



KENNEDY RYAN

SOUL SERIES BOOK ONE

MY  
SOUL  
TO KEEP

*It seems the things worth keeping are  
often the hardest to hold...*

MY  
SOUL  
TO KEEP

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KENNEDY RYAN



***My Soul to Keep***

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# *Dedication*

*Dedicated to those who pursue their dreams relentlessly.*

*Don't ever stop!*

# Acknowledgments

Let's go into this knowing I could screw it up. Having so many people who have been awesome that I might inadvertently leave someone out—well, that's a great problem to have. There have been so many bloggers, readers, and other writers who have been an absolute blessing. There really isn't another word that could fully encompass my appreciation. So many awesome folks in the romance community have supported me, and I KNOW there are a few I can't get outta here without mentioning. There's a close cluster of amazing writers who I have turned to over and over again who are always there for me. My pub buddy Sofia Tate for always making time to read for me with such an exacting eye. I love you deeply, m'friend. Corinne Michaels, my paper bag when I hyperventilated over self-publishing for the first time. You're one of the smartest ladies I know, and there is a place reserved in my heart for you! Adriana Locke, whose wisdom and pure heart have guided and encouraged me too many times to count. Mandi Beck, my #SweetDirty, who always takes time for all my dumb questions, and who makes me laugh HARD all the time. To AL Jackson for taking time last year to read some chick she'd never heard of, and who remains one of the most generous writers I know. To my Indie Chicks, thank you for answering questions, offering support and demonstrating community! Thank you to my awesome betas—Margie, Mary Ruth, Michelle, Sheena, and Shelley. You guys sure did put up with a lot on this one. Thank you for your honest opinions, and your patience when I asked for it over and over and over . . . and over . . . again. Thank you to Melissa Saneholtz, patron saint of clueless authors, for not making me feel like an idiot when I didn't know things and for deftly redirecting me when I thought I knew it all. You are rare, and I'm so lucky to

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And everyone reading this book. Thank you for taking a chance on me and for sharing this journey. It means the world.



# Chapter ONE

Kai

MAMA HAS BEEN DYING ALL DAY.

ALS is a stealthy thief. It stole Mama's wide, crooked-tooth smile and left her face a plane of twitches and jerks. That funny *snap, snap* she'd do with her fingers before she started making a fresh batch of biscuits? That saucy little pop and sway of her hips when she raced around the house on Sunday mornings, late for church? ALS snatched those long ago. Now, Mama's fingers lie limp at her sides on the bed sheets, the complete stillness startling and sad.

ALS is a slow assassin and it's been killing my mama for five years.

But I only realize now that the sound of her breath—barely a wheeze breezing past her lips—is the sound of her dying *today*.

"Mama?"

I bundle up a question and a plea into that one word and pray for an answer to either. I'm asking if she's still here. I'm begging her to stay. Oh, I hear that thin, labored breath. I feel that thready pulse, faintly thrumming through the vellumed skin of her wrist. I know she's *alive*, but is she still *here*? I've sensed her soul wrestling with her body all week, trying to break free for the promise of Heaven that keeps Mama going on her hardest days.

The Hospice workers trickle in and out of Mama's small, orderly bedroom, keeping her as comfortable as a woman slowly choking on her own

breath can be. They don't know if she can hear me. They only know that she can no longer respond. I am left waiting for the battle to end and for her soul to escape its bodily misery. Mama has endured this last stretch of a race I wouldn't wish on anyone.

I confess there were times I longed for this day. Longed for it to all be over, not just for Mama but for me too. I know it's selfish, but things have been so hard. So different from before. Most of my life, I have been at the center of Mama's world. Dance classes, cheerleading, gymnastics, and vocal lessons—I did them all. Our life was a flurry of activity, shuffling between the small diner downstairs Mama owns with Aunt Ruthie and any number of things I was involved in. Mama dedicated a good part of her life and energy to making sure when my big break came, I'd be ready. But the big break is in my heart. And even though months ago, with the last few words Mama could actually speak, she assured me she was ready, I know I am not.

The tears burn like kerosene, but I refuse to close my eyes. What would I miss? Her eyes flickering open for a last glance? Her mouth pulling into that tender just-for-me smile one final time? I won't look away.

“You need to get some rest, darlin’.”

Aunt Ruthie's voice sneaks up on me from behind. I drag my eyes from Mama's face, pale against the faded floral pillowcase long enough to glance over my shoulder. Aunt Ruthie leans into the doorjamb, which I think is the only thing holding her up. Fatigue and weariness have made themselves at home in the deeper crevices around her mouth and eyes. Running Glory Bee, the best little restaurant in our small town, Glory Falls, by herself hasn't been easy. She may not be blood, but she *is* family, and she's been there for Mama and me through all of this.

Mama was the cook of the operation, and Aunt Ruthie, her best friend since third grade, was the business mind. It's so ironic that as far as I can tell, my Korean mother makes the best Southern food this side of the Mississippi. She's known nothing but Georgia though, so her Korean heritage is not so

much lost as never found. My grandparents, a Southern Baptist pastor and his wife, adopted her days after she was born. They brought her home from their mission trip, much to their congregation's confusion and then delight. That little, odd-looking girl, so exotic among the farmers and simple, hard-working folks became the sweetheart of Glory Falls Baptist Church. And when Grandpa finally retired, his young assistant pastor was the natural candidate for his replacement *and* Mama's husband.

A hurt so old it's cracked and fragile, threatening to fall apart if I think on it too long, lies heavy on my heart. Daddy should be here. He should be the one holding Mama's hand and crying and loving her until the end. No telling where he is, but it sure as hell ain't here. He hasn't been for many years.

Son of a bitch.

Mama would tap my wrist for swearing. Aunt Ruthie never really cared about the bad words. Her hand on my shoulder reminds me she wants me to rest, but I'm not sure I can leave Mama's side.

"Go on out to the front porch for a bit, Kai Anne. Grab some air." Aunt Ruthie's Southern drawl is even slower than usual, exhaustion dragging at the words.

"No, I don't want . . . I can't . . ."

The words fade like my hope.

"A few minutes won't hurt, honey."

I look up and over my shoulder, snagging her eyes with mine, trying to see if she actually believes it. And if so, how much time do I have left with Mama? A day? Two?

"You really believe that?"

"I'll call you in here if . . ." Aunt Ruthie's words follow the same trail mine do, and I wonder if her hope is as faint. "I'll call if you need to come."

Mama's still as a tomb. Her dark hair fans out behind her. Her eyes are closed, and it's been days since I've seen them open, but I remember those eyes. They tilt more than mine. They're darker than mine. My skin is a fainter

gold. My faith is not as strong. She always said I was the brightest thing in this town, but I am a shadow of her in every way that counts. And when she's gone, what will I be then?

I settle onto the front step with its loose board that Mama never got around to fixing. Daddy promised at least once a week to replace this board that wiggles beneath my bottom as I wait here for the sunrise. I was eight when he left, and always wondered if Mama never fixed that board because she'd be admitting Daddy was never coming home.

Arms around my knees, shivering against the cold, bare feet on the next step down, I wait. I wait for Mama's favorite time of day. Mama loved . . . Mama *loves* the sunrise. A new day means new mercies, she'd always say. God's mercies are new every morning. I search the sky now for mercy. For respite. For light. For a stay of the death hovering over our little house tucked down a dirt road. I wait for the sun to stretch up over the horizon, but right now, I only see dawn; that limbo that hangs between night and day. If I can only see the sunrise.

*God, give me one more day.* One more day of Mama's fresh mercies.

And just as I'm sure the light is coming to brighten the smudgy hue of dawn, the screen door behind me creaks open. Aunt Ruthie is standing there, face lit by the porch light.

"You better come." She thumbs at the tears sliding down her hollowed cheeks. "Come on say good-bye."

This is the break I could never be ready for. Mama breaking free of this world. Free of the pain. This disease has pressed her like a flower between pages. I look back to the sky, but there is still no sun. Still no mercy.

Only dawn.

When I go to Mama, it feels like the room holds its breath, as if it's waiting for something. Everything is so still. I don't know how much of my mama is left in this body, frail and stiff and paralyzed, but whatever part of her remains would hate this. She's fastidious. She'd hate the fact that she

cannot control her own drool. That someone else tends to her most intimate needs. When Daddy left, there was a span when Mama was so broken, truly on her own for the first time and unsure if she would manage. For the most part, she recovered. The fiercely independent woman she became would hate all the ways she can no longer take care of herself.

She twists and jerks under the sheets. Even with her eyes closed, a frown puckers her otherwise slackened face. She's not at ease, and yet I see why Aunt Ruthie called me. At any moment, she may be gone. I wonder why she lingers. Mama believes so deeply in the peace beyond this life. As much as I'll miss her, as much as I already feel the black hole spreading over my heart like an ink blot, I want that peace for her. I want her to go.

And then it occurs to me. Maybe I know what Mama's waiting for. I pull back the covers, pressing my fit body to her frail one, laying my warmth against her, and I say the words she used to comfort me countless times. The prayer that many a night she'd say to send me on my way.

"Now I lay me down to sleep." As soon as the words leave my mouth, tears leak down my cheeks. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

I lean closer, absorbing as much of her essence as I can before she leaves this world because there will never be another like her. I wrap my arms tight around her tiny, fitful body fighting for peace and whisper in her ear.

"If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

And like my words turned a key to the door she needed to walk through, her body stills. I swear the room around us sighs. Mama draws one last labored breath and then no more.

# Chapter TWO

Kai

*“YOU’D BE LATE FOR YOUR OWN funeral, Kai.”*

The words in my head, as clear as if Mama is rushing off the L.A. Metro bus behind me, pounding alongside me on the sidewalk, jar my thoughts. Even as my heart pinches in my chest, my mouth pulls into my mama’s smile. The one her little bits of wit and wisdom always squeezed out of me growing up. The ones that still do.

“I know, Mama.” I adjust my backpack and quicken my steps. “I’m working on it.”

My phone squawks from my pocket. I know it’s Santos, my roommate and best friend, texting me. Bugging me. Worried about me, as usual. Not breaking stride, I pull the phone out, and sure enough.

***Santos: What the hell? This is not the day to be late. U OK?***

With my head lowered, I rapid-fire my thumbs across the keypad and barely miss walking into a tow zone sign. I stand still to finish the message. I don’t care if it’s Cher waiting at our voice coach’s house. Even she’s not worth a concussion. And as much as I love Cher, that’s saying something.

***Me: Up the street and on my way. Missed my bus. Audition was a joke. Can’t wait to tell. Who’s Grady’s mystery guest?***



***Santos: Hurry your narrow ass up and see for yourself.***

I have a sneaking suspicion I'll be less impressed than Santos, which doesn't take much. An unabashed celebrity whore, he even gets the autographs of obscure reality stars. Really? Excuse me for not being impressed that you are just like me, only you get paid to shop, eat, and act the fool on camera. That isn't talent, and I don't need you to sign anything for me. But thanks.

I stomp the last few blocks to Grady's bungalow. Every time my foot slams into the sidewalk, I envision that vile man's face from the audition I just left under it. Any audition that ends with an invitation to suck a man's dick is suspect, wouldn't you say? I'm tired of being propositioned and objectified and pressured to sleep with these predators who assume I'll set up a drive-thru between my legs to get a record deal. I know girls who do that. Some days, I wish I could throw off my principles and take the easy way. On my back and on my knees, but Mama's voice, even six months after she passed, is still strong in my ears. Strongest in my heart.

Grady's bungalow is deceptively simple. I haven't been in L.A. long, but even I know anything in Arcadia costs a pretty penny. At least more pretty pennies than I have to rub together. Grady houses a small studio in the back of the bungalow where he teaches voice and music. He and Santos have been my saving grace in this town. One my longtime friend and lifeline, the other a mentor of sorts who has grown into the closest thing I've felt to family since I moved here from Georgia.

The heavy wooden door stands open, with just the screen door between me and the muted sounds beyond the entrance and down the hall. Judging by all the cars in the driveway and along the street, every one of Grady's students has shown up to meet this mystery guest he's been dangling in front of us like a carrot for the last couple of weeks. Guess I'm here to bite like everyone else.

I step inside and close and lock the door after me. Even in this

neighborhood, you can never be too safe. And I doubt anyone will be coming after me considering how late I am. The living room, with its eclectic mixture of modern and antique, stands empty. The music, now that I'm inside, reaches me from the rear studio.

And what music. I stop, needing to stand still for a moment. Needing these notes to wash over and past me. I've never heard Grady's old baby grand sound like this. Like some magician is coaxing tricks from it, nimbly charming the keys to make miracles. I don't know classical music very well. Get much beyond "Chopsticks" and I can't name tunes, but even I know that whoever is playing is brilliant. Just moments before, I needed to stand still, but now my feet urge me forward. I have to see who's playing. I want to see them in the throes of this.

I stand in the doorway of the studio, ignoring all the other students standing along the walls and sitting on the hardwood floor. My eyes stick to the man I can see just head and shoulders of in the space between the lifted lid and the piano desk. His eyes are closed, and thank God for that, because it would be so awkward for him to catch me gaping at him. I instantly know him, of course. It's Rhyson Gray, one of the most gifted and well-known musicians in the world, but right now, I don't see the shiny layers of fame, wealth, and privilege I would typically associate with him. The piece he's playing holds him captive, sloughing away all those layers until only this raw yearning on his face remains. His eyes are closed tightly, his brows knitted with the passion of the music he seduces out of the piano.

His features are almost too much. His nose is strong, straight, and prominent. His brows are thick, dark, and slashing. His mouth is wide, sensual, and full. The hard angle of his jaw clenches, like this piece he's playing submerges him in the same emotion drowning me, but he disciplines his face against it. His shoulders are broader than I imagined they'd be, the muscles flexing beneath the white T-shirt covering them as he plays. I'm not even sure if he's handsome, but I know he's dangerously magnetic, like the

center of a whirlpool. Something that would suck you in and down before you had time to pull away.

I don't know this piece, but it knows me. Each note slides in, occupying some corner of my soul that's been barren and empty. And the melody breezes in, scattering dust and cobwebs. Breathing in life. This music, with its rushing crescendos and heaving turns, refreshes me, and I have no idea why. Is it the music? Is it him? Are they separate or somehow inextricably entwined? I love music and know like I know my own name that it is what I'm meant to do, but I've never been moved this way by it. Not this deeply, this quickly, this thoroughly. Like those fingers touching those keys are actually touching me. And though I'm completely covered, I feel naked and exposed. I can only hope that no one sees. That he won't see.

And then the music ends. With a crash of keys, it's over, and thunderous applause presses into the awed silence that immediately follows. Those who were sitting, stand and clap and cheer. We all know we've brushed up against greatness. I'm grateful for the clamor, giving me time to compose myself. To reassemble all the pieces that music broke me into. And the culprit—the man who undid me so effortlessly—opens his eyes like he's coming to himself. Like he'd forgotten we were even there, voyeurs to this fantastic musical display. And then I see those layers wrapping back around him. It starts with the tightening of those full lips, pulled into a practiced smile. It moves to his shoulders, pressed back with pride. And it settles over his eyes, the naked passion of that music hidden in seconds behind the dark, guarded eyes that all of a sudden stare back at me.

# Chapter

## THREE

### RHYSON

WHEN I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD taking the stage at Royal Albert Hall in London for the first time, I told myself it was a sea of faces out there in the audience. I never allowed myself to focus on one particular person. In every venue since, whether before thousands or a group as small as Grady's vocal class, I always block out the faces. I smile. I may even bow, but I blur the faces to remain blissfully oblivious to their expressions of approval, pleasure, or disdain. It insulates me from the crowd and cocoons me inside the music, which is the safest place I have found so far.

Except today, I open my eyes at the end of the Chopin piece, prepared to blindly glance over the crowd in Grady's studio, when I see a face. A *particular* face in a sea of faces. Everyone around her claps, but she doesn't. Her hands hang at her sides, and her expression hovers somewhere between devastation and delight. When music truly affects me, I don't clap either. I don't stand to my feet. I *absorb*. I let the music change me, touch me, and possess me. That's what she's doing. I recognize it. Everyone around her appreciated my music, but I can see that she, this girl, communed with it.

She is looking at me. I am looking at her. Her face . . . I wish I had the right words. I write songs and create music for a living. I practically bleed my thoughts and feelings into everything I compose, into every lyric. But I can't find the words to adequately describe this girl. Maybe I've seen girls prettier

than she is, but it's hard to tell, because even with the width of Grady's small music room separating us, it's like I've been hurled into an electrical storm. My brain is charged and my thoughts are icy water suspended and trapped inside my head. It's a face I can only inadequately describe as . . . extravagant. Like God spared no expense when He made this girl.

If I take her in parts, maybe I will do a better job of this. She has this wide mouth the color of fire-blasted rose petals. Her chin is slightly pointed, narrow, but her face widens and flares at her high cheekbones. Her eyes, the darkest, richest sable—glintless, fleckless, bottomless brown—carry a dramatic tilt, and I am sure a glance from her could seduce me. This, combined with her honeyed skin, make me wonder if she has Asian ancestry somewhere down the line. Her eyebrows are thick and smooth over an abundance of eyelashes. So thick and so long they look fake, but I know they are not. There is nothing fake about this girl. No artifice. Not even makeup. Her beauty is raw and unfiltered. Long, dark hair runs down her back. Of all things, she wears a Madonna T-shirt from the The Virgin Tour. Her skinny jeans mold her slim legs. Small feet in Toms. Simple silver musical notes in her pierced ears. She is this heady mixture of exotic and mundane, and just being in the same room is giving me a buzz. Imagine if I touched her. Imagine if I kissed her. Imagine if I fucked her. I'd be done for.

But I suspect she'd be worth it.

Grady's hand on my shoulder, his words of praise, and the students crowding around me pry my attention from the petite girl by the door. And when my eyes again seek out that particular face in the sea of faces, she's gone.

# Chapter

## FOUR

Kai

“YOU DON’T WANT HIS AUTOGRAPH?” SANTOS chomps on a celery stick and glances over my shoulder to the other side of Grady’s dining room. It’s where I’m sure the whole vocal class, definitely the girls, cluster around Rhyson Gray.

“You know I’m not an autograph kinda girl.” I bypass the crackers and the bite-sized pastries that will be anything but bite-sized on my hips.

“But it’s freaking Rhyson Gray. You can’t tell me you weren’t impressed by that piece he played.”

My fingers hover over a bruschetta. Nah. I’ll eat a salad at The Note when I go in for my shift tonight.

“Yeah, it was impressive, of course.”

And disruptive. And fantastic. And the best thing I’ve ever heard. As soon as he had looked away, releasing me from whatever musically induced trance I found myself in, I high-tailed it out of the music room and headed for the food set up in here.

“Then why is everyone else over there schmoozing the best musician we’re ever likely to meet?” San waves his celery under my nose. “And we’re the only putzes at the hors d’oeuvre table?”

“You know I don’t do schmooze.”

“You meet a guy who was playing on stages all over the world before his



balls dropped, you break the no-schmooze rule.”

This isn’t actually about my no-schmooze rule. It’s a different one. Life has taught me that you survive by your rules. When you don’t follow the rules, you get hurt. Even worse, sometimes you hurt everyone else. My daddy taught me that when he ran off with the church secretary. So, yeah, I have rules. And this one I abide by religiously.

No rock stars.

I know it sounds weird from someone who wants to be a singer, but like all rules, this one has a reason. My last run-in with a big rock star in this town . . . let’s just say what I remember of that night would not make Mama proud. I was lucky to get out of that situation relatively unscathed, but I’m not tempting fate again. I put my dreams on hold for years when Mama got sick, and I’d do it again and again. To have those last few years with her, even as debilitated as she became, was everything to me. But now it’s my time. It’s why I packed up my few belongings and followed San out here to Los Angeles I can’t afford to be distracted now.

And when Rhyson Gray finished playing that piece and opened his eyes, he looked right at me, electrocuting every molecule in my body without even trying. He just opened his eyes, and something in me sizzled. Something started stirring in dark, quiet corners. I can’t be sure he felt it too, but somehow, I think he did. I know it sounds ridiculous because he’s one of the greatest musicians in the world and I’m, well, just me . . . but I think he did.

And *that* would be distracting.

So while everyone else fawns over him, asks him for the secrets to his success, and probably offers to screw him in Grady’s bathroom, I’m considering bruschetta. Because in the rock star category, he would be Grade-A rock star. He’s not just some piano prodigy all grown up. Think Coldplay. Think Mumford and Sons. Think Tom Odell.

Think Rhyson Gray.

Santos is looking at me strangely because I have been quiet for . . . how

long? Lost in thought over Rhyson Gray. Oh, this won't do. Already distracted.

"You're welcome to go over there," I say. "I'm gonna eat."

"Only you aren't actually eating anything. You'll just consider food for the next few minutes and then give up. You haven't fully regained your appetite since . . ."

Santos leaves the last words unspoken, and his eyes grow more concerned.

Not this again. But he's right. I never understood being so sad you didn't want to eat until Mama died. Having to force yourself to do the basic things that keep you in this world when the person you love most has left it. San has been after me to join a grief support group for months. I headed out here just weeks after Mama passed, needing to put as much distance between me and Glory Falls as possible. The awkward sympathy of every customer who came into the diner. The not-quite-right biscuits the new cook served up. Mama's silent sewing machine and half-finished pillow shams. Reminders and memories tucked into corners and waiting around every bend. I didn't need them. Every moment we had is stored in my heart, and there's no running from this pain, but boy, did I try. Since three thousand miles and a few time zones didn't do it, I'm not sure what ever will.

I finally give San a glance that begs him to leave well enough alone even though I'm not sure how well it is. I can't go there. Not after the day I've had. His sigh is a concession and a reprieve.

"I'm just saying you need to eat more, Kai."

"My ass begs to differ," I say lightly, grateful that he's letting me off that hook at least for now.

"Your ass looks fine to me."

"Gross, San."

Santos is gorgeous in a smoldering, Latin lover kind of way, but he's also been my best friend since we were seven. Think your brother checking you

out, and . . . gross.

“Just saying, objectively.” San laughs and snags the very bruschetta that almost got me seconds ago.

“If nothing’s happening on the vocal side, I’ll have to focus on the dance route for now.” My eyes track the bread and tomato temptation on its journey from his fingers to his mouth. “So I have to be disciplined with my eating.”

He just nods even though he knows weight watching for dance is what I hide behind.

“Speaking of the vocal side, how’d the audition go?” he asks. “You said it was a joke?”

“Ugh.”

“What happened?”

Santos’s lips already quirk into a half grin. I’m glad he finds some amusement in the never-ending drama that is my life trying to make it in this industry, in this pit of vipers.

“So the producer asked me to sing something older, something I like. I belt out ‘If I Could Turn Back Time.’ I mean, it’s Cher. How could I go wrong with Cher, right?”

“You and Cher.”

“Shut up. The woman’s a goddess.” I fight back a grin and keep talking. “I can tell he’s impressed. There are three of them in the room, and he asks the other two guys to give us a minute.”

“Oh, hell.” Santos’s eyes narrow, and I know his protective instincts are already kicking in. “I see where this is going.”

“Exactly. He goes on to tell me that he loved my singing. Thinks I have real potential, but he just wants to make sure I’m willing to do *whatever* it takes.”

“Oh, God,” Santos groans and buries his head in his hands before peeking at me from under a lock of dark hair. “What happened?”

“First, he recommended augmentation.”

“Augmen—of what?”

“Breast implants.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. At least two cup sizes up, he said.”

“What’d you do?”

“I just kind of stared at him with my small, offended breasts. I didn’t know what to say, so he just kept on going.”

“He had *more*?”

I snatch a bruschetta from the tray. Screw it. I’m teaching a dance class tomorrow. I’ll twerk these calories away. It feels good to *want* food, so I’m going for it.

“Oh, boy, did he have more.” I pop the carby dream into my mouth and groan. “Best thing I had all day.”

“Come on, Kai. What’d he say?”

“He had very little to say. He just unzipped his pants and looked at the spot in front of him where I guess I was supposed to drop to my knees and suck him off.”

“Tell me you punched him in his face.” Santos balls his fists at his sides. “Or I’m going back there and doing it myself.”

“I said, ‘Let me get this straight, you want me to suck your dick?’”

Santos’s eyes catch something right over my shoulder and stretch wide. His mouth drops open. And then that voice—the one I used to fall asleep listening to with track number nine on repeat—speaks into my horrified ears.

“Are you taking requests?”

I practically choke on my bruschetta. Santos’s mouth crooks into a weird shape, very close to a smile, much like a smirk. Even though he doesn’t actually say “busted,” the wicked mischief in his eyes does. If he laughs at my predicament, he’ll be picking tomato bits out of his hair for the rest of the night.

With dread, trepidation, and a sick feeling in my stomach that has nothing

to do with what I have or haven't eaten, I finally look over my shoulder, and there he is. Rhyson Gray, standing with Grady, who gives him a look that is probably supposed to chastise him. I get the impression it would take a lot to chastise this man grinning at me unrepentantly.

"Sorry," he says, not sounding sorry even a little bit, grey eyes laughing at me. "I couldn't resist."

"You could have tried." Grady shakes his head. At least he looks apologetic. "I'm sorry about that, Kai. Rhys has a wicked sense of humor."

As long as he keeps it away from me.

"No problem." I spare Rhyson a quick glance before looking back at Grady, and I wish I hadn't. Rhyson is even more mesmerizing up close. His hair is a mess of dark and burnished colors with lighter streaks. It's just long enough to hang over his forehead and brush his neck, and he runs his hands through it every few seconds like it's driving him crazy. Which must drive the girls crazy, if my reaction is anything to go by.

"Rhys, this is Santos, one of my vocal students, and this," Grady says, pulling me into a side hug, "is Kai, the assistant I was telling you about. She keeps me straight."

"Oh, I don't know about that." I hate how husky my voice sounds all of a sudden.

"You're Southern?" Rhyson tilts his head, considering me like a zoo animal who's been captured and domesticated for his inspection.

"What? How'd you know?"

"You're kidding, right?" His brows go into hiding under the hair hanging low over his forehead. "With that accent?"

Okay, maybe he's not so irresistible. Maybe he's a bit of an asshole. I'm self-conscious about my Georgia accent, especially here in Los Angeles. It's a sore thumb for the ears.

"Guess there's no hiding it."

"I didn't mean to be rude." Rhyson's eyes try to tease me out of being

offended.

“But you were,” Grady says. “I think Kai’s accent is lovely.”

Which is the West Coast equivalent of “Bless your heart” and a pat on the head.

“Why, thank ya, Mistah Grady, I do declare.” I lay it on thick and bat my lashes before rolling my eyes.

“I really am sorry.” Rhyson manages to look slightly more penitent. “Grady’s been telling me about how you’ve organized everything. How he would be lost without you. I’d like to shake the hand of the woman who finally brought some order to all his chaos.”

Rhyson grabs my hand, sending little sparks up my arm. And we’re back in that moment. That little pocket of time where the rest of the room disappears and it’s just us, unable or unwilling to look away from each other. The longer our eyes hold, the darker his grey eyes go. I could drown in those eyes. Maybe I am drowning. Maybe that accounts for the burn in my chest and the shortness of breath. I can’t afford these sensations. I can’t afford this man. I won’t be distracted. I give his hand a quick shake and jerk mine back.

“I think Emmy gets that honor.” I turn to Grady, who looks close to blushing. “She gets the credit for Grady’s new lease on life.”

“Oh, yeah. The girlfriend. Another new woman in your life I need to meet.” Rhyson laughs and pounds Grady on the back. “Hopefully I’ll manage not to offend that one.”

“It’s fine,” I reassure him. “You aren’t the first person to mock my accent.”

“I wasn’t mocking. I just . . . it’s cute.”

I risk another look up at him, and it confirms what I suspected. I didn’t imagine that he felt it before too. He’s feeling it again. I’m feeling it again. It’s like the lurch of the elevator, how your stomach tips a little and you feel slightly sick, but you find yourself grinning. After a few moments of . . . whatever this is . . . we let each other’s eyes go at the same time. I drop mine



to the floor, studying the Toms on my feet to keep my eyes off his face, which I'm still not sure is classically handsome, but for darn sure fascinates me.

Silence settles around us, thickening the air until the quiet becomes awkward enough for everyone to feel it. I glance at my watch, glad to have a lifeline out of here.

"I really do need to go." I lean into Grady another inch, looking up at his distinguished face with the salt-and-pepper goatee. "I have to start my shift at the restaurant, but I'll swing through tomorrow to handle those invoices."

"Okay. Don't work too hard." His dark eyes twinkle a bit, but I know he means it. He and San take turns worrying about me.

"I can't make any promises." I loop my elbow through San's. "Does my chariot await?"

"Oh. That's right. I'm taxi tonight." He grabs one more celery stick and a cheese-laden cracker before turning to Rhysan Gray. "It was really an honor to meet you. I'm a huge fan."

Rhysan nods and smiles a bit, but I bet he doesn't even hear praise anymore, he's so used to it. San could have said, "Man, you sucked balls on that piece you played." Rhysan still would have just nodded and smiled. He turns his eyes back to me, and something on his face shifts. I hold the entirety of his attention, and I have no idea what to do with it. So I take a cue from him. I smile and I nod.

"It was nice meeting you, Mr. Gray."

"Oh, so formal. Mistah Gray." He leans into the vowels my Georgia roots always draw out. "Call me Rhys."

I hold his stare an extra moment, smile, and turn to San.

"You ready?"

"Um." He drags his eyes between Rhysan and me, raising one dark eyebrow. "Sure. Let's go."

"See you tomorrow, Grady." I allow myself one more glance at the rock

star. “Nice to meet you, Rhys.”

And nicer to be walking away, even though I feel his eyes hot on the back of me as I go.

# Chapter

## FIVE

### RHYSON

“SO HOW DO I FIX THIS?” Grady points to the section of the song he’s composing that isn’t working.

I could have told him fifteen minutes ago how to fix it, but I was waiting for this question. My opportunity.

“I’ll tell you how to fix it if you tell me more about your assistant.”

Grady’s face clouds over. Actually it’s more like a brick wall that takes over.

“No way.” Grady shakes his head. “Leave her alone, Rhys. She’s a good girl.”

“What do you think I’m going to do to her?”

Though several ideas have been percolating in my head since I met Kai last night. Grady looks at me over the eyeglasses he only wears when he’s composing. A look that says he knows exactly what I usually do with girls who look like his assistant.

“Okay, so maybe I have a bit of a track record.”

“A bit? It’s not so much a track record as the Trail of Tears, and I don’t want Kai to be one of your stops.”

“I can tell she’s . . . different, or I wouldn’t be asking you about her.”

“Oh? What’s so different about her, Rhys?”

The way she was off on the other side of the room while all the other girls

smothered me. The way she blushed when we busted her talking about some guy asking her to suck his dick. The way her Southern accent was thick and sweet like molasses. That look on her face when she heard me play. I'd sound like a real pussy if I said any of that, so I just shrug and doodle on Grady's composition pad.

"Well, the things you've told me, and she just seemed nice."

"She is, and I want her to stay that way, so hands off."

"I doubt we'll be running into each other anytime soon anyway, right?" I look up, half hoping he'll contradict me, but he gives me a satisfied grin.

"That's right." He pushes his glasses up on his nose and circles the problematic set of measures in the middle of the piece. "Now, if I could—"

His ring tone interrupts, and he glances at the screen, his face softening with a smile.

"Is it your *girlfriend*, Grady?" I've been teasing him mercilessly only because in the time I've known him, which is my whole life, Grady has never been this way about a woman.

He rolls his eyes and grunts before heading for the door.

"I'll be right back," he says over his shoulder. "Just give me a minute."

His "Hey, Em" reaches me from the narrow hall he's stepped into just beyond the music room. I can't help the goofy grin on my face. If anyone deserves to be happy, it's Grady. He's sacrificed a lot for me. When I emancipated from my parents at sixteen, he was the one wading through a messy, the-whole-world-watching court battle with me. He was the one who took me in. The least I can do is help him with this piece that I could write in my sleep.

And keep my hands off his assistant.

From my experience, there are several categories of pussy. There's groupie pussy. Those girls who just want to be able to say they slept with someone famous. Love that. We both get exactly what we expect, and we're done. Then there's the L.A. girls. My best friend Marlon calls it "thirsty

pussy.” Tit-for-tat pussy, emphasis on the tit. These ambitious girls who want to be a star and see me as their fast track. It’s a transaction, and after we’re done, they think I owe them something. A spot on the next album. An introduction to the hottest producer. A cameo in a video. Strings attached. I don’t do strings.

Grady’s assistant, Kai, made it very apparent last night she is neither of those. After that connection we had in the music room, basically a jolt of electricity that temporarily disabled my synapses, she barely looked at me. She pretended it hadn’t happened. Brushed me off. Girls don’t brush me off. No one brushes me off. I know that sounds arrogant, but it is what it is. I get the sense that she’s not so much playing hard to get as much as she actually is hard to get.

Going back over the piece, I realize a page is missing. I bend down to retrieve it from the floor.

“Grady?”

That hot, sweet molasses voice calls from the door. I hesitate about sitting all the way up because I suspect she’ll dart off as soon as she sees me. She was not just prickly last night. She was full-blown cactus. I’m not used to that with girls. Especially not girls who want to be singers. *Hello?* I’m a walking, talking, fucking opportunity to most of them. Does she not know I could be her big break? It’s like she doesn’t care.

