?”

“Definitely don’t do that,” I grumbled into her hair. “But seriously, stay safe and call me if you need anything, okay?”

Molly pecked my cheek. “Stop worrying. I’ll be fine, you’ll be fine, and I’ll see you next long weekend. Love you.”

I waved until the car turned the corner. Walking back into the house, I was struck with loneliness so heavy that I had to stumble to the kitchen and sit down.

My phone’s incessant buzzing woke me from a nap I hadn’t intended to take. I was curled up on top of the blankets on my bed, and when I finally found my phone in one of the folds, it was Ezra’s name on the screen.

“Hello?” I answered, my voice groggy.

“Hey.”

Some alarm bell started ringing in my head when I heard the worried tone of his voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, we’re just about to start the hike to the campground, and I wanted to call you before we lose signal. Silas didn’t come with us this morning. He has a fever. Could you do me a favor and go check on him at some point today? For as long as I’ve known him, the guy’s been too stubborn to go to the doctor. I just don’t want us coming back on Sunday to find him in rough shape.”

I jumped up from the bed. “Of course, why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“I knew you were sending Molly off, so I didn’t want to bother you in the morning, but I figured she would have left by now.”

“Yeah,” I said, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear while pulling on my jeans. “She’s gone. Okay, I’m getting into the car right now. I’ll bring him some food and meds.”

“You’re the best. Thanks, Ade.”

I smiled at the phone. “Have fun. I’ll make sure Silas survives.”

EZRA

“Ade’s going to go check on him,” I updated Cole and Abel as I hung up my phone.

We were about to get totally unplugged, and I couldn’t remember the last time we’d done that together. It may have been on that old camping trip. It was a damn shame Silas couldn’t come, but there was no way we’d be able to drag his 250-pound body back to the car if he passed out.

I was strong, but I wasn’t that strong.

“Ade, huh?” Abel quipped. “Seems like you two have gotten nice and close with our session guitarist in the past week. So close, you could practically be inside her.”

Cole and I shared a look before turning to Abel.

“You jealous?” Cole asked, his voice taking on an edge.

Fuck. We weren’t supposed to be talking about this with anyone. We had promised Adeline. I had to divert the conversation before Abel managed to rile up Cole even more and get him to accidentally spill everything.

“Please, if I wanted some metalhead pussy, I’d be eating it for breakfast every day,” Abel sneered.

“That’s enough,” I snapped, leveling him and Cole with a look that said this needed to end now. If this was going to be how we started our day, there’d be no chance of a productive conversation later on.

“Grab your gear, and let’s get going.”

We had a two-hour hike and a one-hour canoe trip before we’d make it to the campground.

“I don’t like the look of those clouds,” Abel muttered when we stopped for a quick break about an hour in. He was sweating through his quick dry T-shirt after lugging the big canoe on his back together with Cole.

I wasn’t looking forward to switching in.

“When I checked the forecast, it said cloudy for today with a chance of rain tomorrow,” I reassured him.

“I wish we’d brought a guitar or something,” he added. “The fuck we’re gonna do all night?”

“I dunno, talk?” Cole piped in with an irritated voice. “Catch up? You know, that thing we haven’t done properly in ages?”

Abel adjusted the straps of his pack and gave Cole a dismissive look.

“Fine. We can have one last hurrah.”

I let out a long breath and stepped toward the canoe. “It will be good to talk away from the studio.” A few moments later, the wooden seat was pressed against my shoulders, and we were on our way once again.

Abel flipped the canoe before we even had a chance to get in.

“Dude,” Cole said between gasping laughter, “you look like a poor man’s Aquaman.”

Abel was dripping wet, his hair hanging down in a stringy curtain around his head. Thankfully, he had taken off his backpack before attempting to climb in.

“How the hell did it flip?” he yelled at us from the water, shaking a fist in the air.

I laughed with Cole, and soon Abel joined us, his laugh a little hoarse.

The good mood continued for the rest of the ride, and by the time we had built a fire and settled in for the sunset, I was ready to broach the subject.

“How do you think the recording’s been going so far?” I asked, sipping on my beer.

Abel swirled the liquid in his bottle, his eyes fixed on the growing fire.

“Fine. We’re making good progress.”

“It’s been...fun, hasn’t it?” Cole piped in, giving me a knowing look.

“Sure.” Abel shrugged. A moment later, he turned and squinted at us. “I think you’ve been having a good dose of extracurricular fun as well.”

I ignored the insinuation. “We’ll be finished on schedule, and I’ve started to think about what’s next. Have you?”

Abel’s tongue skirted across his teeth. “I’m staying in River Valley for a while.”

“Doing what?” Cole pressed. I couldn’t blame him. Abel wasn’t exactly helping the conversation flow.

“Starting a fucking family,” he snapped. “Jesus. I don’t know. Trying to figure shit out, I guess.”

I scrubbed at my chin. We had to stop beating around the bush.

“Abel, I think we should give Bleeding Moonlight another chance. Hear me out,” I rushed to say, seeing the flash of anger across his face. “This

recording has been going so well. The material sounds as good as we could ever hope for. And I'm having fun being back in the studio together. Cole agrees, and so does Silas. It feels like we're giving up on something that's still working so well. Why?"

Abel sucked on his beer and then put it down on the ground beside him. "We had an agreement." His voice was too neutral.

"I know. But that was then, and this is now. When Charlie died, we had no idea what we could still do together. Now we do. If we can record this album without him, why can't we write a new one a year from now? Why can't we go on tour?"

"What changed for you?" the singer snapped. "We were on the same page about the band for a long time. You were ready to walk away."

I held his gaze. If I expected him to open up, it was about time I did the same thing. "I wanted to walk away because I felt guilty for leaving Charlie to fend for himself. He was toxic, and I thought I was doing the right thing by setting firmer boundaries, when in reality, I should have tried harder to help. When he died and we found out about the drug use, I felt so worthless. I didn't think I deserved to keep making music without him."

Abel watched me, his face not betraying his thoughts. If he thought I was a piece of shit, I wouldn't blame him. I could work on forgiving myself, but I couldn't demand forgiveness from him.

"You've always shouldered responsibility for us," he finally said. "But his death wasn't your fault."

I bit on my bottom lip, relief and sadness surging through me at the same time. "I appreciate you saying that. It means a lot. And now you know why I was on board initially with breaking up the band, but after talking to Cole and Silas, and having this experience working together without Charlie..."

"You think we can still have a future together," Abel completed my thought.

"I know it's hard, dude," Cole jumped in. "We all miss him. I feel his absence in that studio every single day. But it still works. We still work."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about how things would be between us if we ended up staying together. Could we work this well when Adeline was no longer with us? When her enthusiasm and passion wasn't there to awaken the same in us?

I had no sure answer, but I wasn't ready to retire just yet. Music, after all, wasn't a choice for any of us. It was our lifeblood, and without it, I wasn't

sure who any of us would be.

“Working together with Adeline reminded me why we do this,” I said. “We’ve got art that we need to share with the world. We’re not asking for forever, Abel. We can take it a year, a month, a week at a time.”

Abel cracked his neck. His gaze was fixed on the flames, but I thought he heard me.

Silence didn’t exist this far out in the wild. The forest was alive with sounds—grasshoppers, the rustle of branches, and the sound of the river rushing nearby. We sat there for a few long minutes, just listening and thinking.

Finally, Abel cleared his throat. “Fine. I don’t know how well I’ll be able to write on my own, but we can give it a try.”

A smile spread across my face and a weight I didn’t know I had carried for the past few months lifted.

We were starting to find our way back.

ADELINE

THIRTY MINUTES AFTER EZRA CALLED, I was knocking on Silas's door after finally convincing the security guard downstairs to let me come up. I was lucky he remembered me from the time before, and when I showed him the warm soup I had with me, he seemed to understand I wasn't some obsessed fan.

Silas hadn't picked up when the guard had tried to buzz him to check my story, and my knocking didn't seem to fare any better.

"Silas! Open up! It's Adeline," I shouted at his door and then pressed my ear against it. I thought I could hear some shuffling inside.

My fist hit the wood again, and when the door was flung open, I found my fist hovering in front of the guitarist's chest.

He looked at me through squinty eyes, his face tinged with a pink glow.

"Adeline?" His voice was a deep rasp. "What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you don't die alone. Get inside."

I pushed him back into the apartment, my worry escalating when I felt how warm his chest was. Leading him to lie on the couch, I kneeled on the carpeted floor and took out all the things I had brought.

"Have you taken any medicine? You're running a fever."

Silas's three-seater couch was much too small for him, and his feet hung over the far side. He shook his head, letting his eyes drift close.

"No medicine. I'm fine."

He wore an adorable little pout as he tried to wave my hand away.

"You have to take this, Silas. We have an album to finish, remember? You need to get better by Monday."

This seemed to get through to him, and he propped his mouth open to accept the pill.

"Here, sit up for a second so that you can drink some water." I wrapped my arm around the bulk of his shoulders, helping him sit up.

"Who called you?" he asked.

"Ezra. Told me you weren't looking great this morning."

"Nosy bastard," he grumbled without any energy behind it.

I found a blanket stuffed into the far corner of the couch and spread it over him. "I brought some soup."

"Not hungry."

“Okay, but you’re going to have to eat something today. Get some rest. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

His long hair spilled over his shoulders as he gave me the tiniest nod before passing right out.

It was past eight when Silas woke up. While he slept, I managed to examine all of his guitars and pedals, even playing around with a few in the soundproof music room.

He seemed confused to see me before recognition spread over his face. “You’re still here.”

“I told you I’d stay.”

At that, he gave me a small smile. “Yeah, I guess you did.”

He ate his soup in silence while I made some tea. Given what had happened the last time I was at his place, I was glad this didn’t feel awkward.

“Your sister left today?” he asked when I handed him a cup and sat down on the coffee table across from him.

“Yeah. She texted me a little while back to let me know she arrived at her dorm,” I said, looking down at my steaming green tea.

“How do you feel?”

The loneliness I had managed to stave off for the past few hours nudged at me again.

“Honestly, not great. Not really because of Molly though. I’m happy she gets to go to college and have the experience I missed out on, but I dread going back to our house and seeing it empty. A big house like ours isn’t meant for one person. Or even two people...” I trailed off. The last time I’d felt truly at home there was before our parents died.

He nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.”

My gaze was curious. “You do?”

“I once bought a house for a girlfriend as a proposal gift.”

The casual way he delivered that bomb made my jaw drop. He studied me with an amused expression.

“Do tell,” I urged him.

He placed his tea down beside my thigh and folded his tattooed arm under his head like a pillow.

“My high school girlfriend. We were together for three years when Bleeding Moonlight finally started to take off. Our first album made me more money than I’d ever imagined. I was so in love with her.” He chuckled. “She was my first everything, and I was sure we were meant for each other, so I

used that paycheck to buy a house outright. While I waited to propose on her birthday, I imagined us and our brood of children running around the house.”

I sipped on my tea, enraptured by his tale.

“After a fancy dinner, I took her for a drive in the neighborhood before stopping in front of the house. She must have suspected something by then, because she kept saying that she was tired and we should be going home. I was, of course, too excited to pay much attention to her reluctance. So, I showed her the house, told her it’s ours, and got down on one knee right there on the porch.”

“Oh God.” I breathed out. “Then what?”

“She burst out in tears. And not the happy kind. Told me she wasn’t ready to commit, that she’d wanted to break up with me tonight but felt guilty about doing it in such a nice restaurant.”

My heart broke for Silas, even though he seemed long to have gotten over this incident.

“I’m sorry, that must have been awful at the time.”

He shrugged. “It sucked. I tried living in that house on my own for a while, but like you said, it felt too big and too empty for just me. I sold it and eventually got over the entire ordeal. It allowed me to learn something about myself. When I fall in love, I throw myself off the goddamn cliff with no parachute. I come on hard and fast, and that scares people off. Unfortunately, I still haven’t figured out how to change any of that.”

He thought that was the reason why things between us had ended up the way they did, that it was his fault. I could see it play out in his brown eyes as if they were a TV showing a tragedy. How could I let him think that when I knew it wasn’t true? It wasn’t his intensity that had scared me off. It was my own feelings and the possibility of getting hurt that had made me clam up.

Are you going to tell him all that and then admit you’re sleeping with two of his bandmates? How do you think that will make him feel?

I swallowed the things I wanted to say and placed my mug beside his own. He got up from the couch.

“Where are you going?” I asked, standing up in case I needed to convince him to lie back down.

“I’m moving to the bed,” he said gruffly as he walked toward his bedroom. “You should probably go home. You’ve spent enough time babysitting me.”

His dismissal hurt more than it should have. “Are you feeling better?”

“A bit.” Then, as if regretting the curtness of his words, he looked at me over his shoulder. “Thank you for coming today.”

I sat back down on the coffee table. “I don’t want to leave you here alone. What if you feel worse at night and need someone to take you to the hospital?”

He sighed. “I’d argue with you more, but I’m too tired. If you want to stay, I can take the couch.”

“Absolutely not,” I said firmly. There was no way he was going to play the gentleman while he was sick. “I’ll be just fine here. Could I borrow a shirt or something to sleep in? I didn’t bring any extra clothes.”

He waved me into his bedroom. “Just take whatever you want from the closet.”

The walls of his room were painted a rich forest green. A bay window with a built-in reading nook caught my eye, and judging by the messy throw pillows and the tall stack of books, Silas read there often.

Tearing my eyes away, I opened the dresser Silas had pointed to and grabbed the first shirt I saw. I felt like I was intruding on his sanctuary, so I rushed to leave once I had what I needed.

He grabbed my elbow on my way out, and I noticed his skin was still too warm. “Sheets and stuff are in the closet to the right of the main door.”

“Thanks,” I whispered, all too aware of our proximity. The room smelled like him—black pepper and cloves and something unapologetically male.

His hand dropped away, and I scurried out of the room, closing the door behind me and leaning against it with a sigh.

Why did I think staying here was a good idea? Somehow, even the clean sheets I’d scavenged from the closet carried Silas’s scent, not to mention the enormous T-shirt that cascaded halfway down my thighs and had a little hole by the neck.

I twisted in my sheets, hot one minute and cold the next. For about thirty minutes, I worried I may have caught whatever bug he had, but sleep did eventually come to claim me. In my dreams, I held Silas’s hand as he walked me to a Victorian-style home and handed me a key. The house was empty except for an enormous, plush rug that felt pillowy under my back. As Silas fucked me on the rug, Cole and Ezra came in and stood watching by the door.

I gasped awake, my core spasming from an orgasm. Turning on my side, I bit the pillow, stifling a moan. I couldn’t believe it. I’d never come from a dream before.

“That sounded like a good time.”

I spit out the pillow and craned my neck. Silas was leaning against the kitchen island wearing only sweat pants. Steam rose above the coffee mug between his palms while he watched me have my little episode.

“Shit. Fuck.”

“I hope there was a lot of the latter and none of the former in your dream,” he said with an amused smile before taking a sip.

My face hit the pillow, and I let out an embarrassed groan. “Shut up. I can’t control my dreams.”

“Yeah. Neither can I,” he added, lifting his boulder-like shoulders and looking away.

“How are you feeling?” I whipped the covers off and walked towards him, doing my best to keep my eyes off his sculpted chest.

“Better.”

“Let me feel your head.”

He obliged, craning at his waist to lower toward me. His skin was a little clammy, but not nearly as hot as last night.

Glancing at the clock hanging on the wall above his shoulder, I saw it was nine am. I knew I should leave. He was recovering and didn’t need a sitter, but at the same time, there was nothing waiting for me at home. I had seven hours until I was due at the bar, and everything in me rebelled at the thought of spending those hours alone in my empty house.

Silas straightened up and cleared his throat, making me realize I’d been touching his forehead for far too long.

“Sorry.” I dropped my hand. “I should probably go.”

He placed his mug down on the kitchen island. “Only if you want to. I wouldn’t mind some company if you have nothing else to do.”

I stared at my bare feet. He seemed to be in a much better mood than last night, and I knew he wouldn’t invite me to hang out if he didn’t mean it.

The sudden realization that I was standing in front of him in only his T-shirt and a pair of underwear made me flush.

“Okay, I’ll stay.”

His eyes flickered down to my legs, and this simple action sent a thrill up my spine. He looked sinfully handsome in the morning, raw and undone from having just woken up. I hurried to grab my jeans off the couch and headed to get dressed in the bathroom.

When I came out, pants on this time, Silas was wearing a loose tank top

and was scrolling on his phone.

“I’m ordering breakfast. What do you feel like?”

“Seriously? I can make us breakfast.”

He raised a brow. “I have butter, an old banana, and a dozen different types of sauces in the fridge. You’d need to be Harry Potter to make something with that.”

I grimaced. “Okay. Fair point.”

“Plus, how can you say no to breakfast burritos from Poco Loco?”

I pretended to think for a second. “You’re right. I can’t. I have a soul.” Poco Loco had the best burritos in town, and I hadn’t had one in ages.

We managed to get through two episodes of *Modern Family* by the time the food arrived. I wolfed down my burrito and leaned back against the couch, letting out a satisfied moan.

“So how did your practice go on Thursday?”

My post-burrito euphoria disappeared in a matter of seconds.

“We didn’t have a practice,” I mumbled.

“Rescheduled again? Liam’s in-laws must be a piece of work.”

“Future in-laws,” I corrected. “No, we met up. Practicing just seemed pointless after we argued for a while and then decided to break up.”

Silas sat up straighter on the couch and turned to face me. “Wow. That sucks.”

“Yeah, that seems to be everyone’s reaction to the news.”

“But why?”

I sighed. “All the stuff I expected, to be honest. It’s getting harder for everyone to make the time, and Liam doesn’t want to try anymore. He said some crappy stuff to me, but I don’t think he meant it.”

“What did he say?” Silas asked, his expression hardening.

I tugged on my bottom lip with my teeth, trying to decide if I should tell him.

In the end, I decided I didn’t want to give Liam’s words more power by keeping them close to my chest.

“I told him how encouraging you guys have been toward me, and that you think *Through Azure Skies* has potential. Liam dismissed all that and said you were just being nice to me so that I would sleep with you.”

The tick in Silas’s brow was one of the most terrifying things I’ve ever seen. His face set into a firm frown, while his hazel eyes shone with something deadly.

“I know it’s bullshit,” I hurried to say.

“He’s a jealous prick,” Silas growled, “who sure as hell shouldn’t be taking out his own pathetic insecurities on you.”

Mason had said the same thing yesterday. “I don’t know. Maybe. But who cares at this point?”

“I care,” Silas said, his voice firm. Then the fury on his face broke. “Adeline. Is that what you thought when I tried to kiss you? That I was helping you and complimenting you only to—”

“No! No. That’s not what I thought at all.” I told him, my eyes wide. “I know you wouldn’t do something like that.”

His eyes flickered closed in relief. “What an idiotic thing for him to say. Why would we ask you to record with us if we didn’t really think you had talent?”

I splayed my hands out. “I know. Honestly, I’m over his comments. But fuck. I just wish all of this wasn’t happening at the same time Molly’s leaving. And I only have a week left with you guys...”

The sun shone through Silas’s drawn blinds, and bright lines were scattered across the carpet. His hand landed on my shoulder, his touch warm and comforting.

“What if we got more time?”

I looked up from the floor, surprised at his question. The guys were eager to head back to LA—I knew that much. “You don’t need to slow down on my behalf. I’m a big girl. I’ll figure my life out.”

Whether I liked it or not, I had to come to terms with being left alone in River Valley. Prolonging the inevitable was only going to make the eventual goodbyes more difficult.

“You should take a nap,” I said, changing the topic.

“I’m not tired.”

I stood up, suddenly feeling restless on the couch beside him.

“What do you want to do then?”

“Want to practice?”

His question put a smile on my face. “Always.”

We’d played through a diverse catalogue by the time I had to start getting ready to leave.

Too caught up in our music, I’d forgotten I wanted to go home to change before work. Silas found an old T-shirt of his somewhere in the depths of his closet that was only about three sizes too large.

“Damn, you got big since then, huh?” I commented.

He smirked, and the curve of his lips sent a flock of butterflies through my gut. “I started working out after the whole house fiasco and put on close to sixty pounds.”

I blatantly checked him out, for once not caring that he knew I was looking. He worked hard for that body, and I wanted him to know that I thought he looked good.

“You feeling better?” I asked, casting one final look around his place for any of my things.

“Yeah. Mostly thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do much.”

“You came back here.” His gaze was once again intense, all of his attention focused on me.

This time, I couldn’t stay silent. “Look, I want you to know something.” I took a step toward him. “I didn’t leave that time because you were too intense. Your intensity is... It’s refreshing. It’s real. I like that about you, Silas.”

There was no more than a foot between us. He watched me quietly, a question hanging in his silence.

I knew what he was asking.

Why wasn’t I willing to give this a chance?

The problem was I no longer knew the answer.

I drove to the bar with loud rock blasting in my car, trying not to think about how Silas’s hazel eyes had shone as I left, as if he were looking into a flame.

I served the regulars on autopilot, slinging drinks left and right, the frantic pace of Saturday night at the Crooked Stool somehow still not enough to rid me of the confusion churning in my gut.

When we had played together earlier today, it had felt like Silas had crawled into my soul and taken residency. Many times, I caught myself staring at the tattoos on his arms, the images taken from worlds and stories that weren’t our own. I wanted so badly to ask about them, but I felt like that was something I hadn’t earned. I didn’t deserve to know, not when I’d rejected him out of nothing but fear.

Courage. The word on my arm taunted me as I poured an amber ale from the keg.