I think that’s what I like most about her so far.

I sit up before she can leave the room. Her eyes go wide before she narrows them, and I can’t tell if she’s giving *me* the no way signal or if she’s trying to convince herself.

“I’m sorry.” Her rich voice smothers the words like gravy, weighing them down in the way I teased her about last night. “I thought Grady was—”

“Grady is.” I push the hair out of my face before slumping a little on the piano bench. “He’s talking to Emmy.”

“Oh, that’s right. They have a date today.” She smiles and glances down

at the handwritten invoice in her hand. “I needed to ask him something, but it can wait. His penmanship . . . geez Louise.”

Is she for real? Geez Louise? I haven’t heard that since repeats of *The Andy Griffith Show*. I want to hear what else she’ll say if she sticks around a little longer.

“I’m fluent in Grady.” I motion for her to give me the paper. “I bet I can interpret.”

“Really?” Doubt crinkles her eyebrows, but she hands it over. “Worth a try.”

The first thing I notice at the top of the stationery pad is Grady’s full name. Bentley Gray. Yeah, I’d go by Grady too. I glance at the slashes and marks bleeding all over the paper in my hands.

“Yeah, it says double-check the payment schedule on this student.”

“Wow.” She shakes her head, the dark, silky braid swishing over her shoulder. “I never would have guessed that. Thanks.”

She turns back toward the door. She’s leaving. I’m not the kind of guy who typically encourages girls to linger, but . . .

“So you sing?”

*Wow, Gray. Brilliant.*

She looks back over her shoulder and around the room like there might be someone else I’m addressing.

“Yeah, you.” Just in case she thinks I’m talking to my imaginary friend. “You sing?”

Everything about her screams reluctance at the top of its lungs. The glance she gives the door, like it’s her salvation. The way she taps the invoice against her leg a few times before turning to face me. The gate she locks over her eyes before she looks back at me.

“Yeah. I sing. I mean, I’ve been dancing more than singing lately, but I sing.”

“What kind of dancing?”

“Well, I do ballet, tap, modern dance, hip hop. You name it, I did it growing up. Right now, I teach a hip-hop class to fourteen-year-olds.” She snorts, twisting her wide, full lips into a half grin, half grimace. “And, yes, it’s as much fun as it sounds. I’ve been doing some small stuff in a few music videos. Nothing major.”

“But you really want to sing?”

“I want to perform, to do it all. Dance, sing, act.”

“Ah, one of those, huh? A multi-hyphenate.”

“Are you mocking me again?”

“Mocking you? No, of course not.”

She narrows those tilted eyes at me and puts a hand on one slim hip.

“Okay. Maybe a little.” The stern line I usually keep my mouth in with strangers contorts into a grin. “Come on. You spout some Jenny-from-the-Block shit and expect me not to mock you just a little?”

“We aren’t all born piano prodigies who get to do exactly what we want from the time we’re children. Some of us have to do it all and see what sticks.”

“Oh, is that what you’d call it?” Her audacity, her ignorance of my actual life, and her *nerve* sends heat crawling up my neck and loosens my lips. “Having no friends your age? Working around the clock? Being on the road more than two hundred days a year? Does that sound like the easy way up to you?”

I’ve shocked myself with that tirade. I rarely talk about my life before I emancipated from my parents. Certainly not to strangers. Even a hot, adorable stranger who stands only as high as my collarbone and has a voice that sounds like it’s been sitting out melting in the sun.

She bites her bottom lip, and as much as her assumptions irritate the hell out of me, that gesture manages to distract me. I’m struggling to remember what she did to annoy me in the first place.

“Look, I’m sorry.” She lays the invoice on the piano and slides her hand

into the pockets of her cargo shorts. “I don’t know you. All I have is what I see from the outside and read in tabloids. I wouldn’t want anyone to judge me by that.”

“You wanna make it up to me?”

At least my parents taught me to exploit every opportunity. Sadly, I was the opportunity. Still, lesson learned.

“Depends.” Kai gives me a cautious, considering look. “What did you have in mind?”

“Sing for me.”

“Sing?” Uncertainty takes over her face, and for a moment, I think she’s going to turn and run. “Just sing? Like right here? Right now?”

“Unless you’re scared, of course.” I deliberately keep my eyes glued to my fingers picking out a scale on the piano.

“Did you learn that in *Reverse Psychology for Dummies*?”

My mouth pulls into an involuntary grin even though I don’t look up from the keys.

“I’m just thinking anyone who wants to do it all,” I finally glance back at her, my fingers still playing the scale, “Should be able to sing in front of one guy.”

She rolls her eyes, but her mouth starts tugging up at the edges just a little. She takes a step closer, leaning her hip against the piano.

“What should I sing?”

Her smell surrounds me. Something fruity and sweet, but not one of those scents girls wear that scratches your throat and burns your nose.

My fingers traverse the keys in a basic scale before I look up at her, prepared to be underwhelmed by the pipes hiding in that lovely throat.

“Sing this scale and hold the last note for me as long as you can.” I pick out a basic scale I’ve heard Grady do with dozens of students over the years.

She closes her eyes, draws a deep breath, and duplicates the notes I just played with her husky voice. She holds the final note for a few seconds, and



then her breath wanes, causing the note to fade away.

“Your tone is great.”

Sliding her hands into her pockets, she rocks back on her heels, faking nonchalance.

“I bet you say that to all the singers.”

“Then you really don’t know me.” I hold up a finger. “And you didn’t let me finish.”

She offers a quick nod, her posture deliberately casual. But I can tell she’s nervous about my opinion. Believe me—I’ve lived enough of my life looking for affirmation, so I recognize the need right away.

“Your breathing is off. Not by much. I can tell you know *how* to breathe, but you aren’t executing. Your notes aren’t supported well enough.”

Even though she’s standing and I’m seated on the piano bench, she’s only a few inches above me. I reach up, my fingers hovering over her throat, but not quite touching.

“Too much energy here.”

I envy the slim fingers she rubs against the smooth skin of her neck. My fingers float over her abdomen, and I lock my eyes with hers.

“May I?”

She lowers her lashes, eyes on my hand suspended and waiting for her permission.

“May you what?”

“Touch you here?”

She clears her throat, but if I’m not mistaken, her voice still comes out a little breathier than moments before when she speaks.

“Um, sure. Of course.”

I press my hand to her stomach, and my pinky finger strokes across something resting in her bellybutton. I look at her, brows lifted to ask the silent question.

“Belly ring.” A blush rises over the slant of her cheekbones.

Everything about this girl turns me inside out. The muscles beneath my fingers tense at my touch. The thin cotton of her shirt is a semi-conductor, passing electric current from her skin to mine. I look up to see if she feels the same shock of sensation that I do. Even though she looks away, she can't hide that she does.

"So, your breathing." Even to my ears my voice sounds deeper and heavier. I force a little cough and continue. "I always say singing is the two M's, mental and muscular. Think about what you're doing every time, and about using the right muscles and breathing properly. Do that until you don't have to think about it anymore and doing it right is second nature."

I press gently into the muscles of her stomach and lift my eyes to her face.

"More energy and effort and breath here."

I reach up and rest one finger against her throat. Her skin is like warm velvet, her pulse strong under my fingers.

"You're singing too much from your throat. Pull from your diaphragm. Better support, and you'll be able to sustain your notes longer."

"You're right," she says. "I've been out of consistent vocal lessons for the last six months. I do some with Grady, but I mostly work for him, and my breathing has deteriorated some."

"Let me hear something else." I pick out another, slightly more demanding scale. She matches the notes easily, her eyes flicking to my face for the verdict as soon as she's done.

"Okay, you have a great voice. Really." I meet her eyes frankly. "But if you don't want to be just a dancer who sings, you need to work on adding some tone and texture. You do vocal compressions?"

"I haven't been as consistent with them lately."

"Get back to it. You dance every day?"

"Of course." She shrugs. "It's my job, so yeah. I dance every day."

"If you want singing to be your job, make sure you're doing vocal

compressions every day too. Add some flavor. Something that'll set you apart from every other girl after the mic. Give me one more scale. Focus on the breathing."

She closes her eyes, and the muscles in her stomach tighten under my hand. Her tone, which really is beautiful, sounds stronger. The final note, she holds longer. She hears the difference like I do, and a smile lights her face up.

"It worked!"

"You sound surprised." My laugh blends with the notes I pick out on the piano. "I *do* sing for a living. Maybe you hadn't heard?"

She rolls her eyes and nibbles at her bottom lip.

"I think I *may* have heard something about you being God's gift to the stage."

"Wow." I have to laugh at that. "Once you get started, there's snark under that hood, huh?"

Her sweet smile chips away some of the sarcasm.

"I'm just saying. I'm from Georgia, not another planet. Even in my little backwoods town we know you're one of the biggest names out there."

"Yeah, that just kind of happened."

"Things like that don't just kind of happen for most people, you know?"

"I'm not saying I didn't work hard at it. I did. I just didn't know if I'd ever perform professionally again. When I graduated from high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I knew it had something to do with music, of course, but not exactly what. So I taught voice here with Grady for a while before going to Full Sail for production."

"Are you kidding?" She grins at me. "I had no idea. So that's why you two are close."

"Yeah. That and the fact that he's my uncle."

"No way."

"He and my father are twins." I link my hands behind my head. Talking about my father usually makes me want to play less, which is why it took me

close to seven years to play again professionally after I left his house.

“Twins? Grady’s a twin?” She shakes her head. “He’s never talked much about his family.”

“Yeah, well, we aren’t exactly the Brady Bunch, and they aren’t close anymore. Thanks to me.”

“To you?”

“You’ve heard that I emancipated from my parents, right?”

She looks like she doesn’t want to admit it, but she nods.

“Yeah.”

“Well, the judge may have ruled that I was basically ready to live on my own, but Grady knew better. I came to live with him and went to the L.A. School of Performing Arts for my last two years of high school.”

Without realizing it, I’ve started playing Tchaikovsky’s *Romance in F Minor*. Even my subconscious wants to seduce her.

“It’s like breathing for you, isn’t it?” She runs her eyes over the ebony and ivory keys.

“Sorry?” I sit back and drop my hands to my lap for a few seconds before returning to the keys. “What?”

“Playing. It’s like breathing. You’re playing something so beautiful, and it’s like you’re not even conscious of it. Like it takes nothing for you to do.”

How do I admit she’s right without sounding like an arrogant prick? I don’t remember a time when I couldn’t play. I don’t even remember a time when I wasn’t good at it.

“I guess it is like breathing. It’s just an extension of who I am.”

“Oh, give me a break.” Grady strolls back into the room, pocketing his cell phone. “*It’s just an extension of who I am.*”

He actually does a frighteningly good imitation of me.

“What a load of crap. Don’t listen to him, Kai,” Grady says. “It’s one of his lines to pick up girls.”

She grins. I don’t. I want to strangle Grady when she picks up the invoice

and heads for the door. Does she believe it was just a line?

“I don’t think that even occurred to him, Grady.”

She’s wrong. It definitely occurred to me. I’d have to be dead not to want to sleep with this girl, but it doesn’t have to be now. I think I can wait. I think I want to know her first.

Damn. What’s wrong with me? *I want to know her first?* Who is *this* guy?

“I’m almost done.” She waves the invoice in the air and moves toward the door, giving us only her back. “San’s on his way to pick me up. I’ll let myself out.”

As soon as she’s a few seconds down the hall, Grady turns to me with his eyebrows bunched together.

“I thought we had an agreement.”

“I don’t remember actually *agreeing* to anything.”

“We said you’d leave Kai alone.”

“No, *you* said I’d leave Kai alone.” I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees. “Besides, we were just talking.”

“I’ve seen where ‘talking’ can lead. She’s been through enough without dealing with you.”

“What’s she been through?”

“Her mother, who she was very close to, passed away only about six months ago, right before she moved here. It was a long illness, and Kai was her main caregiver. It took a lot out of her. In a lot of ways, she’s still not over it.”

I haven’t spoken to my mom in . . . damn, years . . . but if anything happened to her, I’d take it hard. I imagine Kai had a less dysfunctional relationship with her mother. Shit, the Addams Family is less dysfunctional than mine.

“What’s up with her and the guy?”

“Santos?” Grady slips his glasses back on and takes the composition pad away from me. “Oh, they’re very close.”

My shoulders tense as I wait for more, but he's not giving me more. He wants to lure every question out of me.

"Yeah, they're close. I picked up on that. Are they just friends though?"

Grady shrugs, tapping his chin with a pencil.

"Maybe I should try a different key."

"Grady, come on. Toss me a bone here."

"Why should I?" He drops the pencil, along with any pretense that he doesn't know exactly what I want. "There are plenty of girls out there more than willing to play your games."

"Who says I want to play games? I just want to get to know her."

"Are you telling me you don't want to sleep with Kai?"

Well, he just put that right out there, didn't he? It should be awkward, him being my uncle and all, but I did live through my out-of-control adolescence under his roof. He did buy me my first condoms. We left awkward behind long ago.

"Grady, I just met the girl last night. Give me some time. Maybe start with coffee."

"I'm just saying what's the point? She's very driven. Very focused, and not one of these girls looking for anything she hasn't earned. So just let her go her way, and you keep going yours."

"Do you really think that little of me?"

"I just think that *much* of her. She hasn't been in L.A. long. Moved here from the backwoods of Georgia. She needs protecting."

"And you're her designated protector?"

"I seem to remember someone else who needed looking after when he first moved here." The stern lines of his face soften just a bit. "Wasn't I that for you when you needed it?"

Grady just played his trump card. He knows I can't, or won't, argue with that. I got nothing.

"So *now* do we have an agreement?" Grady picks up the pencil and poises

it over the song we haven't worked on yet. "You'll leave this one alone?"

I nod and start reworking the measures he's been wrestling with, but I don't say the words. Another lesson I learned from my parents the hardest of ways. Don't make promises you aren't sure you can keep.

# Chapter SIX

Kai

I PUSH BACK THE CURTAIN OF Grady's living room window for the hundredth time and check my watch. It's so unlike Santos to be late. If he's not here soon, I'll be late for my hip-hop class. I hate the thought of my girls standing around waiting for me at the community center. I'm just about to call Santos one more time, when my cell rings. It's him.

"Where are you?" I can't even bother with a decent greeting.

"I'm sorry, pipsqueak." Santos sounds irritated and apologetic at the same time. "Some guy rear-ended me."

My heart completely shifts gears, concern swallowing any impatience.

"Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I'm fine. Still about thirty minutes away, and the cops want me to stay on the scene. I don't want you to be late."

Grady and Rhyson enter the room, laughing and talking. I turn my back, blocking them out of my conversation as much as I can.

"I'll be fine, San. Just focus on that, and I'll figure it out."

I'm already calculating how late I'll be if I have to wait for the next bus, and how every stop will further delay me getting to class on time.

"I'm so sorry. I can't believe this happ—Hold on." His voice grows fainter like he's turned his head. "Hey, it's the cop."

"Go. I'll figure it out. I'm just glad you're okay. Text me once everything



settles down.”

Grady walks over to me, concern on his face.

“Everything okay with Santos?”

I focus on Grady, keeping my eyes off Rhyson, who stands back, observing our conversation, arms crossed over his chest. I will not notice the subtle bulge of his biceps pulling at the sleeves of his T-shirt. I will not remember the heat of his hand on my stomach or his finger caressing my belly ring. Or the way his, “May I touch you here?” pierced my peace of mind back in the music room.

“San was in a car accident, but he’s fine. He just has to stay at the scene.”

“He was taking you to class?”

“Yeah, but it’s okay. I’ll catch the bus to the community center.”

“You’ll be late.” Grady pulls the keys from his pocket. “I can take you.”

“No way.” I shift the bag on my shoulder and start inching toward the door. “Emmy’s coming. I want you two to have a great time. I’ll just take the bus.”

“I could take you.” Rhyson breaks his watchful silence for the first time.

My traitor heart stutters at the thought of spending more time alone with him. Grady looks even less pleased about that suggestion than I should be.

“No, I can do it.” Grady pulls out his phone. “Emmy will understand. I’ll just call her and let her know we’ll be a little later than I thought.”

“That makes no sense. You have plans, and I’m free all afternoon.” Rhyson walks to the door, propping it open with his broad back. “Come on, Kai.”

I look from Grady to Rhyson, unsure of what to do. If I take Rhyson up on his offer, I’ll make my class on time. Problem solved. But if I go with him, I might find myself knee-deep in one tall, dark, fascinating problem that I can’t solve.

Rhyson raises both brows and cocks his head toward the driveway.

“If you don’t wanna be late, we’d better go.”

I glance at my watch one more time, as if it has the answer. My girls will be waiting. I can't afford to miss this class because I need the money. I don't want Grady missing his date. Should be an easy choice, but the way my breath keeps catching in my throat when Rhyson looks at me complicates the hell out of this situation.

Screw it. Girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

"Okay. Let's go."

I drop my eyes to the floor, and when I look up, a small smile plays around Rhyson's mouth. He gestures for me to walk past him. Before I do, I lean up and plant a quick kiss on Grady's cheek.

"I'll see you in a couple of days."

He nods, but fixes his eyes on Rhyson at the door.

"Remember what we talked about, Rhys."

Rhyson runs his fingers through that silky, messy hair and nods, exchanging a look with Grady I can't begin to decipher. I walk past him and approach the only car in the driveway, the silver Porsche Cayenne that was parked there when I arrived. I didn't think much of it since there's always a student, a producer, some friend visiting Grady. The SUV is gorgeous, but not over the top. No butterfly door in sight. It's not a Ferrari or a Lamborghini Mercy. Maybe I've seen one too many episodes of *Cribs*. Or maybe Rhyson left his Lambo at home.

"Nice car." I buckle myself in, watching him slip on aviators and adjust his mirror about a millimeter.

"Thanks," Rhyson says, backing out of the driveway without looking my way again.

I tell him where to find the studio. We should be there in less than twenty minutes, but the first five minutes feel like forever. We ride in complete silence. No music. No conversation. Not even a sigh from either of us.

"So, did you and Grady finish what you were working on?" I finally ask.

Why am I attempting small talk? Back at Grady's, I was fighting what I

felt, resisting the pull of him. Now that he seems to be doing the same thing, I'm stirring the pot. This is what girls do. But not me. Usually.

Rhyson flicks me a glance before looking back at the highway.

"Uh, yeah."

Okay. That was a dismissal if I ever heard one. This is what I wanted, and yet I already miss the intensity of his eyes on me. I miss his complete attention.

"This car is kind of my namesake."

*Really, Kai? You're still trying?* But I can't help it. Parts of me that have been numb for months are humming and buzzing every time he looks at me. Every time he talks to me. Even though I have my reservations, now that he's withdrawn, I find myself drawing him back out just so I can feel those things again.

He looks over at me, one dark brow quirked up.

Damn, that's sexy. And he's waiting for me to elaborate.

"I'll tell you a secret." I open and close the snaps on my cargo shorts, focusing on my fingers before looking his way again.

"That's unexpected." One side of his mouth pulls up, but he doesn't look my way again. "I'm all ears."

"My middle name is Anne."

I wait a few seconds while he assembles that little bit of information into the goofy embarrassment my mother made of my name.

"Your name is Kai Anne?" He looks over at me, a wide grin spreading his lips and showing his teeth. "Like the pepper?"

"And like your car."

I have to laugh. I can't believe I just told the guy I was trying to shut down something that has always embarrassed me. I have no one to blame but myself. He was fully cooperating until I started *sharing*.

"Oh, God. I thought I had it bad with Rhyson," he says, chuckling.

"I like Rhyson."

Our eyes connect across the few feet of space separating us, heating up the air and melting his smile a little around the edges

“I mean, the name.” I draw a deep breath. “I like the *name* Rhyson.”

“I knew what you meant.” He looks straight ahead as he takes the exit for the rec center. “So, did everyone call you Pepper?”

“No one has *ever* called me Pepper.”

“You’ve got to be kidding? How could they not?”

“Not many people know my middle name is Anne. And my mother didn’t realize the punch line she was making of my name.”

“So there has to be a story behind it. Come on. Fess up.”

“No confession. My mom was Korean, but my grandparents adopted her when she was just days old. She already had a name though. Mai Lin. She wanted me to have a name that at least hinted at her ancestry, even though she couldn’t speak a lick of Korean.”

“Not a lick, huh?”

“Don’t you start that again.” I level a warning finger at him. “Leave the South alone.”

“I’ve spent very little time there, but if all the girls there look like you, I should visit.”

“Wow. You just couldn’t resist the line, huh?”

His mouth quirks. I need to stop noticing all the enticing things he does with his mouth, but I can’t help myself. I’m trapped in this car with one of the most brilliant musicians of my generation, who just happens to have gorgeous bed hair at four o’clock Pacific Standard Time and grey eyes that go a little darker every time he looks at me for more than three seconds.

He pulls into a parking spot at the center, leans one elbow on the steering wheel, and faces me.

“Looks like we’re here, Pepper.”

I open my eyes as wide as they can physically go.

“I told you no one has ever called me that. You cannot. I forbid you.”

“Oh, and I’m so scared of a five-foot fairy.”

I will not smile back at him. As much as my grin muscles strain, I will not.

“Five. Two.”

He throws his head back and laughs, the muscles in his neck working to get the husky sound out.

“Okay, five two.” He looks just past my shoulder at the simple square structure of the community center. “Is there a bathroom in there I might be able to use?”

“Sure. Um, I’ll show you.”

“Wait a second.” He reaches into a compartment between our seats and pulls out a Dodgers baseball cap. “I’m not in the mood to sign any autographs at the urinal.”

“Does that really happen?”

“You’d be surprised what I’ve been asked to sign at the most awkward times in the most awkward places.”

“You think a cap and a pair of aviators make that much of a difference?”

“Oh, I know they do. I’ve literally had people walk up to me and say I look just like Rhyson Gray. I tell them I get that a lot.”

I’ve only known him for a day, and I’m pretty sure I could pick him out of a stadium full of folks wearing baseball caps and aviators. I have to admit though, with that unruly hair covered, at a glance he’s just another tall, attractive guy. We walk together and silence falls between us again. He opens the door for me, and I point him down the hall.

“Bathroom’s down there. I’m gonna go to the locker room and change for my class.” I look up at him, his eyes on me a welcome weight I shouldn’t let myself become accustomed to. “Thank you so much. I didn’t want the girls waiting.”

“The girls in your class?”

“Yeah. They’re your typical pain-in-the-butt teenagers most of the time,

but they're good kids. A lot of them wouldn't get exposure to quality teaching if it weren't for the community center."

"And you're the quality teacher?"

"I didn't mean it like—Well, I've been dancing my whole life, so I guess I better be a good teacher by now."

"I taught you something about singing today. Maybe you could teach me a few moves for my next video?"

We both laugh because that's just ridiculous. He may have transitioned from classical piano prodigy into modern rock star, but he never strays too far from an instrument and a microphone. The idea of him doing any of the moves I'm about to teach my girls is hilarious.

"I'd like to see that. We're learning a routine inspired by Beyoncé today. You doing those moves . . ."

"You'd make a pretty penny selling that footage to some tabloid. Believe me."

He laughs, but there's less humor than before.

"Have you . . . well, has anyone ever done anything like that? Sold a video or whatever?"

"Let's just say I've learned to be really careful about who gets close to me."

I angle a wry smile up at him.

"Maybe you shouldn't offer rides to strange women."

The smile drops from his mouth, but lingers in his eyes.

"Some risks are worth taking."

Some aren't. He stands about a foot above me in height, but his success positions him in another stratosphere. I know there are girls who would do everything they could to get as close as they can, but I'm not those girls. As good as it feels to talk to him, to share those loaded looks, to laugh with him and see those protective layers he wears fall away, that's the opposite of what I want. To take advantage of him to propel me forward. I'll make it on my

own, or not at all. He's a distraction, and a risk *I'm* not willing to take.

"Thanks again."

I smile and take off toward the locker rooms. Even though I know he's still there and that he's watching me, I don't let myself look back.

# Chapter

## SEVEN

### RHYSON

LET THE RECORD SHOW I TRIED.

After that warning look Grady basically fired at me before we left the house, I was determined to keep Kai at arm's length. Not to go any further with whatever this thing is that keeps flaring up between us. I was downright rude in the car. Completely silent. *She* started talking to *me*. *She* was the one who shared personal, adorable things that only served to increase her desirability rating.

I mean, come on. *Kai Anne*, she said. *Like the pepper. Like your car.* You can't make this shit up.

So it's basically her fault that I faked a piss so I could see her in action. I'm actually not to be held responsible for the fact that I'm hovering outside the small studio where she's teaching, just beyond her line of vision, barely keeping her in mine. She's definitely to blame for my semi-stalkerish behavior. Talk about the irony. I'm hiding behind sunglasses and a hat so I'm not recognized as a celebrity while trailing a girl who no one would know from Adam.

She stands in front of about ten girls. She changed from the cargo shorts and T-shirt she wore earlier and now wears some leotard thing that shows the lean muscles of her thighs and the ridiculous curve of her ass. A tiny YOLO T-shirt looks like it's been cut in half, hitting just below her high, pert breasts



and hanging off one shoulder. She's built like a cheerleader or a gymnast. A dancer. She has an athlete's graceful body, one that has obviously been disciplined into delicate strength.

Over the giggles and squeals of the girls, her voice reaches me in the hallway.

"Okay, chicas." Kai claps a few times. "The majority has spoken, and we'll be doing a routine inspired by Beyoncé's '711' video for the talent contest."

More squealing. Laughing. High-fiving. Thank God I'm not in high school anymore. I fought so hard to go to school with "normal" kids my age. It was a great experience, but once was more than enough. I figured out pretty quickly that I wasn't missing much.

"I've choreographed a routine that I think you'll like. I know a lot of you are interested in cheering. The video has some of that, and I've included those elements." She walks over to a music system against the wall and plugs her phone in. "I'll show you the whole thing once all the way through in real time. Then we'll start breaking it down piece by piece."

Beyoncé's voice invades the room. I've heard the song on the radio. Then I forget about Beyoncé. I forget about the girls. I forget that at any moment someone could realize who I am and ask me to sign a boob or take a selfie. All I see is Kai.

I realized something pretty early in life. When we're doing that thing we're made to do, it transforms us. Elevates us. The high I get from creating and performing has a lot less to do with the applause and fame or money, and so much more to do with me feeling like I'm doing exactly what I was put on this earth to do. That's what I see when Kai dances. A confidence shines from her eyes. Even her posture changes, straightens. Her movements are crisp and then mellifluous. One moment tight and controlled, but the next, as fluid as water. The routine melds ballet, hip-hop, modern dance so seamlessly, moving from swan to swagger in heartbeats.

When she's done, the girls run forward and cluster around her, laughing and mimicking the snippets of the routine they caught on to. Kai laughs with them for a moment, her face glowing and alive. Then she claps twice, shooing them back to their positions. For the next hour they slice this elephant of a routine into manageable bites. Manageable for them, at least. All my rhythm is in my fingers. I couldn't dance my way out of a paper bag.

As class breaks, I don't think about all the things I could have done with the last hour and a half I forfeited to spend more time with Kai. There's pressure to write my next album. I'm producing tracks for a few artists. Not to mention needing to check on my investment into Wood, the studio one of my buddies opened not too long ago. All of that seems pretty pale next to this girl's vivid presence.

She's a star.

Grady's hinted before that Kai has the potential to be the next J. Lo or Katy Perry. I'll go a step farther. She has "one name" potential. Madonna. Cher. GaGa. I've only heard her sing a scale and dance one routine, but her potential is glaringly obvious. And it's not even just her talent. She's magnetic. That "it" people talk about is so strong in her I can't believe she's still processing Grady's invoices and teaching dance to high schoolers in a community center. There's nothing else you want to look at if she's in the room. I know this from personal experience. The right break would catapult her into the fulfillment of all that potential.

While I'm contemplating all of this, the girls one by one drift past me. I slump and drop my eyes to the floor, tugging the brim of the baseball cap lower over my hair. Once the last girl is safely out the door, I walk into the studio. Kai is looking down at her phone with her bag slung over one shoulder, and she doesn't notice me for a few moments. Then she practically walks right into me.

"Oh." Her tilted eyes, which I now know are a legacy from her Korean mother, widen, and I see surprise all over her face. "What are you—I thought

you . . .”

She peers up at me, a frown settling between her thick brows.

“Rhyson, why are you still here?”

Truth? Lie? Okay, split the difference.

“Well, after I used the bathroom,” I say, leading with the lie and easing into the truth. “I saw your class starting and hung back to watch. Looked like fun.”

The frown doesn’t disappear completely, but she does add a tiny smile.

“So you want to learn some of those moves after all?”

“Oh, no. I’m not doing that . . . what was that roll thing you did with your . . .”

“Body roll. It’s easy. You could totally do it.”

She demonstrates, starting the move at her neck and pouring it over her chest and hips and down the rest of her. I focus on everything from Brussels sprouts to global warming to keep my dick down.

“You overestimate both my ability and my desire to roll my body,” I manage to say.

“You’re probably right.” She grins and glances at her phone again, moving toward the exit. “Well, I need to run. The next bus comes in a few minutes, and I can’t be late for work.”

“More work?” I keep pace with her, determined not to let her make it to that bus stop. “I seem to remember you working at Grady’s and then me driving you to work here. Now, you’re going to another job?”

“Girl’s gotta eat and live indoors.” The smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes sits firmly on her mouth. “I need to run.”

“Hey, how about I take you?” I say casually. “I mean, I stayed. I’m here. Might as well. Where do you need to go?”

Her hesitation makes me hold my breath. Why does it matter so much to me? There are literally a dozen girls I could have tonight. I could swing by Wood. Some groupies would be hanging on while an artist is in the booth. I

could hit it. Quit it. Zip and roll. But this one scrambles my brain. I haven't thought about another girl since I saw Kai last night at Grady's. I want a little more time, mostly just to sort out what this is. I'm sure it will pass, but it hasn't yet.

She looks up at me from under these long-as-hell lashes, trapping her bottom lip between her teeth and toying with the end of the braid hanging over her shoulder.

Nah. Kidney stones pass. This girl, I'll have to work out of my system.

"Okay." Her face looks less convinced than what she says. "You familiar with The Note?"

"That place off Magnolia?"

"Yeah. That's my next job. My last for the day."

Once I've opened her door and then settled into the driver's seat, we're off. The clock is ticking. I have to tell her that I want to see her again.

Tell me I'm performing on Fallon, no problem. Number one album in the country? Unfazed. But this? Unfamiliar territory. I want to know her, and I can't remember ever feeling like this before, responding to anyone like this before, so it's freaking me the fuck out. Next thing I know, I'll be sliding her a note that says check yes, no, or maybe.

I have to say something.

"So how does a half-white, half-Korean girl from the backwoods of Georgia learn to dance like that?"

Yeah, that's actually what I came up with. I seem to find inventive ways to insult her every time I open my mouth.

"I just meant that, you . . . well—"

"I know what you meant." She laughs a little and gives a "Wow, this guy" raise of her eyebrows.

"I'm really not that much of an idiot," I assure her. "I've seen *So You Think You Can Dance*. I know everybody's dancing now."

Her face is half puzzled, half amused. She's still not sure how to take me.

It takes a while.

“That was a joke,” I say. “Apparently not a good one.”

“Oh, so you haven’t seen *So You Think You Can Dance*?”

“I’ve seen a commercial for it, and from what I could tell, it was a veritable rainbow of contestants.”

Finally we smile at the same time, on the same page.

“I used to get that question a lot, actually,” she says. “I’ve always loved to dance, and I took every class I could get into. It didn’t matter what kind as long as it made me a better dancer. The good ones were a thirty-minute drive one way. My mom drove me every day between shifts at her diner.”

“Grady mentioned that your mom passed not too long ago. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks.” A shadow passes so quickly over her face I almost miss it. “It was a long time coming, so we knew, but I still wasn’t ready when it happened.”

“And then you moved here?”

“I was way off schedule. I was supposed to move out here with San right after high school, but when my mom was diagnosed with ALS, I couldn’t leave her.”

It’s quiet again, and this time she’s not trying to break it. Her head is turned to the passenger window, and her arms are folded across her chest. She’s done talking. She’s sitting here, but her mind and everything that counts is somewhere else. Maybe in the past. Maybe on the future. Wherever it is, she’s there alone.

I lean back a little in the driver’s seat, draping my wrist across the steering wheel. We’re almost at The Note, and I’m no closer to defining what I’m experiencing for the first time or to letting her know I want to see her again. I’m not used to chasing any girl. I’ve never had to. Music has pretty much been the silver platter women have been served on for me. And though she’s been friendly, by all indications, Kai’s signaled me that she is not on

the menu.

I pull into the parking lot. I'm a waste of space. I didn't even write a speech when I accepted my first Grammy. Came right off the top, but I can't tell this girl I want to see her again? Grab your balls and do it, man.

"So, Kai—"

"Rhyson, I wanted to—"

We both laugh a little because after riding so long in silence, we choose the exact same moment to speak.

"Ladies first."

"I just wanted to say thanks for everything today." She fiddles with the strap of her bag and keeps her eyes on her fingers. "The reminders about breathing and the compression exercises. Thanks for that, and for chauffeuring me around. I'm sure you had better things to do."

"Nope. I was doing exactly what I wanted to do."

She glances up at me and then away, but not before a little bit of a smile breaks through.

"Look, I may not have been lining up for your autograph or anything last night like everybody else, but I do love your music. I'm a fan."

"Sure you are."

"I *am*." A grin as wide and sweet as licorice spreads across her lips.

"Okay, fangirl. What's your favorite song?"

"Not the one you think."

"How do you know what I think?"

"You probably think it's one you won a Grammy for or one of the ones that went platinum, but it's not. It wasn't even a radio release."

"All right, hit me with it. What's your favorite?"

"Number nine on your first album."

I couldn't have heard her right. No one says number nine. It's one of the most personal songs I ever wrote. So personal and so mine that no one ever gets it. The producer at the time called it a self-indulgent choice, but I insisted

we include it.

“‘Lost’?” I ask, just to make sure. “‘Lost’ is your favorite song?”

She clears her throat before speaking.

“‘I’ve lost my way. I stumbled into the woods, but can’t see the forest for the trees. How did I get here? Where am I going?’”

The first line of “Lost.”

“Why is that your favorite?”

“I fell asleep to that song for months when I was taking care of my mom. There I was, still living in a tiny Georgia town and working at Glory Bee, my mom’s diner. Making biscuits before sun up, dancing only when I could squeeze it in, and taking care of Mama in her final days. It was overwhelming and it all had to be done, but it was nothing I had ever planned to do. That song was how I felt. I loved it because I was so lost.”

She lowers her head, blinking fast and pursing her lips. I don’t think she means for it to, but her voice falls to a whisper.

“Because sometimes I still am.”

As much as she lights up a room, dancing, laughing from time to time, I’m beginning to see that just beneath the surface of Kai, there is as much shadow as there is shine. I don’t know if it’s because of her mother’s recent death and the long illness that came before, or if it’s more than that, but I connect to it. As someone who had to battle my parents in open court for my freedom and survival, I understand shadow. I could step into it with her, or I could pull her out.

“My favorite line of that song is the last one,” I say.

She lifts her eyes to mine, and we build a smile together.

“‘Now I see the light,’” we quote at the same time.

I roll up my sleeve, baring my forearm to show her the ink there. She traces the line from the song, creating mayhem on my skin under her fingers.

“Believe it or not, that’s my favorite from the album too. No one else has ever . . . well, no one ever says that’s their favorite.”

Her fingers drop away from my arm, and her eyes drop away from my face. I screw up my nerve to say what needs to be said before she walks away from me.

“Look, I don’t do this much, but I feel like we have a connection.”

“A connection?” One of her eyebrows elevates just a bit, but she still doesn’t look up from her lap.

“Yesterday after I played, I opened my eyes and I saw something on your face. I know what it was now.”

She looks up, but she’s already shielding her eyes, and I’m not sure why.

“What did you think you saw?”

“The music moved you.”

“Yes. I’m sure your music moves a lot of people.”

This shouldn’t be hard. I didn’t fabricate this pull between us, but she’s resisting it, rejecting it, and I don’t understand.

“I know we just met, but I’d like to get to know you better. Have dinner with me tomorrow.”

“I can’t tomorrow. I’m working.”

*I can be flexible.*

“Maybe the next night?”

She shakes her head.

*I can be persistent.*

“When’s your next night off?”

“I can’t. No.” She pulls in a breath, releasing it as a sigh, but still not looking at me. “I’m . . . I’m saying no.”

“Why?”

She considers me for a moment before answering, her eyes revealing even less than her words.

“Look, Rhyson, you’re not a jerk like I expected you to be.”

“Gee, thanks.”

At least we can both laugh at that.



“So it’s not you, exactly. It’s just . . . I’m not dating. I just can’t get sidetracked right now.”

The easy conversation. The effortless way we made each other laugh. The intimacy of my lyrics comforting her when times were tough. These aren’t things you ignore. So why is she?

“That’s it?”

“If you want to know the truth, no. Maybe it is *you*. I won’t date *you*.” She gives me a frank glance, folding her arms across her chest again. “I want to make it on my own. Not have anyone think I succeeded because of who I’m dating.”

“They wouldn’t. It’s obvious you’ve got what it takes.”

“Oh, you can’t be that naïve.” She lets out a husky, cynical laugh. “Besides, maybe I have things to prove to myself. I barely have time to eat, much less date, but outside of San and Grady, I don’t have any real friends.”

“You want to be my *friend*?”

“Yeah, you can never have too many friends.” Her smile, wide and hopeful, bounces back at me like a refraction of light.

“Actually, I have enough friends,” I say. “I’m attracted to you, Kai. Like really attracted to you.”

Her light fades into a frown.

“I’m not the first girl you’ve been attracted to.”

“No, but you’re the first I’ve wanted to actually get to know in a long time, and—”

“And we can get to know each other. Just . . . not the date. Is that okay?”

I squeeze at the tension tightening the back of my neck and train my eyes on the console between us.

“No. It’s not okay.”

The silence following my words is thick and heavy until her words cut through it.

“I don’t know what to say then, Rhyson.”

“Being my friend is a helluva lot more intimate than a date.” I finally look up, and the frown on my face matches the one on hers. “It’s more intimate than sleeping with me.”

My best friend, Marlon, and the few people who constitute my inner circle earned that closeness. It was hard knowing who to trust once I broke away from my parents. Two albums and several Grammys later, it’s even harder to know. I stopped counting the girls I slept with long ago. That just seems douchey anyway—the counting. But ask me how many friends I have that I can count, and I only need one hand.

“So you’re willing to go on a date with me, even sleep with me,” Kai looks down, twisting her fingers around the strap of her bag, “but becoming my friend is too intimate?”

“That and I think it’s impossible for us to be just friends. I’m very attracted to you.” I reach out and tip her chin up, searching her eyes for the truth, a reason, *whatever* would make her resist this thing that has been tugging on me like an undertow since our eyes locked across Grady’s studio. “You telling me you don’t feel it too?”

Her eyes stay with me, but she eases her chin away from my fingers and lifts it an inch.

“Thanks for asking, but I’m gonna stick with no.”

I swallow a groan, frustrated as hell that this girl has me on the verge of begging when I’m not the guy who ever even asks.

“Kai, it’s just a date.”

“And I’m just saying no.” She opens the passenger door and steps out into the parking lot. “I need to get inside. Thanks again for the ride.”

She closes the car door and starts off toward the restaurant.

What am I supposed to do now? I put all my cards on the table. Cards I’ve never even held, much less shown a girl, and this is her response? She turns me down hard and offers me the fucking hand of friendship. I watch her slim back, the dark hair, and the tight curve of her ass. All that’s great, but

it's more than physical. That moment when we talked about "Lost" showed me how deeply we could connect if she would only give us a chance.

I jump out of the truck, lean my forearms on the hood, and yell across the parking lot from the driver's side.

"Hey, Kai."

I wait for her to face me before finishing my thought.

"Let me know if you change your mind."

She starts walking backwards, and her smile says that'll be the day. Her words yield no more ground.

"Let me know if you change *yours*."

# Chapter

## EIGHT

Kai

GRIEF TAUGHT ME TO LIVE NUMB. Death takes more than just the one life. It thieves tiny particles from the ones left behind until you feel only half alive. In some ways, that's how I've lived, how I've felt, even since moving here to L.A. San and Grady see it. That's why they worry.

Last week, I *felt* something. It started with that music Rhyson played. Each note was a tiny needle shooting adrenaline into my barely beating heart, jolting me awake and heightening my senses. My heart races when I remember every moment, every word we exchanged, every time we looked at one another as long as we could stand it before we'd looked away.

Meeting Rhyson was like being in a darkened room where someone lights a match. He was a flare of light that illuminated everything around me and showed me just how dull my existence had become. Then before my eyes had time to adjust to the light, it was snuffed out again

But that's okay. I'll find my way out of this dark room. The stage is my path to the light. It always has been. I've always known it. I'll make my own light. I'll find my own way.

A bill marked with blood-red past due notice warnings grabs my attention on the corner of my dresser. As soon as I can pay off some of these medical bills, I can actually focus on getting to the stage. I pick up the notice, reading over the dire warnings that I've learned to ignore. The hospital is a bloated

beast satisfied by small payments as long as they're consistent. Especially from a dead woman, or at least her daughter left holding the bag.

"That came yesterday," San says from my bedroom door. "I'm not even the one paying those bills, and I get tired of seeing 'em."

A rueful grin shapes one corner of my mouth, but I don't bother responding. I tighten my ponytail and tug at the cut off T-shirt that is standard issue at The Note. It doesn't quite reach the waistband of my jeans, exposing a few inches of my midriff.

"Can you still take me to work?" I ask, tucking the red-splattered notice under my jewelry box and turn to face San. "Or should I catch the bus?"

San plops on the edge of my bed, falling back and running his palms over the soft quilt Aunt Ruthie made for me.

"I can take you." San laces his hands behind his head, grinning with some secret assured to make me grin back. "You may have to grab the bus home if that's okay."

"Big date?"

I hope so. San's date drought has sadly coincided with my arrival. I don't want him to put his life on hold for me, but I know in many ways he has.

"Something like that, yeah. With Ginny." He gives me a searching look like he's not sure how I'll respond.

"That's great." I sit on the bed and lie back beside him until our heads touch. "I like her."

"She likes you too." San's chuckle rumbles against my shoulder. "Once she believed we aren't sleeping together, and that the idea of screwing you makes me physically ill."

I grab a pillow and press it over his face. His muffled laugh makes me grin and slide the pillow under my own head as I settle back down on the bed.

"You didn't have to go *that* far to convince her." I tilt my head until I can see his profile. "Physically ill?"

"It took that for her to get the picture." San flips to the side, propping

himself up on one elbow and resting his head in his hand. “She got me an interview with *Spotted*.”

“That new celebrity video blog thing?”

“Yeah, it’s supposed to be the next *TMZ*.”

“Like we need another one of those.”

San laughs and rolls his eyes. We have different views of privacy. I believe celebrities actually deserve some.

“Does this mean you’re giving up on singing?” I sit up to search his eyes properly.

We’ve been on the same path since elementary school, even if the last few years I fell several paces behind. The thought that our paths might be forking in different directions scares me a little.

San sits up too, bumping my shoulder with his and leaning his head into mine. He probably already knew this fear before I did. That may be why I’m hearing all of this for the first time.

“I just think I prefer to be on the other side of the camera.” San shrugs. “Well, actually still in front. I’d be an in-studio correspondent, not a car chaser. It’ll still be in the biz, just a different angle. I don’t want it like you do.”

I can’t even deny it. The desire to perform, to entertain, burns so hot inside me I can’t imagine life without the potential to do it. It’s always been that way for me.

“Besides, some people have it, and some people don’t.” San tugs my ponytail. “You, my friend, have gobs of it. People like you and Rhyson got everybody else’s share.”

I stiffen at the name of the man I’ve spent the last week trying to delete from my memory.

“I saw him today at Grady’s.” San’s eyes rest on me, but I don’t look up from the strings I’m pulling on my jeans.

“Really?” My neutral voice.

“Yeah, we go six months at Grady’s without seeing the guy and then run into him twice in a week. I guess they’re close.”

His voice holds a question. The look he levels at me, speculating.

I roll my eyes, debating whether to ignore the bait on that hook or give him the intel he obviously suspects I have.

“I’m telling you this friend to friend,” I say. “Not friend to slimy, *Spotted* correspondent.”

“I resent that. I can’t believe you’d—”

I cut him off with the look that reminds him I know he traded his goldfish, Hammer, in seventh grade to get elected class president. He is just as ambitious as I am, even if his ambitions are being redirected.

“Okay, okay,” he concedes with a self-aware grin. “Friend to friend.”

“Grady’s Rhyson’s uncle.” We stare at each other with saucer eyes. “Can you believe that? I work for Grady. We take lessons from Grady, and we had no idea his nephew is one of the biggest rock stars in the world.”

“What the ever-living fuck?” San’s mouth hangs open a little before he snaps it shut.

“Apparently, Grady and Rhyson’s father are twin brothers,” I add.

My voice has dropped to a whisper, and I stop myself from looking over my shoulder. This feels wrong. I’m not divulging huge secrets or anything, but I’m pretty sure Rhyson isn’t the forthcoming type. For whatever reason, he was with me. He drove me around when he didn’t have to and told me things he probably shouldn’t tell some random girl he met at his uncle’s house. He had no reason to trust me. I hate to think I’m betraying that trust, even in the smallest way.

“San, just don’t mention this to anyone, okay?”

San frowns and sucks his teeth.

“I’m not working for *Spotted* yet, Kai, and even if I were, I wouldn’t do that.” San walks over to my dresser and picks up my hairbrush, bringing some order to his pillow-rumpled hair and meeting my eyes in the mirror.

“He asked about you today, by the way.”

My heart thump-thumps in my chest, and a small heat wave overtakes my body.

“Did he?” As casual as I can, I bend to tie my left Converse. “What’d he say?”

“Just asked how you were doing.” San turns to face me, wearing my least favorite knowing grin. “Did you expect more after you friend zoned him so hard?”

Why do I tell San my secrets? He only rubs them in at the worst times.

“Let’s go.” I head to the door, shutting down this train of thought with a stern look over my shoulder. “I can’t be late.”

“I think you like him.”

“Whatever.” I’m not going there with him. “So what are you and Ginny up to?”

San presses his lips into a smile before surrendering to my subject change.

“She’s taking me to this party to meet the producers of *Spotted*. Get me some face time with the powers that be. Basically a cocktail interview. You know half the business in this town takes place at parties.”

“Must be why I’m having such a hard time breaking into the business.”

I drag my feet through our small apartment, grabbing keys and my bag along the way. I really don’t feel like working tonight. For just a second, I consider calling in, but then that red-splattered medical bill pricks my memory. I climb into the front seat and start mentally preparing myself for the long, uneventful night ahead.



# Chapter

## NINE

Kai

THIS NIGHT HAS BEEN ANYTHING BUT uneventful. Bull, the owner, pulled me to the side as soon as I got to work. One of the cooks was late, and he needed me to cover. If I could rewind to my interview for this job, I would never have mentioned my kitchen experience. That kitchen gets so hot and busy. By the time the cook showed up, my perky ponytail was limp, my armpits were soaked, and I had sweated off what little makeup I started the night with.

From there, it only got worse. A volleyball team rushed in, a flock of teenage girls giggling and taking forever to order. A group of truckers rambled in, boisterous and loud, and of course, having trouble keeping their hands to themselves. I swear, if I swat one more paw away from my butt, somebody's meeting the unfriendly end of my box cutter.

Some nights zoom because things are so busy. Others drag because the place is dead and I'm bored out of my mind. This is some hybrid night, where we're slammed against the wall busy, but time still seems to be crawling. I glance at the clock over the entrance to the kitchen one more time. I'm sure that big hand has only moved five minutes in the last hour.

Misty, the only waitress I've managed to befriend, walks by with a loaded tray balanced on her arm. All the others act like this is still high school. They talk about one another behind each other's backs. Fight over guys and tattle

to Bull every chance they get. I'll stay out of that fray, thank you very much.

"Crazy night, huh?" Misty asks.

"Yeah, crazy." I walk toward the kitchen, needing to check on one of my orders, when I remember San won't be picking me up. I turn back to Misty. "Hey, are you catching the bus after work?"

We've walked to the bus stop together more than once. Safety in numbers.

"Nah, Joe's coming to get me when the shift is over."

Oh, well. I have my mace in my purse and my box cutter in my pocket. It'll be fine.

"But we can totally drop you off." Misty grins, pulling her order pad out of her back pocket. "Your place isn't far."

"That would be great." I wink and blow her an air kiss. "Mwah!"

I bump the swinging door with my rear end and wade into the sticky kitchen heat. Turns out the cook is still having trouble keeping up with orders, so I grab some bacon and start frying. It's only a BLT. I just checked on my customers, and they were all fine for now. This won't take long. I'm plating the sandwich when Misty comes through the swinging door.

"Hey, Kai." A tiny frown draws her strawberry blonde brows together. "There's an older guy who was asking for you. He's in your section."

Maybe Grady? With a quick nod and a muttered, "Thanks," I grab the plate and head to the dining room. I serve the BLT while it's hot and check on my other customers. From behind, I see a broad-shouldered, grey-haired man in my section wearing a seen-better-days fedora.

"Hi, I'll be serving you." I fumble around at my back pocket, searching for my order pad before looking up. Something about him grabs and holds my attention. Have I met him before? Seen him before?

"Were you asking for me?" I frown and tilt my head to study him closer. "One of the waitresses thought . . ."

My words trail off while my brain catches up to what my eyes are trying

to tell me. Those full lips under that salt-and-pepper moustache. The tanned skin pulled taut over sharp and high cheekbones. The long, unlined, sensitive hands resting on the table. Finally, grey eyes snaring mine and waiting for me to figure it out.

“Rhyson?”

He jerks a quick look around the dining room before bringing his eyes back to me.

“Wow. Why’d I even bother with the disguise?” he asks. “Say my name a little louder. I don’t think *TMZ* heard you.”

My hand flies up to my mouth, half in surprise. Half to catch the giggle bubbling up from my throat. I’m partly laughing because he looks ridiculous now that I know it’s him and not some middle-aged stalker. And partly because—I can barely admit this to myself—he was asking Misty for me. He asked San about me. He’s here for *me*.

When I’m around Rhyson, all my numb places spark and fizzle. The match has been struck again, and all the dark corners light up just because he’s grinning at me. This guy is such a threat to my focus, my ambitions, my goals. The grin he made on my mouth melts little by little until only a straight line remains.

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

His smile vanishes, and he shifts his eyes to the menu as if he’s actually here to eat.

“Maybe I’ve changed mine.” He looks up at me. “Aren’t you going to tell me the specials?”

“Hey, Kai!” One of the truckers booms from across the room, impatiently waving his empty beer mug. I hate wearing a nametag sometimes.

I look back to Rhyson, whose eyes have narrowed to silver slits on the rude trucker with his pants on fire.

“Specials are on the back,” I tell Rhyson over my shoulder, headed for Mr. Empty. “I’ll take your order in a second.”

That second turns into ten minutes. Between the table of truckers, the team of volleyballers, and the slow cook in the kitchen, it's the worst night for Rhyson freakin' Gray to show up at The Note.

I finally bustle over to him, blowing at the hair flopping into my eyes.

"I'm so sorry." I plop a glass of water with lemon down in front of him, mortified when it splashes onto his hands. "Oh gosh. I'm so sorry."

I can't stop apologizing. Mainly because I can't stop screwing up.

"Kai." He lays one strong hand over my trembling fingers mopping up the water. "It's fine."

I look at him, something I realize I haven't allowed myself to do very much of since I realized he wasn't a senior citizen. The intensity of his grey eyes provokes a hot spring in my belly. A rush of fiery liquid that emanates to my fingers, to my toes, to my core.

I jerk my hand back and reach for the order pad.

"What'll it be then?"

Even with my eyes fixed on the pad and pen poised to take his order, I feel the heat of his stare still trained on me. After a silence that extends a moment too far, he answers.

"Turkey burger and fries."

I chew at my bottom lip and glance in the direction of the kitchen. Undecided and then decided.

I lean into his space, close enough to smell him, clean and masculine.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," I whisper, stealing a surreptitious whiff of him. "Get the bison. The turkey burger's always dry. The bison is still lean and better for you, but the cook keeps it juicy."

I step back and notice his lips twitching.

"Okay, bison burger it is."

"And we actually have sweet potato fries. Better for you than the regular ones."

"Don't push it." His eyes crinkle with his wide smile and good humor.

“I’ll take my chances with regular fries.”

“Your funeral.” My face is serious, but my tone lightens.

“What time is your shift over?” Rhyson’s question snatches me out of the ease I’d fooled myself into.

“Um . . .” I glance at the clock, which has gone from interminable to warp speed since Rhyson arrived in disguise. “Like in thirty minutes.”

“Can I take you home?”

“Rhyson, I—”

“For the love of God, would you stop calling me that?” He looks over at the table of giggling girls taking selfies. “Or that pack of girls will be over here in about five seconds asking me to sign tits and take pictures.”

He looks so disgruntled. It’s the closest he’s actually looked to a grumpy old man since he arrived, so I can’t help but grin.

“Sorry, sir. I keep forgetting. I’m not used to these covert operations. Let me go put in your order.”

I turn to leave, but he catches my wrist in a firm but gentle grip.

“You didn’t answer my question.” He raises the brows I notice he didn’t bother to salt and pepper. “Can I take you home?”

My eyes fall to his fingers, strong and capable of magic, wrapped around my wrist. Working on my senses like I’m some simple arrangement he could play with his eyes closed. Only his eyes are wide open, watching me with unerring focus. I hope he doesn’t see me swallowing, because it’s perilously close to a gulp. I hope he can’t hear the party my heart is throwing in my chest. I hope the blood in my wrist isn’t Morse coding my frantic pulse to his fingers.

I hope I know what I’m getting into.

“Yeah, you can take me home.”

# Chapter

# TEN

## RHYSON

THIS MOUSTACHE ITCHES.

I focus on the sticky caterpillar on my lip so that damned scent of Kai's doesn't take me under. What *is* that? I can't just spend the fifteen-minute drive to her apartment sniffing the air. Like she doesn't think I'm weird enough showing up at her job wearing one of my disguises.

"So I guess you *do* have at least one friend besides Grady and San?" I peel the moustache off and toss it in the backseat.

"Who?" Kai turns a little to face me, eyebrows bunched.

"What was her name? Misty? The waitress who asked if you were really going home with the old guy?"

"Oh, yeah."

Kai's husky laugh permeates the interior of my car. I want to make her laugh my ring tone. Who am I kidding? Friends?

"So . . . friends?" She tosses the question out clairvoyantly, her voice tentative.

Okay. This is tricky. Start the way you mean to go. I should be honest with her.

"Yeeeeees." I draw the word out, pulling apart the letters, exposing all the "maybes" hidden in the crevices. "I'm willing to try."

"Try to be friends?" Kai turns her head to look out the passenger window.

“That’s kind of the only option, Rhys. It’s friends or nothing.”

She looks back at me, her tilted eyes picking out my features in the semi-darkness of the car.

“I can’t give you anything else,” she says. “Is this a real friendship you want to have or just . . .”

I know what she’s thinking. She’s not stupid. I’d be thinking the same thing.

“Or just a path to the pussy?” I’m only voicing what crossed her mind.

Her mouth drops open and then twists with an astonished laugh.

“I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Hey, that’s how I talk to my friends.” I grin, considering for the first time that this might be part enjoyment, not one hundred percent needless torture. “You’re just one of the guys now.”

Kai nods with a small smile left over from the laughter. I think she means it. I think she does want friends she can trust. Grady says she’s been through a lot, and it shows. I know a guard when I see one. I don’t just live with my guard up. It’s padlocked and on motion-sensored lockdown. With good reason, I don’t trust many with much, but there’s something about Kai. And I suspect, for her, there’s something about me. She could use a friend, and I . . . well, I just want to know her, and since that’s all she’s allowing me for now, I’ll take it.

“Hey, good buddy.” I take my eyes off the road long enough to tease her with them. “Could you reach back there and grab my food? I’m starving.”

“Why didn’t you eat at the restaurant?” She unfastens her seatbelt just long enough to grab the Styrofoam container with my burger.

We aren’t there yet. I don’t know if we’ll ever be. No one knows why I don’t really eat in public. Come to think of it, no one ever notices. Not going there tonight for sure.

“Can I have a fry?”

I lean over just enough for her to meet me in the middle with a

French fry. About fifteen French fries later, we're at her apartment. That went too fast. She told me more about her shitty night waitressing. I told her about my day, which pretty much consisted of sleep, since I'd been in the studio until three A.M. I thought we'd have more time to talk and figure things out. Though it seems she already has it figured out. I'm squarely, immovably in the friend zone, and Kai intends to maroon me there.

"Well, guess we're here." I start tapping out on the steering wheel the bass line for the track we laid last night. "I guess—"

"You wanna come in?"

My eyes snap to her face. Her teeth toy with her bottom lip, and she's blinking a lot.

"I mean, you're hungry." She gestures to my Styrofoam container in her lap. "I don't want you driving and trying to eat this bison burger. That's just not safe. You could, well, you could . . . eat in my kitchen real quick."

You'd think, considering that my parents eat their young, and I barely survived it, I would have evolved out of these damn qualms. But no. That dumb voice in my head is qualming away.

"Are you sure you want me to come in, Kai?"

We look at each other, and I imagine the dim parking lot lights aren't showing Kai much more of my face than they show me of hers, but I see everything. I'm not the only one fighting the attraction between us. Kai has her reasons, and even if I don't get them, I want to respect them.

She blows out a long breath, tips her head back, and closes her eyes before looking back at me.

"I guess that depends." She shifts, pressing her back against the passenger door to study me closely. "Do you mean it when you say we can be friends?"

"I mean it as much as I can mean it."

Her left eyebrow is the only thing on her face that moves, lifting just a bit.

"What does *that* mean?"

"It *means* I'm not going to lie and say I'm not still attracted to you." I



reach over and grab the small hand clenched on her knee. “But I’ll try, if it means we can get to know each other better.”

I’ve gone as far as I can with that unless she wants me to outright lie. And I guess she’s gone as far as she can, still seeing me but knowing I’m not completely feeling platonic. Maybe somewhere in the middle, there could actually be a great friendship. At this point, it’s her call. I took a step in her direction tonight. She’ll have to come the rest of the way.

She lifts my hand away and turns to reach for the passenger door handle. She stands outside for a second, leaning her head against the door and watching me watching her. Those exotic eyes have lost some of their sparkle now that we’re past midnight. The ponytail is barely hanging on, drooping around her neck, strands of dark hair escaping and brushing the pale gold of her cheeks. Her lips, maybe from all the nervous biting, are bee-stung, red and wet. If she’d let me kiss her right now, we’d never make it to her apartment.

Who am I kidding? I can’t be this girl’s *friend*. I’m about to call the whole thing off when she screws with my scruples again.

“Well, come on in then.”

I grab my burger and follow her into her place before she changes her mind.

# Chapter ELEVEN

*Kai*

SO RHYSON GRAY IS IN MY apartment. I see everything with fresh eyes, and wonder how our tiny two-bedroom apartment with its flea market refugee furniture compares to the mansion I'm sure Rhyson will head home to when he leaves.

"Here's the kitchen if you want to sit down to eat."

I point to the simple wooden table and three chairs in the little nook where San and I eat our meals. There's a fourth chair somewhere forever separated from its family, but I can't feel sorry for it. I haggled the guy down a few bucks when he couldn't find chair number four at his garage sale.

Rhys sits down in a chair. Thank goodness he chooses the non-wobbler. I grab a plate and transfer his burger to it.

"I can zap it real quick if you want."

"Yeah, that's cool." He glances around the tiny, linoleumed space. "Thanks."

I pop the plate in the microwave, reach for one of the Mason jar glasses I confiscated from Glory Bee, and rub it between my sweaty palms. I've kind of been nervous ever since he showed up at the restaurant, but my body is just now alerting me how bad it is. Rhyson's in my house, like a poster on the wall come to life.

"Water? Juice?" I croak before clearing my throat. "Diet Coke?"

“Water’s fine.”

I get him some of our filtered water and plop the glass down in front of him, spilling a little . . . again.

“I keep spilling things, don’t I?” I pull off a paper towel to clean up.

“Am I making you nervous?” Rhyson frowns, glancing from the spill to my face.

“I guess it’s just kind of strange.” I toss the paper towel and sit across from him, set my elbows on the table, and rest my chin in my hands. “I didn’t think I’d see you again after our last conversation, and then tonight was just . . . unexpected.”

His opens his mouth to speak, but the beeping microwave interrupts. I spring to my feet to get his burger. When I set the plate in front of him, he grabs my wrist.

“Hey.” His slow, easy, slightly tilted smile releases a fall of feathers in my belly. “Calm down. Sit down.”

I heave a breath and sit across from him again. Why did I invite him inside? He was all set to go, and my crazy . . . heart? I don’t know what part of my body or mind thought it was a good idea to invite him in . . . but it is in direct defiance of my common sense. He’s eating his burger like this is normal. Like for him to be in a tiny kitchenette with a girl he barely knows is everyday behavior for him, when I know it can’t be.

“I saw San today over at Grady’s,” Rhys says between bites. “Cool guy.”

“Yeah.” Just the mention of my best friend’s name soothes me some, like he just walked in the door and started one of his legendary neck massages. “He told me he saw you.”

Talking about San forces my mind back to the conversation we had before work. I blabbed details about Rhyson that I probably should have kept to myself.

“I actually wanted to confess something, Rhys.”

He glances at me, both brows airborne.

“Confess?”

He may regret coming here after I tell him this. I don’t know, but I’ll tell him in case I divulged something that was supposed to be kept quiet.

“I told San that Grady is your uncle and that he’s your dad’s twin brother.” Before he can respond, I rush on with the rest. “It may not be a big deal, or maybe you wanted it not to be public information, I’m not sure.”

“Kai, it’s—”

“I know how hard it was for you after you emancipated from your parents. How the media hounded your family.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And I know you don’t share a lot of personal information, but you shared that with me, and I don’t want to betray your trust when we’re just now becoming friends, so . . .”

I trail off because he’s looking at me across the table with soft eyes and a small smile curving his full lips.

“It’s fine, Pepper.”

No, he *didn’t*.

“What’d you just call me?” I narrow my eyes and lean across the table.

“You heard me, Pep.” He chuckles a little, his broad shoulders shaking.

“We talked about this.”

“We did, and what you said went completely in one ear and out the other.”

He grins at me, and I accept my fate as Pepper. That grin, those mist-grey eyes, and the messy, burnished hair, recently freed from the wig—how am I supposed to fight that? Before I formally admit defeat, not that he’s waiting for that, the front door opens. San walks in, stopping short when he sees Rhyson finishing up his burger. He blinks and glances at the number on our apartment door, exaggerating his surprised expression before walking farther into the room.

“Had to make sure I was in the right place.”

I laugh, but Rhyson doesn't.

"You two live together?" There isn't a smile in sight now, Rhyson's mouth hardened into a rough line. Eyes narrowed on my best friend.

San laughs, unmoved or unaware of the sudden chill in Rhyson's words, but I feel it.

"Yeah, where'd you think I lived?"

"In your own place?" Rhyson gets up to put his plate in the sink. He keeps looking between San and me like any moment we'll start making out in front of him.

"Dude, chill." San's words prove he's not oblivious to the cold front that rolled in with him. "She's like a little sister to me. We've been best friends since elementary school."

Rhyson's frown eases, but San's not done. Oh, no. There's more.

"I mean, unless you count that one time I took her virginity."

My head drops to the table, forehead to wood in a classic face-plant. I look up to find Rhyson squinting at San like he can't see him properly, his mouth tilted to one side like he's not sure if it's safe to laugh yet.

"Is that a . . . a joke?" Rhys asks.

"No, just a really long story." San heads off in the direction of his bedroom. "I'll let Kai tell you. I'm beat. G'night, guys."

*Why that little . . .*

Cheeks ablaze, I face Rhyson with an over-bright smile, silently promising San I'll smother him while he sleeps.

"I didn't know you and San lived together." Rhyson slides one hand into the pocket of his jeans and runs the other over the back of his neck.

"Yeah, I heard that." I sit back in my seat and calm the hell down. Rhyson and I are just friends. I shouldn't have to explain anything to him. "Is that a problem?"

He opens and snaps his mouth closed, tilting his head down before returning a small, forced smile to me.

“None of my business, good buddy.”

“We *are* just friends. San and me, I mean.”

*Whatever happened to not explaining?*

“I wish I’d known you sleep with your friends,” Rhyson says. “I would have accepted the hand of friendship the first time.”

A silence thickens between us as we feel each other out. I can’t tell if he’s actually upset. I have no idea what he’s trying to figure out about me.

“It was senior year, and I was still a virgin.” I cannot believe I’m telling him this. “So was San, for that matter, if you can believe it. My mom had just been diagnosed, and everything in my life flipped upside down. I just . . . I didn’t have time for much anymore. One night before he left for L.A., San and I snuck into the diner’s liquor stash, got plastered, and popped each other’s cherries in the storage closet on a big old sack of grits.”

“That sounds very . . . memorable.” Rhyson’s lips twitch. I think he’s starting to see the funny side of things. I hope so. “I feel for anybody who ordered grits the next day.”

“We were both disgusted the morning after and could barely remember a thing. It was a distant, not-so-clear memory by the time we recovered from our hangovers.” I shake my head and chuckle a little under my breath as the air in the kitchen, which was thick and tight with tension moments ago, starts clearing. “San went on to screw the whole cheering squad and a few softball players.”

“And you?” Rhyson’s smile falls away little by little, and his eyes don’t waver from mine. “Who’d you go on to screw?”

I squelch that little spark of panic I get in my chest every time I think of the last man I slept with. It’s pathetic. I can count on one hand how many guys I’ve slept with but can barely remember two of them. That ill-advised night with the *other* rock star will come back to haunt me one day. I just know it, but not yet. Not tonight.

“No one you’d know.”

He'd probably know the guy on sight, even though I wouldn't remember his face if he weren't on television every once in a while.