Could I be brave enough to take what I wanted? I thought back to Cole’s

earlier words. *Room for more.* What if it really was up to me?

The rational part of my brain screamed inside my head. This was not going to end well. We had a week left, and then we might never see each other again. I'd slept with two of his best friends.

I recited these reasons like a prayer, yet they gave me no relief. Is this what it felt like to watch a hurricane coming ashore? Like no matter what you did, some things were inevitable?

SILAS

It was well past one am when the incessant knocking forced me up from the couch. I had been in that weird state between being asleep and awake, when thoughts tended to trail away from coherence into a much fuzzier territory. Seeing Adeline at my door jolted me right back to wide-fucking-awake.

She looked at me with a devastating expression. She was crying, and the sight of her tears crushed my heart like it was a scrap piece of metal. I didn't think she'd realized she was crying, because her eyes widened when I reached to brush her tears away.

"I- I- I-" she stuttered, struggling to get out whatever she'd come here to say.

I acted on pure instinct and pulled her across the threshold into my chest. "Shh..."

"I slept with Ezra and Cole," she whispered into my shirt, her voice so weak I barely picked out the words.

This is what had gotten her into this state? Did she think I would freak out?

I pulled away gently, still holding on to her arms as I tried to meet her eyes. She lifted her gaze to my face inch by inch, probably afraid of what she'd see in my expression.

When at last she registered that I didn't look mad or surprised, she let out a pent-up breath and shook her head.

"You knew?" she asked, her voice breaking.

"I suspected." She sagged an inch in my arms, and I strengthened my hold on her.

She bit her lip, her eyes glistening once again. "I thought it would just be a mindless hookup," she said. "But it wasn't. It was so much more. And then I realized I turned away from you because I was afraid of exactly that. I was afraid of feeling too much, but who am I kidding?" She lifted her hands to place them on my chest. My balls tightened at the intimate contact.

"It's too late for that."

Her lips crashed with mine in a ruinous kiss, and the world tilted under my feet. I knew there would be no going back from this, and I was more than ready. I had walked her to the edge of the cliff, and instead of pulling back, she was suggesting we take a running start.

I slammed her back against the door, the hinges rattling in protest but summarily ignored. My forearms bracketed the sides of her head, boxing her in, so that the only thing she could see and sense was me.

Her fingers clutched my shirt like it was a lifeline, but that was a fucking lie. We were jumping off with no parachute.

I took a half step back to tear off my shirt, and her hands quickly found their spot on my chest again. She ran her index finger down the line between my pecs.

“You’re not too warm anymore,” she whispered, her eyes glued to my skin.

“I have a feeling that’s about to change,” I told her and closed the distance between us.

We were at war with our tongues, and when she let out a tiny groan into my mouth, it was like a bomb going off. I jerked away from her, my mind running into overdrive from wild, desperate need.

She flicked her eyes across my face and licked her lips in anticipation.

“I’m going to fuck you on the carpet until your knees are raw,” I growled.

If some part of me was still worried I’d scare her off, that part died a happy death when she pressed every inch of herself against me, signaling her agreement. This close to each other, she had to crane her neck to look at me, the stark difference in our sizes making me so very curious about all the ways we’d fit. When she curled her fingers through my beard and tugged on it, I grunted like a goddamn caveman and lifted her off the ground.

Her ass was firm under my palms, no doubt the product of countless hours at the gym, and I kneaded the taut flesh between my fingers as I carried her to the living room. My dick was pressed against her groin, and she rolled her hips, my sweatpants doing nothing to dampen the movement. I hissed at the contact, and she intensified her movements, clearly intent on making me drop her on the fucking floor.

I shoved the coffee table away so hard it crashed into the wall, magazines and remote controls sliding off in a flurry. Adeline tried to look at the damage, but I pulled one hand away from her ass, forcing her to clutch my shoulders even more tightly, and brought her face back to me.

“Your eyes. On me. The entire fucking time.”

She nodded, her face flushed. I sank onto the floor and let her slide off my knees, her ass banging lightly against the ground. I took her—my—shirt off only to discover she wasn’t wear a bra underneath. Her nipples were hard

and begging for attention. She sank onto her back, pliant under my touch, and arched until my mouth had found a nipple.

The whimpering sounds she made as I sucked and nibbled my way across her chest were fascinating. The contrast between her soft breasts and firm body was exquisite. I wanted to spend endless hours exploring all of her, committing every detail to memory.

Her hands found my shoulders, and she tried to push me lower.

“What do you want?” I growled, a hard bud still in my mouth.

She groaned and pushed harder. I didn’t move an inch.

“Words. Use them.”

She gave me an exasperated look. “I want you to eat me out.”

My hips crashed into hers with enough force to elicit a cry. “Gladly.”

I made fast work of her jeans, pulling them off with her underwear so she lay completely bare before me.

I took a moment to appreciate the fine lines of her body, the two lines that framed her abdominals, the curve of her waist, and the heaviness of her breasts. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen, and that realization hit me hard in the chest.

“Are you waiting for something in particular, or should I go ahead and get a snack?” she asked breathlessly and cocked a brow.

I growled, descending onto her. “I’ll give you a snack soon enough.”

Her pussy was already dripping on my carpet, and all I could think of is that I was never going to get it cleaned again. I licked her all the way from ass to clit, and she shuddered like she was being electrocuted from the contact. I dipped my tongue into her, fucking her with it and making her cry out. She fisted her hands in my hair, grinding my face into her pussy until she held my head in one place and crashed to oblivion right there in the middle of my living room floor.

“Fuck, Silas,” she moaned as she rode her high.

I wasn’t going to give her a second to recover. I shoved my sweatpants and boxer briefs down to my knees before plunging into her still-spasming pussy. I nearly came right fucking then. She moaned into my ear, pulling my face down to her neck, where I proceeded to lick and bite and suck on the sensitive skin until I was sure I’d leave a mark.

When I was fairly certain I wasn’t going to embarrass myself, I raised myself on one arm and began to move, building up my speed and loving the view of her breasts bouncing in time with my thrusts.

“Shit,” I suddenly pulled out, earning a disappointed mewl from her. “Condom.”

Adeline shook her head. “Are you clean?” she panted, trying to catch her breath.

“Yes.”

“Then get back inside me right this second.”

I knew the responsible thing to do would be to ask more questions, but I trusted her, and I couldn’t stand the thought of not being in her. Flipping her over, I entered her from behind, serious about delivering on my earlier promise to her. She fisted the carpet as we slammed into each other, my hands holding her in place by the waist.

When I felt my release inching closer, I gave her ass a hard slap, and she moaned in response.

“Touch yourself,” I commanded, watching as one of her hands disappeared between her legs.

The sight pushed me over the edge, and I came in her with a few final thrusts, my groans making music with the sounds coming out of her. She kept rubbing herself until I felt her spasm around my cock once more, the muscles of her writhing back a fucking work of art.

After a minute, I finally pulled out, and I felt a primal pleasure at seeing my cum drip out of her. She flipped over and collapsed on the carpet, her knees and elbows wearing an angry pink.

I crawled over her, placing a kiss on each of the pink marks. Laying down, I pulled her into my chest, suddenly overwhelmed with an emotion I couldn’t quite name.

“That was—” her voice was hoarse, “—incredible.”

I nudged at her chin and gave her a deep kiss. The word in my mind was *perfect*.

ADELINE

I WOKE up with something hard pressed against my behind. Silas's heavy arm was draped over my waist, keeping me firmly in place, while we spooned together on the carpet in his living room.

At some point, we had acquired a blanket and pillows, but my back still screamed in protest when I tried to get up from under Silas's arm.

He appeared to be a heavy sleeper, unbothered by my movements, and I took advantage of this opportunity to study his features. His hair fanned out across his pillow, and he looked so peaceful that I immediately wondered if that had anything to do with our earlier activities.

A shiver ran through me at the memory. This was insane. I had no idea what I was doing sleeping with three members of the band, but for once, I didn't want to spiral down into thinking of all the ways this could go wrong.

I padded over to the kitchen after pulling on my discarded shirt from last night and started to make coffee. When the smell wafted through the entire apartment, Silas finally awoke with a groan.

"Please tell me last night wasn't another one of those goddamn dreams," he mumbled, cracking his eyes open and taking me in.

Arousal crept up my thighs and settled between my legs as he very deliberately dragged his gaze up my body.

"Dreams have never made me this sore," I shot back, enjoying the satisfied smirk that appeared on his face.

He got up from the floor, still completely nude, and walked toward me, his cock already at half-mast. I gulped my coffee down, burning my throat in the process.

"Coffee?" I asked, my pulse speeding up.

He shook his head. "I'm craving something else this morning." His voice was still husky from sleep.

I didn't know what I'd expected from Silas, but the dominant way he'd claimed me last night had surprised me. It was different from my experiences with Cole and Ezra, which despite being intense, had been in many ways easy and fun.

Sex with Silas was like an extreme sport. It was exhilarating and full of adrenaline, leaving you drained and content in its wake. Thankfully, I'd had a few hours of sleep to recharge.

I curled my hand around his thick length, stroking him as he hoisted me up on the kitchen counter and pulled my panties off.

“I want to taste you,” I told him. I wasn’t sure how well he’d fit into my mouth, but I wanted to find out.

“Later,” he whispered into my ear as he pushed himself through my folds.

We moaned in unison as he buried himself as deep as he could. I fell onto the counter, my back muscles screaming at me for the continual abuse, and flung the half-filled coffee cup off the surface, the shattering sound only seeming to encourage Silas to thrust harder.

My release was building quickly, and I gripped the edges of the counter, trying to steady myself as Silas kept up his punishing pace. His hand drifted across my hip bone, and then his thumb was drawing circles around the hard bundle of nerves between my legs, making me see stars.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful when you’re splayed in front of me like this,” he growled, pressing his thumb a little harder.

I moaned in response, feeling a familiar tightness coil inside. I was so close, so fucking close to shattering.

“Come on my cock, baby. Let me see you fall apart.”

His words did me in. And my writhing, climaxing body must have had the same effect on him, because his pace grew frantic.

“Fucking hell, Adeline,” he bit out, his eyes closing as he shuddered his own release.

God, he was magnificent when he came.

He continued pumping into me for a few more moments before offering a hand and pulling me up into a tight embrace. My fingernails dug crescents into his shoulders as I struggled to catch my breath, my body still humming with the aftermath of the orgasm.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to let you leave after this,” he said.

I opened my mouth to say something witty, but a firm knock broke on the door.

We froze, staring at each other. My brows shot up in a silent question, and he shook his head. He wasn’t expecting anyone.

“Dude! It’s past twelve. Wake the fuck up!” Cole’s voice sounded. “We brought lunch for your sick ass.”

His face spelled confusion as clearly as mine did panic. He pulled out with a hiss, and I pushed past him, looking for my clothes, picking up my panties from the ground and frantically trying to figure out how we were

going to get out of this.

“One sec!” Silas yelled before grabbing me by the shoulders. “Adeline, calm down,” he whispered. “It’s going to be fine. Just go get dressed. I’ll clean up here.”

I nodded, rushed to the bathroom, and locked the door. My reflection confirmed my fears. Everything about me screamed that I’ve just been thoroughly fucked.

There was no time to shower, so I quickly wiped the wetness off my inner thigh and got dressed. My hair was hopeless, but I washed my face and rinsed my mouth with the Listerine I found beneath the sink.

When I heard the guys come in, I took one last look in the mirror, took a deep breath, and went back into the living room.

Cole’s and Ezra’s chatter stopped when they saw me. Abel wasn’t with them, which lessened my stress somewhat, and I mustered a casual smile.

“Hey! Welcome back. How was your trip?”

Ezra shot Silas a look, but the tall guitarist didn’t react in any discernible way.

Cole came over and gave me a warm hug. “Great, until the forecast changed, and we had to leave a day early to avoid getting rained on in the middle of nowhere,” he said. Taking a step back, he scanned my appearance, as if trying to work something out.

Actually, I knew exactly what he was trying to work out. I just hoped he wouldn’t.

“Seems like you took my request to make sure Silas would be okay very seriously,” Ezra said with a teasing grin.

I flushed. “Yeah, I kept him company when I wasn’t at the bar.”

“Uh-huh.” Ezra gave me a pointed look before turning away and pulling out wrapped breakfast sandwiches from a big paper bag. “Want lunch? I got extras since Silas eats like an elephant.”

I’d never felt more awkward in my entire life. They both suspected what had happened, and that, rather than Silas, was the elephant in the room.

I shot Silas a desperate look, and he returned it with a barely perceptible shrug. He was leaving it up to me to decide if we wanted to lay it all out in the open.

As we dug into our sandwiches, I stole nervous looks at Ezra and Cole, searching for signs of resentment. I didn’t find any. They kept their faces mostly neutral, sending amused looks in Silas’s direction and in mine, as if

waiting for us to break. Maybe they really didn't mind sharing me. After all, Silas knew I'd been with his friends, and he didn't have a problem with it. Wouldn't it be easier to lay it all out in the open right now?

No. I wasn't ready to face this head-on. The thought of having that conversation made me clam up. And anyway, what was there to discuss if they were leaving in just one week?

"So tell us more about the trip," I prompted, attempting to end the silence that was starting to feel much too loaded. I was eager to know if they'd been able to convince Abel to keep going with the band, but I didn't feel comfortable asking that outright.

"Abel fell out of the canoe at one point," Cole said immediately. "Easily my favorite part."

He told us a few other funny incidents from the trip, including when Ezra's sleeping bag almost caught on fire, and when Cole thought that a bunny rustling in the bushes was a wolf.

After we stopped laughing, Ezra took on a more serious tone. "It was good to get away from the town," he admitted. "I think being here for so long has been hard for Abel. There are too many places that remind him of our visits with Charlie."

His words were like a knife to the gut. Did I need any more confirmation that they would be out of here as soon as the recording was done? Suddenly, I was no longer hungry.

I stood up to throw my half-eaten sandwich into the garbage. "I'm glad you had a good time. I should head home and get some chores done before my shift starts. See you on Monday?"

Ezra turned in his chair to look at me. "Hey, how did your band's practice go?"

If there was one thing I didn't feel like doing, it was replaying that sad tale all over again.

"Silas can bring you up to speed," I said, casting the guitarist a preemptively grateful look. He nodded in response, an unspoken promise in his eyes.

Ezra's forehead creased, but I was already clutching my bag and walking toward the door.

"See you Monday, Adeline!" Cole yelled, and I raised my hand in a wave without looking back.

SILAS

“Spill it,” Cole demanded as soon as Adeline was out the door.

I gave him a blank look. I wasn’t going to tell them what had happened between Adeline and I when she’d just held back from saying anything.

That’s not to say I thought her decision was the right one.

“It’s not like we can’t put together what happened here this weekend, but a confirmation would be nice,” Ezra added.

“Well, you’re not getting one,” I retorted. They’d held their tongues pretty damn well about sleeping with her, so why the hell would I play it differently? I stood up from the kitchen stool and collapsed on the couch. Damn, it smelled like Adeline.

Cole let out a long breath. “Okay, we’ll work on our assumptions then.”

“Hold on,” Ezra butt in. “What happened with Through Azure Skies?”

I told them what had gone down on Thursday, and by the end of my retelling, they both wore thoughtful expressions. I could guess what they were thinking.

“How did the talk go with Abel?” Before leaving for the trip, they had told me all about their plans to convince him to stay together after we were done with the album. I was onboard with that plan as quick as lightning and was pissed that I couldn’t be there when they spoke to him.

That is, before Adeline had come by to play nurse.

“We got him to agree to consider it. I think we really have a chance,” Cole said with a hopeful expression.

This was incredible news. Everything was slowly coming together in my head. I gave Cole a hard look. “We should ask Adeline to join Bleeding Moonlight.”

Cole’s face broke out into an enthusiastic smile. “Fuck yes.”

“Do you think she’s ready?” Ezra asked.

I scratched my beard at his question. “In terms of skill or mentality?”

“Mentality, of course,” the redhead clarified. “We all know she’s got what it takes in terms of skill.”

It was a hard question to answer. Adeline still didn’t strike me as a risk-taker, but then again, this weekend had showed she could go out on a limb when she wanted to.

“She’s afraid of believing in herself,” I mused.

“Question is why? And can we change that?” Cole added.

“If we’re right about the events of this weekend, we’re getting through to her,” Ezra said, looking for any reaction on my face, which of course he didn’t get. “Let me guess, she didn’t want to tell us about you two because she’s worried about our reaction. I thought you hinted to her that we’d be fine with it, Cole?”

“I did. But you’ve got to admit, this is an unusual arrangement. We’ve all had more time to come to terms with it,” Cole added.

Ezra sighed. “Who would have thought it’d feel so fucking right.”

Even though I was keeping my mouth shut, I couldn’t help but agree with Ezra in my head. My initial hesitations had all but disappeared by now. Somehow, all of us being with her felt organic. Natural.

And what about Abel? a voice cautioned inside my head.

If she got through to that salty motherfucker, it would be a miracle.

“Part of getting her to agree will be making sure she’s comfortable with this whole thing,” Cole said, making a circle with his arms to emphasize he was talking about our relationship.

“I agree.” Ezra stood up to pace the room. “There’s also Abel. He seemed a lot better this weekend, but who knows if he’ll be back in one of his moods now that we’re back.”

“He told me he wrote a song with Adeline,” I offered, remembering what the singer had told me before they left.

“Whoa,” Cole exclaimed as Ezra stopped his pacing. “That’s huge. If that’s not a sure sign she’s perfect for us, I don’t know what is.”

“It’s funny, because between all of us, I think she and Abel are the most similar.”

Ezra and Cole waited for me to continue.

“They both want something so badly they’d rather give up instead of risk failing. Adeline wants to be a career musician, but instead, she feeds that intense desire with crumbs, and it can’t do anything but start to eat her from the inside. Abel wants Bleeding Moonlight to be successful, but he’s terrified we won’t be able to without Charlie, so he wants to break up.”

We all pondered that for a minute.

“I think you nailed it on the head,” Ezra said after a while. “The crazy thing is that they can each be the solution to the other’s problem.”

“Hmm,” I nodded. “We need to talk to Abel about asking Adeline to join the band before we hint at anything to her, but in the meantime, I was

thinking we do something to cheer her up.”

Cole sat up straight, his eyes shining with excitement. “I know the perfect thing. I just got four tickets to a Mastery concert on Thursday. I can call my contact for a fifth, and we can all go together with Adeline. It’s in Philadelphia, so we could record during the day and leave after six for the drive.”

I knew Adeline liked Mastery because we had played one of their songs earlier. I grinned at Cole, “I think this is going to be a ton of fun.”

Abel opened the door with a scowl on his face. Obviously, his improved mood hadn’t extended past the camping trip.

“You’re not sick anymore,” he concluded after giving me a once-over.

“I had a good nurse,” I responded gruffly.

“Hmm, Adeline to the rescue once again.” His voice was laced with sarcasm I really did not appreciate.

“We have something to discuss, sunshine,” Cole said, pushing Abel aside and walking into the house.

We crowded around his kitchen island, waiting for Ezra to make our case. He was always best equipped to get through to Abel.

“Her band broke up this week,” he started. “We’re almost done with the album and I think we can all agree that she knocked it out of the park. We need a guitarist, and we’ve got a brilliant one. We all think we should ask her to join the band.”

Abel didn’t react immediately, which only set me on my guard. He zeroed in on me.

“What happened to her being a lead guitarist? You don’t want to give her a chance to find a band where she’ll be the star of the show?”

I shrugged, the answer coming to me easily. “She’ll play whatever parts she wants to play. We’ve worked together long enough for me to know there won’t be any issues with that.”

“You’re all fucking her, aren’t you?”

It was like he’d pulled a string and made us stand up straighter with that question. “This isn’t about that,” I said.

“Like hell it’s not. What happens when she grows bored with you or vice

versa? Or when you all start fighting over her? How fucking great is that going to be for the band?”

Seeing Cole’s face morph into a furious smirk made Abel take a step back.

“If you’d give her a chance instead of sulking about everything in your goddamn life, you would know how idiotic that question is.”

“This thing between us is not a fling,” Ezra stepped in, keeping his tone carefully cool. “It’s real. It doesn’t make sense from the outside, Abel, but once you’re in it, it’s the *only* thing that makes sense.”

He glared at Ezra, but didn’t say anything back.

“So?” Cole prodded. “Do you want her to fucking audition or something?”

“No,” Abel growled. “I know she’s good. It’s not her skills I’m worried about. It’s the whole band dynamic.”

“Look—” I let out a long breath, “—without her here, there won’t be a band dynamic, because there probably won’t be a band. If we start auditions, you’re going to compare everyone to Charlie and find something wrong with them. You’re still doing that to Adeline, even though she’s been playing with us for three weeks and has more than proven herself. There’s no downside to this, only a potential upside.”

“And honestly, what the hell is wrong with the dynamic?” Cole interjected. “We gel like fucking peanut butter and jelly. You could be part of the happy sandwich if you’d only give her a chance.”

Abel rolled his eyes.

“You wrote a song with her,” I reminded him. “You can’t tell me that didn’t mean anything to you.”

That struck a nerve in him. He looked at his feet, hiding his face with his long blond hair, his hand gripping the counter. When his eyes met mine again, there was pain and longing in them. For Adeline? For Charlie? Both?

“Fine. Let’s ask her to join. She might still say no to us.”

I hadn’t noticed the tension in my shoulders until they sagged in relief at Abel’s words. We were all in.

Ezra smiled. “Okay. Let’s plan to do it the day of the concert, near the end of the week. In the days leading up to it, we’ll do everything we can to ensure she’ll say yes.”