Rhyson jiggles his keys in his pocket, studying his boots before looking back up at me. His expression is close to normal, and I think he's past the shock of San being my roommate . . . and my first.

"I'd better get going." He walks over to stand right in front of me, the heat and scent of his body enfolding me. He's lean and tall and strong, a tower of handsome male. The only thing I can think is that I would have to rise up on my tiptoes to reach his mouth.

These are not the thoughts of friends, so I shake them off.

"Thanks for the ride home." My throat is tight around the words.

"Can I have your number?"

He proffers his phone and reaches into my back pocket, taking his time retrieving my phone. I freeze, because the thought of him actually touching my butt without a thin layer of denim separating us could provoke me to some reckless behavior. Our eyes lock and hold. Everything above my belt floats, and everything below it clenches. Does he have any idea how the slow slide of his hand is building a fire in my belly? That the smoke rises through my chest and I can barely breathe?

I blindly enter my number into his phone, transposing the digits a few times before getting it right.

"I'll call you . . . friend." He heads for the door with one last look over his shoulder. "Or call me if you need a ride home or anything. I don't like the thought of you on the bus late at night alone."

I just nod. I didn't anticipate his sweetness. I figured him for snarky. Cynical. Arrogant. And, really, he may be all those things. But that's just the surface few get to scratch below. Maybe even a defense he erects to protect himself from what he's experienced in the past. But with me, he's been downright sweet.

Now that I've spent some time with Rhyson, I really want to be friends.

When we were together tonight, he may have made me nervous, but I barely thought of him performing, or on television, or his fame at all. It was just him. Just laughing and conversation, this connection between us so tangible, I could almost wrap my arms around it. It feels more real than anything I've had in a long time. Even if it is just the beginning of a beautiful friendship, I want it to start and to see how far we'll go.



# Chapter TWELVE

*Kai*

“KAI, THAT OLD GUY IS BACK.”

Misty’s words, dumped on me as she’s entering the bathroom and I’m leaving, stop me in my tracks. That has to be Rhyson. He told me he would call, but I haven’t heard from him in a week. We’re not dating. We’re not sleeping together. We are tiers below all of that. We’re just friends. That’s my decision, and it’s the right one. He respected my wishes and backed off, which makes my disappointment when he didn’t call all the more irrational.

It’s near the end of my shift. I started with only cherry chapstick and mascara, so not much to do there. I turn back toward the bathroom, thinking I’ll just freshen up, but stop myself. No. I’m not fixing up. If it were San, I’d go out just as I am. I’ll treat Rhyson the same way.

If San were in my section though, my heart probably wouldn’t be pumping high-octane rocket fuel into my veins. My palms probably wouldn’t be damp. And we probably wouldn’t be looking at each other for seconds without speaking like the place isn’t packed wall-to-wall with customers. Like we’re the only ones here.

Other than that, just like San.

“Hey,” He speaks first and flips the napkin-wrapped silverware roll back and forth between his hands. “What’s up?”

“Hello, sir.” I hand him a menu. A smile buds somewhere inside me and

blossoms on my lips before I can stop it. “Can I interest you in our senior special tonight?”

His eyes smile back at me for a second, and then his mouth curves under the greying moustache.

“No, but kind of you to offer, young lady. I already know what I want.”

He just looks at me for a few seconds, the smile falling away. His eyes go smoky grey, and a girl could be fooled into thinking he’s not just talking about food. I snap the live wire crackling between us by dropping my eyes and reaching for the order pad in my back pocket.

“So what’ll you have?”

“A friend recommended the bison burger. I had it last time I was here.”

“And was it good?” My grin is back, stretching between my cheeks.

“It was perfect.” He hands the menu back to me without glancing at it. “Let’s do that again.”

“Fries with that?”

“Sweet potato fries, please. I heard they’re a little better for me. When you get to be my age, you can’t be too careful.”

“I can imagine. Excellent choice.” I nod and turn to leave.

“Miss?” Rhyson’s voice stops me, and I turn back. His eyes fall to my name tag. “Kai, is it?”

“Some of my friends call me Pepper.”

*That’s flirting, Kai*, the annoying voice of reason warns me.

“Some?” One brow rises, taking the left corner of his mouth with it.

“Well, just one.” I definitely wouldn’t flirt with San like this.

“Ah, just the one.” He nods and holds his lips back from a full-on smile. “Well, Pepper, you didn’t take my drink order.”

“Oh.” I can never get this waitress thing right with him, and I’ve been doing it since I was twelve. “So sorry. What’ll it be?”

“You’ve got a great selection of beers, but just water.” He picks up his phone and starts a text. “I’m driving a friend home after work.”

And that's how I came to be sitting in my apartment again while Rhyson eats another leftover bison burger.

"Sorry I didn't call." His voice is pitched low and confined to my tiny kitchen. This voice crooned to me from the radio earlier today, and now I have it all to myself. It's intimate and outrageous. "Meetings. Sessions. We're gearing up for a world tour. My first. Well, since I was a kid, at least. My last world tour was when I was fourteen. That was piano though. Very different from this crazy production my team is planning, even though it's not that big. Just six weeks next year."

"It's fine." I squirm in wobbler seat number three. "How'd you know I needed a ride?"

He chews and clears his throat for one word.

"San."

"He was at Grady's?" I run through what I remember of San's schedule, and don't remember a session with Grady. Matter of fact, now that he'll be working as a *Spotted* correspondent, I think he's abandoning voice lessons altogether.

"No, I called him to see if you might need a ride tonight since I wasn't sure you'd tell me if you did."

I can't find words to respond, so I don't. I can only imagine how full Rhyson's life must be. For me to be on his mind . . . for him to ask San about my schedule . . . for him to come get me from work . . .

"That was sweet." I focus on the circles I'm tracing on the wooden table with my fingertip. "Thanks."

Over the last week of radio silence, my curiosity about him has fed on itself, and a dozen questions line up in my mind. Not all the things I could Google to find out, but the things only he can tell me. I don't want to go all Barbara Walters on him. This should be a conversation, not an interview. He said he wanted to get to know me, and I want to get to know him, not through what everyone else has said, but from him.

“Can I ask you something?” I brave a glance at him, and he leans back, linking his fingers over his flat stomach.

“Shoot.”

“How does it feel to be . . .” I stop the word that almost came out. It feels like a fangirl word. Or like I’m writing a piece for *Vanity Fair* instead of chilling with a friend in my apartment.

“How does it feel to be what? Just ask, Pep.”

“A genius.”

His laughter startles and embarrasses me. Total fangirl. I knew it.

“I can’t believe that’s your real question.” His smile fades a little, but vestiges of it linger in his eyes. “I’m not, you know. A genius, I mean.”

“You were playing Mozart at three years old, Rhyson. I’m pretty sure most toddlers aren’t doing that.”

“Well, I can’t do that body roll thing you did in your class. Or any of those moves.”

“That’s different.”

“Exactly. It’s just different. It’s my thing. Something comes naturally to everyone. Music’s mine.” The look he gives me is careful and searching. “For example, I have synesthesia. I didn’t ask for that, or do anything to make it happen. I know some people think it’s a load of crap, and it *is* rare, but it’s real.”

“Isn’t that the thing where you see colors when you hear music?”

“Well, that’s how it manifests for me, yeah,” he laughs. “They used to call synesthetes insane, but I think the kind of hyperfocus required of great art calls for some madness. You have to be a little crazy to be as obsessed, as consumed by music as I’ve always been.”

I think of the long hours I’ve devoted to dancing, singing, and performing, chasing that high; needing to create and add something beautiful to a grimy world. With Mama gone, it feels like all I have left—the thing that keeps me pushing forward. The reason I can’t stop.

“I get that,” I say softly. “I was always shy as a little girl, but as soon as I hit the stage, Mama said it was like another person took over. Like an alter ego stepped in, always ready to perform.”

“Exactly, and you didn’t ask for that. It’s just there. That drive, that need. That’s how it is for me. It’s just there. Some folks pick up languages—Italian, Russian, French—like it’s nothing.” He shrugs. “I pick up instruments.”

“And how many instruments do you speak?”

He squeezes one eye shut and pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Like eight, I think. Piano is the only one that felt like I knew it before I learned it. The others I had to learn, but they were much easier for me than for most, I guess. And I had to work hard at piano, too. I just had this head start.”

“Is there an instrument you’ve wanted to try, but haven’t yet?”

*Okay. I’m Barbara Walters, but I can’t help it.*

“You’ll laugh.” He’s already laughing a little at himself. He moves across the apartment to sit on the living room floor, back propped against the couch. “The harmonica.”

“The harmonica?” I couldn’t have heard him right. “You’ve never played?”

“Just never tried. I mean, I could pick one up and start, I’m sure, but I never have.”

“Wow. That’s funny. A classically trained pianist who plays eight instruments and yet longs to learn the harmonica.”

“I did not say ‘longs.’” He levels a mock-stern look at me. “Just said I’ve never played it. I think things come easier for me once I have the general mechanics because I have a phonographic memory.”

“So you’d be horrible in an argument because you’d remember *everything* I said.”

“It’s not like that. It doesn’t translate to everything, but to music and a

few other useless things. For instance, I'm slightly encyclopedic with movie quotes."

"Now I got you there." I blow on my nails like I'm all that. "I don't even have a fancy phonographic memory, but I'm pretty sure I could out-movie quote you."

He looks at me with great pity.

"Uh, I doubt that, Pep."

I've never backed down from a challenge

"Just when I thought I was out," I say, stretching my arms in front of me and then bringing them back toward my chest. "They pull me back in."

"Don't insult me, Pep. That's from *The Godfather*."

"I'm gonna need you to be more specific, Mr. Pornographic Memory."

He lowers and shakes his head, a silent chuckle moving his shoulders.

"That's *phonographic*, you little shit. And it's *The Godfather*, part three." He gives me what probably passes as his "game on" face with lesser movie quoters. "Shake and bake."

"Now who's being insulting? *Talladega Nights*. 'Motorboat.'"

"*Wedding Crashers*. 'You can't get me, thunder, 'cause you're just God's farts.'"

"I can't believe you even . . . come harder, Gray. That's *Ted*. 'I could see your toner through those jeans.'"

"*Pitch Perfect*."

Whoa. Unexpected. Didn't think he would know that one. I'll dig deeper into my girly movie bin.

"So you bend and snap."

Rhys frowns, eyes fixed on the ceiling as he trolls around in that clever brain of his for whatever phonographic file this quote should be retrieved from. I can already see it. Triumph builds from my feet up, and the smile pops out on my face.

"Before you start your celebration—premature celebration, I might add,"

Rhys says. "Give me a chance to . . ."

He finally side-eyes me and slumps his shoulders.

"I got nothing. What movie was that?"

"*Legally Blonde*."

Rhyson's outrage drops his mouth wide open.

"You have *got* to be kidding me! Even a phonographic memory can't prepare you for movies you've never seen, and I wouldn't be caught dead watching *Legally Blonde*."

I'm up on my feet, doing the running man around the apartment. It then devolves into Hammer time. I'm fully aware I'm making a total dork of myself, but I can't contain it. This is the best I've felt in . . . forever. If muscles have memory, my heart has forgotten this feeling. I'd forgotten how to have this much fun.

"Next time, we'll put money on it." I slide down to the floor beside him, resting my back against the couch and stretching my legs out beside his. Either I'm really short, or he's really tall, or a little of both.

"I don't want to take your money." Rhyson grins and gives me a gentle shoulder nudge.

"Well, if round one is anything to go by, I'll be the one winning." I remember the past due notices under my jewelry box, and the thought deflates my good humor. My smile slowly leaks off my face. "And believe me, I'd take your money."

"Why do you work so much, Pep?"

Rhyson's voice, deep and soft, drifts over my skin, coaxing up goose bumps. Great. Every part of me is exhausted and wants to shut down, but my arms manage to produce goose bumps.

"I know you've never had to worry about it, but some of us have bills to pay," I say. "Some of us have to figure out how to survive."

I regret the waspish words as soon as they leave my mouth and contaminate the air. He doesn't respond, but turns his head to look at me, all

the laughter dissolving into the disappointment I see in his eyes. We've been lowering our guards all night, and I just threw mine all the way back up.

"I'm sorry." I pass a hand over my tired eyes, wishing I could take the words back.

"It's okay." He focuses his attention on fibers of his jeans, giving me space to get this out.

"It's not. I . . . I don't talk about this much."

"So it's not as simple as bills to pay?" he asks, studying me closely.

"It is, but it's not just utilities and rent." I give him a weary smile. "A lot more, but I can handle it."

"What is it?"

Just thinking of the black cloud of debt constantly hovering over my life wraps a steel band around my chest.

"My mom's medical bills."

"Are children responsible for their parents' debt?"

"Well, typically debtors would just take it out of the parent's estate." I laugh, but it's a little sour. "Mama didn't have much of an estate. Just Glory Bee, the diner she and my Aunt Ruthie built from the ground up. I'm not standing by and watching Aunt Ruthie lose everything too. We made special arrangements with the hospital collection agency. Aunt Ruthie and I are paying off the debt together."

"They let you do that?"

"Oh, it took some convincing." I heave a sigh, remembering that fight. "But we finally brought them around to our way of thinking."

"You're a stubborn little thing, aren't you?" He smiles and slides his leg over to bump mine.

I grimace, sliding my leg away and clasping my arm around my knee.

"So I've been told."

"I kinda like it."

"Ha! Yeah, it's real cute," I say with a grin. "Until you want something I



won't give you."

He delivers a teasing sideways glance.

"I already want something you won't give me."

I would move if those beautiful grey eyes would let me go, weren't pulling me in and holding me.

San walks in, saving me from becoming a slutty puddle at Rhyson's feet.

"Hey, guys." He offers us a weary smile and drops his saddlebag down by the door. "Am I busting in on something?"

Rhyson gives me one last grin before standing and extending his hand to pull me to my feet. I come up faster than I anticipated and slam into his chest. It feels good. Him towering over me. Me pressed to his broad, warm chest. I don't step back right away. When I look up, his eyes aren't teasing me anymore. There's a tinder between us, waiting for just a spark to ignite to full-blown flame. The connection is always there, latent or alive, but right now, so close with our bodies touching, it burns through our clothing and heats my skin.

San fake coughs, bringing me back to my senses. I take several steps back, running my palms up and down my thighs and shoving them into my pockets.

"I was just leaving." Rhyson looks around, frowning. "If I could find my phone. You see it, Pep?"

"Pep?" San asks.

"It's a nickname." I glare at him and look around for the phone. "And no, you cannot call me that."

I grab my phone from the coffee table and find Rhyson's number. He peers down at the screen.

"Is that how you saved me in your phone?" His incredulous laugh drags a smile to my face.

"I didn't want to put your real name in case someone picked up my phone or . . . I don't know."

“So you saved me as R. Geritol?”

“Well, every time I see you, it’s as an old man.”

“Nice.” He shakes his head. “Call it.”

“It’s ringing.”

“Lost,” number nine from Rhyson’s first album, starts playing.

Rhyson and I grin at each other.

“Is that my ring tone?” I ask.

“Apparently so.” He looks around a little for where the sound is coming from before pulling it out from under a couch cushion. “Got it. I should get going.”

I glance at my phone. Wow. It’s two in the morning. Time sure flies when I’m with Rhyson. I walk with him to the door, conscious of San’s eyes on us even though he’s drinking his almond milk straight from the carton in the kitchen.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.” Rhyson pulls the door open and turns to face me.

“I’ve heard that before.” The words are out before I think.

“Did it bother you when I didn’t call for a week?” Rhyson’s lips bend a little like they’re really close to smiling.

“Of course not.”

“Still, friends stay in touch, right?” He tugs the ponytail resting on my shoulder.

We’ve done so well, besides the occasional spark and goose bump. I had to go and open my trap.

“I know you’re busy,” I say, finding it hard to breathe this close.

He backs up, facing me as he eases off the little stoop of our apartment and turns toward his car parked in a space a few feet away.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says.

I close the door and lean against it. It’s holding me up because the combination of that last smile, his full lips, the beautiful grey eyes almost

hidden by the dark hair kissing his forehead, made my knees weak.

“That was just sad.” San plops onto the couch, taking another gulp of his milk.

“Don’t start, San.” I cross into the kitchen, finding a bowl to put away in the dishwasher and a few bits of trash to toss. Anything to keep me out of the conversation San wants to force on me.

“Watching you guys trying to be friends is like watching porn with no penetration. Really hot, but no climax.”

“You’re disgusting.” I head toward my bedroom, not bothering to respond further.

“At least if I had a hot rock star wanting to screw me, I’d know what to do with him.”

“You’re welcome to try, but I don’t think Rhyson rolls that way.”

I close my bedroom door, hoping that’s the end of it. Of course, the door flies open immediately.

“He’d roll your way.” He grins at me, his handsome face and knowing grin working my nerves. “Pep.”

“Call me that again and I’m junk punching you.”

“Hey, that’d be more action than I’ve gotten in the last few weeks.”

“Ginny not servicing you?” I pull the elastic from my hair, shaking the waves loose.

“*Spotted* is keeping us both so busy.”

“You love it though, right?” I bring out the vintage Sonny and Cher nightshirt my mom gave me for my sixteenth birthday. It guarantees me a good night sleep every time.

“I love it, but I’m just exhausted and involuntarily celibate.”

“Two weeks?” I scoff. “Try . . .”

I trail off. My self-imposed celibacy hasn’t given me any problems until lately. San knows that, so this is a dangerous path that will only lead to more probing and poking about Rhyson and me. Or more digging about my last

sexual encounter, which San knows is off limits.

“You haven’t gotten laid since that jerk from the video shoot?” San leans against the doorjamb. “How do you do it? I can’t make it through one shower without jerking off.”

“San, there is such a thing as TMI, even in this friendship.”

“Don’t get all prissy. We passed TMI around eighth grade when we went shopping for your first training bra.”

I snort laughing from that memory.

“Remember the sales lady was so polite, saying she thought I could wait a while?”

“There wasn’t much to train at the time, but you were determined not to be the only eighth grade girl still wearing undershirts.”

We’ve been through everything together. Middle school drama. High school heartbreaks. No one else could have dragged me away from Glory Falls so soon after Mama’s funeral.

“You know I love you right, San?”

His cocky grin softens until it’s just a soft crook that warms my heart and has made me feel at ease more than half my life.

“Sometimes I know you better than you know yourself, Kai.”

“True story.” I take off my earrings and stow them in the jewelry box.

“That’s how I know you’ll jump Rhyson’s bones before the year is out.”

I whirl around, pointing to the hall behind him.

“Out.”

San laughs, steps back into the hall, and closes his door. His parting words reach me through the door and stay with me until I fall asleep in my beloved nightshirt.

“Mark my words.”

# Chapter THIRTEEN

## RHYSON

IF I HADN'T BEEN BORN A musician, I'm pretty sure I could have made a living as a professional gamer. A lot less money. A lot fewer women. A much pastier complexion. Upside is I wouldn't have to wear disguises to go out in public to avoid some camera shoved in my face every day. This is the alternate destiny I consider as I kick my best friend, Marlon's, ass in Madden. Again. He just won't give up.

Kai's ring tone breaks my concentration. Where's my damn phone?

"Pause it." I tear my eyes away from the screen, scanning the floor for my phone. It doesn't escape my notice that Marlon's still playing.

"Man, pause it." I toss my controller to the floor and start flipping couch cushions up searching for my phone. "You seen my phone?"

"What's it look like?" he asks.

"What the hell do you mean what's it—" I stop to look at him. Smartass is holding my phone up, inspecting the screen.

"Give me my phone, Marlon." He thinks I'm playing, but if Kai hangs up, I'm suspending him from a chandelier by his dreadlocks.

"Who's Pepper?" His teeth flash white against that dark chocolate skin the girls fall at his feet for. He wiggles his eyebrows. "Is that her stripper name?"

I snatch my phone and walk a few paces away, turning my back on him.

“Hey, Pep. What’s up?”

“Nothing much.” Her honeyed, husky voice goes straight to my dick. I should be used to it by now, but I’m not.

“Everything okay?”

Even though I’ve told her over and over to call me if she ever needs a ride, she never does. San usually will text me or call. I’m glad I resisted the urge to cut his balls off when I found out they lived together *and* that he was her first. How I restrained myself that night, I’m still not sure, but it’s apparent that aside from one random initiating sexual encounter in a storage room on a bag of grits, they’re like family. So for her to call . . . even Madden’s not worth missing this.

“Everything’s great,” she says. If we were together, I bet she’d be biting the sweet curve of her bottom lip. “I . . . um . . . well, I worked an extra shift at The Note today.”

Not surprising. She’s the hardest working girl I’ve ever met.

“An extra shift, huh?” I laugh and lean against the pool table Marlon insisted I had to have, but we rarely use. “That sounds like you.”

“Yeah. Well, my manager gave me the day off tomorrow.”

“Cool.”

I need to let her take the lead here. I’m always the one initiating contact, calling her, picking her up from work, texting first. In the six weeks we’ve known each other, this is one of the few times she’s reached out to me. I need to be patient enough to see how far she’ll come.

“And I don’t have a class to teach tomorrow.” She clears her throat. “And Grady doesn’t need me.”

Okay. That’s enough hanging back. Who am I kidding? I haven’t seen her in days, and I’m practically salivating at the chance.

“We should hang out or something,” I say, keeping my voice casual.

I’m really not used to being in this position. The one chasing and playing down my feelings. But Kai is like another species. I’m not even sure she’s

fully girl. She rarely even acknowledges that I'm famous. Or rich. She won't let me within an inch of paying for lunch, much less the gargantuan medical debt she's struggling to pay off.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking." She sounds relieved that I suggested it first. "Maybe you could pick me up from work, if you don't have anything to do."

"I'm free all night," I lie, already calculating just how much shifting it'll take to free up my night. "What time should I pick you up?"

"I get off a little early. Nine o'clock."

"What do you wanna do?"

"Well, I'm still pretty tired from the double shift. I was thinking . . . well, before I called you, I was thinking I would just stay home and catch the *Sex and the City* marathon."

Shit. That's a boring bullet through the head.

"You know, I've wanted to see that," I force myself to say. "I never saw it when it was on television."

Kai's knowing chuckle loosens the air between us.

"I call BS, Rhys."

"Okay, it sounds about as good as *Legally Blonde*."

"That's more like it!" She laughs outright on the other end. "But just like *Legally Blonde*, you have no idea what you're missing."

"Mmmmm." Let's just leave it at that.

"I'll make a deal with you."

"This should be good."

"We'll watch a few episodes, and if you hate them, we'll watch something you want to see."

"That sounds fair."

"It's really fair."

"Now, if I agree to watch this marathon of girlery, you have to do something I want to do tomorrow on your day off."

“The optimal word being ‘my.’ You want to dictate what I do on my day off?”

“I promise it’ll be more fun than what you were planning to do.”

“You don’t know what I was planning to do.”

“Ah, let’s see. Did it involve cleaning your bathroom, doing laundry, and watching something like, I don’t know, *Burlesque*?”

Her momentary silence on the other end makes me appreciate all the long nights in her living room after work when I actually listened.

“*Burlesque* is another movie you should give a chance, by the way.”

“The hell I’ll watch Cher and Christina Aguilera grinding on chairs and singing show tunes.”

“Wow, talk about oversimplification of a plot.”

“I’m pretty sure the plot was already pretty simple.”

“You’re such a snob.”

“I think we both knew that.”

She chuckles on the other end, and I’d like to teleport wherever she is right now. In a matter of weeks this girl has twisted me into a Boy Scout knot. She invades my mind at inconvenient times, like when I’m supposed to be writing, during meetings for the tour, or in the middle of sessions.

First thing in the morning. Just before I fall sleep.

“Okay, snob,” she says. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

I want to fist pump, but I’ve matured beyond that. Also, I feel Marlon’s inquisitive eyes on me. He’s already going to ride me about this.

“I was thinking a short ride to Pismo Beach to ride dune buggies.”

“A short ride?” Her voice squeaks. “Isn’t that like two hours away?”

Almost three, but who’s counting?

“Something like that, but we’ll make a day of it.”

It’s the closest we’ve come to a date. Usually our time together consists of me picking her up from work, taking her home, eating leftover food from her job, and us talking or watching movies until San comes home and cock



blocks. Not that there is any cocking to block, but still.

“So is San out tonight working?” I ask.

His work for that sleazy online rag has picked up significantly. If I weren’t positive he’s completely loyal to Kai, I’d worry. Me dating a girl whose best friend is basically a pap? Not that we’re dating. We’re . . . friending. Just ask my right hand. Every morning in the shower it sees how I’m handling all this friending.

“He’s in Vegas on assignment,” she says softly. “So I’ll be home alone.”

This time I do fist pump, and sure enough, Marlon gives a knowing grunt, which I ignore.

“Maybe I’ll just stay over then.” I say it like it’s not monumental. “I don’t want you home by yourself.”

One of the things I love about Kai is her brain.

“Wow. That’s big of you,” she says, words dipped in sarcasm. “I think I’ll be fine. We’ll see.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever,” I agree. “We’ll play it by ear.”

*I’m staying.*

“Okay, see you around nine then. And don’t worry about a disguise.” I can hear the smile in her voice, and it makes me smile even though I can’t see her. Goofy shit like this keeps happening. “Just text me when you’re outside, and I’ll come to the parking lot.”

“Okay. See you at nine.”

As soon as we hang up, I dial my manager.

“What’s up, Rhys?”

New York probably won’t ever leave Bristol’s voice, no matter how long she lives on this coast. Her words are always like tiny pellets coming fast and hard at me. Managing me is probably the only thing that would have ripped her away.

“Hey, I need you to reschedule tonight’s session for me.”

If I leave it at that, maybe she won’t act like it’s a big deal.

“What the hell?”

*Or not.*

“Don’t give me shit on this, Bris. Just do it.”

“That’s what you said when you made me bring all these musicians from all over the freaking world for these damn sessions.” Bristol wraps her hard-edged voice around the words to full advantage, like a wire hanger.

“They’re here for another few days. I’ll pay them the same no matter what. No skin off their backs. Just tell them we’ll pick up on Sunday night.”

“But you leave for New York Wednesday. You don’t want to rush this.”

“I think I’m the musician here. I know what I’m doing, Bris.”

“I just want you making the best use of your time, Rhyson. You brought in a damn flutist from Budapest.”

“I think he prefers flautist.”

“And I prefer not to have all my hard work undone, for what? What is more important than laying these tracks for your next album, Rhys?”

Usually nothing, but there is nothing “usual” about what’s been going on with me since I met Kai. I haven’t introduced her to Marlon or Bristol or anyone in that other part of my life. I’ve roped my time with Kai off from everyone else because, well, it’s mine. Mine and hers.

I threw the friendship flag out as a way to get closer to her because I thought I might want more. Now I know for *sure* I want more, but getting to know her this way is fantastic, and in all honesty, I just want to keep her to myself as long as I can. Not have Bris or Marlon questioning her motives or soiling what has been the purest connection I’ve ever shared with anyone. She asks nothing of me. She’s not *after* anything, except to know me the way I want to know her. To talk about music and movies and the things that have hurt and helped us. I have close friends, great friends, but this is something I’ve never had before. *She* is something I’ve never had before, and I can’t get enough.

I’ve told her a lot about emancipating from my parents and coming to live

here. Not everything, but more than anyone who doesn't already know. She's told me about her mom and the years she stayed in Georgia taking care of her. Her dedication, her sacrifice, challenges me. I've lived for myself all my life, and music and ambition have been the constant driving forces. It's hard for me to imagine delaying my dreams for anyone. I've never had to.

"Rhys, are you still there?" My extended silence has pushed Bristol from irate to angry in seconds. "What do you expect me to tell these session players?"

"Tell them I had a last minute conflict, and like I said, we'll pick up with the session Sunday night. It'll be fine."

"But I just don't—"

"Bris, what's your job?" She had to go and make me play the boss card. Her heavy sigh huffs between us.

"To make your life easier."

"Then do it."

I slide my phone into my pocket and make my way back over to the couch where Marlon sits. I feel his eyes on me, but I just press the button to restart the game.

He pauses it.

"So this Pepper girl is worth cancelling a session that's costing you thousands of dollars?"

*God of the joystick, give me patience.*

"Man, don't start." My eyes don't leave the action paused onscreen. "Let's just finish the game."

I press the button. So does he. Pause again.

"Was that Bristol on the phone?"

I run my hands through my hair and scrunch my face up. Can we not just play the damn game? I was winning.

"Yeah, and can I say how creepy it is that you perv on Bristol?"

"Your sister's hot."

“Of course she is. We’re twins.”

“If that head gets any bigger . . .”

“Let me worry about my head.”

“Which brings me back to Pepper. You getting any head?”

Comments like that make me keep Kai to myself. Well, that and the fact that I just want her to myself.

“I’m not talking about her with you.”

“Oh, so you *like* her.”

I could deny it, but I do like her. And I haven’t talked to anyone about it. Certainly not Grady. He’d hang me by my thumbs if he realized I was still trying with Kai. I’ve visited his studio and “bumped into” Kai while I was there a few times. I’m sure it’s obvious from our banter and teasing that we’re friends, but he trusted me when I said I wouldn’t pursue her. We were both fools to think I’d stick to that.

“I like her, yeah.”

It’s quiet for a few seconds. So quiet that I risk a glance at the man who has been my best friend since we met at the L.A. School for the Arts way before I won my Grammys and he became known as Grip to his fans. Two misfits who clicked immediately even though I was a classically trained dork pianist who couldn’t buy a clue, and Marlon was a straight-from-the-hood wannabe rapper and spoken word artist flapping around like a fish out of water. We’ve seen everything the other has been through since we were sixteen, over a decade of friendship, so he knows girls don’t ever really move beyond the “tapped that” category with me.

“You for real, Rhys?” Marlon’s dark brows pique with his interest. “You catching feelings?”

Screw it. If I have my way—and I always do eventually since it’s one of the perks of being me—he’ll meet her soon enough. And the sooner I give him what he wants to know, the sooner we can get back to my Madden domination.

“Long story short, she wants to be just friends. I’ve accepted it, but I’m kind of biding my time because I know she feels more for me than she admits.” I toss the controller to the floor and lean back, resting my head against the cool leather couch cushion. “So yeah, catching feelings or some shit like that.”

Marlon turns the corners of his mouth down, nods, and fixes his eyes on me for more of the inquisition.

“How’d you meet her?”

“Through Grady. She’s one of his students.”

He rolls his eyes and sucks his teeth, the universal sound of disgust.

“Aw, man. An aspiring singer? You sure she ain’t just thirsty?”

“She’s not. She barely accepts a ride home from me, much less wants help with her career. It’s ridiculous.”

“What’s she look like?”

I don’t even want to show him what I have on my phone. Kai had beaten me again at movie quotes and was dancing around like a goofball. She literally did the sprinkler. I caught it on video. Even acting goofy, you can see the lean curves of her dancer’s body and that tight, plump ass. Her dark, tilted eyes laugh into the camera. Her hair is pulled up into this big knot on top of her head. She’s wearing no makeup, but you want to bottle the way her face glows. My heart starts pounding harder watching this ten-second clip. When I show Marlon, his mouth drops open a little.

“Damn, she’s hot.”

He pulls his finger over the progress bar like he’s planning to watch the clip again.

“That’s enough.” I grab the phone and slide it into my pocket and out of reach.

“So why haven’t we met her? You haven’t brought her around or anything.”

“You know what a bitch Bris is. She’d scare her off.” I point an accusing

finger at him. “And you’d freak her out with that player thing you do. And Jimmi . . .”

Jimmi, Marlon, and I all met in high school. We count on each other. We share everything. But this? I’m not sure I want to share yet. I’ve never brought a girl around. Not a groupie, a *girl* that I won’t be able to hide how much I like.

“Well, there’s also the fact that Jimmi’s in love with you.” Marlon leans back into the couch and crosses his feet on the oversized tree trunk that is my coffee table.

“She’s not.” I hate it when he says that. I hate it because it may be true, and I don’t know how to fix it without ruining my friendship with the girl I’ve known since I had acne.

“What about last summer between you two?”

Jimmi wasn’t my only regret from the ten-city tour we did together last summer, but she’s the only one I have to face on a regular basis.

“All kinds of shit happens on the road,” I counter with a shrug. “It was a mistake.”

“Yeah, but when the girl wants to keep making that mistake over and over and over again for the rest of her life, that’s called being in love.” Marlon pulls his locks out of the elastic band holding them back from his face, freeing them to fall around his shoulders. “See, that’s why you need to introduce me to this Pepper. You don’t know women. I know women.”

“Is that why you’ve been asking my sister out for two years and have exactly zero dates to show for it?”

“We’re playing a game of cat and mouse, me and Bris.”

“More like Never Will I Ever.”

I have to laugh at myself for that one, which doesn’t please Marlon.

“So do we get to meet her soon or what? You could bring her to Jimmi’s birthday party in a couple of weeks.”

It’s a private party, so there won’t be any media. Kai has made it clear she

doesn't want anyone thinking her road to the top ran through my bed, so I want to protect her from the paparazzi circus my life can be when I'm out. It's not for another two weeks, so there should be time to persuade her. She has friend zoned me so hard, I have no idea if the next few days will get me any closer to being . . . whatever I want to be to her. Boyfriend? Fuck, that sounds like I want to take her to the prom or something.