ADELINE

“MASTERY BACKSTAGE PASSES?” My voice was incredulous. “Is it Christmas already?”

“I mean...for Ezra and me, Christmas came just over a week ago, so looks like Santa’s all over the place this year,” Cole said with a grin on his beautiful face.

I blushed, immediately picking up on what he meant. His smile grew at my reaction, and he looked around the parking lot before pressing me up against the side of his car. It was Monday morning, and we were waiting for the rest of the band to arrive.

The chill of the morning disappeared as soon as his hard body pressed up against mine.

“Cole, they’ll be here any second,” I said even as I tangled my hands into his untamed hair and pulled him closer.

His lips were impossibly soft as they descended onto mine, but his hands were firm on my waist.

Last night, while bartending, I’d once again spent a good chunk of the time trying to process my feelings for all of them. I was in a physical relationship with three men. Up until this point in my life, I’d never been interested in more than one guy at a time. Most of my life, that number had been zero. And then there was Abel. Despite the hot and cold nature of our relationship, I was drawn to him, too.

“I’m starved from not seeing you this weekend,” Cole said between kisses, his throaty voice bringing me back into the present moment. “It will be very hard to concentrate during practice.” He ground himself into me to emphasize his point.

My earlier thoughts scrambled like fireflies. “Tonight?” I panted.

“It’s a plan.”

The distant sound of a car approaching made him take a step back, his lips beautifully flushed.

“Cole, did you show up early just so you could take all the credit for the surprise?” Ezra chastised once he got out and took in the passes sitting on the hood of Cole’s car.

“Dude, I got them through my hook up, so I sure as hell am taking all the credit.”

“Is everyone coming?” I asked.

“Think so,” Ezra said. “We wanted to do something fun together and thought you could use the distraction after the week you just had.”

My heart swelled at the thoughtfulness of their surprise. I hadn’t had someone take care of me like this since the death of my parents, and I’d forgotten how good it felt. I squeezed their hands, hiding the ball in my throat behind a grateful smile. “Thank you. It means a lot.” The idea of all of us going to a concert together filled me with giddy anticipation.

Ezra grinned and pulled me toward the building. “Silas and Abel are driving together. They should be here in a few minutes. We can wait for them inside.”

The fact that neither he nor Cole had pressed me for information on what happened between the guitarist and I didn’t go unnoticed. I was both relieved and...disappointed. A part of me craved to fess up, to stop holding on to secrets that served us little purpose, but I was still afraid to put the relationship between the four of us into words. What did they really think about it? What did it mean to them?

It couldn’t have meant much. The end had been spelled out from the beginning.

Ezra’s hand traveled to the small of my back as he led me inside. “By the way, what happened to your driver?” I asked, realizing I hadn’t seen the SUV with the bulky bodyguard in a while.

“He’ll be driving us to the concert on Thursday,” Cole said. “Our record label wanted us to keep him around when all the stuff with Charlie was going down, but things have been pretty calm, so they’ve laid off a bit.”

“Yeah, we got some pretty crazy letters when news of his death first got out,” Ezra added.

“What do you mean?”

“Upset fans blaming us for not seeing it coming or not doing more to help him. Of course, none of them know that Charlie hid his issues better than any buried treasure.”

“That’s awful.” To deal with a close friend dying while being under that kind of a spotlight was something I never wanted to experience.

We had four tracks left to record at the studio this week, which meant we had to stay focused. Still, the guys didn’t seem too stressed about getting it done. Even Abel was doing his job as producer in a calm and efficient way that stood in stark contrast to his attitude when we first started.

Despite being pleased with the fact that we'd likely get the recording done on schedule, the prospect of saying goodbye to the guys weighed on me heavily. I hadn't asked them what they planned on doing after this week, and every time I tried to, the words couldn't seem to get out.

Cole and Ezra coming home with me on Monday was a welcome distraction. Ezra backed me into Cole's hard chest and pushed his hands up my shirt before I had taken my boots off. His calloused hands molded around my breasts, the rough skin creating delicious friction against my already puckered nipples. Their bodies enveloped me, firm and eager, grinding against all the right places and making me moan.

My head dropped back, landing on Cole's chest. "Even a few days away from you is too long," he murmured against my hair before pushing it to one side and baring my neck. His hot breath skated over it, his lips barely touching the pulsing vein. "Did you think about us while we were gone?"

Shivers erupted down my spine. "Yes." I did think of them, even when I was with Silas. Even when the guitarist's thick cock had been deep inside my cunt. It was like all four of them were braided together and pulling the strings apart only created a tighter knot. I couldn't separate the desire. God knows, I'd tried. I didn't want just one of them. I wanted all of them. Even Abel, though I knew nothing could happen with him, not when our remaining days together were racing at a break-neck speed to zero. I couldn't forget how his eyes had shone when he'd said I had power over them. I couldn't forget how my heart had pounded when I'd thought we were about to share a kiss.

We stumbled into my bedroom, tearing each other's clothes off with desperate haste. "What did you imagine us doing to you?" Ezra asked, falling back onto my bed and pulling me down to straddle him. His fingers landed at the nape of my neck, slid into my hair, and tugged.

"I imagined your head between my legs. I imagined you thrusting into my mouth. I imagined both of you inside of me again."

Cole made a strangled sound that sent a jolt of pleasure straight down to my core. He was kneeling behind me, on the bed between Ezra's legs, and his hands landed on my ass, prying the flesh apart. I couldn't turn to look at him, Ezra's hand held my head in place, and I felt a pang of shame at the thought of him examining me *there* so carefully.

"What else?" Ezra prompted, as if he knew where my mind was going and wanted to bring me back into the moment.

I swallowed, forcing the shame down. "I imagined you losing control. I

imagined your grunts and groans and moans. I imagined coming apart on your tongues until I forgot how to form words.”

“Did you imagine my tongue here?” Cole rasped and licked over the hole he’d been studying.

I gasped as the feathery sensation went straight to my clit. “I promise I will next time.”

He laughed, the vibration of his tongue adding to the pleasure starting to build and making me whimper. Ezra put pressure on the back of my head, lowering my mouth to his. I kissed the drummer, pushing past his lips and tasting his need with the frantic swipes of my tongue.

Frantic. That’s what we were. I wondered if they had thought about our impending separation as much as I had, and if a part of them was already saying goodbye. How many more nights like this would we have? What if this was our last?

Cole pulled away, placed his thumb over my clit, and pushed a finger up my ass. My thoughts were wiped blank, replaced by battling currents of pain and pleasure. “Fuck,” I growled against Ezra’s mouth.

“He’s getting you ready for me this time,” Ezra murmured.

“How thoughtful,” I whispered with a grin.

The drummer released my hair and scooted up on the bed until his cock pointed at my mouth. He propped himself up on his elbows, meeting my lustful gaze with his own. “I want to watch you take me in your mouth.” His abs flexed with anticipation as I licked the drop of pre-cum off his fat tip and lowered my mouth onto his cock.

He pumped into my mouth while Cole worked me into a breathless frenzy with his fingers. The orgasm started from a single point deep inside my core before expanding and consuming every part of me. I moaned as I came, and Ezra pulled me off him to kiss the sounds right out of my mouth.

They switched spots and positioned my body until I was sitting on top of Cole, his hard ridge pressed against the wetness between my legs. The sight of the handsome bassist beneath me made me forget to breathe. I took him in slowly, loving the drama playing out across his flushed face as he watched himself disappear inside of me. He gripped my breasts, squeezing the nipples hard enough to hurt just as Ezra nudged me from the back with his lubed-up tip.

I hinged at my hips, lowering myself onto Cole and pressing my breasts against his chest to give Ezra better access. The thought of being filled by

both of them at the same time never failed to elicit a frisson, no matter how many times we'd done it by now.

Ezra gripped the back of my neck and pushed in. We moaned in near unison, the friction of their cocks was impossibly perfect against every nerve ending inside of me.

"God, that's good." Ezra's voice was rough. "It's so tight."

I remembered to breathe. "Can you feel Cole through me?"

"Oh yeah," he groaned.

"Are you ready?" the bassist asked, his hand rubbing circles over my back.

"Yes." I clenched around them, and they both hissed.

"How are you so fucking perfect?" Cole asked, beginning to thrust beneath me as Ezra did the same above. "How can you feel so goddamn good?" Under the lust there was something broken in his voice.

Ezra's hand clamped down harder on my neck, pushing my cheek flush against Cole's chest.

"I don't know," I blubbered into the dark patch of hair covering his pecs. "I don't know."

We fucked until everything I imagined came true. By the time my second orgasm crested, I was a pile of soft muscle and vibrating limbs, incapable of speaking or thinking about anything other than the divine sensation of being pressed between the two of them.

Ezra followed right behind me, pulling out and coming on my lower back in hot spurts. When Cole met his release, he gripped my face between his hands, the gold flakes in his eyes glistening like the surface of a lake on a cool summer night.

"Where have you been all our lives?"

"Here," I answered simply, still descending from my high.

"The answer to everything," Ezra whispered, trailing his fingers down my spine. "Right here in our old home town."

I shut my eyes. It was still my home, but for them it was just a memory. A postcard they'd pulled out to look at for a while before they'd bury it back in the box.

Cole's fingers trailed my cheek. "Whenever we're together, I know everything will work out just fine."

How badly I wanted to believe his words. But I knew that a moment this perfect could be no more than a dream.

ABEL

Well, fuck. Somehow, I went from trying to keep Adeline away from the band to agreeing to ask her to join us.

If that wasn't some voodoo shit, I didn't know what was.

As much as I didn't want to admit it aloud, the bastards had a point. As we neared the last few days of working together on the record, it was obvious to any idiot that she helped bring the chaos that was our personalities together.

Even Kyle, my favorite sound engineer, was spewing praises. "You really have unbelievable chemistry. I've never seen a session musician integrate so smoothly with a band."

I know, asshole. I fucking know.

Her playing was impeccable. Somehow, over the past three and a half weeks, she had gotten even better than that first night at the Barnyard, and sometimes I got chills just listening to her play.

But they were all sleeping with her. That bothered me, and the problem was that I didn't know if I wanted to stop them or join them. It was easier to stay away when I knew I wouldn't be seeing her again in a week. But if she agreed to join us, how could I keep denying the attraction I felt?

She brought my muse out of its self-imposed coma. She was working fucking miracles, and as much as I hated it, a part of me was in awe of that as well.

On Tuesday, while she played, her tattoo peeked out of her sleeveless tank top, over and over again. It was a cheesy, basic, small-town-girl tattoo, but the word taunted me like a high school bully. How many times had she looked at that tattoo and found the courage she needed? How many times did I have to look at it for me to do the same?

As we were packing up to leave, I saw Ezra and Cole were eager to get out, so I pulled them aside.

"Stick around for a while longer."

That seemed to irritate Cole. "Dude, we kinda have a thing."

I didn't miss how his eyes flashed toward Adeline, and it riled me up. She looked gorgeous today in her tight black jeans and a gray tank top that emphasized the soft curves of her chest. If I had to guess, these two were planning on doing things to her I'd been dreaming about for weeks.

“Do you want her to agree or not?” I bit out. “I have an idea.”

Cole sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Fine. I’ll be right back.”

He ran after her, probably to tell her that their fuckfest would have to be postponed.

Silas was sitting on a chair and studying me with thoughtful eyes. “If I didn’t know you better, I would think you were jealous.”

I glared at him, refusing to acknowledge his assumption, even though it was true.

Cole strutted back in and raised a brow at me. “So?”

I walked over to the desk and pulled out a few sheets of notes. “Here’s the song we wrote together. I think it fits with the album and could slide right in between track six and seven. I was thinking we figure out your parts, rehearse it a few times, and play it for her.”

Ezra’s face lit up with a smile. “That’s brilliant. Show her what our original material with her could sound like.”

I nodded. “We play it for her on Thursday, then we pop the question.”

“Didn’t know you could be such a romantic,” Cole jabbed.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

The guys were impressed with what we had written. “This is different,” Ezra mused, his finger tapping on his bottom lip. “But I’m digging it a lot. I think this could inform our direction for the following album.”

We worked on the song for a few hours, figuring out the other instruments and making small adjustments to what was already written. Last time we had tried to do this during rehearsals, we’d been at each other’s throats within the hour. Now, we were united by a common goal—getting Adeline onboard—and that was enough to keep all of the egos and pain at bay.

It was close to eleven when we finally called it quits.

Ezra stayed behind while the other two left. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, leveling me with his steady gaze.

“Talk about what?”

“What’s been going on between her and us.”

I grit my teeth. “You’re sleeping with her. You can spare me the details. If I want to learn about the specifics of three guys nailing a girl, I’ve got a dozen of websites for that.”

His expression didn’t waver. “You said you were worried about the band dynamic. Talk to me.”

Clearly, Ezra was back to his old ways. I rolled my eyes, rubbing at my cheek. I knew he wouldn't let up until we had the conversation he wanted. "You're operating in an alternate reality. As far as she's concerned, after this week, she's never going to see you again. You may have managed to convince her to be with you in the short term, but an occasional orgy is a hell of a lot different than being seriously involved with three dudes at the same time. Three dudes that want to become her bandmates. If she decided she wants to join the band but walk away from your relationship, are you going to be ready to accept that?"

Ezra bit down on his lip. "Honestly? No. I don't think I could accept that. I'd hope she'll agree to at least give us a chance."

I narrowed my eyes. "A bit coercive, don't you think? Here, join our band and guarantee yourself a sparkling career, but only if you'll keep fucking us."

He shook his head. "Abel, it's not like that between us. It's not just sex. I want to be with her, and I think she wants to be with us."

But she didn't want to be with me. Even if Ezra was right, and she agreed to the band and to the relationship, where would that leave me?

"You have a point, though," he added. "It's always been her choice. If she says no to either of the things we're offering, I'll do everything in my power to get her the opportunities she deserves. She was born to be a musician, with or without us."

"That, I can agree with." A moment of silence passed, and I took a step toward the door, sensing the conversation was coming to an end.

"Abel," Ezra called out, making me pause. "What about you and her?"

I met his gaze. "Nothing. There's nothing."

From his expression, I could tell he didn't believe me, but what concerned me more was that I didn't, either.

ADELINE

On Wednesday, when Abel said Ezra and Cole had to stay behind to rerecord some parts from earlier tracks, Silas walked me to my car and insisted I come over to his place.

We dropped my car off at my house before driving together to his. We didn't make it out of his condo's garage for a long while.

"Thank God you have a big truck," I said between gasps, holding on to the handlebar near the window for leverage as I rode him on the reclined seat.

He smirked. "This is definitely the best use it's ever gotten."

The windows were fogged up by the time we were done, and we both laughed at how teenage this whole thing felt. In a weird way, I did feel younger when I was with the three of them. During moments like these, the things I constantly worried about disappeared for a little while, and I felt carefree.

Once inside his place, we ordered dinner, and I was finally ready to discuss what was happening between the four of us. We were alone for the first time since Ezra and Cole had barged in on us the morning after my confession to Silas. I still didn't fully understand how Cole had been so right in predicting Silas's calm reaction, but I was ready to find out.

"I'm sorry I ran away from that first kiss," I told him, leaning back into the couch. "I felt like such a bad person for hooking up with Ezra and Cole a little over a week later. I thought you'd hate me if you ever found out, even after Cole tried to hint that you wouldn't. I guess I just...found it hard to believe."

He scooted closer on the couch, wrapping his muscular arm over my shoulders and kissing the crown of my head. "I get it. You anticipated the most probable reaction. It's a good thing we're different from most other people."

"Have you done this before?" I asked even though I was afraid of learning the answer. Admitting my feelings for all of them to myself had been so difficult. Had I been making a big deal out of something that meant nothing to them?

"No," Silas said, and I was immediately relieved. "Never. I was ready to fight for you, but then Cole floated the idea of sharing, and I didn't hate it as much as I thought I would. We're all drawn to you. All of us are eager to

explore what this could be.”

“You planned this?” I asked in a tentative tone. What exactly had they envisioned?

“We talked about it.” He squeezed my shoulder. “There wasn’t much of a plan besides agreeing that you had to be the one to initiate. We didn’t want a repeat of what happened at my place that first day.”

I nodded and lifted my gaze to Silas. “Was...Abel part of the conversation?”

The guitarist ran a hand over his beard. “No. We didn’t think he was in the right state of mind to consider something like this. Plus, he was being a dick toward you.”

Because he was grieving the death of not only his friend, but his lover. Of course, Silas didn’t know that.

“We aren’t sure how he feels, to be honest,” Silas continued. “Or how you feel toward him.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I shook my head, feeling a harsh wave of sadness crashing over me. All the things that had happened over the past three and a half weeks were coming to a bittersweet end. “I’m glad I found the courage I needed so that we can enjoy these last few days. I’ll...” My throat was tight. “I’ll miss you when you’re gone. I’ll miss making music together.”

Silas’s expression changed. I thought he was holding something back, but then the doorbell rang, and he went to get our takeout.

“What happened to you, Adeline?” he asked me as we ate our dinner while sitting on the carpet in his living room.

“What do you mean?” I asked between bites.

“What made you stop believing you could make it as a musician? Someone doesn’t become a guitarist as good as you unless they pour years into their craft. A hobbyist could never put in the time required. At some point, you must have wanted something more from music. What changed that?”

I lowered my plate onto the coffee table, casting my eyes down. I knew it was going to sound stupid when I said the words out loud.

“Growing up, all I ever wanted was to study music in college. From as young as around ten or eleven, my plan was to go to Julliard. I thought that once I got in, I’d meet like-minded people, master my craft, and figure out a way to make music my career.”

Silas was completely focused on me as I spoke.

“I sent in my application and got invited for the audition. I was so nervous that day. It felt like my whole life was at stake. This was it. I had my biggest dream within reach, but even before I started playing, I could feel something was off. The judges were sitting in a half circle around the room, their faces so serious, and all I could hear was my pulse in my ears. My anxiety shot through the roof. When I started to play, it was like I was holding an alien artifact rather than my guitar. I knew I was screwing up, but I couldn’t do anything to stop it. And so, a few weeks later, the rejection letter came, and that was the end of it.”

The crushing disappointment I felt that day was a clear memory. I’d revisited that memory often, a masochistic habit I couldn’t seem to shake.

“I fell into a deep depression for a few months and didn’t touch my guitar until much later. When I finally picked it up, I decided I never wanted to go through that kind of experience again, so I carefully set up boundaries around how I would engage with music going forward. And that’s what got me here.”

I lifted a beer bottle to my lips and met Silas’s eyes.

His brows were pinched together. “I’m not saying this to minimize your feelings,” he said after a while. “I know how badly rejection can sting, even when it becomes a distant memory. But have you ever considered that your childhood understanding of how you could succeed as a musician was a little limited?”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“Many, if not most, successful artists skip the whole arts-school thing. Why did you anchor so much to that?”

“Well, in my mind, that was the only sure way for people to take me seriously. A degree from Julliard would give me legitimacy.”

Silas shrugged. “An institution can’t make you a real artist, Ade. It’s what’s inside of you that counts. It’s your attitude, your skill, your worldview, and your faith in yourself... Your ability and willingness to take risks.”

I flinched at the last part, earning a nod from Silas. “There it is. You’re afraid of taking a risk.”

“The stuff that you’re so good at, right?”

A corner of his lips ticked up. “I am good at that. It’s gotten me in a lot of trouble over the course of my life, but it’s also brought me a lot of joy. It gave me this band. It gave me you.”

My skin heated at his words.

“Maybe you’re right,” I admitted. “Maybe it was a mistake to put so much weight on getting into that school. But I did, and I can’t change the past or the effect it’s had on me.”

Silas shook his head, reaching for my hands across the table. “That’s where you’re wrong. It is never too late to change how you choose to respond to a setback. Your past doesn’t need to dictate your future. You’ve shown that to all of us over the past few weeks by agreeing to work on the record, and in the process, you made us realize that we still have a band even with Charlie gone.”

The hair on my arms stood up at his admission. “So you’re going to keep making music together?”

I watched his chest drop as he let out a heavy breath. “We’ll make a decision soon enough.”



I woke up in Silas’s bed. His chest was pressed against my back, its hard expanse making my insides coil before I had even opened my eyes. He made soft sounds as he slept, his breath caressing my neck.

I turned to face him, and he blinked open at the movement.

“Hi, beautiful.” His voice was laced with sleep.

I pulled my hand from under the sheet between us and brushed the hair away from his face. His arm snaked around my bare waist and pulled me closer.

The dark lines of his shoulder tattoo caught my attention, and I traced a path down his arm. Yesterday, I’d shared something with him that I didn’t talk about very often, so I met his eyes and finally asked the question that had been on my mind for weeks.

“Tell me about your tattoos.”

“Okay.” He gave me a soft kiss and pulled away to sit up on the bed.

The sheet pooled at his waist, revealing an impeccably sculpted torso that belonged on the cover of a magazine. I couldn’t resist dragging my nails down his pecs as I moved to straddle his thighs. He caught my hand and brought it to his mouth, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“You’re very distracting when you’re naked on top of me.”

I laughed and pulled at the corner of the sheet to cover myself, but he tore it out of my hands with a grin. “Shhh. Don’t wiggle too much, and I should be able to get through it. Then I’m eating your pretty little pussy for breakfast.”

I bit my lip, forcing myself to stay focused on my question despite his words pulling my mind toward considerably less-verbal activities.

He pinched a nipple before clearing his throat and looking down at his left arm. “I got this sleeve when I was twenty. I’ve always read a lot, mostly fantasy. Dragons were my favorite creatures in those books. Strong, dangerous, but also wise. They had this awesome power, greater than anything a human could ever possess, but they didn’t corrupt it with their ego. They lived for thousands of years, protecting secrets that could change the trajectory of the world around them, forever stable in the presence of chaos.”

I reached for the head of the first dragon, touching the green scales that parted to reveal bright-yellow eyes. The other two were painted blue and gold, their tails and bodies folding onto each other in what looked like a braid.

“Plus, they look cool,” Silas added with a smile. “When I was twenty, that was probably the most important thing, but over the years, whenever I feel beaten down by life, looking at them always gives me strength. I know that a dragon would stay resilient through any challenge thrown at him.”

He grabbed my knee before showing me his other arm. “There’s a lot of stuff here. Around my wrists and lower forearm, it’s a picture of the house I grew up in. My family lived out in the woods about a few hours from here when I was younger. My earliest memories are from there, and it’s always been a special place for me.

Twisting his arm a bit, he let go of my knee and pointed at a large depiction of a square-shaped gem in an intricate setting. “This is an amulet from one of my favorite fantasy books. It was a mystical object created at the dawn of time to hold the evil spirits at bay. When the amulet was broken, the world would be consumed by darkness. In the book, the hero’s goal is to get to the amulet before the villain so he can hide it where no one can ever find it again. I wanted to get it tattooed with just a thin crack through the middle, a reminder that the world as we know it is a gift we shouldn’t take for granted.”

My chest felt tight when he finished his explanations. Learning all of this about him felt as intimate as reading a person’s diary, and the fact that he

hadn't hesitated when I asked him about it touched me deeper than he could ever know. I felt connected to him. To all of them. What was I going to do when that connection was severed?

Silas grabbed my waist, his large hands covering it almost entirely, and flipped me on my back.

"I want to make love to you before we go," he whispered against my skin, trailing kisses down my abdomen, and I told myself not to read too deeply into his words. It was a figure of speech.

He spread my legs and dipped his tongue inside, tasting me and making appreciative sounds as I squirmed under his touch. As he worked me up to my release, I thought my body was like the amulet on his arm—holding something back and cracking under the pressure. When it broke, would it be darkness that was released or something else?

Minutes later, when I finally splintered on his bed, my eyes fell shut, and all I could see was light.



"We're going to do a quick rehearsal in the studio," Abel said on Thursday about an hour before we were due to leave for the concert. He turned to Kyle and told him he could leave for the day.

"What are we rehearsing?" I asked, a little confused. We were recording parts of the last song for the album, and I thought that if we kept going, we might be able to finish everything today. That would give us all of tomorrow to rerecord any parts on earlier tracks that Abel didn't like.

He ignored me, which struck me as strange. I had thought we were past that kind of thing.

Ezra shrugged when I raised a brow at him and walked inside the studio, leaving me with nothing else to do but follow.

Before I made it inside, Abel turned to me. "You don't need to join for this. Just listen in the control room."

His words stung, even though they shouldn't have. Maybe they had a song they didn't need another guitarist for. I pursed my lips and went to sit in Abel's chair on the other side of the glass while the guys gathered in a circle and adjusted their instruments.

After a few moments, Abel looked back at me and flashed a sign that

meant I should turn up the volume on my side. I quickly pushed my disappointment and confusion aside, curious to hear what they would play.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I heard.

It was the song we had written, but it was made ten times better with the addition of the other instruments. My heart was crawling up into my throat as I took in the sounds and the visual before me. The guys were shooting me excited glances as they played, watching for my reaction while I tried my hardest to keep it together.

Abel sang the whole song while looking at me, the words somehow made more powerful because of the unbound emotion in his voice. He wasn't holding anything back. I imagined the sea of fans who might one day hear this song played live at a concert, and I hoped that they would appreciate it as much as I did in this moment.

I've never given birth to a child, but I've often thought that songwriting was in many ways a metaphor for watching a child grow. It got expelled out of our minds and bodies in its most primitive form, then it took on a life of its own and changed in ways we could never have predicted initially. I listened to our song evolve under the influence of the other players and grow into something exquisite.

When the song ended, Abel waved me inside, still holding onto his mic. I walked through the door with shaky steps, my tears successfully contained, but my emotions still running high.

"What did you think?" Abel asked.

I opened my mouth a few times like a fish, unable to get the words out. "It was incredible. I can't believe how good it sounds."

Silas grabbed another guitar and handed it to me. "Play with us. I wrote a backing track I want to try, so you play the melody."

I looked around to see the encouraging smiles on Ezra's and Cole's faces, and I nodded. "Okay."

My hands were clammy as I grabbed the guitar from Silas. The guys moved to make space for me in the circle until I fit right in.

We began to play, the melody unravelling from my fingers into the room. Even though this was my first time playing this song with all of them, we sounded just right, as if we'd practiced it for weeks. I couldn't believe how natural this felt, and something similar to my awe played out across all of their faces. That feeling of being infinite, of being part of something larger than myself, swept through me with enough force to make me stumble.

We finished and let a quiet moment linger for a little while.

“Adeline, we have something to ask you,” Ezra said in a steady voice even as his eyes danced with excitement.

“What is it?” I asked, raising my brows.

“We want you to join the band.”

I froze, his words slicing through my euphoria.

“What?” Everything around me began to spin. “I could ne—”

“Before you say no, hear us out,” Cole insisted. “We need a guitarist, and you’ve more than proven yourself over the past few weeks. You wrote this incredible song with Abel, which captured our sound perfectly while at the same time pushing us forward. You can’t tell me playing it together just now didn’t feel like magic.”

I shook my head, not to refute anything he was saying, but rather to show my disagreement with the conclusion they had settled on as a result.

“More importantly,” Silas sounded from my left, “this is what you’ve always dreamed about. This is your chance to push past your fear and pursue your calling as a musician.”

What they were saying was insane, and I looked at Abel for backup. There was no way he’d agree to this.

His eyes were softer than I’d ever seen them before. “I agree with everything they’ve said. I think we can be amazing together.”

The way he said that last sentence made my heart skip a beat. There was a waterfall of feelings contained in those few words, engulfing me and making my head pound. *Together*. He wasn’t just talking about me joining the band, was he? Did he know about what had been going on behind the scenes?

“Look, this is impossible,” I muttered, panic creeping up my neck like a dozen sharp vines. “I thought you didn’t even know if you wanted to keep going after this recording the album.”

“For a while, we didn’t,” Ezra said. “But after working together—after working with you—we realized we wanted to give this another chance. You helped us see that there is still a band here. That we can pick up the pieces and glue them into something even better than before.”

My laugh was an empty huff of air. Inside my head, alarms rang. *Danger! Move away! High-voltage area!*

But as I looked at their resolute and hopeful faces, I knew I couldn’t just dismiss their request outright. I owed them more than that. “I need some time to think about it.”

“Of course,” Cole responded. “Take as much time as you need.”
I nodded and walked out the room, feeling their eyes on my back.

ADELINE

WE GOT INTO THE SUV, Abel and I in the back row, and began the drive to the venue while I tried to come to terms with what they had asked of me. I was glad they'd decided not to break up, and I was even more glad that I had helped them make that decision, but asking me to join the band was madness.

I couldn't just leave my life behind. I couldn't work with four people when I was sleeping with three of them. Abel must know—they had to have told him. How could this possibly work? None of it felt real.

Abel, probably sensing my unease, reached over and squeezed my hand. This action from the moody singer only added to my bewilderment. Who was this guy, and what had happened to the cold asshole who couldn't spare me more than a few words only a few weeks ago?

Ezra plugged in his phone and started blasting In Flames loud enough to make it hard to think. Instead of fighting it, I surrendered to the music. My brain needed to be wiped clean if I wanted to enjoy the show I had been so excited about.

"You ready to meet the guys from Mastery, Ade?" Cole called out over the music.

"As ready as I'm ever going to be." In the midst of all the craziness, I had nearly forgotten I was about to meet the members of one of my favorite bands. My life was a surreal reality TV show.

The rest of the drive over passed quickly, and soon we were weaving our way through the back parking lot to the venue. A pair of security guards checked our backstage passes before leading us down a long narrow hallway.

Silas tugged on my hand. "Let me know if you want to talk," he whispered in my ear. "I know it's a lot to process."

I shot him a nervous look. "Does Abel know?" There was no need to clarify what I meant.

"Yeah. He figured it out himself, but we didn't bother denying it. I'm sorry. I know you were nervous about him finding out. But he needed to know the full picture. It wouldn't have been fair to hide it from him at this point."

Abel had agreed to the idea of me joining the band despite knowing the full story. Was I relieved? Maybe a little. But what did he think was going to happen if I agreed to their offer?

The security guards stopped in front of a door labeled “Green Room,” breaking my train of thought. I straightened my leather jacket as we waited for someone to open the door, suddenly wishing I had put on a flashier outfit than my torn-up gray jeans and a Mastery tank top. At least the jacket dressed it up a little. Abel stood in front of me wearing a simple light-gray T-shirt tight enough to reveal the muscular outline of his back. All of the guys looked incredible tonight, and nearly every female—and male—roadie did a double take as they rushed past us.

The door opened. Nick, the front man of Mastery, stood on the other side. His face broke out into a grin. “Hey, y’all. Come on in.”

He slapped the guys on their backs as they walked in, hard enough for everyone to flinch except for Silas, who stood about half a head taller than the front man.

They shared a tense look before bursting out laughing and pulling each other into a hug.

“You fucker,” Nick said as he pulled away. “You get bigger every time I see you. I swear, they fucked up when they cast Chris Hemsworth as Thor instead of you.”

Silas wore this satisfied grin under his beard that made me laugh, which earned me a look from Nick.

“And who’s this?” His gaze skated up and down my form. Normally, this kind of attention from the leading man of one of my favorite bands would delight me, but instead, I simply worried Silas would tear his head off his neck. The guitarist grabbed my arm and pulled me into his side, a move so obviously possessive that Nick’s lips turned up.

“This is Adeline, our session guitarist for the album we’re working on.”

I smiled at Nick and extended my hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m a big fan. Thanks so much for having us.”

He took my hand and winked. “Of course, anything for our friends from Bleeding Moonlight.” His gaze once again found Silas. “I was worried about how you’d fare after everything that happened, but I’m glad to see you’ve been able to continue making music.”

Silas nodded and tightened his hold on me.

The four other members of Mastery were scattered around the dressing room, chatting to Ezra, Abel, and Cole. Silas led me around to meet all of them, and my smile grew progressively bigger with each introduction. People always dream of meeting their idols, and there can be nothing worse than

finding out they're not what they seem. Fortunately, the guys from Mastery were all polite, funny, and seemed to take an interest in just how I'd ended up working with Bleeding Moonlight.

"If you're looking for work once you finish with these losers, let me know," Kev, Mastery's guitarist, told me after hearing the full story. "You must be great if they let you record with them. They're a bunch of perfectionists, something I'm sure you've realized by now."

Silas tensed beside me, so I picked my words with care. "Thank you. I'm not sure what I'll be working on afterward, but that's a very kind offer."

"Sure. Let me give you my number."

As he added himself as a contact on my phone, Silas leaned down to whisper in my ear. "Our offer is a little kinder, don't you think?"

"If by kinder you mean more likely to make my brain short-circuit, then yes." Their offer had more than one implication, and I was having a lot of trouble wrapping my head around it all.

Nick stood up. "The opening band is about to go on if you want to check them out. We're going to go warm up."



The opening act was a heavy metal band called Flies of Misery, and we watched from the side of the stage, away from the main crowd in the pit.

I'd never attended a big concert this way, and even though the intimate view of the performers was cool, I wanted to be in the middle of the action for Mastery's performance.

Ezra handed me a beer, meeting my gaze and reminding me of the dilemma I had blissfully forgotten for the past half hour.

I sucked on the bottle as if I could find some answers on its bottom.

Of course, what they were asking for was completely mental. Impossible. Insane.

But as I stood and watched another band bring their all to the stage, something scratched at my heart. This reality, this dream I'd once carried but had long given up on was suddenly within my reach. I only had to stretch my fingers and grab it.

What happens when you disappoint them? When they realize what a mistake they've made and kick you to the curb? You may have helped them to

pick up their pieces, but who's going to help you pick up yours?

I emptied out my lungs and looked down at the now-empty bottle.

“Another one?” Ezra offered.

“Sure,” I agreed, deciding it could only help. As he turned his back to me and walked to the cooler, I nibbled on my bottom lip.

I wanted to talk to Ezra about their offer and my unorthodox relationship with him, Cole, and Silas. They had to have discussed it. If I agreed to join the band, did they think we'd keep going or stop? Shouldn't we lay all of our cards on the table at this point? If any issues came up as a result, me joining the band could never work.

“We need to talk,” I told Ezra as he came back with my second beer. Face twisting in concern, he nodded and clasped my hand in his. We weaved through the small crowd of roadies until we were out of everyone's earshot. The other guys didn't seem to notice us leave. Their attention focused on the performance.

He watched me as I took a deep breath, working on finally spitting out what I should have told him days ago.

“I've been sleeping with Silas since last weekend. I know it's probably a moot point by now. Silas said all of you know what's been happening, but I still wanted to say it. Ezra, I've never done this before.” I squeezed his hand to emphasize my point. “I don't know if this relationship between us should be a pro or a con for me joining the band,” I admitted. “It feels so messy. So complicated. Thinking about it makes my head hurt, but I know that when I'm with the three of you, I feel... God, I can't even describe it.”

His expression softened, and he leaned in and wrapped his arms around me. I let my head fall to his chest.

“You feel alive.” His lips moved against my hair. “You feel like you can take anything that the world throws at you. You feel like you have people that will always have your back.”

I swallowed. “Yeah. Something like that.”

He pressed his forehead against mine. “None of us wanted to pressure you into a conversation you weren't ready to have.”

“I'm ready now. I have to be. How can I possibly join Bleeding Moonlight if we're not on the same page about all of this? I know we should probably all talk together, but I feel like I'd be going into a conversation like that blind. I have so many questions.”

“You can ask me anything,” he said, dragging his palm over my cheek.

Without a thought, I leaned into his touch.

“How can you not mind that I’m with all of you?”

He placed a soft kiss on my lips. “Adeline, we all have feelings for you, and so we understand how the others feel. You came into our lives and changed everything. We’ve never done this before, either, never even imagined that something like this could work. Maybe because it only works with you. We want this, whatever this is, exactly as it is.”

His words send a shiver down my spine. “I’m not like you,” I told him. “I can’t share you with other women. If we’re going to do this, I need to know I’m the only one.”

“There’s no one else,” he said, looking me directly in the eye. “For all of us, it’s only you.”

The relief I felt at his words was palpable. “What about the media? What if it gets out? And what about Abel? He must have strong feelings about it.”

“I don’t have all the answers,” Ezra confessed. “Frankly, I don’t think anyone does at this point. But I do have faith in our ability to figure it out together. And Abel... I think you should talk to him. I think that’s a story that’s still being written.” He cradled my face with his hands, his sky-blue eyes singing promises I could only hope he’d keep. “This isn’t something frivolous. You must know that by now. This is real. And I can’t speak for the rest, but I know exactly what I feel when I look at you. When we play music together. When we talk and I don’t hesitate to tell you things that normally choke in my throat.”

His words made my heart skip a beat.

“I’m in love with you, Adeline.” His fingers landed on my lips. “And you don’t need to say it back to me for it to be true. It is an indisputable fact, and I want you to know it.”

His confession traveled through my bloodstream and into my head like a strong glass of wine.

“Ezra...” I clasped his forearm, the solid feel of him beneath my hand anchoring me down. “I—”

Loud applause interrupted the moment, and we both turned to look at the stage. The opening band was done with their set. Their clothing drenched with sweat, yet their faces were ecstatic. They stopped to greet Cole, Silas, and Abel when they recognized who they were.

Knowing we were running out of time, I pulled on Ezra’s arm, drawing him back to me. “I’m still figuring this out, but...it’s real. It’s real for me,

too.”

His smile said that he understood, and it lingered on his face even as Cole jogged up to us.

“Want to go down to the pit for Mastery?” the bassist asked, his curls bouncing around his face.

“Yes,” I answered. My whole body was buzzing with adrenaline and tension as Abel and Silas appeared by Cole’s side. We rushed down the stairs leading into the pit, me surrounded by my men on all sides, their hands brushing against mine and sending sparks across my skin. We grinned at each other as we became enveloped by the packed crowd.

Abel clasped my hand in his, surprising me for the thousandth time this night. “Don’t get lost,” he said against my ear.

I was lost, though. And now I had to decide if I was ready to be found.

ABEL

I held her hand through the first few songs, unable to stop myself from watching how thoroughly she was enjoying the show.

Silas stood a few feet ahead of us, headbanging to the music. Ezra and Cole had disappeared, probably to somewhere in the mosh pit. It wasn't the smartest thing for them to get into, but they were big boys. They could take care of themselves. Unlike Adeline, whom I suddenly had a strong urge to protect. I knew she'd probably tell me that she didn't need any protection from me if I voiced my thoughts, but despite how hard she worked at the gym, I couldn't see her getting into a physical fight. She was too measured. Too deliberate. I was glad to play the part of bodyguard.

For a woman you haven't even had?

I pushed that thought out of my head. Standing room at a metal concert could get pretty intense, and I didn't want her to get knocked down, or even worse, groped by a drunk idiot. She was our potential future bandmate, and that meant I had to watch out for her.

Right. That's why you're doing this.

When some dude from behind bumped into her, she staggered forward, pulling on my hand, her eyes still glued to the stage. I whipped my head to scowl at him, and he raised his palms up in apology when he saw my expression. Physically, I wasn't enormous like Silas, but I was stronger than I looked, and I could be downright vicious if the occasion called for it.

I moved to stand right behind Adeline, putting my hands on her hips, and earned a quick glance from her. She tensed underneath my palms for a moment before relaxing again.

I'd never been this close to her before. Her voluminous hair reached to just below my chin. The scent of it was intoxicating and sent blood straight to my dick. I shifted my hips back so that she wouldn't accidentally find out exactly what she was doing to me.

This was bad. Very bad.

Despite the rest of my band's intimate relationship with her, it felt like the two of us were only starting to cross the fiery chasm that I had created and fed from the moment we met. A part of me still didn't know if I was ready to give my heart to someone so soon after Charlie.

You sure it's not too late for that?

Maybe it was. As I pushed away another guy who got too close to Adeline, it hit me that while the thought of another man's hands on her was infuriating, irrationally, that feeling didn't extend to the rest of my bandmates. Did that mean a part of me wanted to join in on whatever the hell they were doing?

Even if I did, I had no idea if Adeline would have me after I'd spent weeks acting like a dick.

Our fingers intertwined as she placed her hands on top of mine and pulled my arms tighter around her waist. When she turned her head to say something to me, her lips were a tantalizing few inches away from mine.

"I know what you're doing."

My face began to burn. How could she possibly know about the erection I was sporting?

"Thank you for keeping me safe. It's very sweet."

Oh. "Sure," I said, keeping my voice as casual as it could be while trying to make myself heard over the music.

She twisted slightly in my arms and leaned into my ear. "You've surprised me, you know?"

"How so?"

"With the fact that you're onboard with this idea. One day I'd love to know how the guys managed to convince you."

Her smile was teasing, but all I could do was stare at how her lashes fanned across her cheeks. I wanted to tell her that they didn't have to do much. That as soon as we'd written that song together, I'd known there was potential here.

"Maybe one day I'll tell you," I responded lamely. Her smile wavered for a moment, and then she turned away from me once again.

I instantly felt bad for my cold response and pulled her even closer, bridging whatever inches had remained between our bodies.

When she stiffened, I remembered why I had put that distance there in the first place.

My hard cock was pressed against her ass, and I knew there wasn't a chance she couldn't feel it. I was too mortified to move, and we stood like two stiff mannequins for a long moment.

Then, she pressed back.

I nearly choked on the saliva that was rapidly flooding my mouth. Why wasn't she pulling away?

Maybe she was scared. Maybe she thought I'd take back the offer if she didn't reciprocate. That idea made me feel nauseous, so I moved my hands to her hips with the intention of pushing her away, but before I could, she ground her ass against me.

Was she...into this?

The possibility of her being into me made me rock on my heels, as if the movement could right my world that just flipped upside down. I could resist my own budding feelings for her if I knew she was unlikely to reciprocate, but if she was starting to feel something for me, refusing her would be impossible. I was stronger than I looked, but I was not strong enough for that.

She was definitely grinding into me, the movement slow and deliberate, and I stifled a groan. She tipped her head back to rest on my chest, giving me a view of her exposed neck, and I didn't waste a second before pressing my lips to the smooth skin.

I didn't have a chance to ask myself what the fuck I was doing before her scent once again assaulted my senses. She smelled phenomenal, like flowers and honey, and I lapped at her like a starving man at a buffet. The music swallowed up her moans, but her neck vibrated with the sound against my lips. My balls tightened as I slowly dragged my right hand from her hips to graze the underside of her breast.

The song ended suddenly, and I broke away, my breaths fast and ragged. Adeline's chest moved with the same rapid pace as she spun around to face me, her face flushed and a little broken. "I'm going to get another beer. I'll bring you one back."

"Ade—" Before I could finish saying her name, she was moving, twisting through the crowd and disappearing from sight. I sighed, running a hand through my hair and looking around for the other guys, none of whom I could see. Mastery was switching some equipment, and the crowd was frothing all around me, waiting for the music to start again.

"You traitorous piece of shit."

The venomous words came accompanied by a hard jerk on my wrist. I whipped around to see a short woman I didn't recognize grabbing onto me, her fingernails biting into my skin.

"What the fuck?" I said, trying to shake her off. She wouldn't let go, and I had to figure out how to get her away from me without using force.