What would I call what I want us to be?

I just know I want to spend as much time with her as any day will allow. I want her slow-cooked molasses Southern drawl to roll over me and seep into all the cracks hard days leave behind. I want to fall asleep talking to her about music and wake up from dreaming about her naked to find her naked beside me. I want to teach her to play piano just so I can touch her fingers. I want to give her nice things because I know she'd never ask for them. Because I know she doesn't need them. I want to taste her, to kiss her so deeply my tongue hits the back of her throat. I want those small, high breasts heavy in my hands. I want her nipples swollen when they brush the roof of my mouth. I want to hold her so close our heartbeats syncopate.

So what's that called?

# Chapter

# FOURTEEN

Kai

THIS MAY BE THE BEST SLEEP I've had in months. Maybe it isn't so much the sleep, as how I'm waking up. I'm curled up on my lumpy sofa, but my head rests on Rhyson's warm, hard chest. Well-muscled arms cocoon me in strength and safety. And he smells absolutely divine. I pull in a long breath, relishing the clean scent of him even at whatever godawful time of morning it is. I hold my breath so my chest doesn't rise and fall. I want him to stay asleep so I can enjoy this.

Being Rhyson's friend for the last six weeks has been a lot harder than I thought it would be. I knew I was attracted to him, but I had no idea we'd grow so close in such a short time. That every day he'd make me laugh with some outrageous text message. That his thoughtfulness, picking me up when San couldn't, would make me look forward to our short rides home and to our long talks at the apartment. And I didn't take into account how much I would want to kiss him every few minutes. He's the kind of guy I've dreamed about, but didn't think actually existed. And being his friend—*just his friend*—is exhausting.

So I'm holding my breath and hoping he doesn't wake up. I want to look my fill without worrying he'll read too much into it. The first night I saw him, I wasn't even sure he was handsome. Boy, was I wrong. He's gorgeous. Everything is prominent. His nose. His wide mouth and full lips. His high



cheekbones. It's almost too much, like the man himself. Too gifted. Too smart. Too funny. Too . . . right. And yet, so wrong for me. I'd lose myself in Rhyson. Before I'd know it, I'd be off on his world tour, following behind him and neglecting my own dreams just to be with him. I'd sink everything into him, and I've seen firsthand where that leads.

"Kai," he mumbles my name in his sleep but doesn't wake up.

Does he dream about me? Does he think about me as many times a day as I think about him? Does his heart skip beats when he knows we'll see each other?

His arms tighten around me, and I don't have the resolve to wake him up. His big hands run up and down my back, warm through the thin tank top I put on after work last night for the *Sex and the City* marathon. I haven't been touched like this . . . ever. I've had a few boyfriends. Slept with a few guys, but even in his sleep, Rhyson is so tender with me. His hands move under the tank top until they caress my bare skin.

I'll wake him up soon. I promise myself I will, but I can't yet. It feels too good. One hand drifts down until he's cupping my butt. I want to push my hips into him, relieve this pressure building between my legs. He groans, a frown pulling his dark brows together.

"Pep." His sleep-husky voice seduces away what remains of my common sense. I slide my hands under his T-shirt. Oh, God. The lean muscles of his back flex beneath my fingers. He bends his head until his lips trace my neck. The layer of scruff on his chin is a prickly, tickly, tantalizing burn across my skin. Being touched by him, being kissed by him, even just on the neck, is heaven.

"Mmmmm." He moans against my collarbone, eyes still tightly closed.

I have to stop this. He shouldn't be kissing my neck. He shouldn't be stroking my back. For the love of God, he should not be twisting my nipple between those long, gifted fingers, but he is. I push my breast deeper into his palm, needing the pressure. Needing his touch. An electric thread pulls taut

from my breasts to my core. He hasn't even kissed me, but I'm wet through my pajama bottoms. Embarrassingly wet, and I want his fingers on me. Pushing inside me until the world around me goes prismatic with an orgasm I know will be more spectacular than anything I've ever felt before.

I want him, but I can't have him. Not and be who I want to be. Not and do the things I want to do. There's too much of him. Not just physically. His presence. His talent. His fame. It's this fabulous vacuum I won't be sucked into. I'm afraid if I have him completely, he'll take all of me.

I ease myself away, inch by careful inch, making sure not to wake him. My body mourns the loss of his hands and lips, his warmth, but I pull back until I can stand on shaky legs. I allow myself one last look. He settles back into the cushions, long lashes fanning down to cover the shadows I noticed earlier under his eyes. So much of his life happens late at night in studios while most people are sleeping. One day that'll be me. The shadows under my eyes will be from doing what I love, what I'm meant to do. Not from waiting tables, teaching high school students dance routines, and reconciling Grady's accounts.

It's rare to have a break from all my jobs at once. And if Rhyson hadn't come, I'd be spending the day exactly the way he predicted. Doing laundry. Instead, I get a day at the beach with the wind in my hair.

Speaking of hair, mine's a rat's nest. My tongue is covered in mink, and Rhyson may still smell good, but an investigative sniff under my arms confirms that I don't.

Thirty minutes later, I smell like the pear cinnamon soap Mama sold in the diner. I've been meaning to get the recipe from Aunt Ruthie. I'm down to my last three bars. When that soap runs out, it'll be one more piece of Mama I've lost forever. If I can make another batch, replicate her recipe, I'll be able to hold on to that bit just a while longer.

With damp hair hanging down my back, I slip on a black bikini top and a pair of old cut offs. I have no idea how to dress. The smell of brewing coffee

tantalizes my senses and pulls my caffeine-deprived body toward the kitchen.

Rhyson has such a great ass. It's the first thing I notice when I enter the kitchen. His back—and ass—are to me as he scrambles eggs. His hair, per usual, dips and flops over his eyes and around his ears. My fingers itch to wind through its thick, not-quite-curliness. He grins at me over his shoulder.

“Morning.” His smile drops away and his eyes scroll down my body, lingering on my breasts in the bikini top and the length of my legs. “You look great.”

“Yeah, right.” I fold my arms under my breasts, self-conscious under his stare. “I’m not sure what I should wear.”

“What you’re wearing’s fine.” He draws in a deep breath. “And you smell great too. What’s that scent you always wear?”

“Pear cinnamon,” I say softly. “My mom used to make it.”

He crosses the small kitchen to stand in front of me.

“I like it.” He leans in to inhale at my neck. “A lot.”

Our glances tangle when he pulls back, and my breath hitches. He pushes my arms away so his thumb can venture over the skin covering my ribs. Every inch of skin he touches ignites like he’s branding me with his gentleness.

“You have a tattoo,” he says softly, voice rough from sleep or this moment sizzling between us. I’m not sure which.

I glance down at the cursive ink just beneath my breasts and over my ribs. My skin feels so alive beneath his touch I expect to see the ink move and dance under his fingers.

“My soul to keep?” He pulls his eyes from the script back up to me. “What’s that?”

“Um, it’s part of a prayer my mom used to say with me before I’d go to sleep.” He drags his knuckles over the skin, and I have to dedicate half my neurons to not wrapping myself around him like a koala. “You know that prayer they teach you as kids.”

“Nah, we didn’t learn any prayers as kids. Ever.”

“Not even grace?”

“No, my family’s not religious at all. Unless you count music as our religion. That, we’re fanatical about.” He crosses over to the stove, giving me back some space and air to breathe, and starts dividing the eggs between two plates. “Your family was religious?”

“Well, it’s small-town Georgia, the Bible belt and all, so that’s the rule, not the exception.” I sit down at the table, composing myself and saying a quick grace, something I haven’t done in a long time. My sagging faith would disappoint Mama.

“My grandfather was a pastor.” I sip my orange juice before continuing. “He and my Grams couldn’t have kids. They’d tried their whole marriage and were in their forties when they took that mission trip to Korea.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah.” Memories of my grandparents make me smile. “They were something else. Pops, that’s what I called my grandfather, said they took one look at Mama and knew she was theirs. Come to think of it, he said the same thing about Grammy.”

“That’s amazing.” He props one elbow on the table and holds his chin, eyes never leaving mine. “Just knowing you want someone right away like that.”

The way he looks at me as if nothing else in the room interests him at all is addictive. I know because I want it all the time now.

“Yep.” A laugh breezes across my lips as I drag my fork uselessly through the eggs on my plate. “Mama was just two days old when they found her. So yeah, she grew up a PK, a pastor’s kid.”

“And she kept the whole religion thing going with you?”

“Her faith was strong. Mine, not as much anymore. She married a pastor too.” My fork clatters on the plate when I drop it abruptly. “My father took over the church, Glory Falls Baptist, when Pops retired.”

“You talk about your mom all the time, but I’ve never heard you talk about your dad.”

“Let’s just say you don’t have the market cornered on the bad dad thing.”

Rhyson lifts his eyebrows and bends his head to that angle that silently encourages me to go on. I swallow the painful lump that always forms when I think about my father.

“My dad left when I was eight. He ran off with the church secretary without a word, and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Asshole.”

I smile at the fierceness of his tone. The hard lines of his face soften only when mine do.

“My sentiments exactly.”

“His loss, Kai.”

I wish it were that simple. When a man leaves his family, there is a lot he loses out on, but it goes all ways. The wife who cried herself to sleep for months after he left, she suffered losses. The little girl who always looked up the dirt road every birthday, half wondering if he’d show—she lost too. She *becomes* lost. Sometimes she stays lost for a long time.

I gather our dishes and scrape the remnants down the garbage disposal. Once the dishes are loaded in the dishwasher, I turn back to find him staring at my bikini top.

“Should I change?”

“Huh? What?”

“I was gonna throw a T-shirt on top of the bikini. I wasn’t sure if it would be warm enough to swim, but thought I should be prepared.”

“Um, yeah. Good idea. I have some clothes out in the car. Lemme shower and we’ll get on the road.”

“Rhyson.”

My voice stops him, and he turns around.

“Thanks for last night.” I twist my fingers together in front of me. “I

didn't want to be alone, and with San in Vegas . . . well, thanks."

"And how do you repay me?" he asks, eyes teasing me. "By force feeding me hours of *Sex and the City*. You owe me big time for that one, Pep."

"Oh, don't even try it," I fire back, needing this lighter conversation to chase away my father's ghost. "You loved it."

"What do you see in that show?"

"Female empowerment. Strong, successful, independent women."

"And the clothes don't hurt, right?"

"Oh, I do love everything Carrie wears, especially her nameplate necklace."

"Yeah, feminism and Manolos." Rhyson's mobile mouth smirks. "Spare me."

"I know you stayed up and watched another episode after I fell asleep."

"If you fell asleep, how do you know that?"

"I'm a light sleeper."

"So am I, Kai." A smile takes its sweet time spreading across his face. "You might want to remember that."

He couldn't have . . . surely he wasn't *aware* . . . *awake* when I was cuddling and near-humping him earlier on the couch. He touched my *nipple*. My face burns, but I give no indication I have any idea what he's talking about. I hold his stare for as long as I can before I have to look away. When he looks at me like that, I don't know how to describe it except to say that his eyes speak. All the things I won't let him say, his eyes do. And it's too much sometimes, because there is so much I want to say in return.

With every conversation, he peels away another protective layer, coaxing me to reveal more of myself. To share more of myself, and I know it's the same for him. I'm not sure how much longer we can go on with this intimacy blooming between us like a hothouse flower. I only know that I feel more alive than I have since Mama died. I don't want to give him up. And that dependency, that is the very thing I've always feared the most.

# Chapter

## FIFTEEN

Kai

WE'RE JUST A FEW WEEKS FROM Halloween. Back in Glory Falls, Aunt Ruthie's probably making sure there's plenty of firewood for cold nights. She's serving hot cider to the morning crowd. Not mint cider. We save that for Christmas. By now, there's a nip in Glory Falls' autumn air that would make me pull my scarf closer and huddle into the light jacket I grabbed "just in case" before I left the house. We don't get the variety of seasons as much on the left coast, and I miss it some days. But today, standing in eighty-degree weather in a bikini and cut offs with the sun suspended high in the sky, warming the bare skin of my shoulders and neck, today isn't one of those days.

I've been working too hard. I can tell because my body and my mind soak up rest like water in a desert. Like it's a mirage that might disappear any moment. On the two-hour . . . correction, almost three-hour . . . drive to Pismo Beach, I fell asleep. Rhyson's deep voice was a lullaby, making a sleepy song of all the goings on in his life. His semi-addiction to Madden, his growing irritation with the details for the upcoming world tour, this group of musicians he has flown in from all over the world for sessions this week. It's hard to believe the public sees him as broody and almost reclusive. I mean, yeah, I've seen firsthand how the guy wears disguises so he can go out in public undisturbed, but with me, he's open and downright chatty.

He's living the life I want so badly, and instead of listening with bated breath and sitting on the edge of my seat, exhaustion forces me to sleep. He wakes me up with his thumb whispering across my cheekbone. His eyes and his smile hold so much affection it makes my heart ache. Soon he'll stop pretending with me. He wants out of the friend zone. It's apparent, but I had my reasons for putting him there in the first place, and they still stand.

"We're here, sleepyhead." He pushes strands of hair back behind my ear. "Should I be offended that you fell asleep on me?"

I subtly pull back from his fingers, and his smile slips a little. It's hard not to give him what he wants. It's even harder to consider giving up our friendship though, so I'll just let this go for as long as I can. I'm so selfish, but I can't imagine my life without him now. By the same token, I can't imagine risking my peace of mind, my independence, or my focus for the kisses I know we both crave. Well, I know *I* crave. I can only speak for myself, but Rhyson isn't great at hiding what he wants either.

Once we're out on the beach, I find myself grinning hard. There's nothing but sand and ocean as far as the eye can see. Instead of renting from a public spot where he'd be spotted and stalked, Rhyson's had the spot come to him. It's just us and the dune buggy, this contraption made of fluorescent green metal bars, oversized wheels, and testosterone. It's one of the larger ones, with an open top and two seats. Rhyson practically bounces even though he stands perfectly still, listening to the guy making sure we're ready for the ride. The energy he's emitting draws me in and has me bouncing inside too. When the guide moves to place the helmet on my head, Rhyson snatches it from his hands.

"I'll do it." Rhyson frowns and puts the helmet on, tightening the strap under my chin.

I can't help but smile. If he ever got out of that friend zone—not that I plan to let that happen any time soon—he'd be a possessive handful. I can already tell.



“What are you grinning about?” He grins back at me as he puts on his own helmet.

“You, acting like that guy was trying to cop a feel or something.” I recreate his frown and imitate his gravelly voice. “*I’ll do it.*”

“He was flirting with you the whole time. You didn’t notice?”

“No, I really didn’t.”

He rolls his eyes and says, “Figures,” under his breath.

“Are you one of those jealous, possessive boyfriends?”

I’m a foolhardy idiot for asking him. I’m baiting a shark with a baby worm, but I want to know how he is when he’s off the friend leash.

“I’ve only ever had one girlfriend.” He walks over to the dune buggy and leans against the frame, nodding his head for me to get in. “And, no, I wasn’t jealous at all.”

That’s not possible, right? Rhyson’s twenty-eight years old.

“One girlfriend *ever*?” I buckle in and wait for him to do the same.

“Yeah, I was seventeen, and she cheated on me, like Carrie cheated on Aiden.”

“I knew you were watching!” I point an I-told-you-so finger at him. “Admit it. You loved *Sex and the City*.”

“Love is a strong word.” Rhyson rolls his eyes. “But Carrie did Aiden dirty, and that whole thing with Big was just a train wreck.”

“So, is that what happened with you and her? A train wreck?”

“She cheated with a supposed friend of mine, so it was kind of a train wreck.” Rhyson shrugs. “I don’t know that I was even really that hurt. Our parents wanted us together. It was just . . . messy. That was enough for me. I decided I just wanted to fuck, and I’ve never looked back.”

He challenges me with that look that reminds me that if all I want is to be one of the boys, he’ll talk to me like one. I prefer his frankness though. It’s one of the things I love about our tenuous arrangement.

“I’m just surprised, I guess, that there hasn’t been anyone you’ve wanted

more with,” I say as we settle into our seats.

“Believe me, most girls are fine with just fucking as long as they get what they want.”

“And what do they want?”

“Damned if I know.” He adjusts the helmet on his head and turns a few knobs before giving me one last grin and gunning the engine. “Apparently just to sleep with a rock star since that’s all they ever get from me.”

Anger stirs in my chest and tightens my lips. I’d like to meet all these girls who were fine with “just fucking” Rhyson. Who are these nameless, faceless bimbos who have jaded him so much? And who was the adolescent idiot who at seventeen made him feel this was all he needed? If he did get off that leash, is that all he would want from me?

“Hey, you gonna fall asleep on me again?” Rhyson raises his voice over the revving engine, jarring me from my wayward thoughts.

“No. Sorry.”

“I’ll forgive you if you say yes to what I’m about to ask.”

I wasn’t born yesterday at ten o’clock. I’d never agree to anything Rhyson proposes sight unseen.

“Yes to what?”

“Yes, you’ll go with me to a birthday party next week when I get back from New York.”

“We’ll have to see about . . .” I frown as I process two things at once. “When do you leave for New York?”

“Wednesday. I’m there for a few days. I’m doing Fallon and some more session stuff for the new album.” The look he gives me is half teasing, half earnest. “You gonna miss me when I’m gone?”

“Sure.” I grin at him. “You think I *like* taking the bus?”

“Nice. That’s all I’m good for, huh? Transportation?”

“Girl’s gotta get around.”

“So will you come or not?” he persists. “It’s a private party. Just some

friends at a bowling alley.”

I never know what Rhyson’s up to. This party at a bowling alley with “just some friends” has me intrigued.

“We’ll see.” I brace my hands against the dashboard as if ready for a crash. “Now are we gonna chew the fat all day, or you gonna drive this thing?”

My curiosity, my worries about medical bills, my fatigue from working like an indentured servant, all blow back and off my shoulders once we’re speeding across this vast stretch of sand butting up against the ocean. My stomach rises and falls when Rhyson races over hills. The Pacific, the sand, the birds meandering over the horizon—it’s all a beautiful blur zipping by. The only thing in clear focus is Rhyson and me in this niche of space and time, sailing over dunes.

And joy! This joy starts as a kernel in some long-neglected corner of my heart, and it burgeons with every second of freedom this ride offers. Before I know it, a laugh breaks free from my chest and spills all around us. My arms stretch wide and high over my head. Even though I’m strapped in, I’m flying. I’m propelled by this great joy forward, up, high! And Rhyson is right there with me, laughing and throwing his head back, as free as I am.

How long we ride, I don’t care and I don’t know. How long will I remember this gorgeous day with this gorgeous man? And this rediscovered joy that I thought maybe was lost?

Forever. I’ll remember it all forever.

# Chapter SIXTEEN

Kai

“PLEASE TELL ME THAT ISN’T BREAKFAST.”

San’s comment pulls my attention from the bowl of green goop I’m mixing on the counter.

“Hardy har har.” I crease my quick grin with sarcasm. “This is my avocado face mask. You actually could eat it though. You got your avocado, honey, oatmeal, vinegar, and lemon juice. Yum-my.”

“If you say so.” San looks from me to the bowl of goop. “You are planning to eat something though, right?”

He knows I’ve been doing better. I’ve been eating better and feeling better, but his concern lingers.

“You gotta eat, Kai.”

“Yeah, and I will in a minute. Stop worrying so much about me. Now if you’ll excuse me, it’s homemade spa time.”

I head to my bedroom, scoop my hair up into two loop ponytails high on either side of my head, and spread the avocado mask onto my face. I chill in my Partridge Family nightshirt, flipping through the latest *LUCKY* magazine while the mask hardens.

“Kai, your phone’s ringing,” San calls from the front room. “R. Geritol calling.”

I’m up and off the bed before I’ve blinked twice, sprinting to the kitchen

and snatching up my phone from the counter. Rhyson's face is onscreen in FaceTime mode.

"Kai, you've still got the . . ." San trails off with a small smile. "Never mind."

"Hi, Rhys." I walk with the phone back into my bedroom. He's been in New York for a few days, and it's so good to see his smile, even if it is on a tiny screen.

"Um . . . Kai?" Rhyson stands outside on a sidewalk, a grin taking up half his face. "What's that all over your . . . ?"

He circles his face with a finger, and I glance into the corner of the screen and screech like a banshee when my green face stares back at me from the tiny block.

"Oh, God. Let me wash this off."

"No way. I only have a few minutes."

"Rhys, do you honestly expect me to have this conversation wearing an avocado mask?"

"I honestly do. You look really cute."

"Yeah, to aliens. I'm probably excreting extraterrestrial pheromones."

"Call me ET." He laughs at his own corny joke. "Cut me some slack. My day has been nonstop, and I'm exhausted. I really do only have a few minutes, so leave the mask for the sake of time."

I groan and settle onto the edge of the bed, my cheeks burning with a blush that probably headlights through the green goop.

"Look where I am." He repositions the phone up so I see the sign behind and above him.

"Southern Hospitality, huh?" I think of my salad waiting in the fridge, and my stomach protests with a growl. "Isn't that Justin Timberlake's spot?"

"Sure is. Made me think of you." Rhys grins back into the screen and walks into the restaurant. He flicks his chin up at someone in greeting before following them to a back corner and settling into an empty leather-seated

booth. “My band is here already at another table, so I gotta go soon. The bass player insisted we try this place.”

If there was a speedometer on my heart, it would be popping and sputtering right now. The poor thing tom toms in my chest the longer I look at Rhyson. He holds the phone with one hand and takes off his newsboy cap with the other, spilling his hair over his forehead and ears.

“How’s New York?” I finally ask to keep myself from drooling.

“Fucking freezing.” Rhys peels the scarf away from his neck and lays the phone on the table, peering down at me, offering a reverse aerial view of his face. “And so busy. I had the *GQ* shoot this morning, a session right after. We’re eating lunch and then prepping for Fallon this evening.”

“Poor baby with the rock star lifestyle.”

“You shut it. Posing and looking badass is hard work.”

“Oh, I’m so sure. Sounds like fun.”

“It has been. I like it here. New Yorkers are so jaded they barely blink when they see me. It’s awesome. I haven’t used a disguise once. I have a small security detail, but I’m walking around pretty freely.”

“Would you ever think of moving there?”

“Oh, I thought you knew.” He raises both brows and runs a hand through all that beautiful, sloppy hair. “I have a place here. An apartment.”

“Oh. Of course.”

“I just don’t come out here much.” Rhyson’s expression hardens almost undetectably, like the mask on my face. “My parents are in New York, so . . . I mean, they aren’t in the city, but still.”

“I get that. I’m assuming you won’t see them while you’re there?”

“No, but they’ve been trying to get me to come home for Christmas.”

“You should. It’s been how long since you saw them?”

“A few years. I doubt if they miss me. They have a steady stream of income from my old royalties. That’s all they need from me, I think.”

“You sound so cynical. I know they went about everything the wrong

way. I hate that, but I'm sure they miss you."

He gives a quick shake of his head, dismissing my comment and the subject.

"Let's talk about something else. I have a question for you. This is a serious question and requires a serious response."

"Oh, boy. Shoot."

Rhyson waits an extra beat, his eyes darkening and intensifying as he bites his bottom lip.

"It's okay for friends to miss each other, right?"

I take a deep breath, staring into his serious eyes and nodding.

"Good, 'cause I miss you, Pep." His rich voice deepens over the words. "I miss you a lot. I wish you were here with me."

"Rhyson—"

"Kai." He imitates the higher pitch of my voice and drags the name out with my Southern drawl. Despite the teasing voice, his eyes remain earnest. "Do you miss *me*?"

Yes. Yes, I really, really do. I didn't realize how much I've come to love the texts during the day, the rides home, the long talks over lunch or dinner until he went to New York. I can't say all of that. I'm the one who said just friends, and that would sound like . . . more. So I settle for a simple truth that will not make things more complicated.

"Yes."

"Good." A smile creases his lean cheeks. "So you'll go to my friend's birthday party when I get back? The one I told you about?"

"Um . . . I have to check my work schedule. You know my life is all over the place."

"Everyone deserves a little time off, Pep. Even you."

His eyes, nimbus-grey, like clouds before a storm, make everything hazy and humid, like he's right beside me, pressing his lean, muscled body into mine. The longer we hold that look without speaking, the more we say.

*I miss you.*

*I want you.*

*I wish you were here.*

I snip the hot thread between us stretching from coast to coast with my words.

“I’ll take it under advisement, Mr. Gray.”

He glances up, smiles, and reaches to fist bump someone I can’t see, before returning his glance to the screen.

“You do that,” he says. “Make sure you watch me on Fallon tonight.”

“I’ll have to DVR it. I have to work, and I’m closing.”

“You should probably watch since I’m gonna shout you out.”

“You will not. Rhyson Gray, if you—”

“Untwist your panties. Nobody but us will know. I’ll tug on my ear twice, which means, ‘Hey, Pep. What’s up?’”

“You’re ridiculous.” I try to hold onto my sensibilities, but it’s like holding my breath. I can only do it for so long.

“Hey. I gotta go. Our table’s ready. Bye.”

“Okay.

“Watch tonight.”

After we disconnect, I sit on the edge of my bed with the phone dark and quiet in my lap. What am I going to do about this thing between Rhys and me? I can lie to him, but I’ve never been one to lie to myself. He’s wanted more than friendship from the beginning. He settled for less, but I know he’s not that guy. He’s the guy you only deny for so long before you give him exactly what he wants.

And Rhyson wants me.

God, I want him too, but I didn’t delay my dreams for five years to come out to L.A. and be some rock star’s plus one.

“All done?” Santos leans one shoulder against the doorframe.

“Yeah. Thanks for the heads up about the mask, by the way.”



“Couldn’t resist. Things going well out there?”

“Yeah. He didn’t have much time. He’s headed to rehearse for Fallon right after lunch.”

“So you two still pretending to be just friends?”

“Pretty much.” I’ve stopped denying it. We *are* more than friends, and I have to figure out what I’m going to do about it.

“Would it really be so wrong to just do it? Just give it a shot with him?”

“Yes, wrong on so many levels.”

“Tell me more about these levels. Kai.”

“First of all, he’s a huge rock star for God’s sake. People will assume he got me where I’m going. I don’t need that. I want to earn this on my own and for there to be no doubt how I got there.”

San shrugs and turns his lips down in that way that always tells me he thinks I’m full of shit.

“That’s pretty flimsy to me, Kai, but if you say so.”

“It’s not flimsy. It’s true.”

“And the other level it’s so wrong on?”

“Well, for another thing he’s a huge rock star.”

“That sounds suspiciously like the first level.”

“Let me finish. He’s a great guy, but he *is* a rock star. He’s going on tour. Do you really think he can be faithful? Can be depended on? To stick? To stick around?”

San cocks his head to the left, studying me with a new understanding in his eyes. All of a sudden, I’m glad I still have the green goop on my face to hide behind.

“Just makes me wonder if we’re really talking about Rhyson.” He pauses, his eyes breaking it to me gently before he continues. “Or if this is actually about your dad.”

And with that parting shot, he turns on his heel and walks away.

I hate it when he knows me better than I know myself.

# Chapter SEVENTEEN

## RHYSON

“NOW WHOSE PARTY IS THIS AGAIN?”

I’m just about to answer Kai’s question when she comes down the tiny hall of her tiny apartment wearing a tiny top and jeans that cling to the luscious curve of her hips and ass.

“Uh . . .” What was the question?

“The party?” Kai prods me with raised brows. “Whose birthday party is it and am I dressed okay?”

She’s wearing makeup, which I haven’t seen much. Smoky eye shadow exaggerates the tilt of her almost-black eyes. Her lips are lush and nude colored. The dark hair I can barely keep my hands out of on the best of days rolls past her shoulders in a dark, straight, shiny curtain. Her bright-red top falls well below her breasts, but still leaves the subtle, sexy pack of tight abdominal muscles on display. When she moves just the right way, I can see the small script tattoo curving under her breast and over her delicate rib cage. I want to make her move in just the right way all night.

“Yeah, the party.” Think using the *other* head. “It’s my friend, Jimmi’s, birthday party.”

“Jimmi as in Jimmi Dawson? The singer?” Kai’s dark brows jerk together, and she looks down at what she’s wearing. “Is this, like, a big deal party?”

“No, it’s super casual. Look at what I’m wearing.”

I know it’s different for guys, but my dark wash jeans and Bob Marley hoodie should reassure her that this isn’t exactly a red-carpet event.

“Okay.” She grabs her keys from the hook on the wall. “I’m ready.”

I’m not. I just got back from New York yesterday, and today is the first time I’ve seen her since we rode dune buggies at Pismo Beach. I’d rather stay here and endure another season of *Sex and the City* than share her company with other people. But Jimmi will castrate me if I don’t show. She still might. I’m not great at hiding my attraction for Kai. Jimmi will spot that shit right away. Considering the last *real* conversation we had was me telling Jimmi we should just forget we slept together, she might not be happy that I’m showing up with another girl at her birthday party.

But that was *months* ago.

I ignore Marlon’s voice in my head telling me I’m a delusional idiot and head out. Jimmi loves to bowl, so Pins & Needles is the perfect place for her party. It’s got a ton of lanes, a great bar, and a tattoo studio in the back.

“I’m gonna park in the back lot.” I turn to Kai, struggling not to notice the way her seatbelt slices between her breasts. Am I thirteen again?

“Okay.”

“It’s not a big party or anything, but there are several celebrities here.” I open my door, walking fast around the front of the Cayenne to open hers before she can do it herself. “And there’s always some pap lurking. I just don’t want you caught up in that.”

“Believe me, neither do I.”

She laughs up at me, and I want to hold her hand. To stake that claim before we walk into this party with all these guys who will find it just as hard as I do not to stare at Kai. But she tucks both hands into her back pockets and walks beside me, eyes fixed on her silver sequined Converse with their wedge heels. How she walks in them, I have no idea, but they’re kind of adorable.

As soon as we walk in, people stick to me like flies to fly paper. Where was all this attention in high school, when I was an awkward sixteen-year-old who had never been to a school dance? Who'd only ever had private tutors and barely knew one song on the radio? The guy who had been kissed by one girl in his whole life and almost threw up the first day of tenth grade? That guy would have loved the attention. This me now, not so much.

I keep my circle small, but Jimmi has friends, acquaintances, associates, frenemies, and they're all here. I immediately want to drag Kai back out to the car. This is much more public and much less private than I thought it would be. I don't even have names for half the faces crowding around me. Fame is such a charade. These people all think they know me because, what? We attend the same parties? Move in the same circles? Drive the same cars? Fuck the same people? Sometimes my life nauseates me, and I just want to hibernate in the studio under my piano, make music, and play Madden all day.

"Introduce us, Rhys." Some short guy with blond hair and, if I remember correctly, one Grammy nom to his name, runs his beady eyes up and down Kai's body. She inches imperceptibly closer to me. Good girl.

"I would introduce you, man, but I honestly don't remember your name."

*So I become an asshole at these things.*

Kai's smothered laugh as the guy turns and stalks off makes me feel better about myself. She leans up to whisper in my ear, and her hand burns a slender hole in my arm where she touches me.

"That was rude." I feel her lips curved into a grin against my ear, so I think she approves.

With one hand claiming the curve of her back, I lean down to whisper to her, hoping the six or so people still standing around take the hint that I have no interest in talking to them.

"I was just being honest." I press my nose into her hair. Damn, she always smells so good. "I have no idea who that guy was. I don't know these

other people either.”

She pulls back so our eyes can share the inside joke.

“Then who *do* you know?”

I’m just about to tell her when someone grabs my shoulder and forces me to turn around. I suppress the string of curses I was ready to unleash when I see the girl I am actually here for.

“Jimmi.” My face softens and my shoulders relax as we hug. I really hope we can get past that drunken lay on the Fourth of July because Jim’s one of my best friends. “Happy birthday, baby doll. Quite the crowd you got here.”

“I’m glad you came.” Her blue eyes smile back at me, and I think we’ll be fine. Then her eyes go hard and her smile disappears when she notices Kai standing closer to me than anyone is usually allowed at these parties. “And who’s this?”

Here goes.

“Jim, this is my friend, Kai.” For once, I’m glad Kai froze us in the outer reaches of friendship. “Kai, this is the birthday girl, Jimmi Dawson.”

“Nice to meet you.” Kai steps forward and offers a friendly smile. When Jimmi doesn’t respond right away, Kai’s smile disappears little by little. She bites her bottom lip and stares back at Jimmi.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Finally Jimmi speaks, toggling her eyes speculatively between Kai and me. “Rhyson hasn’t mentioned you before. He doesn’t usually bring . . . friends around.”

“We haven’t known each other that long.” Kai gives me a quick glance and smile.

“Yeah, Kai’s one of Grady’s students.” I hope that mollifies Jimmi some, but I see a bad light bulb go off and realize I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Ah, a singer.” Jimmi squeezes her lips into a tight smile and flicks her brown-when-we-first-met-currently-red hair over one shoulder. “I see.”

“And a dancer too,” I add.

Kai smiles stiffly, her discomfort obvious.

“Oh, a *dancer*.” Jimmi’s face lights up and she starts looking around the room. “I have someone you just have to meet. The choreographer from my last video. He’s so good he even made me look like I could dance.”