"Charlie dies, and you move on to some bitch less than two months later?"

Her words were so shocking that I froze. Judging by the gray hairs peeking through the grown-out roots of her jet-black hair, she must be in her forties or older. I could smell the alcohol on her breath, but she didn't seem disoriented or unsteady. Her band T-shirt was so worn that it took me a while to recognize it was one of ours.

She tugged on me with surprising force. "You fucking deaf?"

She must be a crazy fan, I concluded, but that didn't explain how she knew about Charlie and I. Everything between us had happened in private, away from any prying eyes.

"Let go of me," I demanded. "You don't know what you're talking about."

She scoffed. "Please. You think you could hide the truth from your fans? We know you were together. We think he was the one who wrote the majority of your songs, and you took credit for it. He gave you everything, and this is how you repay him? By replacing him before he's cold in his grave? It should have been you who died."

Something in my face made her reel back a few inches and finally release my wrist.

"Fuck you," I snapped, her words slithering over my skin like maggots.

"Charlie was an angel," she yelled, her spit flying into the air between us. "A pure soul. I think you drove him to his overdose. Maybe you'll do the same to the new bitch you were wrapped around."

I saw red. I couldn't stay here, because I knew I'd do something I'd regret for the rest of my life if I did. Charging past the woman, I elbowed my way through the crowd until the doors to the venue flung open before me and the late summer air began to dry the tears streaking from my eyes.

ADELINE

I spotted Silas at the end of the other bar and rushed toward him, gripping a beer in each palm.

His smile was silly as he wrapped an arm around my waist. “Is that one for me?”

Was he drunk? I moved one of my beers out of his reach. He’d had enough for now.

“It’s for Abel, but I can’t find him. I can see he hasn’t read my texts. I’m getting worried, can you help me look for him?”

Silas’s face dropped. “Shit. He’s probably off sulking somewhere.”

I felt guilty. Had our spontaneous flirting triggered this in him? He’d seemed totally fine when I’d made my escape. I’d needed a second to collect myself on a day that was proving to be the wildest one in my existence.

My heart had threatened to burst out of my ribcage when Abel came up behind me, in an attempt to make sure I didn’t get pushed around. His touch on my hips had set my skin on fire. I didn’t know if it was the two beers I’d had by that point or the adrenaline I’d been riding for hours, but when I’d felt him hard against me, I didn’t want to pull away. Rather, I’d wanted to crawl inside of him, or even better, have him inside of me.

There was something unbelievably thrilling in knowing I was able to turn him on. Our relationship had always been so complicated. I never knew exactly where we stood with each other. When Abel started kissing my neck, I’d wanted so badly to kiss him in earnest, but something had held me back. What if this wouldn’t last? What if once the magic of the day wore off, he’d revert to being cold once again? I’d needed to get some space and cool down, so I’d left him.

Silas grabbed the beers out of my hands and put them behind him on the bar. “Did something happen between you?”

I was too tired of keeping secrets to lie to him. “Maybe. Kind of. We had a moment but then I went to the bar and he was gone when I came back.”

Silas gave me a pitying look. “He’s a tough nut to crack. The fact that you had any kind of a moment is an accomplishment. Just give him time. He’ll come around to see you like the rest of us already do.”

Did he mean he expected Abel to eventually join in on our arrangement? Maybe I should be worried about how willing they all seemed to be to share

me with each other, but instead, I found it...liberating. They made it seem like I didn't have to choose between them or between our relationship and the band.

Maybe Ezra was right. What if I could have it all?

"Come, let's find the rest of the guys," Silas said and laced his fingers with mine. We moved along the wall of the venue, where it was less packed, while Silas scanned the crowd.

I was about to tell him there was no way we'd be able to spot them when he looked down and grinned. "There they are. Hop on."

"What? Are you crazy?" I stumbled over my words as he squatted in front of me. "I'm not getting on your shoulders."

He craned his neck to look at me. "Why not?"

"You'll drop me!"

"I won't. Think of this as a trust-building exercise prior to you joining the band."

I laughed incredulously. "You're insane."

"Hey, at least this time you didn't deny you'd be joining," he said with a smirk and patted his shoulders. "Get on before they move from the spot I saw them in."

His insanity must have rubbed off on me, because I lifted my leg and hooked it over his shoulder. His hand immediately tightened on my thigh, and the leverage allowed me to put my other leg on the opposite side.

"Hold on!"

I clutched his traps hard enough that I was sure there would be bruises the next day. On my fingers, not on his rock-hard muscles. From my vantage point, I was able to spot Cole and Ezra easily. When we got close to them, they both cheered and pulled me down from Silas, while I screamed at them not to drop me.

"Oh my God, you two are drenched!" I screeched as the guys pulled me into a sweaty embrace, their laughter filling my ears.

"I think they got one song left!" Cole screamed over the music. "Let's go into the pit for it!"

Despite going to my share of metal concerts, I'd never been a huge fan of bouncing around between sweaty dudes twice my size, but I couldn't say no after seeing the excitement in Cole's eyes.

"We'll make sure you don't fall!" Ezra yelled before grabbing my hand and waiting for my consent.

I nodded with a smile. They all seemed a little drunk and way too excited. “Let’s go.”

Mastery announced their final song, which happened to be one of my favorites, and the pit started to swarm like a cloud of buzzing flies.

I turned to Silas, who was hanging behind me. “I’m not sure about—”
“Ezra will catch you on the other side!”

Before I could protest, the guitarist pushed me directly into the pit, where all I could do was charge ahead until I landed safely into Ezra’s arms. He laughed at the expression on my face.

“Told you we’d keep you safe!”

Cole erupted from the mass of bodies right before me, a wild grin on his face. I let him pull me back into the pit, and we ran through, bumping into a bunch of people until we were back with Silas.

The undeniably primal activity turned out to be perfect for helping me take the edge off the adrenaline still surging through my veins. By the time the song wrapped up, I was charging through on my own, not minding the bruises I’d have tomorrow morning.

“Thank you! What a fucking night. We’ll see you again soon, Philadelphia!” Nick shouted into the mic, his face ecstatic as the song came to its end.

I cheered at the top of my lungs, and the guys did the same beside me. This was the most fun I’d had in ages, and as I opened my mouth to say exactly that, Cole leaned in and gave me a deep kiss that took my breath away. When we broke away, I saw Ezra and Silas looking at us with smiles on their faces.

Maybe this could work after all.



We opened the windows of the SUV as we sped back to River Valley with Leo at the wheel. The cold air quickly made my flesh pucker up with goosebumps.

“I got something that will help,” Ezra said, handing me a bottle of tequila from beneath the seat and wrapping a sweater he’d left in the car around me.

“You’re definitely a few drinks behind us,” Cole assessed from the back. “Time to catch up.”

I laughed, pushing the bottle away. “Night’s over. I don’t want to get drunk right before I go to bed.”

“Night is definitely not over,” Ezra disagreed. “I say we all come back to my place and hang out in the heated pool.”

It was tempting. I was well aware of the fact that this would be the first time we were alone after putting our relationship out in the open. Was I willing to see where this night could lead?

I snatched the bottle and took a long sip, earning loud cheers from the three men. Ezra’s arm appeared around my shoulders and pulled me into his chest. “That’s our girl,” he said with a kiss.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t stop by Abel’s?” I asked, still worried about the lead singer. He had texted Ezra before we left the venue that he was tired and had gone home early in an Uber.

“Nah.” Ezra shook his head. “He’ll sleep it off and hopefully be over whatever came over him in time for our last session tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Abel’s quick disappearance seemed strange to me, but the guys knew him better, and I had to trust their judgement of the situation.

By the time we arrived at Ezra’s home, we were nearly finished with the bottle, and I was tipsy.

He turned on the lights and led us to his living room. During all my visits here, I’d never spent a lot of time in this room. My eyes immediately settled on the enormous framed photograph hanging above the fireplace.

I giggled as I looked at it while taking off my shoes. “Wow. That’s bound to get whoever you bring back here in the right kinda mood.”

It was a cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine featuring the five men of Bleeding Moonlight, shirtless and draped over a single couch. They must have trained particularly hard before this shoot, because they all looked unbelievably ripped and seductive.

“Is it working on you?” I could hear the smirk in Cole’s voice as he wrapped his bare arms around my waist. In the time it had taken me to appreciate the photo, he had stripped down to just his jeans.

I swallowed, anticipation and excitement building inside my body. Of course it was fucking working. It would have worked on a goddamn street pole. “Maybe.”

He chuckled, his breath hot on my neck. “Let’s go to the pool.”

“I don’t have a bathing suit.”

“We won’t look,” Ezra said as he rummaged for something in the fridge.

“Promise.”

“Liars.”

Laughing, Cole spun me around, his eyes sparkling with alcohol and lust. “Come on. I’m getting cold.”

He tugged on my hand, and I let him lead me through the living room and out into the backyard where Silas was already taking his clothes off.

“Ezra told me about your conversation,” Cole said in a low voice as he nudged up the hem of my shirt.

I blinked at him before pulling it over my head. “Oh?”

His eyes lingered on my chest before leveling back up to my face. “I just want you to know, me and him are on the same page about this. About you.”

The tequila was making me bold. “You like the idea of all of you sharing me?”

His eyelids fluttered as he took a ragged breath. “Yeah. I fucking love it.”

He dropped on his knees and started to undo my pants with his teeth.

“Jesus,” I groaned. Was it weird to be impressed with how efficient he was with his mouth?

The zipper down, he tugged on the fabric until it fell around my ankles. I stepped out my pants, and the cold night air sent a shiver through me.

Ezra had made it outside and was watching us with obvious interest, while Silas sat on the edge of the pool, drinking my body in with his eyes.

Three stunning men, all of their attention hungrily fixed on me. How was I not freaking out right about now? Shouldn’t I be more anxious about what we were about to do?

Perhaps it was the combination of alcohol, arousal, and the trust we had built, but all I felt was a need to keep going.

I reached back to unclasp my bra. The black lace plunged into the water with a soft splash, the sound doing nothing to hide the breaths they all sucked in at the same time.

Their reaction to me was headier than all the tequila we’d consumed in the car. I’d always been reasonably confident in my appearance, but they made me feel worshiped.

I walked over to Silas, altogether aware of their hungry eyes tracking every single one of my movements. The guitarist gave a strained grunt as I straddled his powerful thighs and pressed my center to his length.

“What about you?” I asked, reaching my fingers up to stroke the guitarist’s full lips. “Will you share me with them?”

He choked out a “yes” while tightening his hands on my waist, his eyes wildly fluttering across my face. There was something nervous, almost shy, hidden in his lustful expression.

I realized I had no idea if Silas had ever done something like this before. If he hadn’t, that would explain his nervousness. I, on the other hand, was feeling more and more bold with every one of their reactions. I leaned in to give him a reassuring kiss.

“Want to put on a show for those two?” I asked, tilting my head to the side to look at Ezra and Cole. They stood frozen as they watched me grinding against Silas, their erections straining and begging to be freed.

Silas nodded and cupped my ass, lifting me until my breasts were level with his mouth. He sucked on one nipple, his teeth racking over the sensitive skin and making my back arch in pleasure. When he moved to the other nipple, I shuttered my eyes closed and let out a loud moan, the knowledge that Ezra and Cole were watching us only making me more turned on.

Silas lowered me back down, keeping his left hand on my ass and kneading the firm flesh while he moved his right hand to the remaining scrap of lace between my legs. He pushed the fabric aside and plunged two fingers into me.

I whimpered in response.

“God, you’re so wet,” he hissed. He found my clit with this thumb and rubbed circles around it, making me gasp and shiver in his lap.

I forced my eyes open to take in the other two men, who were by now both jerking off beneath their underwear while watching Silas and I.

“Strip,” I told them between the throaty moans that Silas was working out of me. “I want to see all of you.”

Cole shed his pants and come closer. His expression was darkened with lust. “You like that? Having us get off to the two of you?”

“Oh yeah.”

Ezra joined him, gripping my chin with his hand. “Look at what he’s doing to you.”

I lowered my gaze to Silas’s thick fingers sliding in and out, his hand coated with my juices, and it was enough to send me over the edge. My body spasmed violently as I came undone around his fingers, clutching his shoulders, and stifling my yelps with the skin on his neck.

He took his fingers out and licked them clean before putting them into my mouth.

“Jesus, fuck,” Cole grunted from a few feet away.

Sucking on Silas’s fingers, I took him out of his underwear, giving myself a moment to appreciate how my hand just barely wrapped around the girth of his cock. He pushed my underwear to the side once again, and I slid down his length, shivering at the sensation of being filled at last.

We kissed, losing ourselves in each other for a long moment, his beard tickling the bottom of my chin and reminding me of that very first kiss. Had a part of me always known we’d end up right here anyways?

Extending my arms over his shoulders, I reached for Ezra and Cole. “I want to make all of you come.”

“I think there’s a hundred percent chance you’ll get what you want,” Cole snarked with a breathless grin.

I fisted them while I rode Silas, the wet sounds of our slapping flesh filling the air in the backyard. The moment felt unreal, as if it were a figment of all of our imaginations coming to life in some kind of a dirty art-house movie.

I was finally with all three of them at the same time, and if I’d had any doubts about their sincerity when they said they were okay with sharing me, they disappeared now. Silas watched enraptured as the other two came on my breasts one at a time, before he gave in to his own release, squeezing his eyes shut and biting at my lips. I rubbed the sticky liquid over my skin and continued riding Silas until my second orgasm snuck up and broke me apart.

We swam in the pool to cool down before heading back into Ezra’s house to shower. Cole insisted on joining me for mine, where he proceeded to press me up against the eggshell tiles and make me come for the third time that night.

The alcohol, the intense emotions, and the vigorous exertion of the past few hours were catching up to me. I sat down on the massive couch in the living room, and within a few seconds, I was asleep.

At some point, I awoke to the sound of gentle whispers and the sensation of someone’s strong arms lifting me off the couch and placing me onto a considerably more comfortable surface.

When I woke up in the morning, I was on Ezra’s enormous bed with the guys all curled around me. I sat up and studied their beautiful sleeping faces. They looked completely at peace.

COLE

WHEN WE WALKED into the studio on Friday and I saw Abel's face, I knew immediately something was very wrong. The dark circles under his eyes and his broken expression were incomprehensible in my rosy-colored world after our night with Adeline.

When she'd taken off her bra by Ezra's pool and made it clear she was going to claim all of us, I had to rub my eyes to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I was so fucking proud of her for finally taking what she wanted and not letting self-doubt sabotage her happiness.

At breakfast, she'd leveled all of us with a serious gaze and said, "I think I've made a decision about your offer. Let's wait until we're all together to talk about it."

She was going to join the band. I was fucking sure of it. Last night, we'd proved to her that this thing between us could work. It was only a matter of time before Abel got his head out of his ass and admitted to himself that he was all in as well. I've known the idiot for a long time, and I'd never seen him look at anyone the way he looked at Adeline.

So as I tried to puzzle out what the hell was going on with him, I was also starting to feel nervous. I wasn't prepared to handle this, and as I caught Silas's and Ezra's concerned expressions, I could tell they felt the same.

Adeline waltzed into the control room last, a pep in her step that seemed to scream she'd just had a very good night. Pride and satisfaction swelled in my chest. Then, Abel's gaze immediately found her and darkened in a way that made me shiver.

"Let's get started," he barked, causing Kyle, who was sitting a few feet from him, to startle in his seat. "We have about eight sections we need to rerecord before we're kicked out of here."

Adeline jerked as if she'd been slapped. The happiness melted right off her face and was replaced with deep worry. She opened her mouth to say something to Abel.

"You're all fucking late," he yelled. "I don't want to hear a word until we're finished."

On a normal day, I'd tell him to stuff it and stop being an asshole, but I was too stunned to do so now. How could a perfect day take such a sharp turn so quickly?

Ezra grabbed my elbow and pulled me aside. “What the fuck happened?”

“I have no idea. I messaged him when we were about to leave last night, but he didn’t respond. We need to talk to him before he freaks Adeline out. I think she was ready to say yes this morning.”

Ezra let out a heavy sigh. “Let’s give it an hour and see if he calms down. I don’t want to escalate it with a confrontation just yet.”

I nodded in agreement. I could deal with Abel being a dick to us, but if he said some bullshit to Adeline, we’d shut that shit down quick.

“Silas, you’re first,” the dictator said, not looking at any of us. “We need to work on the melody for ‘Hoarse.’”

As Silas played, Adeline came up to us, her brows pulled tight. “I feel terrible for not going after him last night. Should I talk to him one-on-one?”

I looked over her shoulder, trying to see if Abel was watching us talk. No. He had the headphones on and was glaring at Silas through the glass.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I reassured her. Ezra lifted his hand to rub her arm. “Did anything happen before you left him? Anything that might have set him off?”

She pursed her lips, her beautiful eyes swimming with guilt. “We kinda had a moment. He was protecting me from the crowd, and he wrapped his arms around me. We didn’t kiss, but it got a little heated. I thought he was enjoying it, though.”

I felt a little smug at the news that Abel was indeed caving to his real feelings for her, but at the same time, if this is how he reacted...

No. It made no sense. Abel could be a loose cannon, but even he wouldn’t freak out after a bit of overdue flirting. “I doubt that’s what triggered him. Maybe something happened after you left.”

“Should we just ask?”

“Are you still drunk?” Abel’s tight voice made our heads snap up. He was talking to Silas through the microphone. “You sound like a high school band player. Let’s go again, and this time, try not to suck so bad.”

Silas glowered at him from the studio. They could see his mouth moving, but the glass blocked his undoubtedly creative swearing.

Ezra winced but shook his head. “Let’s give him a bit more time.”

We didn’t even make it to lunch before all hell broke loose.

Abel seemed to calm down after finishing with Silas, so we decided to not intervene. I still felt uneasy, but I guess I was riding the residual optimism last night and this morning had implanted in me.

“Adeline, you’re next,” Abel said in a calm but cold voice, not even casting her a single glance.

She padded into the studio, her head not as high as usual, as if she were hiding herself from the unknown threat.

“We need to have a serious chat with him,” I said to Silas and Ezra. “This is not going to fly when she’s in the band.”

Silas’s expression was grim. “Fuck no.”

Adeline was all set up and waiting for Abel’s instructions.

“Play the chorus for ‘Jumpsuit from Hell,’” Abel instructed her before sitting back in his chair.

I could see the tension in her face and hands. It was a tough song, but she knew it well by now. I caught her gaze and gave her my best encouraging smile.

Unfortunately, what I didn’t realize was just how much her mental state affected her playing. She was nervous, and the tricky rhythm on the chords was throwing her off in a way that it hadn’t before. Even from ten feet away, I could see the sweat building on her forehead.

Abel stood up, his expression furious, making all of us jump to our feet.

“What the fuck was this?” he barked into the mic. “Did they screw your head off last night and forget to put it back on straight?”

I crossed the room in three steps and jerked him to me by his arm. I could hear Ezra telling the sound engineer to leave.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Adeline came into the control room, her expression bewildered.

“What’s wrong with me?” Abel hissed, his breath on my face. “I’m just starting to realize that we made a big mistake. We asked an amateur to join us, and she can’t even play a song we’ve practiced properly.”

I couldn’t help but look at Adeline at his words. Her face collapsed into a blank expression that scared the shit out of me.

“You’re being a goddamn terror and freaking her out. She’s nervous,” I said, trying to control the anger that was fighting to get out.

“And that’s a good excuse in your opinion? How’s she going to feel playing in front of tens of thousands of people? Are we gonna tell our fans our new guitar player is just nervous when they boo us off the stage?”

“What the hell happened with you?” Silas cut in. “You were fine until you left the show last night.”

Abel whipped to look at him with a cruel expression on his face. “I

simply realized that we can't replace Charlie with the first small-town player we happen to come across. Not even one who lets all of you fuck her."

My fist met his face with a crunch that told me I'd probably broken his perfect little nose. I could hear some commotion behind me and Ezra shouting Adeline's name, but I was too fucking angry to move from my position standing over Abel.

"You idiot," I spit, as Silas held me back from doing further damage. "You better pray you didn't just ruin the best thing that has ever happened to the three of us. The best thing that could have ever happened to you if you'd fucking let it."

ADELINE

I wished I could say I was surprised. That this wasn't the outcome I had predicted. That I had faith the wrongs would still right themselves.

But I couldn't. Because I may be an idiot, but I wasn't delusional.

My phone started blowing up within minutes of my hasty departure from the studio, but I'd ignored the calls and messages. I was lucky enough to get an Uber right as I ran out of the building, desperate to get away from the meltdown that was happening in the control room. Ezra tried to chase after me, but I ignored his pleas and got into the car without saying a word.

As soon as we pulled out of the parking lot, I burst into tears.

The driver looked at me in the rearview window. He was a wiry guy my age with a shaved head, and his face twisted in nervous concern. "Are you okay, miss?"

"Fine," I said, wiping my face like a maniac in an attempt to regain some dignity. "I'm sorry. I'm fine."

"No need to apologize." He dug under the passenger seat for a moment before handing me a crumpled tissue box.

I sniffed and grabbed the box from him, mumbling a thank-you.

"You still going to Harrows Street?"

"Yeah," I responded. I wanted to crawl into my bed and not wake up for a week or two. Maybe sleep would stop my brain from replaying Abel's words over and over.

It was hard for me to reconcile what had just happened with the fact that just this morning I'd been ready to join their band. It felt like emotional whiplash.