That was a small miracle because Jim’s about as coordinated as I am. She waves over this . . . guy. I dislike him on sight. It’s not the fact that he’s tall and ripped. That he has caramel skin and bleached platinum blonde hair buzzed close to his head. I can’t tell what ethnicity this guy is, but I know that all girls would like him. It’s none of that. What I dislike immediately is how he’s looking at Kai.

“Dub, I wanted to introduce you to someone,” Jimmi just about purrs, searching my face for a response. “You know Rhyson, don’t you?”

“We’ve never met, but I love your music,” Dub says with an Irish lilt to his voice. One more reason to dislike him. He extends his fist for me to pound.

I pound reluctantly.

“And this,” Jimmi pulls Kai over to Dub. “Is Rhyson’s friend, Kai. She’s a dancer.”

His green-grey eyes light up as they follow the lines and swells of Kai’s petite frame.

“Cool.” He takes Kai’s hand and smiles right into her eyes. “I’d love to see what you got.”

Kai’s cheeks go rosy, and she shifts her weight from one sequined Converse to the other.

“Jimmi got a sick DJ,” Dub says, still holding Kai’s damn hand. “We’re battling in a little bit.”

“Battling?” I don’t like the sound of that.

“It’s not violent, Rhys.” Jimmi laughs at me. “You should see your face! It’s like when dancers go back and forth . . . dancing.”

“I know what battling is, Jim.” *Well, now I know.*

Pitbull's voice comes over the sound system, and then Ne-Yo joins in. Kai's probably not even aware that her shoulders have started moving, but I am. And so is Dub.

"Wanna dance?" Dub gestures toward a section of the room cleared of tables and chairs. A group of people have started dancing in ways I'd never attempt.

Kai turns wide eyes in my direction and drops Dub's hand. Is she *just now* figuring out that he's pushing up on her? Oblivious.

"Don't worry about Rhyson." Jimmi pats Kai's shoulder with a reassuring hand. "He and I have a few things to talk about anyway."

Kai's tiny frown silently asks me if it's okay.

"It's fine." I shrug like I don't care when I actually want to dislocate Dub's shoulder. "Have fun. I'll be here."

She looks between Jimmi and me for a few seconds before nodding at Dub and walking off. I follow Jimmi to a booth facing the bowling alley, making sure not to look back over my shoulder to check on Kai. Jimmi's a sharp-eyed cat. First sign that I care more about Kai than she thinks I should, and Kai is on her list. If she's not already simply for being here with me. I've never brought a girl to things like this, so if I want Jimmi to think Kai's just a friend, I need to leash the wild animal that wants to go drag her off the dance floor.

"You happy now?" I force myself to grin instead of grind my teeth to dust while Kai's with Dub.

Jimmi takes a sip of her chocolate martini and smiles, eyes narrowed on my face like she's still searching for clues.

"What better way to see what she means to you than to give her to someone else?"

"You could've just asked."

"Oh, but people say things they don't mean all the time." Her face sobers, her smile disintegrating. "Like the night we hooked up. I'm sure you said

some things you didn't mean, right?"

*Aw, hell.*

"Jim, we were both a little drunk that night."

"Not that drunk." She pushes her glass away and fiddles with a toothpick piercing an appetizer on the tray in the middle of the table.

"I thought we agreed to forget about it."

"I've tried, Rhys. I can't."

I feel like a real dick when tears gather in her eyes. I've known this girl since tenth grade. I fucked up.

"Look, I'm—"

Someone hits me on the head, cutting off my worthless apology. I turn to find Marlon standing behind us, his dreadlocks hidden under a floppy beanie sporting the Rasta colors of red, yellow, and green.

"Whassup!" Marlon throws himself into the space across the table from me. "How's the birthday girl?"

Jimmi discreetly passes a cocktail napkin under her eyes, soiling it with her mascara.

"I'm good. Thanks for coming, Grip."

She's known him as long as I have, but she, unlike me, calls him by his stage name. I refuse. She was less prepared for fame than he and I were. Marlon attended our school of the arts on scholarship, and was bussed in from a few neighborhoods over. His background was hard, and mine was privileged, but we'd both grown a protective shell by the time we met. Jimmi hadn't. It took her a little longer, and even though she has it now, it slips sometimes. You'd only figure her smile for a phony if you'd known her as long as we have. Marlon's eyes bounce between the two of us, and he frowns at me. I give him my "What?" face, but he just rolls his eyes.

"Where you been?" I ask.

"Working on Bristol." He gives me an inappropriate leer, given that he's talking about my sister. "I think she's close to going out with me."



“No, she’s not,” my sister says, dropping into the seat beside Marlon.

“I thought you said—”

“What’d I tell you about thinking?” Bristol winks at me across the table, picks up Jimmi’s chocolate martini, and takes a sip. “HMMMM. Whose is this? It’s great.”

“Mine,” Jimmi pipes up, her smile becoming more real by the second. She loves Bristol. “S’good, right?”

“Delish.” Bristol clasps her hands together and leans forward on her elbows. “Now did you two talk about which dates Jimmi’s joining you on the tour next year?”

My sister is all business, all the time.

“Bris, it’s Jimmi’s birthday,” I say. “No business.”

“My people will call his people,” Jimmi promises with an easy grin for my sister. When her eyes flick back to me, we both look away. This is tough. Unnecessarily awkward, and all because I couldn’t keep my dick behind closed zippers.

“Cool.” Bristol’s grey eyes, identical to mine, wander to the dance floor. “Who’s that fine guy I saw you with earlier, Jim?”

Marlon leans back deeper into his seat, draping one elbow over the back of his chair and frowning. How’d he end up hooked on my sister? She’s the worst girl to fall for. Years under my parents’ roof did the same things to her they did to me, only for longer. And she actually liked it.

“Who, Dub?” Jimmi raises her sleek brows and flashes that smile that girls share when they talk dirty about a guy.

“Dub?” Bristol knocks back the rest of the martini. The girl drinks like a fish. “What kind of name is that?”

“Short for Dublin,” Jimmi says. “It’s just what they call him. He’s a choreographer from Ireland. I don’t even know his real name.”

Bristol nods to the dance floor, a lascivious smile on her face.

“If he moves in the bed anything like he does on the dance floor, I don’t

care what you call him.”

That vein in Marlon’s forehead may burst. The muscle clenched in his jaw could puncture the skin. I just want to tell him to forget about it. Marlon isn’t my sister’s type. She couldn’t care less that he’s featured on a number one album and is already performing at sold out concerts. The guy she will ultimately end up with is probably wearing a three-piece suit in some boardroom right now. And the kind of guy she’ll fuck around with until then? Is out on the dance floor somewhere, not mooning over her. Bristol doesn’t do complicated or clingy, and her brother’s best friend could be both.

“And who’s the girl he’s dancing with?” Bristol frowns and reaches for the glass again. “What do I have to do to get another one of those?”

“Just ask.” Marlon stands up and stalks off to the bar.

Pussy whipped and getting no pussy seems like a waste to me, but who am I to judge? The girl who has me whipped is out on the floor dancing her ass off with some Irish body builder.

“That’s Rhyson’s ‘friend.’” Jimmi provides helpful air quotes around “friend” so Bristol knows it’s a load of crap.

Bristol turns her probing glance on me.

“You brought her?”

She says it as if I smuggled Ebola across the border.

“She’s one of Grady’s students.”

I give her the same line I gave Jimmi, and she buys it even less.

“A singer?” The word tastes foul in her mouth judging by the grimace on her face.

“I’m a singer. What’s wrong with singers?”

“No, brother, you are not just a singer. You are *already* a star.” Bristol takes the chocolate martini Marlon brings her, giving him a quick smile before returning her attention to me. “She’s a wannabe singer. Which makes her a groupie. Which makes me wonder why you brought her.”

“Told you that chick was thirsty,” Marlon offers as he slides back in his

chair.

“She’s not.” My words slice into our conversation sharper than I intended, but I won’t let them talk about Kai like that. “Don’t say it again.”

Marlon and I hold a stare long enough for him to know I mean it. If we’re comparing clout scores, they know mine is higher than all of theirs combined. I don’t flash it around, but I have more than money in this town. My history and the success I’ve found over the last few years give me a broader reach than Jimmi or Marlon. It gives me influence. It gives me power. They know it and I know it. It’s not something I throw around, but it positions me as the undeclared leader of our little group, as much as most of the time I don’t want to be. They know when I’m serious about something. And they know I’m serious about them laying off Kai. At least Marlon does.

That song “Truffle Butter” comes on, and a small group of dancers circle up and start battling.

Look at me adapting and using my new word already.

Each person has their solo moment to show off what they can do before passing it off to the next person. Dub is fantastic. His body is as much an instrument as my piano, and he plays it with confidence. He commands everyone’s attention with the fluidity of every movement. Popping his shoulders, rolling his body, every motion purposeful but effortless.

And then it’s Kai’s turn. I’m nervous for her. I’ve seen her teach her dance class, and I can tell she’s good, but this guy, these dancers, are on another level. I hope she can hold her own.

As soon as she starts moving, my jaw hangs open. I knew she was talented, but I had no idea how little I had seen. Not only is she holding her own, but she is more magnetic than Dub ever could be. She spins, dark hair swinging out behind her. She drops to her haunches, rolling her hips back and forth, and then pops upright, arms extended over her head, eyes closed, head rolled back. She loses herself in the sensual pull of the music, and she’s making love to the beat. Thrusting, grinding, her body rolling, finding the

pulse embedded in the lyrics.

My dick is like a lead pipe under this table. I want her to the point of physical pain. There is only one release for this, and that's having Kai spread beneath me, her body the harbor I sink into. Unrestricted access to all that sweetness. I want to tear the roof off this place because she won't give herself to me. I feel Jimmi's eyes on me, watching me watching Kai, but I can't help it. And even though I know the longer I watch Kai, the more Jimmi will hate her, I can't look away.

Dub steps into Kai's space, and her eyes open slowly like she expected him, like she lured him. He cradles her hips with his hands and pulls her into his body. Kai doesn't miss a beat, but twists until her back presses into his chest. She rolls her hips into his before spinning away, teasing him over her shoulder, her eyes holding him captive. He chases her, grabs her, lifts her. She wraps her legs around his waist and falls back until her hair brushes the floor. She snaps herself back up, pressing their chests together, and then she slides down his body like honey, coating him with her arms and legs before sliding away again. It's like their bodies know exactly what to do. Instinct, talent, and elegant athleticism spark a connection between their bodies that has everyone around them cheering and high-fiving and clapping.

When the song ends, that confident sensuality Kai wore like skin during the music, falls away. I think I just witnessed the alter ego she told me shows up when she performs. She leaves the center of the circle, and I know her well enough to see self-consciousness settle around her shoulders. She laughs up at Dub, but it's not reckless and free like moments before. I know that feeling. True freedom is only really found in those moments where you're unleashed into your purpose. Something comes alive in me that lays dormant when I'm not making music. I will never shine brighter than I do behind a piano or a microphone.

The stage is my galaxy. It's Kai's too, and she's destined to be a shooting star. My days of having her to myself are numbered, but I'm okay with that. I

want that for her. I'll share her with the rest of the world, but if I didn't know before, I know now. I want to see her soar. Hell, I'm determined to *help* her soar higher than she ever imagined, if she'll let me, but when she comes down, I want her to land with me.

# Chapter

# EIGHTEEN

Kai

NOTHING COMPARES TO THE EXHILARATION OF performing, even if it's in a bowling alley on a makeshift dance floor. And dancing with someone of Dub's caliber—absolute choreographic theater. It's one of the few things that penetrates the wall of grief that still surrounds my heart sometimes. The only thing that has come close to comparing, to exceeding is . . .

“Dub, do you see Rhyson?” I crane my neck to peer over the dense crowd. He's not where we left him.

“I'm sure he's in here somewhere.”

But I don't see him. There was something hungry and possessive about the way Jimmi Dawson watched Rhyson. And she wasn't happy to see me here. She wasted no time pawning me off on Dub. What if they've slipped off to the bathroom for a quickie? Even the thought stabs a fork through my heart. I did this. I shut him down at every turn. He's not a monk. Who could blame him for seeking out someone else? Certainly not me. I have no right to —

“Did you hear me, Kai?” Dub takes my arm to regain my attention.

“Huh? No, what'd you say?”

“I asked if you wanna be in the video I'm choreographing.” He twists his full lips into a knowing smile. “You were too busy looking for your

boyfriend.”

“He’s not.” I frown up at him. “Rhys and I really are just friends.”

“I’ll take you at your word.” He shrugs. “You in or what?”

Obsessing over Rhyson, I almost missed exactly the kind of opportunity I’ve been waiting for.

“I’m in.”

“Great. I’ll get your number and send you details.” Dub nods his head toward a section of tables and booths. “And if you’re still looking for your *friend*, there he is.”

Jimmi sits across from Rhyson, and I recognize Grip, the rapper, whom Rhyson’s talked about some before, at the table too. Rhyson faces away from me, his arm draped casually around the slim shoulders of a girl whose face I can’t see. Dark, thick hair falls to the middle of her back. She turns to say something to him, and I see her profile. She’s striking. I feel like I walked into a brick wall and all the air has been knocked out of me. Of course, he’s free to date. Free to see other people. Sleep with other people. But actually seeing him touching another woman, affectionate with another woman, sets a small fire at the base of my throat, like I could cry. Ridiculous.

*Get it together, Kai.*

When we reach the group, I take the seat beside Rhyson, glance at him, and find him already looking at me. Looking from me to Dub and back again, jaw tight, hands gripping his knees. He told me it was okay to dance with Dub, but maybe seeing me with someone else bothers him as much as seeing his arm all over the gorgeous woman seated on his other side bothers me.

Her hair is dark, but burnished with streaks of copper like Rhyson’s. She passes her eyes over me so sharply I feel like a razor sliced across my face. Her eyes are beautiful, stormy grey, like Rhyson’s. I glance between the two of them a few times. They could be . . .

“Kai, this is my sister, Bristol.” He tugs on his sister’s hair. “Bris, this is my . . . my friend, Kai.”

I bite my lip until it hurts holding back the big, goofy smile that threatens to take over my whole face. His *sister*! Of course. His family is the one thing Rhyson hasn't talked much about, except to say he doesn't talk much about them.

"Nice to meet you." I smile at Bristol, but she doesn't smile back. What is it with the women in his life? So far, Jimmi and Bristol have been rude for no reason.

"So you're one of Uncle Grady's students?" she asks instead.

"Yeah." I nod and wipe at my neck. I didn't realize what a sweat I worked up dancing. Rhyson slides his glass of water across to me, not watching while I take a grateful sip.

"Interesting. Yeah, nice to meet you." Bristol slides her eyes from me to Dub, her smile growing wider, her eyes flirting. "And you, too. Dub, was it?"

He smiles and takes the seat beside me, not biting what she's baiting.

"And this is Marlon." Rhyson gestures to Grip. "Marlon, Kai Pearson."

"Heard a lot about you," Marlon says, a polite smile on his face. "You guys did it out there. That was fire."

"Thanks." I offer a small smile. That flip has switched again. The one that emboldens me onstage or the dance floor, but leaves me shy with strangers. "Rhyson's told me some about you, too."

"Don't believe half of what that dude says. He makes shit up." Marlon laughs when Rhyson rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "He didn't tell me you could dance like *that*."

"Wasn't Kai amazing?" Dub smiles and sips his water. "I just asked her to be in the video I'm working on."

"That's great." Jimmi passes a sly glance between Rhyson and me. "I knew you two should meet."

She and Rhyson share a look for a few moments before Rhyson drops his eyes to the table, jaw tight again.

"So you ready for Chicago, Rhys?" Bristol peers at her brother over the



rim of her martini glass.

“Guess so.” Rhyson toys with the wide, leather strap of his watch. “Can I get through Thanksgiving before we start talking about Chicago? That trip’s not until after Christmas.”

“Did you guys see him on Fallon last week?” Bristol wears a proud grin.

“Yeah.” Grip takes a chug of his beer. “I was surprised you did ‘Lost.’ You’ve never done it before.”

“That was brilliant, actually,” Bristol concedes. “Downloads for that song went bananas after the show.”

Rhyson and I lock eyes, smiling over our secret. Not only did he play “Lost” on Fallon, but he also tugged on his ear, his private greeting to me. I must have watched that performance a dozen times on DVR. The moment loosens something that’s been tight between us ever since I returned from the dance floor.

“Not a big deal,” Rhyson says.

“As the person who moved heaven and Middle Earth to book it, I think it’s a huge deal,” Bristol says with a frown.

“I’ve done Fallon before.” Rhyson takes his glass back and sips.

“Still a big deal,” Grip says. “I haven’t done Fallon yet.”

“If you’d let me manage you,” Bristol smiles at Rhyson’s best friend, “You’d get Fallon.”

“If you’d go out with me, I’d let you manage me.”

Bristol rolls her eyes and flicks her dark hair over one shoulder.

“I don’t mix business and pleasure. Although, I’m not sure there’d be any pleasure.”

“Guys, I have food coming.” Rhyson grimaces like he feels sick to his stomach. “Please stop talking.”

Bristol’s lips twitch, and Grip laughs aloud. Jimmi joins in. Eventually, Rhyson loosens his mouth into a smile, and I realize these are the friends he told me about. He said friends are more intimate than lovers in some ways. I

see that now. He has a bond with them. He's relaxed with them. I'm glad for him.

Food arrives, and everyone sorts out their meals.

"I ordered you the veggie nachos," Rhyson leans toward me and says quietly. "There weren't many healthy options."

"It's fine. Thanks." We share a quick smile before digging into our plates.

"Will you see Petra when we're in Chicago?" Bristol asks, her voice loud and deliberate. I get the impression she's returning to the subject for my benefit.

"Yeah. We talked the other day."

"Petra Andreyev?" Jimmi asks with a frown. "Did she immigrate?"

"Yeah." Rhyson pushes his plate away nearly untouched. "Couple of years ago. She lives in New York now, but she's guesting for a few weeks with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and invited us to come see her while we're there."

Dub's phone rings and he walks off to talk. Rhyson scoots his chair closer to me.

"You did look amazing out there." His voice drops until the others at the table would have to strain to hear. "I didn't even know you could dance like that."

My cheeks heat and I dip my head until my hair covers my face.

"Can you believe Dub wants me to be in a video?"

"Yeah. I can believe it." Rhyson's voice goes gravelly, and he leans back, folding his hands over the tight muscles of his stomach. He hasn't really eaten anything. I lean forward until I'm right at his ear, even if everyone else thinks it's rude.

"Why don't you ever eat in public?"

He stills and turns his head until only a few steamy centimeters separate our lips. It's my first time being in public with him. Really in public, and he is much more guarded than I'm used to. The eyes that usually speak all the

things he's thinking are opaque, giving away nothing. I don't look away. Honesty has become a habit between us, and if I wait, Rhyson will remember that.

He takes a quick sweep of our surroundings. Grip is dragging a laughing Bristol to her feet and toward the dance floor. Rhyson rolls his eyes when Grip turns to give him a thumbs-up and a silly grin. Dub is a few feet away, still on the phone. Jimmi has wandered off to talk with some of her other party guests. In a crowded room, we're suddenly alone again. Just us at the table. Two peas that should never have ended up in the same pod. There should be nothing about us that mixes or draws us together, and yet, the veil hiding his secrets, dissembling his thoughts, floats away. And all that's left is the truth and the connection always burning bright between us.

"I was attending state dinners by the time I was ten years old." Rhyson looks at me from under his thick eyebrows. "Ten, Pep."

"Got it." I smile and push the wayward hair back from his forehead. "Ten. And what?"

"I could never get it right." He catches my hand before I can pull away, toying with my fingers on the table when he speaks. "Always using the wrong fork. Talking with my mouth full."

His mischievous smile invites me to smile back.

"Farting at the table."

"Farting at state dinners." I laugh and wrinkle my nose. "I bet you were a terror."

"I really wasn't." His smile fades. "I was actually pretty well-behaved, but it wasn't ever good enough for my mother. I infuriated her by, well, by being a kid."

"But you were ten. Who cared if you used the fork wrong or burped or whatever?"

"I was a ten-year-old kid making thousands of dollars every night playing for my supper, so to speak." Cynicism hardens the curve of Rhyson's mouth.

“My mother finally said if you can’t get it right, don’t eat.”

And I thought Bristol was a piece of work.

“But surely you . . . you ate, right?”

“I’d eat when we got back to the hotel or back home. I guess it became a habit not eating until later.” He sets my fingers aside and runs an agitated hand through his hair. “You think I’m crazy, huh? I promise I’m not. I just . . . some habits are hard to break.”

I hate that his own mother did that to him. Everything I hear about her and Rhyson’s father makes me want to peel back their scalps for hurting such a unique, gifted little boy. For hardening him into a cynical man who has had all of one girlfriend his whole life and settles for meaningless sex instead of meaningful relationships.

I pick up a loaded nacho and suspend it in front of Rhyson’s mouth.

“Eat.”

He looks at me for a moment and shakes his head, an uneasy laugh escaping his lips.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Don’t be stubborn.” I press the chip against his mouth. “Eat.”

Not letting my stare go, he opens his mouth and takes the nacho. I watch every bite, ready for the next one. I pick up one of the French fries in the basket in front of him and offer it to him. He eats one and then another until he’s almost done. When he’s down to just a few fries, I grab one and throw it in his face. Surprise drops his mouth into an “o” for just a few seconds, but he recovers quickly and throws a fry back at me. We volley the last of his fries at each other, laughing at how silly we’re being.

“You’re ridiculous.” Rhyson gathers fries off the table and I pick up a few from the floor. He places his hand over mine, making sure I look into his eyes. “Thank you.”

“For what? A food skirmish? I can’t even call it a fight.” I laugh, but there’s suddenly not enough room in my chest for my heart because it’s

swelling with some emotion that shall remain nameless.

“For noticing. For caring about me. For making me eat. It’s not even hard.” Rhyson looks away, dropping his eyes to the table. “I guess I was wrong. Maybe I did need another friend.”

“That’s what friends are for, huh?”

I need to change the subject, because this one, where I get to see the damage his parents did to him, makes me sad. Makes me angry. Makes me want to spoon him all night. And who knows where that would lead?

“How come you never told me you had a sister?”

Rhyson considers Grip and Bristol on the dance floor, his mouth loosening into a grin. “I keep her away from my friends as long as possible.”

“Are you older? Younger?”

“Technically, I’m older, but only by about two minutes. We’re twins. Like my dad and Grady. Twins run rampant in our family. We weren’t really that close until the last few years.”

“Why not?”

“She isn’t musical at all.” Rhyson chuckles. “I mean, at all. Believe me, my parents tried. If they could have wrung a few coins out of her, they would have.”

He pops a French fry into his mouth and points to the now-empty basket.

“See what I did there?”

“Yes, I’m very proud that you ate all your food.”

“It’s not that I never eat when I’m out. Just . . . I don’t usually want to.”

“Well, now you do. You were saying?”

“Well, Bris resented me. Felt like my parents poured everything into me, which they did as soon as they realized how well I could play. Everything revolved around me. Around piano, and lessons, and then tours and concerts and promotions and recordings and television appearances.”

It sounds glamorous, but he was so young. Seeing Rhyson that day in the dune buggy, laughing and free, I bet at ten years old, on some level, he would

have preferred that.

“Then when I emancipated, she called me ungrateful.” Rhyson shakes his head, a wry tilt to his mouth. “I wouldn’t trade my gift for anything, but I never asked for that life. She couldn’t understand how much it suffocated me.”

“What pushed you to emancipate?”

We’ve never really talked about this, and I’m not sure why in the middle of a birthday party in a bowling alley, I choose now, but I won’t let this window close before getting a look inside.

“Like, after all those years, what was the straw that kind of broke the camel’s back, Rhys?”

A frown darkens his face. He won’t look at me.

“Rhyson?”

“I heard you. Yeah.” He keeps his eyes on the long, sensitive fingers in his lap. “Um, it was actually Grady.”

“What’d Grady do?”

“He found out I was addicted to Xanax, and that I’d been on it since I was eleven.” Rhyson lifts his long eyelashes, and his eyes probe mine. Searching for—I don’t know—judgment?

“How . . . what? How is that even possible?”

Rhyson chuckles, a raspy, scornful sound.

“My mother gave me hers to help with anxiety before performances until later on when I got older and got my own prescription. I got hooked early and was pretty messed up by the time I was sixteen. Grady saw me at Christmas and confronted my parents about it.” He looks at me, eyes crystalline with emotion. “They wanted to hold off on rehab until after my European tour.”

Rhyson relaxes his face so deliberately I know he’s hiding the hurt.

“And that was the beginning of the end for me and my parents. I told Grady I wanted out, and he helped me emancipate. When things got really nasty during the hearings, he threatened to expose what my mother had done

so they would stop fighting it. I haven't seen them outside of a courtroom in years."

"And Bristol stayed with your parents in New York, obviously."

"Yeah, I moved here and started at the School for the Arts. She stayed back East. We had very little communication from the time I was sixteen until she left home and went to Columbia."

"Who reached out first?"

"She did actually." Rhyson gives a quick shake of his head and a half smile. "Told me she was getting her entertainment business degree so she could manage me."

"But weren't you teaching vocal lessons for Grady then? You weren't even performing, were you?"

"Right. I was writing and producing for other artists by then, but she assured me that I'd be back." Rhyson watches his sister dance with Grip. Affection softens his face, I assume for them both. "She was right, and when I told her a few years ago I wanted back in the business as an artist, she was ready."

A frown darkens Rhyson's face and he shifts in his seat.

"My parents weren't too happy about it, but Bristol's got too much backbone to care much what they think. We've been rebuilding our relationship ever since. She's started rebuilding with Grady too, something my parents still won't do. They won't forgive him for helping me leave."

"Why didn't he just become your guardian? Why emancipate?"

Rhyson chews on a straw, eyes narrowed with fierce determination.

"I didn't want anyone to have control over me ever again. Not even Grady."

"I'm surprised you signed your record deal."

He wears a crooked grin on his handsome face.

"So true. I signed a deal for just two albums because I knew music, but the business I was clueless about. I had a lot to learn."

“Wow, really?” I fold my knee up and prop my heel on the seat. “I’m surprised they went for just the two.”

“They wanted me enough to loosen the rules a little.” Rhyson shrugs. “They still allowed me a lot of control given my experience and history.”

“You mean as a genius?” I tease him with a wide smile.

“Yeah, whatever.” He matches my smile and adds a wink that makes my pulse pound. “Can you keep a secret?”

“To the grave.”

“My next album?” He lifts both brows, making sure I’m tracking with him. “It’s not with the record company.”

“What . . . then who . . . ?”

The smug, eager look on his face clicks things into place for me. Rhyson wants to control everything around him.

“You’re starting your own label, aren’t you?”

He touches the straw to the top of my head like he’s knighting me.

“Ding! Ding! Ding!”

“Rhys, that’s awesome.”

So many questions flood my mind, but I’m not sure what to ask. I want him to trust me with whatever he wants me to know.

“It’s called Prodigy, the label, I mean.” Rhyson, so often impassive and guarded, looks almost animated. “Grip’s my first artist.”

My eyes find Grip and Bristol out on the dance floor.

“He’s so popular right now, hard to believe he doesn’t have an album yet,” I say.

“I know. All collabs and features. That was our strategy. To build his fan base and create so much buzz before he even has his solo project. Kind of how Drake did.”

Rhyson takes a swig of his water and reaches for an onion ring from Bristol’s abandoned plate. So we’re passed the eating in public thing.

“We’ll drop his album first and then my next album after my tour.”



I haven't heard a lot of Grip, just on other artists' albums like Rhyson said, but I know he isn't the typical rapper.

"He has kind of his own flow, doesn't he?"

Rhyson reaches across the table to grab a wing from the large tray in the center, dipping it into blue cheese before taking a bite.

"Yeah, probably the closest I'd say to his sound is Childish Bambino." He shoots me a quick grin. "When I first met him, his raps were basically a notebook as thick as my arm filled with poems he had written. He's the one who convinced me to start experimenting with my sound. Figure out how my classical training would translate to a more modern, mainstream sound."

We chat for a few more minutes before everyone drifts back to the table. I love seeing Rhyson with his friends. After hearing about his awful parents, it's great to see that he is genuinely loved by someone. And after hearing more of his story, I want to kiss Grady's feet for being the adult who cared more about him than the bottom line.

It's been a long few days of double shifts for double pay, and my body tells on me with a wide-mouthed yawn.

"You're exhausted." Rhyson stands and pulls me to my feet before looking around at everyone else. "We're gonna bounce."

Jimmi stands and walks over to Rhyson, looping her arms around his neck and tipping her head back. She's a tall girl. Not as tall as Rhyson, but in her stiletto boots, she's almost eye level. I've always been small and lean. Dancing, cheering, and gymnastics always kept me that way, and I love my body. Even my butt, which is almost too big for my petite frame. The only thing I'd change is my small breasts. That producer wasn't the first to suggest I enhance my bustline. Jimmi has full, gorgeous breasts and presses them into Rhyson's chest. Is that what he likes? I cross my arms under my modest curves, my cup confidence plummeting.

"Thanks for coming." Jimmi licks her lips and pushes her hand into his hair.

“Jimmi, if you’re in heat, I’m sure we can find some dog in here to help you out.” Bristol laughs from her seat, shoving at Grip’s face when he leans into her neck. “Grip, I said *no*.”

Rhyson carefully pulls Jimmi’s hands from behind his neck and drops a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Happy birthday, Jim. Your gift should be arriving very soon.”

“What’d you get me?” Jimmi’s arms hang at her sides now that she doesn’t have them wrapped around Rhyson, and she looks a little lost.

“Just call me when it comes. I’ll give you a hint. You can play it and I think you’ll like it.”

A guy dressed in all black approaches and whispers something in Jimmi’s ear. She nods and frowns before addressing Rhyson.

“We got a lot of paps out front and out back.”

“Dammit.” Rhyson frowns at me. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I give him an easy smile, even though my stomach knotted a little as soon as I heard “paps.”

“Let’s go.” He grabs my hand and waves at his friends. “We’re out before it gets any more intense out there.”

Their speculation is so heavy and thick, I can barely breathe under it. All eyes clamp on my hand linked with Rhyson’s. I tug, but he doesn’t let go, even when we head for the back exit. At the door, he stops and peels his Bob Marley hoodie over his head. His broad shoulders straining against the white T-shirt distract me for a moment so I’m surprised when he pushes the hoodie over my head. I absently push my arms through as I breathe in the delicious scent from his body clinging to the sweatshirt.

“I don’t want them to see you.” Rhyson pulls the hood up, tucking my hair into the sweatshirt down my back. “They see you, they’ll start following you. Wondering who the ‘mystery girl’ is. Start stalking and chasing you.”

“But why?” I slide my hands into the front pocket of the hoodie. “I’m nobody.”

He brushes a thumb over my bottom lip, and it's like an open sesame for my senses. My lips part automatically. His eyes sear the sensitive skin of my lips, and I feel him like a kiss.

"I'm never out with girls, Kai, besides Jimmi and Bristol." He squats until we're eye level. "If they see us together, they'll figure out that you're special to me."

His words snatch my breath. Hearing this man who has become so special to me say that he feels the same literally takes my breath away, just for a second. I start breathing again, wanting to look away. I *need* to look away because the longer we stare at each other, the warmer I become.

"You ready?" He has one hand on the back door bar and one hand at my back. "As soon as I open this door, keep your head down, okay? And keep your face covered."

I nod that I'm ready. When the door opens, I realize I'm wrong. I'm completely unprepared as we slam into a wall of lights and sound.

# Chapter NINETEEN

Kai

MY HEART IS STILL RACING. WALKING out of the bowling alley was like running the gamut in a war zone, with us as the possible prisoners of war.

“That was crazy.” I turn in my seat to study Rhyson. His hands are relaxed on the steering wheel, but he keeps flicking glances to the rearview mirror.

“Yeah. We’ve still got a few trailing us. I want to lose ‘em before I take you home, or else they’ll be camped out at your place tomorrow.” He slants a grin my way. “You sure you want this? Paps staking you out and bugging you every time you leave the house?”

“No, I don’t want *this*. I just want to perform.”

“Yeah, well, the days where you get to just make music and not have *TMZ* in your face every time you go out are gone. At least if you’re good enough for the public to care.”

He looks over his shoulder and frowns.

“I’m gonna drive around for a little bit to shake them. Sound good?”

I nod, still a little freaked by all the lights, the intrusive cameras, the bodies pressing into us on our way to the car. All of them yelling, asking Rhyson who I am. Apparently word had spread pretty fast that not only were Jimmi, Grip, and several other celebs at the party, but the elusive Rhyson Gray too. His disguises when he comes to see me have always just been

funny, but now I understand how little privacy he has without them.

My phone lights up in my lap with a text message.

***“Hey, It’s Dub. Great meeting you tonight. This is my number. I’ll send you deets about the video.”***

Rhyson glances from the phone in my lap back up to my face before turning his eyes back to the road.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” he says. “Guess he doesn’t just move fast on the dance floor, huh?”

My cheeks flush hot, but I remind myself I don’t owe Rhyson an explanation. Only I remember how ill I felt when I saw his arm draped around Bristol. Before I knew she was his sister, I wanted to rip her hair out strand by strand. So even though I don’t owe him an explanation, I offer one anyway.