Really, it was a blessing that Abel had spoken up when he did. He hadn't said anything that was untrue, which is why it hurt so fucking bad. It was like he'd X-rayed my head and pulled out the deepest fears I kept inside. From my inexperience, to my tightly controlled nervousness onstage, to the relationship that I was still only getting comfortable with... He'd covered all the bases and landed a home run.

I bid the driver goodbye, opened the car, and trudged into my empty house. The air smelled stale, like nobody had been there in a while, even though I had aired it out before I left yesterday morning. It was like the house was trying to tell me that it needed more than one person taking up its space.

The thought and the accompanying loneliness led me to collapse onto my unmade bed. I reached for my phone to send one concise message to Ezra, refusing to read what they'd already sent.

“Don't come to see me at my house. Please.”

I didn't want to talk about what had happened or hear their inevitable excuses for Abel's words. I'd made the mistake I had promised myself I'd never make again. I'd allowed myself to believe in something that was never meant to come true.

When I woke up, it was four am on Saturday. It wasn't the week-long rest I had hoped for, but even fifteen hours of sleep could still do wonders for the soul.

I made coffee and got dressed for the gym, which opened at five am. There was no point in moping. My lucrative contract with Bleeding Moonlight was officially over, and I had to get back to my original plan of looking for a job that would allow me to support Molly and I.

The front-desk attendant saw me park through the glass doors and got up to let me inside.

“Haven't seen you as often in these past few weeks,” he noted. “Staying busy?”

I plastered on a smile. “I was. But I'll be around a lot more going forward.”

Just like I used to before Bleeding Moonlight barreled into my life and messed with my head.

My lifts weren't as good as before, but I pushed myself hard for an hour and a half before doing a quick fifteen-minute stretch and driving back home. The post workout endorphins made ignoring my occasionally buzzing phone a little easier.

Turning into my neighborhood, my heart sped up at the sight of a Jeep, but it drove through the intersection before I could make out the driver. I tightened my hands on the wheel, angry at myself for thinking of Ezra, and even more frustrated with how my heart leapt when I thought it might be him.

When I pulled into the driveway, I noticed a dark silhouette by the door. I'd realized it was my guitar as I came closer. I hadn't even noticed that I'd left it at the studio in my desperate rush to leave.

Had Ezra really come here at half past six in the morning? Maybe this was his way of honoring my request for not coming to see me, while at the same time trying to reach out.

I shook my head. It didn't matter. Abel was right. I wasn't good enough to join the band. And I couldn't tag along like a groupie after having experienced the magic of making music with them. Abel was done with me, and the rest would move on soon enough.

It was seven am sharp when our home phone rang. I rushed to pick it up, since no one ever called here, and my first thought was that something might have happened to Molly at college. My relief was palpable when it was my sister's own voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey! I'm just calling to make sure you're still alive. Thanks for ignoring my messages."

I sat down on the couch. "I'm fine. You scared the shit out of me calling here. I thought something had happened."

"Yes, I had to resort to antiquated technology. That's what happens when you ignore five calls and ten messages," she retorted.

I sighed, rubbing my face. "I'm sorry. It's just...something happened, and I didn't want to talk to anybody."

"Oh, I know all about your disastrous last session."

My eyes widened. "What? How?"

"The guys called and told me about what happened with Abel. And they told me they asked you to join the band. Congrats, by the way. They wanted me to try and talk some sense into you."

I scoffed. "No need to worry about that. Actually, everything is finally making a ton of sense."

I could practically feel her eye roll.

"Ade, don't be a fool."

"I won't be going forward, although I'll admit I have been one for the past four weeks. I let myself get sucked into a pipe dream, as Liam so aptly called it, and now I'm paying the price. Mol, they nearly convinced me to agree to their insane request. Can you believe what an idiot I've been? I really thought I could be Bleeding Moonlight's new guitarist. As if that kind of stuff could ever happen to someone like me." My voice was breaking.

"You're not an idiot for believing in yourself, for Christ's sake," Molly exclaimed. "You're an idiot for not giving it a proper shot. Although Abel's little episode was downright dickish, you can't just walk away without talking to them again. They still desperately want you to join them, and I think it's the best goddamn idea I've ever heard."

"I could never agree to play with them." I hoped my tone conveyed the

finality of that statement.

“Liar. This is everything you’ve ever wanted. Everything you’ve been afraid of. The best things in life are hard. They don’t come served on a silver platter. We fight for them with blood, sweat, and tears, and that effort is what makes them mean so much. We can fight for what we want, Ade. Don’t you want to set that example for me as an older sister?”

Tears were streaming down my face, and I sucked in a hoarse breath, no longer caring to hide my emotions from her.

“Oh, love...” Molly sniffed. “I’m crying too, if that makes you feel any better.”

I bawled into the phone, heavy sobs racking through me, and my sister joined me in solidarity. How had she turned out so well? I didn’t think I could love her any more than I did right then.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled once I managed to calm down. “All of it just means so much. It means so much that I don’t want to touch it with a ten-foot pole. I wish I could excise the last month from my brain and go back to not knowing what I could have. Now that I’ve gotten so close to it, the loss is fucking crushing.”

“You haven’t lost anything yet. Talk to them,” she pleaded.

I wasn’t ready. I didn’t know if I’d ever be ready, but I didn’t want to worry her any more. If she got even more concerned about me, I wouldn’t put it past her to take Mason’s car and drive back here so she could drag me to go see Bleeding Moonlight.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

She started to protest.

“I promise, Mol. I just need some more time.”

Her loud sigh rattled through the phone on my end. “Fine. No more ignoring my calls and messages, okay? I’ll be checking in with you every day.”

“Okay, deal.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I hung up and splayed out on the couch. I had no idea what I was going to do.

EZRA

“We need to give her space,” I said for what must have been the tenth time in the past twenty-four hours.

That’s exactly how long it had been since Adeline stormed out of the studio and Abel brought down the future we were trying to build. Turned out it was a house of cards, and one rogue joker was enough to send it crumbling.

“Where the fuck is he?” Cole bit out, dialing Abel’s phone once again. We sat in my living room. None of us had caught more than an hour of sleep through the night.

Abel had left after Cole punched him, and we’d let him, thinking it was a good idea for everyone to cool off. We hadn’t anticipated him disappearing, his phone off, and his house empty.

“The longer we wait, the further she’ll drift in the wrong direction,” Silas argued.

“That’s why we talked to Molly. I trust she’ll be able to smooth things out a bit,” Cole said.

“We need to talk to Abel and figure out what the hell is going on.” For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine what had set Abel off like that, given his earlier agreement to our plan.

“If we can’t reach him in the next hour, I’m calling the police,” I added. “We’ve waited long enough.”

As if hearing me, the front door opened, revealing a ragged-looking Abel on its threshold. His nose was taped up, and shades of purple were visible from under the bandages.

Cole jumped up, his expression a mix of anger and relief. “Where the hell have you been?”

Abel walked in and shut the door behind him. I didn’t know if his silence was a good or bad thing. He collapsed on the couch, lying on his back and rubbing at his eyes.

“I went to the hospital. Then I just drove around.”

I motioned for Cole to sit back down, and the bassist complied, his gaze bouncing between Abel and me.

“You wanna tell us what the hell is going on?” I asked, keeping my own temper in check.

The lead singer sighed and sat back up, his hands clasped together on his

knees. Then, he told us about the fan. He repeated every cruel thing she uttered while his eyes stayed fixed on the ground.

“When I got home after the show, I spent all night thinking about what she said. How can we just replace him like that? He was our bandmate, our brother, my—”

He looked up at me for a brief second before he slammed his eyes shut.

“Your what?” Silas asked gently.

Abel shook his head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try us,” I urged him, sensing he was holding back something big. Why else would he take the words of an insane fan to heart like this?

“I loved him,” Abel said, as if that changed anything.

“We all loved him,” I said.

“No. I *loved* him.”

Comprehension spread across Silas’s face. Cole tented his hands in front of his lips, shocked.

“You were together?” Silas asked, his voice careful.

“Sometimes,” Abel admitted. The air in the room was still. For the first time in as long as I could remember, none of us knew what to say. I leaned back into the couch and let out a breath. How did we not know this?

Our lead singer studied us, tense. “Charlie knew me better than anyone,” he began. “We both came from fucked-up families, abandoned as kids, jaded as adults, and pissed at the whole goddamn world. We were the same. I thought, who else could better understand me than a guy who was just like me? He knew the dirty, ugly things I’ve survived, and instead of recoiling, he dived right in. Somewhere along the lines, I developed feelings for him.”

My heart ached for Abel as my mind travelled back in time to sort through various memories that were suddenly colored in a different light. There’d been clues to how he felt, but we’d always been comfortable with each other, affectionate even. The looks and touches between him and Charlie had never stood out. I thought of the lyrics to the song he’d written with Adeline—another clue we hadn’t picked up on.

“Charlie never showed himself to me the way I did to him,” Abel continued. “I never knew where I stood with him, and that feeling only intensified when he found out I was interested in him romantically. The songs on this new album? He wrung them out of me by manipulating my emotions, the highs and the lows acting as fuel and inspiration to our sessions that went on for days.”

“Dude, why didn’t you say anything to us earlier?” Cole asked, moving to sit beside the singer and putting an arm around him. “We could have been there for you.”

Abel let out a tired breath. “I knew things were fucked up between us. I didn’t want you to know about us because I was ashamed of how he acted toward me. Of how he could reject me so easily, only to invite me into his bed the next day. I don’t even know if I like men other than him. It just felt like too big of a mess to try to wade through, so I kept my mouth shut.”

Abel rubbed his eyes. I’d never seen the singer raw like this. “And I’m not the best at communication, if you haven’t noticed yet.”

That earned a gruff chuckle from Silas.

“How did the fan know about you two?” I asked, trying to fill in the remaining missing pieces.

“I’ve spent the past few hours trying to figure that out,” he said. “The only thing I can think of is…” he trailed off, glancing at Cole. “Amy walked in on us once, three years ago, when she was still with Cole.”

The bassist’s expression darkened at the mention of his ex-fiancée.

“She caught us making out on the bus and swore not to say a word,” Abel continued. “She didn’t have any evidence, but you know how rumors like that can blow up on the message boards. Especially, when it comes to shit like this.”

After Cole’s breakup, our manager had told us he suspected Amy was spreading information about the band on various forums. To fuck with us or to find some angle where she’d get paid? We’d never given enough of a shit to find out. Unsubstantiated rumors about us popped up online all the time. Usually, they’d disappear without any intervention on our part.

Cole’s face was pale. “Damn it. I’m sorry, Abel,” he said, shaking his head.

The singer waved him off. “It’s done.”

“But we’re not done,” Silas said. “Abel, I was so pissed at you, but I get it now. The fan hit you right where it hurt. But nothing she said is near enough to change our plans.”

“We have to get Adeline back,” I agreed. “We have to get her back and keep going with her in the band.”

Abel met my gaze, the whites of his eyes tinged with red. “Honestly, I don’t know if I can. I’m not even sure I can write anything half decent without him.”

“But you wrote with Adeline,” Cole insisted. “You wrote a damn good song with her, and you wrote our first album. Your fear, your doubts—they’re in your head. I know you have it in you, dude.”

“Cole is right,” I said as Silas nodded beside me.

Abel closed his eyes and let out a long breath. When he opened them again moments later, they narrowed with determination. “I need to be the one to explain.”

A smile pulled on my lips. Together, we were stronger. Together, we could fix the mess we’d made.

“That is probably not a good idea,” Cole said. “You are going to be the last person she wants to see.”

“You can’t try to justify what I’ve said. She won’t believe it. It has to come from me.”

“He has a point,” Silas agreed. “She knows what we want and how badly we want her to join. Abel’s going to be her main concern.”

Abel rubbed at his face, and Cole jerked his hands away. “Be careful. You shouldn’t touch your nose.”

Abel glared at him. “You fucking did this to me, and now you’re concerned about preserving my face?”

“We’ll have an army of angry fans after us if anything happens to the pretty lead singer,” he joked, casting Abel an apologetic grin. The singer punched him in the arm and rolled his eyes.

“All right. We’re done moping,” I declared. “It’s time to make a plan for how we get Adeline back.”

ADELINE

I TRUDGED into the Crooked Stool like a zombie ready to be put out of my misery. After getting off the phone with Molly earlier today, I'd considered calling in sick, but then I remembered this was once again my main source of income. I couldn't afford to slack off.

It was five thirty pm when the door to the bar swung open and Liam walked in.

I gave him a tired smile, and he smiled back before sitting down at the bar right in front of me. We hadn't talked since the breakup, but the friendly expression on his face told me he was eager to make peace.

"Hey, Ade, how's it going?"

I poured him a Guinness, his go-to drink.

"It's been better," I said, giving him an honest response. I was too drained to put on a happy face when I felt the exact opposite inside.

He frowned. "You're done with the recording, right? Is that what's bumming you out?"

I shrugged. "Something like that."

His brows pulled together. "Look, I just want to apologize to you about how things ended. I was a dick. I know I didn't do a great job of showing it, but your friendship means a lot to me. Can you forgive me?"

I considered him for a moment. He had a few days' worth of scruff on his face, and his eyes looked tired. I knew the baby was due in a few weeks, so I could imagine the rush he and Vanessa were in to get everything ready in time.

The pint glass I pushed across the bar felt like a peace offering. Liam picked it up and dropped his other hand on the counter, palm up.

"Friends?"

"Friends," I said after a moment, placing my hand in his and letting a grin unfold across my face.

He laughed, relieved, and lifted the glass to his lips. "Cheers to that."

I cheered him with an imaginary glass and withdrew my hand. "So, how's Vanessa?"

"Fuck, Ade. Let me tell you—think twice before having kids."

I snorted. "It's not even here yet, and you're already complaining?"

He groaned. "Van's doing fine, but her family gives overbearing a whole

new meaning. They either think we're completely incapable of raising the kid, or they're all hidden childhood development experts. I could write a book with the amount of advice we're getting over FaceTime on a daily basis."

We fell into our familiar banter as Liam told me everything his in-laws had been advising them on. The distraction from my own issues was more than welcome, and I served patrons as I listened to his stories.

When he quieted down and shot me a questioning look, I knew the distraction was over.

"So what's been going on with you?"

I took my time closing out a tab for one of the regulars before turning to face him again. "You remember how you told me I didn't have time to waste on pipe dreams?"

He nodded, his face taking on an uncomfortable expression at his own old words.

"Well, I should have listened to you, but I didn't. Bleeding Moonlight asked me to join the band, and I was actually going to do it until everything blew up in my face."

Liam's jaw was on the floor. "Holy shit, Ade! They asked you to join them? That's huge."

"So huge that I should have known it was too good to be true." I rubbed the back of my neck as I looked up at the ceiling.

"Wait, what happened?"

I described how the guys managed to convince me it was a good idea—omitting the part where I had slept with three of them—and how Abel eventually made it clear that I could never be up to task.

Liam let out a long breath after I was finished.

"Molly thinks I should talk to them," I added as I wiped down the counter, "but honestly, I'm still too fucking raw about the whole thing. She says I should let them explain. Thing is, I don't really want to hear it. I've already wasted enough of my time entertaining the idea of being a full-time musician."

"I agree with Molly."

My brows rose as our eyes met.

Liam rubbed at his chin. "Ade, I really regret what I said to you that day, and the fact that you keep referencing that conversation makes me feel awful. I want to be honest with you. After looking inward, I realized I said those

things from a place of envy, not friendship. You've always been a more talented guitarist than me. You have incredible stage presence. You can write kickass songs that sound better than anything I could ever write. I was envious of you because it's been obvious for years you were meant for something more than the rest of us. We fucked around with Through Azure Skies, but you always took it seriously."

I picked at a cardboard coaster, fraying its edges. "Jesus, Liam," I said after a while. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"I don't think I knew it consciously either, until saying those things forced me to take a hard look at myself."

This felt like a moment that required something harder than beer, so I poured two shots of whiskey and handed one to him.

Liam slammed it back and continued. "I couldn't keep playing with the band. I know that was the right decision for me and my family, but I shouldn't have shut down your ideas the way I did. You have what it takes to succeed—the full goddamn package. Meet with them. You'll either put the whole thing to rest and be free to look for new opportunities, which you won't have any trouble finding, or you could discover that what went down with Abel was just a huge mistake. Either way, don't give up on music. It's what you were always meant to do."

I swirled my drink, watching the amber liquid coat the sides of the glass before settling back down. Maybe Liam was right. I could pursue my dream regardless of what happened with Bleeding Moonlight. Confidence was building inside of me like it hadn't in years, but I couldn't deny my need for closure. How had we gone from Ezra telling me he loved me to this? My feelings for them were as strong as ever, and the thought of not seeing them again made my blood run cold.

This couldn't be how we ended everything. It was time for me to answer my phone.

When I messaged Ezra that I was ready to talk after closing the bar on Sunday, I didn't expect to find Abel on my doorstep Monday morning. He looked as handsome as ever, and it took all the air out of my lungs. It's like being away from him for almost three days had removed the small immunity

I'd built up to his appearance.

But being unbelievably attractive didn't change the fact that he had acted like a huge asshole. I was on my guard.

"Come in," I offered, my voice clipped. He was looking at me with a weird expression on his face, but he stepped inside without a word.

It was awkward as hell. I offered him a glass of water, which he refused, before leading him to the living room and settling down on the couch. I waited for him to say something, because I sure wasn't going to start. He was the one who'd humiliated me, and I wasn't going to make this easy.

"Adeline, I'm a fucked-up, broken person."

I swallowed. He was fiddling with the edge of his shirt.

"Most of the people in my life who I've gotten close to have left me behind. My parents, multiple foster homes, and of course, Charlie. Every day, I walk the narrow edge between thinking it's my fucking fault they leave or that I've just been dealt a bad hand through no fault of my own. Most likely, it's some combination of the two."

I grit my teeth. "Abel, if you came here looking for a pity party, you've come to the wrong place. Everyone has shit they deal with in their lives. My parents died when I was nineteen, leaving me to take care of my sister. Do you see me going around and using that as an excuse for being an asshole to people?"

He physically recoiled at the intensity of my words. Like I said, I wasn't going to make this easy.

"You're right. Of course, you're right. My past isn't an excuse for taking my shit out on you. I just want you to know that what I said in the studio had nothing to do with how I actually feel about you. Instead, it has everything with how afraid I am that I'll fuck this up."

I sniffed but stayed silent, allowing him to continue.

"At the concert, after you left me, a fan came up to me and said some shit that hit right where it hurt. Stuff about replacing Charlie with you, and how she thought I was the one who drove him to OD. My mother died from an overdose. I've spent most of my adolescence thinking I was at fault for that."

My eyes widened. "Fuck."

He shook his head. "I know. The woman didn't even know what she was talking about, but somehow, she managed to find exactly the right mark. I spiraled."

Jesus. I hadn't expected to hear that from him. I knew from Ezra that

Abel had had a terrible childhood, but I hadn't realized just how bad it must have been.

His hand reached out to grab mine. "I feel awful because Silas told me about your audition and why you gave up on pursuing music. Just like the fan, I hit you right where it hurt. There's no excuse for that. I'm so goddamn sorry. I want you to know that I am one-hundred percent certain that you have everything it takes to be in the band. I want you there."

I pulled my hand out of his. "Abel, I might find it in me to forgive you for what you said but that doesn't mean I'm still considering joining the band."

When he pulled at the collar of his shirt with his newly empty hand, I realized that he was genuinely nervous. Abel, the illusive, enigmatic lead singer of Bleeding Moonlight, was nervous about how this conversation was playing out.

"Why not?"

I laughed, and it sounded hollow and unrecognizable. "This is a life-changing decision. I can't make it on a whim or in the aftermath of a blowup, just because you've now delivered an apology."

"Are you worried about not having what it takes?" he asked in a careful tone.

"No," I snapped, my jaw firm. "Even if I'm starting to think I can be a successful musician, it doesn't mean I want to do it with Bleeding Moonlight. If I'm going to do this, I want to feel excited about it, and honestly, I don't right now. I feel anxious. Worried. Concerned that we'd be at each other's throats within a few days again. That's not the right way to start something this big."

He rubbed his knees, his expression pained. "I understand."

I tilted my head in suspicion. "You do?" I had expected him to argue.

"I do." He nodded. "I know I'm the difficult one. We've struggled to connect the way you have with the others. Let me prove to you that I can be a good bandmate. That we can work together. Write with me for a week, just us. I'll come to your house every day before your shift at the bar, and we'll compose as many songs as we can together. If at the end of the week you're still unsure, I promise we'll respect whatever decision you make."

The thought of songwriting with someone who cared about the music as much as I did was heady, but I forced myself to consider his offer critically. What if I ended up clashing again? Even if it went well, would it be enough for me to agree to join them?

Abel must have seen the battle in my head playing out across my face. “You’ll co-own the rights to whatever we compose together, and you can choose what to do with the songs after we’re done. Release them or sell them—there are plenty of people who’d pay good money for unreleased songs that have my name attached to them.”

I bit my nails. It was a good offer, even if we ended up nearly killing each other in the process. This could help me kick off my own career if I decided to go at it on my own.

“Fuck. Okay.”

His smile made me squirm. It was like looking at a solar eclipse. I knew I shouldn’t look directly at it, but I couldn’t turn away.

“I promise you won’t regret this.” His hand found mine again, and this time, I remained still as his thumb moved in smooth circles across my skin. The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight.

“Fine,” I croaked and stood up.

I really hoped he was right.

ABEL

We decided to start the very same day, so while Adeline was using the bathroom, I hurried to text the rest of the guys.

“It worked. She agreed.”

Over the weekend, after brainstorming a few ways to win her back, we’d all agreed that having her songwrite with me was the winning idea. The guys would stay away and let me prove to Adeline that she and I could work together. Selfishly, I also wanted to prove to myself I had more than one song in me.

I needed to make this work to fix the mess I had made. I’d do anything to show her just how badly I wanted her to do this with us.

“Okay, ready?”

I slipped the phone in the back pocket of my jeans and lifted my gaze to her. She was beautiful, as always, wearing an old band T-shirt and cut-off jean shorts that put her toned legs on display. I had to use every inch of my willpower not to stare.

“Yeah.”

“I have an extra guitar you can use.”

To my surprise, she led me to her bedroom, where two instruments leaned against the wall. I had thought we’d be working in the living room, but the cozy, intimate vibe of her bedroom immediately felt right. This must be where she composed her songs. I didn’t know how I knew that, but I felt sure I was right.

She grabbed her guitar and sat down on the bed, motioning me to take the small armchair in the corner.

“I’ve had this little melody in my head for a while. What do you think?”

I smiled at how eager she was to jump right into it. I’d collaborated with enough famous musicians to know that half of them wanted to just fuck around instead of do any actual work. As I listened to her play the melody to me, I could tell there was nothing else in the world she’d rather be doing.

“It’s catchy,” I told her before playing a slightly altered version and immediately earning an excited smile.

Warmth spread through my body. This was off to a good start.

By Wednesday afternoon, we had three tracks in the works. Working with Adeline was a dream, and I was even more angry at myself for not fully

appreciating the potential between us earlier. It was rare to find a partner who could push you to new heights as a musician, and she was making me climb Mount fucking Everest. The exhilaration I felt at the top was unreal.

She didn't tease me, not like Charlie did. She also didn't tear me down until I was no more than a shred, and somehow, we still worked well together. I couldn't help but pray to the universe that she would agree to join the band. There was so much potential here, the thought of leaving it unrealized physically hurt.

Unencumbered by old secrets and doubts, I felt more in touch with myself than I had in years, and I knew the truth now. I wanted her badly.

The night of the Mastery concert had taken a sharp turn for the worst, but I'd spent the past few days replaying how Adeline had molded to my body as we'd watched the show. Her hips beneath my hands, her ass grinding into me, the sweet taste of her skin... I couldn't get those memories out of my head.

We stopped for a quick lunch, and I followed her to the kitchen to fill a glass of water at the sink.

"Are you okay with a turkey sandwich? I don't have the ingredients for anything fancier."

"Yes, sounds great." I turned to face her and caught her quickly shifting her gaze up. Was she checking me out? The blush on her face was a sign I might be right.

She sucked in a breath and walked over to the fridge. Of course, I did what any red-blooded male would do in this situation, and let my eyes drift down to her ass. It was just one of the things about her that had been on my mind a lot lately. My balls tightened, and I quickly sat down at the kitchen island.

She made the sandwich with precise efficiency and handed me my plate before sitting down on the stool beside me and digging right in.

I knew I was a goner when I caught myself thinking how cute she looked munching on her food.

Fuck.

It's like the very real prospect of losing her had finally made me realize what an idiot I'd been all these weeks. I gulped down my water before turning slightly toward her. She must have seen my movement out of the corner of her eye because she stopped chewing for a moment before resuming.

“So how’s Molly doing?”

For the past two and a half days, we’d been all work. I didn’t think she’d done anything besides writing with me and working at the bar. It was great to be so focused during our sessions, but I wanted to know more about her life.

“Fine, I think. We haven’t had a good chat in a while, but we text frequently. She says she likes two out of her three roommates, and that so far, the classes are pretty straightforward.”

“Do you miss her?”

The second song we were writing was shaping up to be a ballad about loss. I could piece together what I knew about Adeline’s life with the hints in the lyrics, and I was pretty sure it was about her family leaving her. Her parents in a tragic death, and Molly in a natural progression to adulthood. Of course, the two weren’t the same, but the feelings they brought up in her might be similar.

She put the last bit of her sandwich down on the plate. “Yeah. A lot. It’s just me now in this house, and every little part of it reminds me of her. Of my family. All the things are like echoes of them, but the sources are gone. It gives me chills sometimes,” she said with a shudder.

“Sell it,” I suggested. “Environment matters a lot. If you don’t feel good in your space, it will suck the creativity right out of you.”

“I think I will. I just haven’t had the time to figure it all out with what’s been going on.”

I shifted on the stool. “Molly is lucky to have you. I wish there’d been someone willing to take care of me when my mom passed.”

It hurt to talk about my past, but a part of me craved to open up to her. To make her see that I had reasons for how I behaved toward others. For how I behaved to her.

“You didn’t have any family besides her?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“None who wanted that kind of a responsibility. Some of them were more than twice your age when you decided to stay by Molly’s side. You had a hell of a lot more courage than them.”

She paled and fell silent for a moment. Then she began to speak.

“When our parents died, I was scared as hell. I was nineteen with an underage sister to take care of, and I’d never admit it to Molly, but there were nights early on when I considered running away. My aunt and her husband would have probably stepped in if I left. We aren’t close to them, but they seem like decent enough people. I loved my sister so goddamn much, but I

felt like a kid left in charge of another kid, and in my worst moments, I dreamed about the freedom of being on my own. How awful was I for even having those kinds of thoughts?”

Her hand was on the counter, and I covered it with mine. “You weren’t being awful. You were rightfully scared.”

She nodded, and tears glistened in her eyes. “One afternoon, Molly came home from school all smiles. I remember it clearly, because she didn’t smile a lot in the aftermath. She told me she’d won Most Courageous in the yearbook, and that over one hundred students at the school had voted for her. I congratulated her, and while she was eating her dinner in her room, I went to sit in the car in the garage to cry. In the yearbook, it said the definition of courage is ‘the ability to do something that frightens one.’ If my fifteen-year-old sister could be courageous, then what kind of a shit stain was I if I let my fear win?”

I squeezed her hand. “What did you do then?”

She wiped at her eyes. “Once I was done crying, I put the keys in the ignition and drove straight to the tattoo parlor. I got that definition inked down the inside of my biceps, so that I’d never forget.”

Her basic, small-town-girl tattoo. God, how I’d misjudged her.

I rose from the chair and wrapped my arms around her. She hugged me back, her body trembling with silent sobs that told me she didn’t share this story often.

“I’m so sorry, Adeline,” I murmured as her hair tickled at my chin. “I was so preoccupied with my own fear that I never took the time to appreciate how much there was for me to learn from you. You’re amazing, you know that? I wish I had your strength.”

She sobbed louder this time, and we stood in her kitchen wrapped together for what may have been minutes or hours, the clock ticking in the background as I tried to swallow up her pain.

The guys accosted me as soon as I got home on Wednesday. We had planned to have dinner together, and it looked like Ezra had taken the liberty of bringing takeout with him before I arrived home.

I walked into my kitchen, and all three of them turned their heads to

watch me shrug my hoodie off and approach the island.

“Status report, please.”

I reached for a takeout box only to have Cole swipe it away from me.

“Talk first, eat second.”

Fucking bossy bastard. “I think it’s going well.”

“You think?” Ezra asked, his voice careful. “You have two more days left. I think we were all hoping for a bit more than that.”

I rubbed my neck, ignoring the rumbling in my stomach. What had passed between Adeline and I earlier today felt too intimate to share. “We’ve been working most of the time, and it’s been freakishly productive. So that’s going well. When we write, everything is smooth sailing, but as soon as we take a break, the temperature is hard to read.”

“Are we talking Antarctica or New York in the late winter?”

“Both of those are pretty cold,” Silas noted, his expression glum.

“You haven’t freaked out or said anything stupid, have you?” Cole asked, earning a glare from me.

“No,” I told him firmly. “I’ve been letting her drive the process and contributing when I think it will help. You guys have been texting her. Hasn’t she said anything?”

Ezra shook his head. “Nothing about this. I haven’t pried, because I don’t want her to feel like we’re ganging up on her.”

His logic made sense, despite the fact that none of us were happy about being so in the dark about Adeline’s thinking when it came to joining the band.

Cole pushed my food toward me at last. “Two more days. Make them count.”

ADELINE

TWO MORE DAYS.

I wasn't sure I could keep my resolve for that much longer. Every hour spent with Abel, doing what we both loved so much, chipped away at whatever defense I had managed to erect before I agreed to spend a week together.

He picked up on the themes of my lyrics with ease and helped me write choruses that felt as if they were simultaneously being lifted from both of our minds. Despite his eager involvement, he wasn't a domineering songwriter, and my doubts about him letting me take the lead on the composition were quickly alleviated. The last time we worked together, he'd been driving the process, but now that the roles were reversed, we were working together just as well.

He was respecting my craft and my ability as a songwriter, even though he had many more years of experience and success. It was thrilling to have him sit in my little bedroom with me and offer suggestions on how to take my own music to the next level.

The first thought I had when I woke up in the morning was that I couldn't wait to work with the rest of the band on completing the songs Abel and I had composed.

This plan of theirs was working.

Abel showed up at nine am sharp, as he'd done the previous three days, and I knew he'd stay until I had to start getting ready for my shift at around four. In an attempt to distract myself and continue to build up my savings, I had picked up more shifts at the bar, with only Friday and Sunday nights off.

He halted as soon as he stepped through the doorway, his eyes catching on my hoodie.

His hoodie.

Shit. I had gotten into the habit of wearing it around the house because of how warm and soft it was, and definitely not because of how it smelled deliciously like him.

"Sorry, I forgot to give it back to you," I said nervously as his gaze shot back up to my face.

His lips curled up, deepening the dimples in his cheeks. "Keep it. It looks better on you than it does on me." It wasn't what he said, but rather how he

said it, all husky and low, that made heat pool between my legs.

Today, his hair was tied at the nape of his head in a bun, and my fingers itched to pull at the elastic as we began our work. To keep from doing that, I kept playing with my own messy curls, occasionally catching Abel watching. There were flashes of hunger in his eyes that I hadn't noticed before, and my pulse quickened at the thought of what they could mean.

His forearm flexed as he strummed the guitar, drawing my attention to the corded muscles running up his arm. He wore a cut-off band tee that did nothing to impede the progress of my eyes from his forearm to his shoulder. His skin was darker, like mine, glowing with a gold tan that made me think he'd been spending a good bit of time in his backyard.

Those green eyes found my gray, and something tense passed between us. Had he noticed me checking him out? My cheeks heated, and I looked down at the paper at my feet.

"I'm going to go grab some water," he said, forcing me to look at him again.

"Me, too."

We awkwardly tried to leave the room at the same time before he took a step back to let me pass first, accidentally bumping his elbow against mine in the process. Why did that small contact light my skin on fire? I chugged my water, feeling dehydrated as fuck. He sipped his carefully, his attention still focused on me.

"Are you all right?" His glass clinked as he lowered it into the sink.

"Sure," I said, leaning against the door of the fridge in an attempt to look casual.

He frowned and walked around the kitchen island until he was only a foot away. "You seem a bit flushed. Are you sure you're not sick?" He lifted his hand to my forehead before moving down to my cheek, and I held my breath as he conducted his spontaneous physical examination.

Out of everyone in the band, Abel had the slightest built, but somehow, he was still crowding me with his presence in the confines of my small kitchen. My eyes trailed down his chest, noting how it rose and fell a little too quickly.

My hand landed above his heart. Two could play at this game. "I'm not sick. But your heart rate seems a little elevated."

His face took on that hungry look again, and he trailed his fingers along my jaw before gripping my chin. If my phone buzzed right now, I was pretty

sure the house would explode from the release of built-up tension.

Instead, his lips descended on mine, pressing me against the door of the fridge. It was like jumping into a cold pool on a hot summer day, the initial shock quickly replaced by pure exhilaration.

I found the goddamn elastic and ripped it out of his hair. The scent of his coconut shampoo enveloped me, and I tangled my fingers through the silky blond locks to draw him closer.

His kiss was confident, much like his hands. One slipped under my shirt and bra to cup my naked breast. His deep moan at feeling my hardened nipple was so unlike anything I'd ever heard come out of his mouth that I trembled in triumph. I felt like a conqueror.

I drew my nails down the arms I'd been admiring earlier today, pausing to squeeze his biceps and forearms. There were so many parts of him I didn't know yet, and I wanted to discover them all.

The old fridge shuddered violently behind me, and Abel pulled away at the noise, his hand still cupping my breast.

"That...escalated quickly," I said, glancing down at where his arm disappeared under my shirt. He extracted himself with deliberate slowness, his fingers grazing down my abs before falling to rest on my hip.

"Must be another symptom of whatever is behind my racing heart," he said with a teasing grin.

My own heart was ready to burst out of my ribcage. I knew there was a lot at stake here, but in that moment, all I could think about was Abel, the way his scent lingered around me, and the fact that we had just shared our first kiss.

And what a fucking kiss.

"If you keep doing that to your lip, I'm going to need to intervene," he said, making me realize I was nibbling on it.

"I think you'd better." I took a deep breath and closed whatever distance remained between us.

He carried me from the kitchen to the living room couch without breaking our hungry kiss. I was ravenous, and he pressed his body down on me, letting me feel the extent of his arousal. I scratched at his back, as if some part of me wanted to mark him to prove this was really happening. When he at last pulled away from my lips, I whimpered in distress, missing the contact immediately.

"God, Adeline," he muttered, pressing his forehead against mine. "I've

wanted to do this for so long.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. Everything seemed unreal. Was this really the same guy who wouldn't spare me more than an irritated look when we first met?

He must have sensed my shock. “I'm going to make you come so many times, you'll forget what an insufferable asshole I've been.”

Damn. I chuckled. “I'm going to hold you to that.”

He grinned, and I knew that if my panties hadn't already been wet, they would be soaking now. My toes curled in the anticipation of what was going to happen next as Abel sat up and started to unbutton my jeans.

“Hey! Surprise!”

I panicked and jumped off the couch, pushing Abel to the ground in the process.

“Molly?” I shouted as I rushed to do up my pants.

My sister waltzed into the living room with an enormous smile on her face. It quickly morphed into a look of pure horror when she took in the tableau before her.

“Oh my God.”

“Hey, Molly,” Abel croaked while trying to discreetly rearrange himself in his jeans before getting up.

“What are you doing here?” I breathed.

Her initial embarrassment seemed to be quickly replaced with giddy glee. She shot me a conspiratorial look. “I wanted to come home for the long weekend and surprise you. I thought you might need some cheering up, but clearly Abel already has that covered. I'll be in my room!”

“No, no.” I stopped her. There was no way we'd be resuming our earlier activity with her in the house. “Abel was just leaving. We can hang out until I have to go to work.”

Abel nodded, his face schooled into an unreadable mask, and crossed the living room to go into my bedroom for his things.

“That's the one you picked?” she hissed at me excitedly when he was out of sight. “I'm honestly surprised. I was sure you'd go for Cole. He's such a sweetheart.”

I dragged my hands over my face. “It's complicated.”

Abel emerged from my room moments later with his jacket and a folder of notes. “I'll see you tomorrow?”

I rubbed at my neck, looking between him and Molly. “Um. I think I want

to cancel tomorrow so that I can hang out with Mol.”

A part of me worried he would explode and yell at me for changing the rules of our deal, but he simply nodded. “Of course, you guys need time to catch up.”

Then he turned his attention to Molly. “We’re actually playing a secret show tomorrow in the Barnyard. Just close friends and family and folks from the community that have supported us over the years. We all would really love it if you’d both come.”

Whoa, what? I wasn’t expecting that. He hadn’t mentioned anything to me. Was this planned a while back? Why hadn’t the guys said anything?

Molly smirked at him. “We’ll be there.”

“Wait a second,” I interjected. “What if I have work?”

“Do you?” my sister fired back.

“Well...no.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll see you tomorrow, Abel.”

He gave her a rare genuine smile, and my heart tremored at the sight. “Nine pm. Don’t be late.”

I wasn’t sure about going to this show, but Molly had become truly dictatorial in the weeks she’d been away. We spent the day hanging out in the backyard, chatting about her life at college and catching up on everything that had happened while she was away. Around six pm, we went inside for dinner, and when she made it clear that the only way we wouldn’t be going to the Barnyard was over her dead body, I could do nothing but start getting ready.

“This is so exciting,” Molly gushed. “I can’t believe they’re able to get me into an eighteen-plus show just by putting my name on the guest list. And it’s a secret Bleeding Moonlight concert! Carly is going to die when I show her the pictures.”

I smiled as I pulled on my knee-high boots. For once, I opted to wear a flowing black dress that reached about mid-thigh, anticipating how hot the venue would get by the end of the night. My leather jacket completed the look.

A car honked outside our door, and I shot a questioning look at Molly,

which she answered with a wink.

“Go ahead, open the door.”

Outside, Mason sat in his car, his grinning face peeking out the window.

“Mason?” A laugh burst out of my lips. “You’re back here, too?”

“Who do you think drove your sister here?” he said as he got out of the car to scoop me into a hug. To my embarrassment, I hadn’t even considered how Molly had gotten here.

“Are you going to the show, too?” I asked once we had broken our embrace.

“Sure am. I’m Molly’s plus one.”

“He’s not,” she retorted, “but Abel was nice enough to give him a ticket after he made me beg for an extra one on his behalf.” Her voice had a bit of a bite, and I couldn’t help but wonder if something had happened between her and the drummer in the past few weeks.

Mason snickered. “Close enough,” he said with a wink that made Molly roll her eyes. “All right, ladies. Hop in or we’re going to be late.”

We piled into the car and set off for the Barnyard. I recalled the excitement I had felt driving there before Through Azure Skies’ last show and smiled at the memory. I could only hope that being there again tonight would help me make the right decision. After all, I still owed Abel my answer.

Since our names were on the guest list, we were quickly hustled inside when we arrived. The barn was already about three-quarters full, and the crowd was buzzing with excitement. I turned my gaze to the stage where a couple of sound technicians were finishing setting up. The show would start in about ten minutes.

A man I didn’t recognize came up to me and introduced himself as Barney, Bleeding Moonlight’s manager.

“The guys have been telling me about you for weeks,” he informed me in a gruff voice. He sounded like he smoked at least a pack a day and took no bullshit from anyone. “I wish I’d been here for at least some of the recording sessions, but I had to babysit The Cult of Osiris on their world tour. Then Bleeding Moonlight called me up five days ago and demanded I put together

this show at a moment's notice. Not that I'm complaining. I was seriously fucking worried about them ever getting out of their funk."

Huh. That was interesting. What had prompted the guys to do this?

"I'm glad they decided to perform," I said. "Should be a hell of a show. Do you know if they'll be playing some of the stuff we worked on?"

He shrugged. "Ask them yourself. Come with me. They insisted I bring you backstage as soon as you arrive."

My pulse sped up. "Oh, okay." Shit. I wasn't sure I was ready to see them, but I didn't want to cause issues just before they were due to go on.

Molly nudged me. "Go, Ade. I'll stick around here with Mason until you come back."

We pushed through the crowd toward the side of the stage and walked through the inconspicuous door labeled "Staff Only".

The small backstage area was busy with roadies running around with cords and equipment. Barney led me past the open area with red leather couches where less than two months ago I'd sat with Liam, Elly, and Mason, freaking out about Bleeding Moonlight being in the audience. Now they were the ones performing, and I was about to meet them once again.

"They're in here," Barney said and opened a black door I hadn't noticed during my previous time here.

It was a small dressing room. The four men stopped their conversation and looked at me in unison as I entered. Internally, I screamed at Barney for not giving me a second to compose myself before coming face-to-face with them.

They all looked good enough to eat, muscles and tattoos on display, their edgy appearance reminding me in an instant they were untouchable metal legends. I'd gotten used to their toned-down appearance over the past six weeks, but seeing them like this now took my breath away. Cole and Silas donned leather pants I hadn't seen on them before and black T-shirts with different band logos. Ezra's chiseled torso was bare—he was shirtless with just a pair of loose jeans held up by a leather belt. And Abel looked every bit the charismatic front man in a white tank top and fitted black jeans, his silky blond hair cascading past his shoulders.

"Ade!" Cole broke the momentary silence that fell after Barney closed the door behind me.

He crossed the small room to envelop me into a hug and ran his hands down my arms like he was trying to convince himself I was really here. I

couldn't help but return his hopeful smile, my heart fluttering at being close to him again.

Ezra and Silas took turns pulling me into their own embraces, all of them looking at me like I was a precious prize. It hit me just how much I'd missed them over the course of the past week—their easy companionship, energy, and affection.

Abel came up to me last and stopped a foot away, as if unsure of what to do. Up close, I noticed he'd lined his eyes with kohl, and the thin dark lines that took him from gorgeous to heartbreaking. I swallowed and closed the distance between us to give him a hug of my own. A heartbeat later, his arms snaked around my shoulders, and I could have sworn he let out a relieved breath into my curls.

"I can't believe you're putting on a show," I told them as I pulled away, forcing a smile on my face. My gaze darted across their faces. "Barney said it was a last-minute thing."

Ezra scratched the back of his neck, his blue eyes bright even in the dim lighting of the room. "Yeah. We thought we'd give the new songs a go."

"You're playing the new stuff?" I asked. "That's fantastic. The fans will love it."

Silas's hand landed on the small of my back, as if to keep me steady.

"Barney said you guys wanted to see me before going onstage. Do you need me to give you a pep talk?" I joked nervously.

Cole was beaming at me as if he was barely holding something in. Ezra and Abel wore carefully guarded expressions, but their eyes glowed with intent. I swiped my clammy hands on the sides of my dress.

"No, no pep talk," Silas said. "We are looking for a guitarist to perform with us, though."

Understanding crashed over me so hard I thought my knees might give out. I was thankful for Silas's grip on my back.