“I gave him my number so he could send details for the video.” My knee bounces with the nerves I’m feeling. “That’s all.”

“That’s all?” He swivels his head in my direction, and the passing lights of the city illuminate his frown. “So he didn’t ask you out?”

“No, of course not. We just met.”

“I asked you out pretty soon after we met. Of course, you turned me down.”

It’s the first time since the beginning of our friendship that he mentioned that again. I can’t draw enough breath. The interior of the car closes in on me. I can’t go there with him. He can’t make me resolve this problem we’ve created over the last few months. Not right now. Not yet.

“Rhyson, you know why I turned you down.”

“Yeah, you didn’t want people to think that you succeeded because you slept with me, right?” His mouth distorts into a sneer. “High profile choreographer is after you now, and you just scored a video gig. Looks like being my friend is working out for you after all. All the benefits without the fucking.”

If we weren't whizzing through the streets at fifty miles an hour, I'd jump right out. As it is, I'm trapped in the car with his anger and his resentment. They crawl over me and press onto my chest, oppressive and unfair. Instead of firing back at him, giving him the fight I'm guessing he wants, I turn my face toward the window so he won't see the tears standing in my eyes. He doesn't try to get another response from me, and I don't offer any words for the ten minutes left in our ride to my apartment. It's a fragile silence, and I think we both realize that breaking it with the wrong words could break everything. As frustrated as we are with one another, neither of us wants to risk that.

As soon as he pulls into the parking lot of my apartment, I'm out of the car almost before it stops rolling. I take the asphalt strip between his car and my front stoop at high speed. I'm fumbling with the keys when I feel him at my back. His big hand covers mine over the doorknob. He presses his chest to my back and rests his chin on my head.

"I'm sorry, Pep." His voice, deep and low, rolls over me. It should soothe, but it incites. His body so close and so warm incites every part of me. I can't believe how numb I was before I met him. My body, my heart, and my soul twist around one another, a three-stranded nerve waiting for his touch, his words, his attention.

So dangerous.

He turns me around by my shoulders until I'm forced to face him. I strain my neck back to look up at him.

"I didn't mean it, Pep. You know I didn't mean it."

I swallow my hurt and force myself to speak.

"Then why'd you say it?"

He rolls his eyes up to the starless night sky before dropping his gaze to his feet, a breath huffing past his lips. He rests one forearm against the door behind me, bringing our bodies so close to touching.

"I was jealous," he admits with steel pellets lodged in his voice.

“Rhyson—”

“No, listen.”

He dips his head until his lips hover over mine. If I open my mouth, I’ll taste his words. If I move even a little bit, we’ll share our first kiss. If I do nothing, I’ll imagine his tongue dancing with mine all night.

“I can live with being just your friend as long as everyone else is too.” His thumb caresses my jaw and he drops his forehead to rest against mine. “You know what I mean?”

I nod, rubbing our skin together. His nose trails down my cheek. He drags his lips over to my ear, and his breath feathers the hair there. I slump against the door because his warm breath invading my ear turns my knees to putty. He pulls back just far enough so he can see my eyes. He reaches up to brush the hair off my face and rests his hand at the curve of my neck.

“Don’t go out with Dub.”

“He hasn’t asked me,” I whisper between our lips.

“But he will.” He studies me in the light of my apartment stoop. “I would. I did.”

“Rhyson, don’t.”

“I’ve heard all your reasons for keeping things platonic for now, and I’m cool with it. For now.” He levels his beautiful eyes at me, and I’m afraid he’ll finally voice all those things his eyes always say. “But it only works if you’re just friends with everyone else too. The thought of you seeing someone else . . .”

His words fade, but his eyes become more vibrant, intense. He just shakes his head.

“Are *you*?” I have no right to ask, but curiosity ignores the reasonable voice in my head.

He raises one dark brow, captures the length of my hair in one hand and tugs until I have to look into his eyes.

“Am I what?”

“Seeing anyone?”

“You mean am I fucking anyone?” This time both brows go up. “‘Cause that’s kind of all I do.”

Is that all he wants from me? Yes, I’m attracted to Rhyson, but it goes so much deeper than the physical pull. The thought of him giving himself to someone else that way while I figure this out leeches my heart. It’s quiet while I wait for his answer.

“I haven’t been with anyone else since we met, Kai.”

My contrary heart—the same one that is afraid to trust him and need him and depend on him—is perversely happy. I even smile, which I regret because Rhyson wastes no time using that smile against me.

“You like that?” he demands. “You like that I don’t think about anyone but you? That I jerk off in the shower every morning because you won’t give us a chance and I don’t want anyone else?”

A quick death for my smile.

“Rhys, no, I . . . you can be with anyone you want. It’s none of my business.”

“Is that what you want me to say? That it’s none of my business if you see someone else? If you fuck someone else? ‘Cause I won’t say that, Pep.” He leans in closer until the world is no bigger than this patch of cement we share right now, and the only air is between our lips. “When you and Dub were dancing, I wanted to shoot him through the knee cap.”

“Rhys, we’re dancers. It was just dancing.”

“I get that, but seeing you with someone else, even knowing it was nothing, drove me crazy. Not to have a *right* to be jealous drove me crazy.”

I can’t answer. Anything I say will tell him too much.

“And I saw the relief on your face when you realized Bris was my sister,” he adds.

I don’t deny it, but just return his unblinking stare for a few seconds until I can’t any longer. My eyes drop to the cement between our feet.



“And while we’re being honest,” his voice sinks to a heated whisper, “I was awake that morning we drove to Pismo Beach, when you touched me. When I touched you.”

His words are hot, but they freeze me. I don’t move an inch. The implications of that paralyze me. My mind floods with the sensations, with the touches, we shared that morning. How I pressed my breast into his palm. How I gasped when he twisted my nipple between his fingers. How my hands caressed the smooth, muscled plane of his back.

“You want me as badly as I want you, Pep. I’m just waiting for you to do something about it.” He takes the key I’d forgotten I was holding from my limp fingers and opens the door behind me. “Until then, we’ll keep pretending we’re just friends.”

He squats to brand my mouth with a quick kiss before turning and walking away. I should be in the house by now with the door locked behind me, but I watch until he’s in his truck and drives away, leaving me alone with just my thoughts and what’s left of that kiss. I still feel his lips against mine, a swift, sweet press that marked me. If I lick my lips, will I taste him? I rush into the house and head straight for the bathroom to wash my face. To wash that kiss away because if I have one taste, I won’t be able to stop.

# Chapter TWENTY

## Kai

I DREAMT OF MAMA LAST NIGHT. Not so much dreamt as remembered her while I was sleeping. I think my mind pulled out her memory to prepare me for what's ahead—my first Thanksgiving without her. She was, in my mind, in my sleep, as vivid, as vibrant, as if she were still alive.

“Dammit!”

*Mama swearing feels about as right as a nun in a whorehouse. I'm in my room rehearsing for Saturday's dance competition when I hear Mama cuss for only the second time in my life.*

*She's in the living room sitting on the floor, her back against the old saggy-cushioned couch she took from Grammy's living room when she passed. Her head rests on the knees she has pulled up to her chest. Shards of glass litter the hardwood floor around her feet.*

“Mama, you okay in here?”

*Her head snaps up, and her beautiful dark eyes that I've always thought so mysterious brim with tears I know I'm not supposed to see. She runs her thumbs hurriedly over her cheeks, wiping the dampness on the one pair of jeans she always wears to clean the house.*

*“Kai Anne, I didn't know you were here. Thought you and San were going to the movies.” She tries to smile, but it doesn't take because her bottom lip trembles too badly. She pulls it between her small teeth and draws*

*a long breath.*

*“We were, but I needed to practice. I was in my room going through some steps.” I gesture to the broken glass. “I can get that up, Mama. Let me just—”*

*“No.” Her response comes as sharp as the glass at her feet. “I’ll get it in a second.”*

*I settle beside her on the floor, pulling my knees up like hers. Even in the smallest things, I always find myself mirroring Mama. She’s the finest woman I know. It’s not just me who thinks so. The whole town does too. Daddy leaving and Mama staying so strong and true just about elevated her to sainthood in Glory Falls.*

*“I broke your ballerina.” It’s obvious the words don’t want to leave her mouth, but she pushes them out.*

*For the first time, I really study the pile of glass. Mama gave me that ballerina after I won my first dance contest. It’s tinted pink and so fragile she presented it to me wrapped in cotton. I’m disappointed, of course. I wanted to give that ballerina to my daughter one day, but considering what we’ve been dealing with since Mama was diagnosed, a broken ballerina isn’t such a big deal.*

*“Mama, it’s okay.” I lean my head against hers and loop our fingers together.*

*I have San, and Mama has Aunt Ruthie, but we mostly have each other. When Daddy left, it felt like Mama and me against the world. It sounds cliché, but to me, Mama has been everything. One by one, all the relationships that mattered to me have been stripped away. First Grammy, then Pops. Then Daddy. Mama’s the only blood I have left, and what we have goes beyond blood. It’s her choosing me and me choosing her over everything else all my life.*

*“I picked it up when I was dusting, and it . . .” There aren’t more words for long moments. Then she holds her hand out for me to see.*

*It trembles.*

*“You see that, Kai?”*

*“See what? Your hand?”*

*“The trembling.” Mama pulls her hand into a fist and squeezes her eyes closed. “It’s getting worse. Sometimes I can’t control it.”*

*My fingers tighten around her hand I’m holding, and a vice tightens around my heart. I don’t want to hear this. I want to run back to my room and pick up where I left off with my dance routine. I shouldn’t have come in here. I could still be in there focusing on the movements. Focusing on my body, which never lets me down. Not like Mama’s body is betraying her now.*

*Heel, ball, toe.*

*“Kai, I know we haven’t talked about this much, but you know there’s only one direction with ALS.” Her small hand cups my chin and turns it toward her face, but I look down at the carpet so I don’t have to meet the painful candor of her eyes. “And that direction is down. It only gets worse.”*

*Ball, change, shuffle, ball.*

*I just nod and pull my chin gently out of her grasp. While the dance continues in my head, I give as little of myself to this conversation as possible, seeking shelter in the mental counts and motions that distract me.*

*“I think about Grammy and Pops a lot lately.” A limp chuckle escapes through the tight rosebud of Mama’s mouth. “How they’re probably looking down on us. Waiting for me.”*

*Shuffle, ball, heel, dig.*

*Mama turns her head to look straight at me. She’s the most exotic thing in Glory Falls. Those dark eyes, tilting and teasing. The black hair, usually braided and kept out of the way is loosened and wild and free, hanging to her waist. The pale gold honey of her skin. I never tire of looking at Mama. She’s delicate and fierce, and just the thought of losing her pounds my heart like a sledgehammer. I squeeze her hand because she’s right here. She’s real. I can touch her. Nothing’s taking her away from me. Not today.*

*Mama licks her lips and closes her eyes over a few tears that slip down her face. She swipes at her cheeks, but the tears persist. She finally drops my hand and wraps her arms around herself, a desperate clutch that shuts me out. An awful sound makes it past Mama's clenched lips. It's wrenched from a place so deep and low she's only hit it once before in her life. A sound I haven't heard in years. Not since the day Daddy left.*

*My body sets panic free like a runner. It sprints through my blood and pounds in my head and slicks my palms. My rock is crumbling before my eyes.*

*"I don't want to die." Mama's words are crumbling too. Fragments, pieces, and syllables are broken behind her lips. "Baby, I don't want to die. Not like this. Not this long, slow . . . I'm so scared of the day I won't even know you. Won't know I'm in the world."*

*Pain clogs my throat like an old sink, but I flush the useless, worthless words out.*

*"Mama, I'm so sorry."*

*"I keep . . ." Mama presses her forehead to her knees, the dark hair hiding her shoulders and arms. "I keep asking God why. Why me? Why now? I'm not old. I've been faithful. I've been good, and I just wake up every day asking Him, why?"*

*"And what does He say, Mama?"*

*Mama lost both parents within months of each other. Daddy, the man who was her husband and her pastor, skipped town with another woman, leaving only a note behind. She picked up the debris of her life and started over. She opened the diner with Aunt Ruthie to provide for me, to keep us clothed and fed and under a roof. I've seen her stand like a mountain, steadfast and immovable, through it all. But today—in this moment—her faith, her hope, her strength are a landslide. I witness it all fall down.*

*She lifts her head, and even though she still breathes and she's still here, something in her eyes seems already dead. Is it her faith? No, Mama's faith*

*isn't dead, but it is weak from unanswered prayers and unanswered questions.*

*"Mama, what does God say?" I ask again.*

*"He doesn't, baby." She shakes her head, wipes away her last tear, and pulls herself to her knees to start gathering the shattered glass. "He doesn't say a thing."*

# Chapter

## TWENTY-ONE

Kai

THE SUN IS HIGH AND BRIGHT, but today feels like the dark side of the moon. The world is upside down with the sky overhead like a perfectly blue, serene sea, while the ground beneath me rolls and wobbles like tumultuous waves. I'm not sure how I'll stay on my feet through this gorgeous California day, my first Thanksgiving here.

Aunt Ruthie has called me twice already. Maybe I should have figured out a way to get home so we could huddle together and comfort each other, but even scraping together enough money to fly home for Christmas is a stretch. If I can't be with Aunt Ruthie, at least I'll be surrounded by friends at Grady's.

I know "friend" is Rhyson's least favorite "F" word, but he has been that to me consistently, even after our argument. I woke up the next morning to a quote from

*Talladega Nights* waiting on my phone.

"I wake up in the morning and piss excellence."

I'd been too relieved that we could status quo for a little longer to dwell on what we'll have to figure out very soon.

"You good in here?" San asks from the kitchen doorway. "Need help getting anything to the car?"

"Yeah." I grab a mitt to pull a pan from the oven. "We need to load the

pumpkin pies, yams, and this stuffing.”

I set the large pan on the stove and stir the gravy I left simmering.

“Oh! And biscuits.” Steam rises from the basket of biscuits I pass to him. “It’s a short drive to Grady’s, but I can pop them in the oven to warm if I need to once we get there.”

“Everything looks good.” San scoops up the pies and heads back out, but gives me one last look before he goes. “Especially you. You’ll have to fight Rhyson off with a stick.”

I fake exasperation—a quick eye roll should do it—but my heart, Benedict Arnold that it is, skips a few beats wondering if Rhyson *will* think I look good. I took time with my appearance, which I don’t often do. Most of the time Rhyson sees me at the end of a shift, with my hair limp, makeup gone, and wearing the jeans and T-shirt I don’t mind getting dirty.

Today’s a little different. For starters, I’m wearing a dress. It’s a peach shift, shapeless except for the hints of my curves underneath. It hits mid-thigh and has quarter-length sleeves. I’ve chosen simple peach- and mint-green leather flats since I’ll be on my feet a lot today helping Emmy. I give myself one more glance in the mirror, studying the dark eye shadow and nude lips before adding simple gold earrings and a necklace Grammy left me. I’ve piled and pinned my hair on top of my head, leaving just a few tendrils escaping the confines of my hair pins. Will he think I’m pretty? I know . . . why should I care when I won’t do anything about it even if he does?

*But will he?*

By the time we arrive at Grady’s, my stomach feels about as wobbly as the cranberry sauce I almost forgot to bring. Rhyson’s SUV is already out front. I assume Bristol will be here too. His sister and I didn’t exactly bond at Jimmi Dawson’s birthday party, and I’m hoping we get to know each other a little better today.

Emmy greets us at the door like a perfect hostess, her cornflower blue eyes are bright and welcoming, and her blonde hair pulled back in an elegant



chignon. It's only a matter of time before Grady pops the question. Rhyson and I have bets . . . and hopes . . . on a Christmas engagement.

"This all smells so good, Kai." She takes a pumpkin pie from me and heads toward the kitchen. "Come on in and we'll get everything settled. Rhys and Grady are in the studio, of course. Bristol is out by the pool on the phone. Thank you for helping with dinner."

"No problem," I say. "I loved it. I cooked all the time growing up. My mom owned a diner, and we cooked around the clock on holidays. So days like today, I really miss it."

San brings in the rest of the dishes, and Emmy and I sort out what we have. Green beans, a salad, her turkey, which smells delicious and only needs carving.

"Thanks so much for doing the stuffing." Emmy laughs while tossing the salad. "Mine is always so dry. I just can't get it right."

"I use my Grammy's recipe. I haven't made it since . . ." I made it last Thanksgiving. Mama had been just months from passing. Knowing it would be our last one with her hung a cloud over the holidays.

"Hey, you." Rhyson walks in the kitchen, distracting me from my sad memories. He smiles at Emmy as she takes the salad through to the dining room, but walks over to me, tipping up my chin and studying my face. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I give him a bright smile, but when he doesn't smile back, I know I haven't fooled him. "Starving. We're close though. Just a few more things before we'll be ready to eat."

"Sure you're okay?" He frowns, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone.

"I'm fine." His concern only fans the emotion higher, sinking my voice to a whisper. "For real."

"It's okay if you're not." He captures my hand, twisting our fingers together. "Come on, Pep. Talk to me."

I wish I could barricade myself from the probing care of his eyes.

Stuffing these feelings, functioning on autopilot, and living on mute has become a habit since Mama died. It's so hard to do that with Rhyson. He demands so much and knows when I'm holding back.

"I'm having a hard time. It's my first Thanksgiving without my mom."

He wraps his hand around my neck, dipping his head to catch my eyes.

"I'm sorry. What can I do?"

Even though emotion rises like the tide, filling my eyes and burning my throat, I manage a smile.

"You're already doing it."

The kitchen falls silent as we consider each other. He's tamed his hair today . . . at least for now. His rebellious hair, collapsing around his face every few minutes, is one of my favorite things. He's broad and strong in the black shirt that strains against the lean muscles of his shoulders. He looks so good, and I'm so weak today. That's not the best combination.

Emmy comes back in smiling, her eyes speculating about what's going on between us, and grabs a few more dishes.

"I think we're just about ready to eat."

When we enter the dining room, Bristol has one hand poised over my biscuits. Maybe my way to her heart will run through her belly.

"Hi, Bristol." I set the dishes on the table and settle into a seat between San and Rhyson. "Good to see you again."

She gives me a stiff smile, but looks at San like she wants him as a side dish.

"And who's this?" Her smile is the same one I've seen Rhyson use in interviews and public appearances, beautiful and practiced. Aware of the charisma it carries and how it will affect everyone else. "I'm Bristol, Rhyson's sister."

"San." He smiles in return, but holds back. I wish I hadn't told him Bristol's not my biggest fan. San's as loyal as a German Shepherd. "Kai's best friend."

“Oh.” Her eyes drift back to me for a quick second. “How long have you two known each other?”

“Since we were seven.” He unfolds the linen napkin over his lap and angles a smile at me. “My dad was in the military, and when my mom passed, I went to live with my grandmother in Glory Falls. That’s where I met Kai.”

“Glory Falls?” Bristol puckers her perfectly arched eyebrows. “Where is that exactly?”

“Georgia.” I pass the tray of turkey to Rhyson on my left. “This turkey smells so good, Emmy.”

“Thank you again, Kai, for helping with dinner.” Emmy smiles at Grady. “This one sure wasn’t going to be any help.”

“Never claimed to be good in the kitchen,” Grady says with a laugh.

“I just got off the phone with Mother.” Bristol casts a cautious glance in Rhyson’s direction. The fork pauses on its way to his mouth, but there is no other indication that her comment bothers him. “She has quite the spread today too.”

“Bertie’s doing, I’m sure,” Grady says with a wry smile. “I’ve never known Angela to cook very much.”

“Maybe she’ll cook at Christmas.” Bristol turns her full attention to Rhyson. “Have you thought any more about coming home?”

Rhyson doesn’t stop chewing, but he raises irritated eyes to his sister.

“Not now, Bris.”

“It would mean so much to them,” she says in a rush.

“Let’s talk about it later.” Rhyson doesn’t look up from his plate. “These yams are really good, Kai. Can you believe I’ve never had them before?”

“Forget the yams,” Bristol snaps, her good humor evaporating. “I don’t understand why you won’t even consider coming home.”

“You wouldn’t, Bris.” Rhyson tosses his fork to the plate, and it clatters in the sudden silence. “They didn’t drag you through months of a court

battle.”

“You dragged *them* to court.”

“To escape the life they forced on me,” Rhyson fires back. “You have no idea—”

“I was there too, Rhyson.” Bristol cuts in, her grey eyes angry slits. “You weren’t the only one hurt all those years ago. Our whole family needs to heal, don’t you think? That’s why Uncle Grady has agreed to come for Christmas.”

Rhyson does a double take, his eyes locking on his uncle.

“That true, Grady? You’re going to New York for Christmas?”

“Well, yes.” Grady sits back in his seat, holding Emmy’s hand on the table. “Your mother and father want to meet Emmy.”

Rhyson sucks his teeth and rolls his eyes.

“No, they don’t.” He tosses his napkin to land beside his plate. “There’s another motive, believe me. They’re using you to lure me back there.”

“It’s always about you, isn’t it, Rhys?” Bristol’s words come through clenched teeth. “It can’t just be that they want us to be a family again?”

“No, Bristol, it can’t because that’s not who they *are*. And I never wanted it all about me. They were the ones who cared more about profit than their own son’s well-being.”

“You certainly weren’t concerned about anyone’s well-being but yours, were you?” Bristol crosses her arms over her chest. “You took their livelihood when you left.”

“If I hadn’t left, there wouldn’t have *been* a livelihood, Bris. I was on the verge of collapsing, or have you conveniently forgotten that?”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten anything. Not how they sacrificed all our lives so you could do what you wanted to do.”

“No, *now* I’m doing what I wanted to do. I was doing what *they* wanted me to do, and it was killing me.”

“Killing you? Dramatic much?”

“You’re just as toxic as they are, Bris. Sometimes I wonder why I even

—”

“That’s enough.” Grady’s voice cuts over theirs, authority squashing the vitriol between the siblings. “Both of you. Don’t ruin everyone’s Thanksgiving with your bickering.”

Bristol and Rhyson don’t look away from each other for long seconds. Rhyson pushes one hand through his hair, like I knew he would eventually, disrupting it beautifully.

“I’m sorry, everybody.” He looks around the table until his eyes settle on me. “I hope we didn’t mess things up.”

I shake my head and offer a small smile to reassure him. Still, their anger chokes the air around us. I can’t help but contrast this dinner to the holidays growing up at home. How special it always was. Even when Grammy and Pops passed, and after Daddy left for good, Mama made Thanksgiving and Christmas magical for us. It hurts my heart that Rhyson never had that.

The conversation and eating resume all around me, but I find myself lost in memories of the past. The simple traditions Mama held onto that were so much a part of this season. Rhyson touches my hand in my lap, asking with a lift of his brows if I’m okay. I nod, but I’m not sure anymore.

“I need your recipe for these biscuits, Kai.” Emmy smiles with a biscuit on its way to her mouth. “They’re the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“They’re my Mama’s recipe.” Even with my heart heavy, I have to smile. “She and I would make biscuits every Thanksgiving morning. The pumpkin pies are her recipe, too. She loved to cook.”

“You didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving with your own family there in . . . what was it? Glory Falls?” Bristol’s voice makes it obvious that she wishes I had. What have I *done* to this girl? Before I can answer, Rhyson responds. Sharply.

“Kai’s mother passed away a few months ago, Bristol.” His tone holds a warning that he’s ready to break their temporary peace if she missteps.

Bristol’s frown fades and her remorseful eyes meet mine.

“I’m sorry, Kai,” she says softly. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay.” I bite my lip because I’m not sure my voice will remain steady. “I . . . she loved the holidays. I made her favorite today to go with dessert. Mint apple cider.”

“And we’d always put up the Christmas tree Thanksgiving night,” San says, his voice low and sober.

When death hits so close, so close it abrades your soul, there sometimes isn’t room or thought for what anyone else loses. I forgot that San was always at Mama’s table for Sunday dinners. She cheered the loudest at his baseball games. He was a pallbearer at her funeral. He lost her too. It’s not just my first Thanksgiving without Mama. It’s his too.

It hits me all at once. I made a batch of mint apple cider. I got up early and made Mama’s biscuits from scratch. My pumpkin pie will taste almost just like hers, but we didn’t say grace before we ate. We won’t visit a shelter together tonight to serve a meal to the homeless. She won’t keep me up decorating the tree before we can finally go to bed. There was only one Mama, and the world has lost her, but it keeps turning. But for me, I live in that void where her love and her voice and her kindness used to be. And in so many ways, even moving forward, I’m standing still.

I am suddenly aware of everyone’s compassion, this collective kindness for which I was unprepared. It penetrates the wall I use to insulate my grief and hide the lingering pain. I hate that these tears keep assaulting me when I least expect them. That sadness ambushes me. That the desolation Mama’s absence creates inside of me is inescapable, even here at Thanksgiving dinner in front of Rhyson’s family before we’ve even served dessert. And I hate this awkward quiet while they all try to figure out if it’s okay to move on or if they wait for me to get it together. Only this time I can’t. I’m trapped in this moment while I reach for my composure in vain.

Breathing in and deeply usually helps, but I’m too far gone. My heart is too raw today. A sob erupts into the silence. I’m horrified that my body is

betraying me this way. That my emotions are this undisciplined, wet spill over my cheeks. I squeeze the linen napkin in my lap until I'm sure I'll draw blood from it, but the tears won't stop. The pain doesn't stop. I leak it. I lose it. I cannot stop it.

I cover my face with my hands too weak to even stand or run. I'm lost in this storm of grief, and there's nothing to hold on to. I'm blowing in high winds, and I'm sure I'll be carried away. God, *please* carry me away. In this moment, saturated with loss, life is merely the thing I want to escape. On this day that always meant so much to us, I want to be with her again more than I want to be here.

But then strong arms encircle me. Rhyson's firm hand nudges my face into the solace of his shoulder. He rubs my back and makes *shhhh* noises by my ear. His voice, his touch, is an unexpected balm.

"It's okay, Pep," he whispers, his voice so low and tender I want to stop sniffing to hear what he's saying. "I'm right here, baby."

It's so perfect. It's just what I needed him to say. That he's right here. That even though I feel like I'm alone in the outer reaches of grief, someone who cares is right here with me. Anchoring me to this life. Every touch, every soothing sound pulls me back from the precipice until I can breathe again.

I sit back to look up at him. He smiles at me, a slow, subtle smile that tells me if I need to cry some more, I can. His food could grow cold and his family could wait all day, and he'd still be right here. I manage a watery smile as he gently mops the tears from my face with his napkin.

"Better?" He angles his head and positions his shoulders to block everyone else out. I nod and finally glance around the table. Emmy's eyes are wet, but she gives me a kind smile. Grady's concern is all over his face, and so is San's. Bristol is looking between her brother and me, a mixture of emotions I can't decipher shadowing her pretty face.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I didn't realize . . ." I pick up my fork and turn back to my plate, hoping it's the signal they all need to resume dinner as usual. "I

didn't know it was hitting me that hard. Please, go on and eat."

I dig into the turkey and stuffing, even though it tastes like ashes in my mouth. I eat and manage to smile as Bristol and Rhyson fall into their usual brother-sister banter, but it takes time for me to get past that dull ache. When will it be gone for good? Will it ever, or will there always be this chance that when I think of her, when I dream of Mama, I will lose myself to this sorrow?



# Chapter

## TWENTY-TWO

Kai

“I THINK I ATE AWAY TEN years of my life,” Rhyson groans, holding his stomach.

I laugh and scoot a little closer on the nook built into the wall surrounding Grady’s poolside fire pit. Today was gorgeous and warmer than any Thanksgiving I’ve ever had, but with the sun gone, there’s a bit of an early evening chill.

“What was your favorite dish?” I already know. I lost count of how many helpings Rhyson had of my stuffing.

“You know what it was.” Rhyson bumps my shoulder and laughs.

“My stuffing?”

“Yes, your stuuuhffin.” Rhyson drags the syllables out and teases me with a sideways glance.

“There you go again, belittling my Southern roots. Will it never get old?”

“I doubt it.” Rhyson eases back against the pillows behind us, pulling me closer and tangling our ankles. “That first night we met, I thought you were gonna stab me in the eye with a toothpick for teasing you about it.”

“You were awful.” I kick his shin and feel his shoulder shake against me when he laughs. “You teased me about my accent and then made me feel even more self-conscious about that icky producer at my audition.”

I expect him to laugh again, but he doesn’t. He’s still against me for a few

seconds before speaking again.

“Yeah, you never told me who that guy was.”

“Huh? Who?”

“You know, the guy. The one who wanted you to blow him.”

“Oh, he was . . .” I stop myself just in time, sitting up and looking back at him. His easy smile doesn’t distract me from the cold calculation in his stormy eyes. “Why do you want his name, Rhyson?”

He shrugs one shoulder, but he’s tense at my side.

“Just wondering.”

“Just wondering so you can go find him? You’re worse than San.”

Rhyson sits up so fast I’m not prepared for how close it brings us together. Not prepared for the heat of his body or his words.

“You’re right.” His sharp words disrupt the quiet. “I *am* worse than San because he knows who the guy is and didn’t do anything about it. If you gave me a name, not only would that bastard be walking with a limp, but he’d be broke by next week. Count on that.”

It scares me. The violent emotion brewing behind Rhyson’s eyes. Not because I think he would hurt me. He never would, but because he lets me see it. Less and less he’s hiding, and I wonder how long we’ll be able to stay in this limbo where everyone knows we’re more than friends, but where I keep us less than lovers.

“Look, I know you worry about me, but I’m a big girl.”

“You’re not a big girl.” He grabs my wrists, holding them up in front of my face like little sticks. “You’re a tiny girl, and any guy bigger than you—by the way, all the guys are bigger than you—could get you alone and make you do something you don’t want to do. Something I’d have to kill him for. This is a tough town, Kai. It’s not Glory fucking Falls.”

“I know that, and I know you have my best interests at heart.”

“Do you?” He moves his face closer to mine, the apple cider mintiness of his breath misting my lips. “If you know that, then why do you catch buses at

midnight instead of calling me when you need a ride? Why do you work yourself half to death instead of letting me help you?"

I jerk my wrists away and pull back a few inches to escape the temptation of his mouth and those soulful eyes.

"Thousands of girls are here in L.A. doing the same thing I'm doing. Working in crappy restaurants. Dodging lechers at auditions. Catching buses late at night because they are *hungry*. They want their big break just like I do, and are willing to pay their dues."

"And I don't give a damn about them!" He plows a hand through the hair dipping to the crinkled line of his eyebrows. "I care about you. Only you."

His eyes soften, and a small smile touches his lips, but I know him too well to think that means he's backing off. If anything, he's using our intimacy against me to get his way.

"Let me make things easier for you, Pep." He pushes the hair over my shoulder and down my back. "Grip is Prodigy's first artist. Be my second."

I can't believe he just offered that to me. After all these months of me telling him I want to make it on my own. That I don't want anyone thinking our friendship, or whatever this is between us, gave me an advantage, he offers me a spot on his label that I haven't earned. He's barely even heard me sing properly.

I stand up and start toward the house. His hand grasping my elbow, gentle but firm, his warm, hard chest at my back, stop me.

"Just think about it." He runs his hands down my arms until he reaches my fingers, plucking at them like they are the strings of one of his rare guitars. I turn to face him, hoping to make him see once and for all.

"If you give it to me, you can take it away, Rhyson."

"That makes no sense. Once you have it, you have it. Who cares how you get there? What matters is that you have the talent and drive and grit to *stay* there, and you do, Pep."

"It matters to *me* how I get there. I want to do this on my own. I wish

you'd respect that."

*I wish you'd respect me.*

He lifts my chin with one finger. The callus from all the acoustic guitar he's been playing lately brushes the sensitive underside of my chin, and I press into its roughness. I want him rough and sweet with me, just like this. I want it all the time. I want him all the time, and if I give into it, he could easily become the only thing I want.

"Okay. I'm sorry I brought it up." He runs a broad hand over my hair and pulls a chunk of it back to drape across my shoulder. "Forgive me? Forget about it?"

The light from the fire partially illuminates his face, painting shadows under the high cheekbones. Lighting sparks in his dark eyes. I nod because I want what's left of our time together before I go home with San to be better than the last few minutes.

He walks us back over to the fire pit and settles against the pillows like our argument never happened. He pulls me under his arm, and my head flops against his strong shoulder.

"I really like Emmy," he says, a deliberate change of subject if I ever saw one. "She's good for Grady."

"I like her too." I groan, recalling Emmy's sympathy when I broke down at dinner. I press my face into Rhys's shoulder. "Ugh, I'm so sorry I melted down like that at dinner. What must your sister think?"

"She'll probably thank you." He kisses my hair so softly I wonder if he thinks I don't feel it. I pull back to look at him.

"Thank me?"

"Because of your meltdown, as you call it, I've decided to go home for Christmas after all."

I throw my arms around his neck. I'm too happy to worry if the small sparks always idling between us might flare to life.

"That's wonderful, Rhys." I settle back against the pillows with a smile.

“I’m glad.”

“Seeing you that way did something to me.” Rhyson gives a quick shake of his head. “What you had with your mom, with your grandparents, I won’t ever have that with my mother and father. Too much has happened, but seeing you today, knowing you would give anything to have one more day with the ones you’ve lost—”

“Anything,” I cut in with a vigorous nod. “One more day with Mama. Seeing Grammy and Pops again, I’d give anything for that.”