"Wait. What?"

"This is for you, Ade," Abel said calmly, as if his words were making sense. "This concert is for you."

"You want me to play with you live?" I asked in a hoarse voice, my eyebrows squeezing together.

"Don't think we'll find someone else in the next five minutes." Abel had a sly smirk on his face.

As if on signal, the crowd erupted in cheers, the sound loud enough to

penetrate the walls of the room.

“We’d love to stand and chat, but seems like we’ve got people waiting.” Ezra made a show of looking at his watch.

“Fuck.” My head was spinning. I wasn’t sure I could move my legs, let alone play a concert at the moment.

“C’mon, Ade. You’ve got this.” Cole came up to stand on my other side and tucked me under this arm. “You’re a pro.”

Right. I was a performer, and although I definitely wasn’t a pro, I knew how to pull myself together and put on a show.

Abel’s green eyes danced as he took in my expression. “Let’s get out there and do this. Then, afterward, you can let us know what you’ve decided on.”

I let out a breath and shrugged off my jacket. “Let’s go.”

This is insane.

Those words played on repeat in my head as I stood just offstage. I didn’t know what songs we were playing, I hadn’t done sound check, and I sure as hell was not mentally prepared to perform in front of a full house. Someone handed me a guitar, which I was relieved to see was a Les Paul.

Ezra clapped me on the shoulder, and I jumped in shock. He barely contained a laugh at my expression. “You’ve been playing these songs for weeks now, Ade. You’ve got nothing to be nervous about. Everything is set up just like it was at the studio.”

“C-can I see the set list?” I stuttered. A bead of sweat was already running down my neck. He pushed a small piece of paper into my hand, and I scrambled to read the messy writing before the background music was turned off and we had to go on.

Despite them not needing a pep talk, I sure as hell did.

Abel squeezed past me just as the music started to fade. It was almost time. He turned and grabbed my face—were his hands trembling?

For a moment, everything around us disappeared, and there were just him and I suspended in time and standing on a precipice. We’d either soar or tumble down in a spectacular crash.

He seemed to be vibrating with pent-up energy. I was so consumed with

my state of mind that I hadn't considered what this show meant for him and the rest of the guys. A few weeks ago, they weren't sure if they were ever going to play again, and now here they were, about to go onstage in front of an intimate crowd in their hometown.

Of course, for them, intimate was bigger than any show I'd ever played.

He slid his hand to the back of my neck and pulled me closer. "I hope this is the first show of many," he whispered against my lips. I gasped as he collided with me, the kiss drawing breath out of my lungs and making me see stars. Our tongues danced together, his teeth finding my bottom lip, biting and pulling and sending heat right down to my core.

When he pulled away, I was quivering.

"And I hope that's the beginning of a tradition," he said, his forehead pressed against mine.

The music stopped.

He took a step back, turning toward the stage.

I took a deep breath and followed.

Looking down at the frothing, cheering crowd was surreal, but it focused my attention completely on the present moment, leaving no room for any lingering fears.

Abel was saying something to the crowd, hyping them up even more as I plugged in my guitar with shaky hands.

Then he looked at me.

"We've spent the past month recording these songs here in River Valley, our hometown. This is the place where it all began for us, and also where it almost ended."

The audience hummed with surprise at that.

"It wasn't until we met a talented guitarist that we realized these songs deserved to be heard. I want to introduce Adeline—" He extended his hand in my direction. "Some of you may already know her, and those who don't... Well, trust me, you won't forget her."

Loud whoops and cheers rang in my ears as I finally tore my gaze from Abel, whose magnetism seemed to multiply onstage, and smiled shakily at the crowd.

My mouth parted as I saw Liam and Elly beside Mason and Molly at the front of the stage waving at me with unbridled enthusiasm. Of course, Molly had her phone out and was probably recording the entire thing. Was that Frankie and Jimmy just off to the right? I waved at them while making a

surprised face. Who the hell was working the bar tonight?

“This one is called ‘Hoarse.’”

And with that, the show began.

Silas kicked off the song with a heavy riff, and I joined in a few seconds later. We sounded solid through my in-ear monitor, and with relief, I saw that everything was set up just like I was used to. My fingers danced across the fretboard, muscle memory leading the movement and the remnants of my nerves finally disappearing. The magic of being onstage was kicking in.

Abel prowled across the intimate stage with magnetic energy, exuding power and confidence. I’d never seen him like this, and it was a stunning sight. He had complete mastery of his voice, his body, and the effect he was having on the audience.

The same was true with the others, who all looked like amplified versions of themselves. Ezra was pounding the drums, his chest already glistening with sweat, his face twisted in concentration.

My solo came, and I closed my eyes to focus all my attention on my instrument, feeling inspired to improvise a few parts while the guys cheered me on in the background.

The first song ended, and when I opened my eyes, something intangible yet vitally important shifted within me. A switch had been flicked on, unleashing joy and energy through my entire being. I was exactly where I belonged.

We shredded through the next six songs with only minor breaks in between. Abel said little after the initial introduction, preferring to douse the audience with the new material without editorialization, and they seemed to love it. A small pit had started during our second song, and it kept forming despite the security’s best efforts to break it up. Whenever I got a chance to look down at Molly, her expression radiated with pride.

“This one is really special,” Abel said before our next song. “It’s the first song I wrote after our friend and bandmate Charlie passed away. I couldn’t have written it without Adeline, who was the co-writer. This one is for you, Charlie.”

He nodded at me to begin, and tears pricked at the back of my eyes as I played the intro to our song. It wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for Charlie, a man I never met but who had managed to have an outsized influence on my life nevertheless.

The track got an exuberant reception, and we kept playing until every

single song we'd worked on over the past month had been heard.

Playing onstage always drove me to a place of ecstasy, but this was the first time I'd done so surrounded by people who clearly felt the same way, and their emotions amplified my own.

As we stood there at the end of our set, dripping with sweat and exhilaration, I felt like I'd left my body and was hovering above in space. This feeling, it had come to me the last time I was here, but this time, it was different. I wasn't alone in this space between reality and whatever lay beyond. There were four other people here with me.

My eyes burned with tears even as I grinned at the audience.

Abel came up to wrap an arm around my shoulders.

"Thank you! Thank you so much," he shouted.

I waved at the audience and let him walk me offstage, his body a fiery furnace pressed against my side. Stagehands blurred and walked past us, their congratulations fading into the air. Someone took my guitar off my hands.

Suddenly, I was pressed into a small alcove at the back of the venue. It may have been a storage closet, but I was too dazed to tell.

Abel slid his hands down my waist, grinding his hips with mine. I tore at his pants, my onstage ecstasy turning into a purely physical need to feel him between my legs. That need eliminated all thought. His kiss was a feverish dream, consuming and unreal.

When I freed him, he was as hard as a rock, craving me as much as I craved him. He lifted my legs to wrap them around his waist, hiking up the skirt of my dress and pulling my panties aside with one hand. His eyes met mine for a moment before he entered me, filing me completely. I gasped and clawed at his shoulders, my hand slipping on his sweat.

He began to thrust, transforming all the tension that had ebbed and flowed between us over the past five weeks into something infinitely more potent. We understood each other, I realized. The way we made art together, the way we performed... It was one and the same. We put everything on the line, discarded the shields that kept us safe, and risked it all in the name of creating something bigger than ourselves.

The lines between us blurred, and when I looked into his eyes, I saw myself in him. Not the Adeline of six weeks ago, but the *real* me. The one who did the things she wanted, who chased after her dreams, and who fought for things that mattered to her. The Adeline I'd locked inside a basement for the past four years, and who was ready to come out.

His lips silenced my groans as his fingers dug into the flesh of my ass, holding me in place. He felt unbelievable—perfect inside of me. I knew I wouldn't last long, especially not when he increased the pace of his thrusts, driving toward his own release.

“Fuck, Adeline,” he grunted.

My world shattered, and I broke our kiss to bite the space between his neck and his shoulder, knowing I was bound to leave a mark. He came moments later, shuddering inside of me. I lifted my head to look at his face and saw his expression slacken. In his eyes, only a thin ring of green remained.

Pulling out, he fixed my underwear back in place before leaning his forehead against mine.

His mouth opened a few times as if to say something, but no words came out.

I understood him completely.

There were no words for this.

When minutes later we stumbled into the dressing room, the rest of the band was already there.

They were drinking beers, their wet shirts puddled on the ground, and I shuddered at the thought of what some of their fans would do to be in my place.

Their heads turned toward Abel and I, and Silas gave us a slow once over before putting his bottle down and walking over to pull both of us into a hug. Moments later, the other guys piled on, and we held each other for a long minute like a bunch of saps.

I was crying again when the huddle broke up, my emotions still running on high. Silas came up and brushed my hair out of my face. “You were brilliant.”

“So were you,” I croaked. “All of you.”

The guitarist led me to sit down on the couch as I tried to collect myself, his big palms warm on my skin. He nestled me under his arm and gave my temple a kiss.

“Your sister was looking at you with stars in her eyes. Same with your

old band. You blew everyone away, Ade,” Cole said with a sigh. “What a fucking show.”

“They loved the new material,” Ezra added, his face melting into a satisfied grin.

Abel pulled up a chair to sit to my left and reached for my hand. His gaze found mine. “Ade?”

I knew what he was asking. I took a moment to absorb the surreal nature of this moment—me wiping tears off my face backstage while being surrounded by Bleeding Moonlight after having just played a show with them. These four incredible men who all wanted me, in more ways than one, who’d captured my heart and mind, and who’d made me remember things I never should have allowed myself to forget. I may have gotten here by chance, by a stroke of luck, but now it was up to me to decide how my life would play out.

“Have you made your decision?” Abel asked.

I squeezed the singer’s hand. “Yes.”

The next couple of hours were a blur as my friends and family met us backstage and heard the news.

Molly was ecstatic and squealed loud enough to leave my ears ringing. “Oh my God! I have the coolest sister ever. Ade, you’re going to have to take me on tour at least once.”

Cole swung his arm around her shoulders. “Been there, done that, ended up with a pregnant sister. Would not recommend.”

Molly gave him an appalled look while I laughed, despite taking his advice to heart. If Molly wanted to go on tour, I was going to run a background check on every single other band.

Liam, Elly, and Mason all came up to offer their warm congratulations and wish me the best of luck. They seemed genuinely excited for me, and I was happy to learn that Mason had found a guitarist and a bassist to play with at Northeastern.

Frankie and Jimmy stopped to say goodbye and tell me how much they’d enjoyed the show. Bleeding Moonlight had bought out the bar for the night so they could get the evening off work to see me play.

My heart swelled with pure happiness, the kind I hadn't felt in years. Being surrounded by all these people that cared for me and wanted the best for me was like being enveloped by a soft, warm cloud.

I turned to Ezra, who stood beside me. "Tonight may have been the best night of my life. Thank you."

His expression softened at the palpable emotion in my voice. "This is only the beginning," he said, wrapping his arms around me. "What do you say we get the guys and get out of here to celebrate properly?"

I burrowed my face into the side of his neck, smiling against his skin. "Where should we go?"

We drove in the dark for about thirty minutes before parking in a clearing at the foot of a forested area just outside the town. Leo waited in the car, while Ezra led me toward a narrow path between the trees, using his phone as a flashlight. The guys followed behind us, Cole cracking jokes that threw us into fits of laughter.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see in a moment," Ezra said with a smile.

Then the trees parted, and we were on a small beach with a dock leading into the water.

A lake?

I had never been here before. The moon's reflection glittered on the surface, lighting up the space above the water in a hazy glow while soft waves lapped at the narrow beach. The crickets filled the air with a high-pitched trill.

"This is where we first came up with the name for the band," Ezra explained. "We were here on a night just like this, and Cole had said the moonlight looked like it was bleeding across the lake. I loved that description, and that's how we became Bleeding Moonlight."

I whipped around to look at Cole and caught him flashing me a grin. "I have my moments," he said with a shrug.

Ezra motioned for me to sit down on the sand beside him, but as soon as I hit the ground, Silas lifted me into his lap. I leaned back into the guitarist's warmth, comfortable in his powerful arms. Abel plunked down in front of me and dropped his head on my thighs, and Cole lounged on the sand just to my left.

We were a puzzle that fit perfectly together.

Silas brushed my hair off my shoulder and gave it a soft kiss, while I

combed Abel's blond strands with my hands.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked, feeling tiredness creeping into my bones after the emotional day.

"Right now?" Silas murmured into my ear.

My lips curled. "Tomorrow. Next week. Next month."

"We'll make music, and we'll make love," the guitarist responded.

Abel twisted to look at us from my lap, his green eyes shining. "It's the same thing, isn't it?"

It was for the five of us. Music had brought us together, and in its boundlessness, we'd found that love had no limits, either.

Together, we'd pave our own path.

Together, we were infinite.

EPILOGUE

ADELINE

THE CLOCK TICKED on the wall of my living room, one of the few pieces still left to pack in the dozens of boxes scattered throughout the house. I glanced at it when we returned from a quick lunch. “What time are they going to be here again?”

Cole came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Five pm, darling. Staring at the clock won’t make it tick any faster.”

“Abel and Ezra are going to purr like kittens when they find out how badly you’ve missed them these past few days,” Silas said, walking by us and flicking my chin. “Their egos really don’t need the extra encouragement.”

“I just hope everything worked out okay in LA,” I muttered, nibbling on my bottom lip. “The two of them had a lot to handle in just over a week. I can’t imagine how they managed to find a house for all of us and sort everything out with the label in such a short time.”

“They were highly motivated to get it done so they could come back to you,” Cole said, tightening his hold on me. “Silas,” he called out to the guitarist who’d begun taping up a box across the room. “I feel like we didn’t make a point to enjoy this time as much as we should have.” His pressed a light kiss to my temple. “This is the last time we’ll have you to ourselves in God knows how long. Between packing up this house and wrapping things up at the studio, we haven’t spent enough quality time together.”

The last two weeks had been hectic, starting the day after the show at the Barnyard. Suddenly, there’d been a million decisions to make and things to do, and then Ezra and Abel had left with Barney to deal with things in LA, and I was still wrapping my head around my life changing overnight. The news about me joining the band hadn’t leaked yet. Bleeding Moonlight’s label was insisting we get my contract in order before going to the press. In a few hours, Ezra would be returning with the documents, and then all I had to do was sign it, and it would be official.

“You’ve seen me every single day,” I pointed out, craning my neck to look back at him.

“You know that’s not what he means,” Silas piped in, drawing my attention. His dark eyes narrowed dangerously, and my core clenched on instinct.

“You’ve slept here every night,” I shot back, trying to discreetly rub my

thighs together. I knew if they saw, they'd pounce on me immediately. "That's not enough for you?"

"Never," Cole said behind me. I could hear the grin in his voice. His finger landed on my chin, and he turned my face until our lips met in a kiss that threatened to make me forget all about packing. "Good thing we have a few more hours left," he purred, pulling away. "I have some compelling ideas on how we can make the time go by faster."

I laughed lightly, twisting in his arms. "We need to finish here first. Good thing you're highly motivated."

He groaned, rolling his eyes. "Damn you for using my words against me."

I left them in the living room and walked to the kitchen where a pile of bowls and plates were still waiting to be wrapped. Rays of sunshine splayed across the surface of the kitchen island, and through the open window, birds chirped, calling to each other before flitting away.

I got to work, tearing off pieces of coarse brown paper and wrapping it around the ceramics. Tonight, I'd be leaving this house forever. It had gone on the market last week, with the help of the real estate agent that had sold Silas his condo. I thought I'd be relieved to be rid of it, but now, in the remaining hours, a creeping nostalgia settled in my bones. I'd been raised here. Each room contained memories of my parents, of Molly, of a life that seemed so different from the one I had now. I'd cried, laughed, grieved, and loved in this house. And soon, another family would be doing the same.

I placed my hands on the counter and closed my eyes. I was saying so many goodbyes so quickly. In a few days, I'd be boarding a plane and moving to LA with the guys. Despite growing up in River Valley, I've never felt particularly fond of the town until now. That's how it went, didn't it? We took familiar things for granted until we were on the verge of losing them. Their beauty emerged suddenly, as if it were something new, but really, it was there all along. I thought back to the lights at the Tulson Estate gardens, the Crooked Stool in the early afternoons before it opened, Annie's omeletes and red vinyl booths, Gravehurst Park's solemn splendor during sunset...

A pair of strong arms wrapped around my waist.

"Cole, we can't keep getting distracted," I murmured. "The movers will be here in just a few hours."

"Don't worry, he's moving the boxes to the garage right now."

I whipped around, startled. "Abel."

The singer smiled at me, his eyes dancing over my face. Hair pulled back

in a low bun, two-day-old scruff, and barely noticeable bags under his eyes. He looked tired, but his expression radiated warmth as he tugged me closer.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you wouldn’t be back for another few hours.”

“We wrapped up early and switched to an earlier flight. We didn’t want Silas and Cole getting too used to being alone with you,” he said with a smirk. “So Cole’s been distracting you, huh? I bet I can do a much better job than him.”

He kissed me, his tongue sneaking past my lips and triggering a wave of lust. His hands moved to my ass, squeezing and pulling until my hips were flush with his. I felt his erection against my thigh, my thoughts hurried out of my head, and a greedy, needy moan escaped my throat.

When he broke the kiss, he wore a cocky grin. “Told you.”

“Huh?” I was so dazed I couldn’t remember what he had said earlier.

Abel laughed, shaking his head. “I’ve missed you. Ezra and I have been going crazy on our own.” He brought my knuckles up to his lips and kissed them one by one.

I watched as he dragged his full lips across my skin. “I missed you, too. I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Is that why you seemed sad when I first saw you in here?”

“Don’t be so full of yourself.” I pushed lightly at his chin with my knuckles. “I was just reminiscing, I guess.”

His expression turned serious. “Change is hard, isn’t it?”

“A little.” I shrugged, giving him a soft smile. “But I’m excited to start my new life.”

“You have the four of us to help you through it,” he said, his eyes softening.

“I’m counting on it.” I gave his ass a playful whack before sneaking my hand up his shirt. “Speaking of, where’s Ezra?”

He sucked in a harsh breath when I pinched a nipple. “Ezra’s showering. The stewardess spilled coffee all over his clothes just as we were about to land.”

“Let’s go see if he’s done.”

Abel nodded, biting his lip as I stepped away and extracted my hand from under his clothes. Before I could drop it at my side, he gripped it and tangled our fingers together. It was like he couldn’t stand the thought of not touching me. I searched his gaze for a moment, looking for doubts and hesitations a

part of me was still worried he'd feel, but I saw none.

The night after the concert, the five of us had come back to his house and talked until the sun began to shine through the trees in his backyard. We'd agreed to take things slowly, one day at a time, while we figured out how we would work together. None of us had been in a relationship with four other people before. None of us knew we had this much love to give.

Abel's green eyes were clear, holding none of the pain I had gotten used to seeing inside of them. Now they shone with contentment and hope and unmistakable desire. In the days before he and Ezra left, I'd discovered that he liked to watch. He'd make love to me and then sit back on his couch and watch as the rest took their turns. I wondered then if one day he'd like to join us.

I wondered if one day might be today.

In the living room, Cole and Silas had taken out the last of the boxes, and when we came in, their attention quickly turned to us. Cole's lips curved into a smirk at whatever he saw on our faces. "Finally."

"Is Ezra still showering?" I asked in a lowered voice.

"All done." The drummer emerged from the hallway with only a towel wrapped around his narrow hips. Drops of water peppered his chest, sliding down and catching on his nipples, moving along the lines of his abs, and disappearing into the reddish hair that peeked out of the towel.

The divine sight of him wet, and the agony of being apart for a week and a half, propelled me forward. He opened his arms, catching me as I rushed into him with desperate haste, claiming my mouth with his and kissing me, kissing me, kissing me. I'd forgotten that Abel still held my hand in his, but he gave it a squeeze and then, I was swinging back into his hard chest and getting lost in a different man.

A moment later, four hands became eight, and I was led to the bedroom where my old mattress lay bare on the ground. I didn't care. I didn't care that we were in a nearly empty house, that the movers might come early and find a lot more than they'd bargained for, that we hadn't discussed the many logistics we needed to sort out. All I cared about was satisfying the need that was roaring inside—the need to burn together and become one.

Ezra pulled off my shirt, and I tugged on his towel, letting it unravel and fall at his feet. He was already at half-mast, and I gripped him, wanting to feel the velvety skin under my palm. I began to move my hand, up and down, feeling him grow stiffer and larger with every drag. He moaned. "Fuck. Just

like that.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the others getting undressed, their shirts and pants puddling on the ground, buttons hitting the floor with sharp clanks. Someone made quick work of my shorts, helping me step out of them, and then Abel was there, dropping on his knees between Ezra and I and pressing his nose into the damp fabric covering my cunt.

My breath hitched, and I leaned back into the massive body at my back—Silas. “Abel. Are you sure?” I asked. He was going to participate with us for the first time, and I needed him to be sure. “What if it’s just the time apart—”

“I’m sure,” he growled against my clit before tilting his face up and looking at me directly in the eye. “So fucking sure. I’m done sitting on the sidelines. I’m all in, Adeline. All fucking in.”

My heart felt like it was going to burst. Abel grinned at me, wrapped his fingers around the fabric of my underwear, and pulled it down. Cole appeared beside Ezra, threading his fingers through my hair and pressing my forehead to his. “Didn’t I tell you, darling? When we’re together, everything will work out just fine.”

About an hour and eleven collective orgasms later, I thought Cole had really undersold it. Things weren’t just fine. Things were absolutely, undeniably, rapturously perfect.

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