“It made me want to at least try to restore things with my parents.” That familiar cynicism tugs Rhyson’s mouth to the side. “I don’t expect much, but I want to at least try.”

I blink back tears because my hurt served some purpose today. I’ve become so accustomed to the weight of my grief, sometimes I forget I’m carrying it. And sometimes I think it’s actually getting lighter, more so since I met Rhyson. Maybe I shed pain every time he makes me laugh, opens me up to something new, or shares a secret that by all rights he shouldn’t trust me with.

“You got me through today, you know?” I reach for his hand, and he immediately wraps his fingers around mine. I keep my eyes trained on our hands melded together by friendship and this heat I’m not sure I can keep ignoring. “I almost lost it completely today, and you rescued me. Without Mama, I thought I’d be so . . . alone. But I can’t ever feel alone when I’m with you.”

My soft words are a confession I can’t take back. I don’t know what he’ll make of them, but I can’t take them back. I’m not sure I want to. Rhyson looks at my bent head so long that I have to glance up, compelled by the heat of his eyes on me. He slides his hand around my neck, his fingers warm and searching.

“This wasn’t just your first Thanksgiving without your mom, Pep. It was our first Thanksgiving together.” He bends until his lips whisper against my

ear. "But it won't be our last. D'you hear me?"

I drop my head to his shoulder and nod because I know he's waiting for me to acknowledge what he said. I can't look at him though, because I don't want to see what's in his eyes. And I can't let him see what's in mine.

"Sorry to interrupt this special moment." San stands over us, smirking.

Rhyson glares at him. He's usually pretty tolerant of San's constant presence, but lately, his patience has been wearing thin.

"What's up, San?" Rhyson tightens his hands on me so I don't move.

"Just got a tip. Celebrities are off the chain, so I'm needed in the office." He scrunches his face into an apology. "Sorry, Rhys. It's a living."

"Long as you're not reporting about me." Rhys raises warning brows.

"Uh, yeah." San looks between us. "You'll be okay getting home, Kai?"

"I'll take her home," Rhyson says.

"Somehow I thought you would." My two guys grin at each other for a few seconds. "I'm gone, pipsqueak. See you when I get home."

We sit in silence for a few minutes after San leaves, both of us contemplating the fire we don't need for warmth and the pool whose refreshing invitation it's too cool outside to accept.

"You ready?" Rhyson finally asks.

"Sure." I stand and stretch. His eyes sweep over my legs, my hips, the slight curve of my breasts, and finally over my face.

"You look really pretty today," he says softly, making me blush.

"Thank you." I straighten my dress, shaking out wrinkles. "You're rather handsome yourself."

"We're quite the pair."

Thank goodness he didn't say couple. I can't deal with that can of worms tonight. I barely survived dinner.

Loaded down with leftovers, we say our good-byes to Grady and Emmy. Bristol left a while ago to hit clubs and visit friends. We're taking a few unfamiliar side roads before I realize we should be at my house by now.

“Rhyson, where are we going?” I look around, confused to see fewer shops and traffic lights.

“You’ll see.” He grins, turning the steering wheel with confidence.

Ten minutes later, we stop, and I may cry all over again, but for a completely different reason. Not because Mama is gone, but because Rhyson is *here*. He’s in my life, and he is a blessing.

Hundreds of Christmas trees sit in neat rows under the bright lights strung overhead. The sun has gone down, and the lights cast a faint glow over the wide variety of trees on display. A few people mill about, but not many.

“You wanna pick a tree?” He’s already grinning.

Shock and gratitude encompass me, and I can’t believe he brought me here, just based on what San said about our Thanksgiving Day tradition of putting up the Christmas tree.

“There are a few people here. Will you be okay?”

“I’m not a hermit, Kai.” He laughs even as he reaches in the backseat for his Dodgers cap. “I just like to interact on my own terms, not have some camera shoved in my face every time I go to the grocery store. People aren’t that bad. It’s the paps I want to strangle.”

“I don’t have any decorations at the apartment.” I frown, wondering if I can dash into a Walmart, even though the thought of braving those already-Christmas-shopping crowds makes my head hurt.

“I asked Emmy if she had any spare decorations.” Rhyson loosens his seat belt and turns off the car. “She has tons and is dropping them off at your place in a little bit.”

He gets out of the truck and, as is always his way, walks around to my side of the car to open my door. He helps me down, and I grip his hand tighter when he would let go.

“Thank you.”

It’s only two words, but I can barely get them past my lips. I’m overcome with emotion. My insides have been shredded today, and in this sweet,

thoughtful moment, are beautifully restored. I push myself up on my toes to kiss Rhyson's cheek. His hand immediately presses into my back, keeping me against him. I lay my head on his chest, listening to his strong and steady heartbeat.

"You didn't have to do this." I take a step back, but he doesn't let me get far before he's stepping back into my space, his eyes engaging mine and refusing to let go.

"You have no idea what I'd do for you if you'd let me." He runs his thumb over my bottom lip., his touch light, but enough to seize my breath. Enough to triple my heartbeat. "But one day you will."



# Chapter

## TWENTY-THREE

### RHYSON

NEW DRAPES, REFINISHED FLOORS, AND FRESH coats of paint do nothing to change what this house has always been to me. How it still feels. Like a luxurious prison with me the inmate and my parents the wardens. Redecorating, re-facing my childhood upstate New York home is like wrapping a corpse in a fresh layer of skin. It's still cold, dead, and rotting inside.

I only realize that I'm humming "Rach 3," caught up in its robust virtuosity, and fingering imaginary keys on the dining room table, when everyone around me goes completely quiet. I've sought success as an adult in the mainstream, but concert piano haunts me like a first love waiting in the wings for a second chance. When people, things, situations bore me, which is about half the time, I find myself retreating into the hallowed chambers of my mind. The music that was just always there, still is.

The stares of my family members weigh heavily on me, transporting me, like everything else in this house, back to my childhood when I always felt like a rough-edged puzzle piece that never quite fit anywhere.

Grady and Emmy are the only friendly faces at the table. Even Bristol's expression pulls tight.

I clear my throat, lowering my fingers from my makeshift piano on the dining room table to my lap.

“Sorry,” I murmur, spooning some of the lobster bisque into my mouth. It’s delicious, but makes me feel like I’m eating a catered meal.

What I wouldn’t give for the simple dishes Kai prepared for Thanksgiving dinner. They tasted like home and care. I can’t help but wonder how things are going for her. I glance at my watch. We’re having a late lunch since Bristol, Grady, Emmy, and I arrived a little later than we had anticipated. Kai told me they would serve the homeless in the basement of Glory Falls Baptist Church tonight, followed by a brief service and some traditional carols. I want to be there with her. I try to convince myself that being anywhere would be better than at this long dining room table, as tight and closed as a coffin, but I know anywhere wouldn’t do. I want to be with Kai.

I saw her only briefly before she flew back to Georgia, just long enough for us to exchange Christmas presents. A Pepper nameplate necklace from me to her like the one Carrie wears on *Sex and the City*. An engraved harmonica from her to me. She left yesterday, and I miss her already.

“So I heard you and Bristol will see Petra in Chicago in a few weeks,” my father says, chewing a delicately seasoned piece of fish.

I give Bristol a long look. She better not be spying on me for my parents, reporting my activities to give them something they can use to get back in with me. She shrugs like it’s no big deal. With a marble-hard look, I let her know we’ll talk about it later.

“Yeah, probably.” I give my father a brief glance and swirl my spoon in the bisque.

Seeing his face that looks just like Grady staring back at me, but with hard, calculating eyes and a tight mouth that rarely smiles disconcerts me sometimes. Amazing how two physically identical people can be so completely different where it counts. I glance over at Grady to make sure he’s still there, still real, and not some carbon copy of the cold man at the head of this coffin table.

“That will be nice,” my mother offers.

She sits to my father’s left, but they may as well share a seat, they are always so in sync. I don’t know that it’s ever been a love match between them, but it’s a damn good partnership. Her eyes, seemingly the only physical attribute Bristol and I inherited, consider me down the length of the table.

My mother, Angela Gray, is a beautiful woman. She may have nipped and tucked a few things, and the vibrant, red hair is surely aided by the bottle, but for the most part, she remains as I have always known her. Slim. Expensively attired with pearls at her neck and ears. Perfect and proper.

“Petra, I believe, is touring soon, yes?” Mother raises an asparagus spear to her neatly outlined mouth.

“So I hear.” I push a bit of food around on my plate.

“She’s doing Europe next year.” Bristol takes a sip of her Sauvignon Blanc. “We’ve talked about getting her into a few of Rhyson’s shows on the tour.”

Invisible screws turn, tightening the muscles in my back and shoulders. This is exactly what we should *not* be discussing. Any talk about my music, about my work, could toss a lit cigarette into the pool of gasoline on the table. Am I the only one who realizes this? I look around the table, catching Grady’s eyes. He already wears a troubled frown.

“Maybe we should . . . this bisque is delicious.” Grady spoons some into his mouth. “Bertie made this, Angela?”

“Yes, Bertie’s a marvel.” Mother waves the question off with a slim hand. “Bristol, have you considered a full reunion tour of sorts? Celebrating the tour Rhyson and Petra did together when they were younger?”

Bristol bends her head over her plate, steadily lifting forkfuls of bisque, but I know she feels my stare, heavy as stones. If this family dinner reunion is actually part of some grand plan to re-infiltrate my parents into my career, into my life, I will fire my sister without blinking. I will write her off and ruthlessly, mercilessly cut her out of my life like a malignant tumor. She

knows it too.

Bristol finally lifts her eyes to meet mine, shifting her gaze between my tyrannical parents at the head of the table and me.

Choose wisely, Bris, I silently urge her. We weren't close growing up, but I've grafted her into my tight inner circle the last few years. I don't want to lose her. She and Grady are the only family I have any real ties to. She's seen what I do to family ties that choke. To protect myself, I'll cut them.

"No, we haven't considered that." Bristol speaks into the waiting quiet broken only by silverware scraping plates and bowls. "Rhyson doesn't want to go in that direction right now."

"It's a missed opportunity, if you ask me." My father sits back a little to give our housekeeper, Bertie, more room to ladle another helping of bisque into his bowl.

"Everything is an opportunity, right, Dad?" I stop pretending I want lobster fucking bisque on Christmas Eve and slide it away. "Every person too?"

He and my mother exchange a meaningful glance, one I saw a thousand times growing up. The look that says Rhyson's being difficult. That I need managing. What I needed was for them to parent me, not manage me, but they never bothered to do that.

"Rhyson, don't read too much into it." My father uses that cajoling voice I hate. "It was just an observation."

"One I didn't ask for." Irritation sharpens my words, and I can't dull them now.

"So you would miss a great opportunity that would benefit your career just to spite us?" My mother's sarcastic laugh grates across my nerves. "Well, that's wise."

"I think I'm doing fine without your wisdom, Mother."

"Is that so?"

"I would say so." I lean forward, setting my elbows on the table to annoy

her. “Both my albums went double platinum. I have six Grammys to show for it. I can write my own ticket, and I plan to.”

Mother’s eyes rest on my elbows like she wonders if farting and cartwheels are next in my dinner etiquette repertoire. She finally looks me in the eyes, her lips tight.

“You’ve coddled your brother, Bristol.” Mother delicately pats her mouth with her pristine napkin. “Despite the success he’s had so far, he doesn’t seem to grasp that it could all be gone tomorrow if he doesn’t make the right moves.”

“*He* is sitting right here,” I snap. “I run my career and my life, not Bristol. She knows that and so should you.”

“We’re only trying to help you,” my father cuts in, abandoning his bisque and leaning back in his seat. “You’re so self-destructive. Always have been. It comes with your gift, I suppose. That wild temperament. That’s why we had to keep the reins so tight on you, but you never understood that.”

“Working two hundred dates a year?” I fire back before he can reload with a second round of bullshit. “Hooked on prescription drugs? Your tight rein was strangling me, but you didn’t care about that as long as the checks kept rolling in, did you? You knew I needed to go to rehab but still pushed me to keep touring. Hell, you got me hooked in the first place. Thanks for all that help, Dad.”

I’m reminded that Emmy is hearing all of this, witnessing all of this, only when she gasps. Pity and horror fill her eyes. Great. I’ve fucked up her Thanksgiving *and* Christmas with my family drama. Batting a thousand, Gray.

“We should all calm down.” Grady looks between my red-faced father and me like he’s a negotiator and we’re both strapped with dirty bombs.

“Grady, maybe you can manage to stay out of it this time,” my mother says through tight lips. “We wouldn’t be in this situation if it weren’t for you.”

“That’s fucked up, Mother.” My words come out sharp as hot glass before Grady has the chance to defend himself. “The one person in this farce of a family who looked out for me, who had my best interests at heart, and you attack him.”

“We *all* had your best interests at heart, Rhyson,” my father says. “We just had different ways of arriving at them.”

“And your way could have gotten me killed.”

“Oh, spare me the melodrama.” My father tosses his linen napkin onto the table. “Our way would have saved this family the public humiliation of being dragged through court for a totally unnecessary step that set your career back nearly a decade.”

“With all due respect, Benjamin,” Grady says. “I wish things could have been handled differently, but I only wanted what was best for Rhyson. If we could all focus on the future and put the past behind us—”

“You just can’t stay out of it.” My mother shakes her head, narrowing her eyes on Grady. “How are we supposed to reconcile with our son if you’re always getting in the way?”

That does it. I stand to my feet to face the Machiavellis at the head of the dinner table.

“For the record, Grady is the reason I’m here,” I say. “And since you can’t show him any respect or gratitude, I refuse to endure this Christmas charade.”

I turn to Emmy, touching her hand and smiling ruefully.

“I’m sorry my family seems to ruin all the holidays for you. You’re very lucky Grady’s nothing like the rest of us.

Without another word, just a touch to Grady’s shoulder, I’m headed toward the door.

“Where exactly do you think you’re going?” my father’s voice booms from behind me. “You’re even more self-centered and arrogant than you were before, disrupting our Christmas this way. Walk out that door and you’re no

son of mine.”

*Son?*

That word doesn't even sound right on his lips, like a foreigner mispronouncing a new tongue. The right letters and syllables, but wrong to the point of grating on your ears. I turn by degrees to face him, years of pent-up rage slipping through cracks I've only spackled and plugged in therapy.

“Really, Dad?” I set my voice to deadly quiet. “That’s the threat? That I’m no son of yours? Didn’t you get the message that I didn’t want to be the son of a cold, heartless, mercenary bastard like you when I begged the courts to emancipate me?”

I think I’ve actually hurt him. Before he lowers the shade over his expression, I think I see pain. Am I evil for hoping so? How much of my life have I lived just wanting a reaction from him? He didn’t seem to respond to the things a father should, so our dynamic has always been off. Now, it’s so bad that even his pain satisfies me because it may be the only real emotion between us.

I can’t take this room anymore. It’s like being locked in a garage filling with carbon monoxide. My chest hurts. My eyes burn. I think I’m dying so slowly I don’t even notice. Without another word, I’m out of the dining room, through the foyer, and on my way up the steps to get my shit.

“Rhyson,” Grady calls from behind me.

I can’t even talk to him right now. I don’t stop.

“Rhyson, don’t go.”

No way am I stopping. No way am I listening.

“Rhyson, stop,” Grady says again. “Stop, son.”

*Son.*

That’s how it’s supposed to sound.

I stop and turn to face the only member of this family who has ever loved me without strings. I don’t say anything. He has earned my undivided attention.

“He wasn’t always this way, Rhyson,” Grady says.

“Well, he is now.”

“I think he can change. I think he wants to.”

“Maybe he does.” I shrug. “But that’s not going to be our Christmas miracle. I’m sorry, Grady, but I can’t stay under the same roof with them. You and Emmy stay, but I can’t.”

“I just don’t want you to be alone on Christmas,” Grady says with a concerned frown.

My first genuine smile since Bertie set a bowl of lobster bisque down in front of me breaks out.

“Don’t worry about that, Grady. I don’t plan to be alone.”



# Chapter

## TWENTY-FOUR

Kai

IN YEARS PAST, CHRISTMAS WAS A blur of activity. Everybody wanted Mama's holiday specials at the Glory Bee. I loved seeing newcomers do a double take when a tiny Asian woman, just shy of five feet, would emerge from the kitchen in her apron, making sure they were loving her Southern cooking. She made fruit cake that actually tasted good, cinnamon spice loaves, and of course, her famous mint apple cider. We made more money in December alone than any other quarter. We nearly made more money on Christmas morning than the rest of December. While other kids were tearing into their presents, Mama, Aunt Ruthie, and I were prepping for Glory Bee Christmas breakfast. Most years, I even managed to recruit San, but this Christmas he's spending with his grandmother who just retired to Florida.

You wouldn't believe how many folks don't want to cook breakfast on Christmas morning. They much preferred Mama's hot biscuits and homemade preserves to anything they could do themselves. We were always up by four that morning prepping, open for business from eight to noon, and home opening our own gifts by two. A strange Christmas, a working Christmas, but I never minded. The money we made that morning didn't just pay for Christmas gifts. It paid for dance and singing lessons. For cheering and gymnastics fees. For new tap and ballet shoes. Mama never held with me having a job because she knew how demanding my schedule was, but I

worked for her.

Inevitably, I'd have Christmas dance recitals, parades, holiday singing competitions. Mama never complained. She just juggled all her responsibilities at the diner, made sure I got where I needed to be, and that she was there when I needed her presence and support.

Christmas was a time of traditions, hard work, and gratitude. Mama never wanted me to take the little we had for granted. She made sure each Christmas Eve Glory Falls's homeless or those in need had a hot meal. They'd crowd the basement of Glory Falls Baptist Church, and we would serve. Even though Mama is gone, that tradition remains.

And if I never see another dollop of mashed potatoes it will be too soon. I'm not sure if Glory Falls's homeless population has tripled in the few months since I moved to L.A., or if I'm feeling Mama's absence that acutely, but I can't keep up with this crowd. Aunt Ruthie and I have been plating for the last thirty minutes. I first learned about the miracle of the fish and the loaves in a Sunday school classroom upstairs. It feels like we have our very own miracle meal going on, because I swear we didn't make this much food. It's multiplying faster than we can scoop it into the sections of the rectangular Styrofoam plates.

"Kai, honey, can you serve plates out there for a little bit?" Aunt Ruthie swipes a sleeve over her perspiring forehead. "I think Lila could use some help."

"Sure thing." I tighten the ties of the apron around my waist and adjust the hair net Aunt Ruthie insists I wear. I think more just to privately laugh at me than for sanitary reasons.

I grab a tray of plates, almost buckling under the weight of the food, and walk into the basement's fellowship hall. Some church members are upstairs preparing for the service we'll have in about an hour. Others are serving food out here or helping Aunt Ruthie in the kitchen like I was. Some are giving out coats from the winter wear drive Mama started years ago. I love seeing that

program live beyond her. Christmas has always been all hands on deck for those less fortunate. That's a legacy from Mama, and Grammy before her.

"Let me take that for you, Kai." Mr. McClausky, one of Pops's oldest friends, relieves me of the heavy tray. "Sure is good to see you back."

"It's good to be back, Mr. M." I lift a couple of plates from the tray and hand them down to people waiting for food.

"How's it going out in Los Angeles?" Mr. McClausky follows behind me with the tray, and I keep passing plates down to people and adding a smile.

"Pretty good." I grin up at him over my shoulder. "Can't complain."

"You meet any superstars out there?" Mr. McClausky gives me a peekaboo grin, showing off the space where a tooth used to be.

"One or two." I can't help but think of Rhyson and wonder what he's doing right now. Maybe I'll sneak in a text if we finish the service before it's too late to see how things went with his parents.

"We sure do miss you around here." Mr. McClausky hands the now-empty tray over to me. "And your mother. She was a fine woman for sure, and this town hasn't been the same since she passed."

"Thank you." I drop my eyes to my soft-soled boots that split the difference between fashion and comfort.

"Your daddy . . ." Mr. McClausky pauses, an uncharacteristically uncertain look on his face.

"What about him?" My voice usually weakens to nothing or goes stony when I speak of my father. There's no middle ground. I've wasted enough weakness on him, so stony it is. Mr. McClausky must hear the hard shift because his face softens with something close to pity.

"He was a fool." Mr. McClausky pats my shoulder. "How he could leave a precious little thing like you and a woman like your mama, I'll never understand."

He's asking a question that has tortured me since the day Daddy missed my recital. I avoid the sympathy in his eyes and look around at the people

enjoying a hot meal on Christmas Eve.

“I always knew he wasn’t the one though.” Mr. McClausky tucks his words into a conspiratorial whisper, making me lean in to find them.

“Wasn’t the one?” I frown, finally looking at him again in case his face yields more insight. “What do you mean?”

“Before he retired, I told your grandfather Jim wasn’t the one to take over Glory Falls Baptist. I said he wasn’t the one for your mama neither.” Mr. McClausky gives a firm nod of his balding head. “But he didn’t listen to me. Twenty-five years of friendship, and he chose that one time not to listen. Well, and your mama loved that man something fierce, so it seemed like it was meant to be.

“Why wasn’t he the one?”

There are questions that stay with us our whole lives. Seeking, searching for the answers, is what drives us on and forward. If we ever found the answers, we might stop moving. If we ever found the answers, it might feel like losing a friend who has spurred us on every step of the way. All my questions about my father are like that, but I have to know.

“First time I met your daddy, he ate past full.”

“What does that mean? Ate past full?”

“I watched that man eat himself almost sick that night. Your mama had a spread like nothing I’d ever seen.” Mr. McClausky licks his lips like he can still taste that meal. “Like she emptied the pantry trying to cook her way into that man’s heart. He was just about sick, but do you know what he did?”

I shake my head because I gave up long ago trying to figure out anything about my father.

“He heaped more on his plate and kept on eating.”

“*That’s* why you knew he wasn’t the one?” I give a sharp, little laugh. “People overeat all the time, Mr. McClausky.”

“You didn’t see him. It was something about the way he just wasn’t ever . . .” He twists his lips, searching for the word. “Satisfied. He wasn’t ever

satisfied. No matter how good a thing was, no matter how much he got, he couldn't be satisfied. It wasn't just food either. I saw it more than once. Underneath it all, he was a man of excess. You can't hide something like that forever. His appetites ruled him, and nothing was ever enough."

*Nothing was ever enough.*

Certainly not a backwoods Baptist church with only a handful of members and a small hundred-year-old parish house to live in. Certainly not his little wife, who devoted everything she had to a modest home and a family. Certainly not his daughter, always nipping at his heels, doing pirouettes, and begging for attention. Was it that *nothing* was never enough, or when it came down to it, was it just that we weren't?

"William McClausky!" Aunt Ruthie yells from the kitchen doorway with her hands on her ample hips. "You been standing still long enough for moss to grow under them feet. Get back in this kitchen and grab another tray."

Mr. McClausky pushes his brows up his shiny, bald pate, his face long suffering.

"Duty calls, and her name is Ruthie."

He ambles off toward the kitchen, and I start counting the number of people who still need plates. About halfway across the room, I become aware of someone standing a bit too close at my back. I turn abruptly and nearly stumble face-first into a broad chest. I look up, but can't see the man's face because his head is lowered, and a hood flops down to obscure my view.

Mama taught me to be kind, but not stupid. She used to serve the homeless with a small knife strapped to her thigh under her demure dress. She's the one who gave me my box cutter. I go to step around the human roadblock looming over me, but he catches my wrist.

"Let me by, buddy, or this could get ugly." I lay a beam of steel in the warning words.

"Pep, it's me."

I stop tugging at my wrist and squat a little so I can see under the hood.

“Rhyson?”

He gives a little nod, but doesn’t answer. His expressive mouth, the dramatic slope of his cheekbones, the sharp jaw line covered in the lightest layer of scruff, come into view under the hood.

I pull him out into the hall and around the corner to a deserted classroom. It may be Glory Falls, Georgia, population next to nothing, but they have cable now. And Internet. They are as connected to the world as anywhere else, which means many of them will know Rhyson. I feel protective of him. I don’t want him poked and prodded, bugged and bothered for autographs and pictures. For him to be here, something must have gone horribly wrong at his parents’ house. The last thing I want is for him to leap from that frying pan into this fire.

As soon as we’re in the classroom, I close the door behind me and lean against it. He shoves back the hood, and his dark hair predictably flops forward. He slides his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt.

“Surprise,” he says softly, his mouth slightly creasing to the right.

“What are you doing here, Rhyson?”

I don’t want him to think I’m upset that he’s come, so I soften the question, reaching up to push his hair back. At least that’s what I tell myself. It has nothing to do with the fact that he smells so freaking good and looks even better, tall and broad and strong, and did I mention tall?

“Is it okay?” An uncertain frown takes over his face.

“Of course.” I step closer. “I just . . . what happened at home?”

“That place is not home.” Bitterness flavors his words, calcifies his expression. “Those people . . . it was all a setup, Pep. Just like I thought. They didn’t care about meeting Emmy, or the fact that Grady wants to make things right with them, or even about Bristol. I’m not being conceited when I say it was ultimately about me and weaseling their way back into my career.”

“What happened?” Hurt on his behalf cracks through my words.

“Can we talk about it later?” A smirk lightens the heavy line of his full

lips. "I'm loving the hair net, by the way."

Horror. That is the only word to describe how I feel when my hands encounter the meshed netting confining my hair. This man has seen me with guacamole on my face. With sweaty armpits and smelling like day-old hamburger grease. Without a scrap of makeup. And now, we can add the most unflattering hair accessory known to womankind to the reasons he should not want me. Should not still be looking at me like he would sop me up with a biscuit if he had gravy.

I rip the net off my hair, shoving it into the front pocket of the apron that covers me almost neck to ankle. This may be the single most unflattering moment of my life, and it's witnessed by the man I'm more attracted to than any other living creature on earth.

Typical.

"How did you get here?" Let's just move beyond the hair net and maybe he'll forget. That wicked glint in his eye tells me that's wishful thinking, but I have to try to regain some dignity.

"Mostly by plane."

"Funny. No, I mean how did you find me?"

"A man of my means, my wealth, my resources? You don't think I could find one small woman if I applied all that to the search?"

"You called San and asked for the address, huh?"

"That's exactly what I did, yes."

My head flops forward onto his chest. His wide, sensitive hands span my waist and draw me in, inch by inch, until I'm pressed against him. We shake with laughter together. His amusement vibrates into my chest, and I know mine echoes back to him. Is it even that funny? Or are we just happy to be together on Christmas Eve, regardless of what familial explosion united us?

I think that's it.

# Chapter

## TWENTY-FIVE

### RHYSON

CHRISTMAS COULD COME AND GO, AND I'd be fine standing here all night with my girl's arms wrapped around me and mine wrapped around her. Yeah, that's how I think of her. As *my girl*, even though she won't admit it yet. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, and I've got her now. She's in my possession, so she's mine. Her head is tucked under my chin. My fingers rest on the sweet curve of her hips. If I shifted my hands down just a few inches, I'd be cupping that round, tight ass. But I'll keep being good for a little while longer.

Not much longer though.

She moves in closer and stiffens. Does she feel how hard I am? How her scent, her softness, and her breath at my neck, all affect me? And I'm in a church, for God's sake. Is that blasphemous? I have no idea how this church thing works, but I can't check an erection at the door. Sorry.

The door behind us opens so quickly I jump back like a guilty choir boy. The woman standing there is tall and imposing. No one thing about her is attractive, but something about the way her ordinary features cooperate on her face is pleasant and compelling. Her hands seem stuck to her hips and her light blue eyes are glued to Kai.

"Kai Anne, I've been looking for you well nigh ten minutes, young lady." One broad, work-roughened hand gestures back out toward the hall. "All



them folks gotta eat before service, and you're in here—"

Her eyes snap to me, and back to Kai, and then back to me. She blinks three times, her eyes stretching owlishly.

"Rhyson Gray!" Her hands fly to her cheeks, and she starts gushing like a teenager. "Oh my gosh! Rhyson Gray is in our church basement. I can't . . . well, as I live and breathe. You know Rhyson Gray, Kai Anne?"

Kai's mouth hangs open and she closes her eyes briefly before looking back to the woman at the door.

"Aunt Ruthie, I—"

"You didn't tell Aunt Ruthie about me?" I cut her off.

I know it's ridiculous, but it irritates me that she hasn't told the most important person left in her life about us. Whatever "us" is, the people who matter most to me know that Kai matters a lot.

"Rhyson, I—"

"You're *dating* Rhyson Gray?" Aunt Ruthie's face goes from fangirl to fuming in a millisecond. "How could you not tell me that?"

"Of course we're not dating." Kai catches me looking at her like she just stuck a pin in my eye. "I mean . . ."

"Of *course* we're not dating?" This is the wrong time to press the issue, but hearing her make it sound so farfetched infuriates me.

"You know what I mean, Rhys." Kai swallows, her discomfort evident, and shifts from one foot to the other. "Could we not do this now?"

I've already ruined one Christmas dinner, no need to piss on another.

"Right. Sorry." I step forward and extend my hand to Aunt Ruthie. "I'm Rhyson, which I guess you know. I've heard so much about you."

"I love your music," Aunt Ruthie says unnecessarily since I gathered that. "Not just the new stuff. I heard you play once in Boston when you were only thirteen."

That's unexpected. Aunt Ruthie's shaking up my stereotypes about the cultural inclinations of Glory Fall's citizens.

“Aunt Ruthie, we can talk about music later,” Kai interrupts. “Is it almost time for the service? I haven’t seen any sign of Ms. Hargrove, and she and I need to rehearse at least a little.”

“Rehearse?” I ask. “Are you singing tonight?”

Kai’s eyes widen and her jaw goes slack.

“Ugh. I am. Maybe you could stay in the basement?”

Kai never sings around me. She’s kept her voice under lock and key since the day I corrected her breathing and encouraged compression exercises. It’d be great to hear if she’s taken my advice.

“The hell I am.”

Aunt Ruthie clears her throat in a way I should probably find significant.

“You’re in the Lord’s house, young man.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, Aunt Ruthie. I mean . . . the heck I am.”

“You might be singing a capella anyway, Kai.” Aunt Ruthie’s expression is rueful. “Ms. Hargrove’s son had an asthma attack, and she’s rushed him to the hospital.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry to hear that.” Kai frowns and then after a moment, shrugs. “Well, it won’t be the first time I’ve sung without music.”

“What song is it?” I ask. “Maybe I could help?”

Kai’s already shaking her head, but she’s not fast enough. Aunt Ruthie bounces on her toes and claps her hands.

“What a treat, Kai. To hear you and Rhyson sing together.”

“He didn’t say *sing*, Aunt Ruthie.” Kai looks up at me, her expression guarded. “He may not even know the song, and I—”

“What’s the song? Is it a carol?” I ask. “I know most of those.”

“It’s ‘O, Holy Night,’” Aunt Ruthie interjects. “You’d sound amazing on it together. It was her mama’s favorite carol, and Kai’s sung it every year since she was eleven.”

“I’m in.” I take in Kai’s slightly shell-shocked expression. I think she’s still stuck back there somewhere with Ms. Hargrove, but Aunt Ruthie and I

have moved forward with our plan. “Got an acoustic guitar somewhere around here?”

“Huh?” Kai fixes vacant eyes on the floor. “Um . . . yeah. Upstairs.”

“When are we on?” I direct the question to Aunt Ruthie since Kai still seems to be wrapping her head around us singing together.

“In about twenty minutes.” Aunt Ruthie grins at me and claps again.

“I thought you needed my help in the kitchen, Aunt Ruthie.” Kai sounds like that might be preferable to rehearsing with me.

“Oh, we can spare you, honey, for this,” Aunt Ruthie assures her.

I’m getting excited. Me and Kai singing together at the church she grew up in? Singing her mother’s favorite carol? This could save Christmas.

# Chapter

## TWENTY-SIX

Kai

THIS COULD RUIN CHRISTMAS.

Me singing with Rhyson Gray? I mean, yes, he's *my* Rhyson who rides dune buggies and watches *Sex and the City* marathons and throws French fries at me, but lest we forget . . . he's still Rhyson Gray. His voice . . . I can't even really articulate what his voice and the words he wrote meant to me when I was stuck here in Glory Falls those last years. "Lost" became my anthem in the mornings, my lullaby at night, my lifeline anytime I was sinking. To sing with Rhyson could be the most terrifying and possibly most blissful experience of my life. To sing Mama's favorite carol with him on Christmas Eve?

I don't know if I'm ready for that. If my heart is ready for that.

Rhyson glances up at me, sitting on the stool, acoustic guitar resting on his knee.

"What key?"

"What what?"

Could I speak intelligibly? Nope.

"What *key* do you wanna sing it in?" He frowns, dark hair dragging over his eyes. "You okay?"

"Um. . . . yeah, sure." No. "B flat?"

He nods, sliding the capo down the neck of the guitar.

“How about you start and I’ll listen the first time through.” He begins strumming the melody that always brought Mama to tears. “I’ll come in later. I’m thinking if I just harmonize on the chorus, it’ll have more impact. Especially at ‘fall on your knees.’”

It was the chorus that always got Mama, and hearing him play, it’s what will probably get me too.

“I’m not sure about this.” I press my palm to my stomach, afraid I won’t be able to breathe normally, much less the way I should to sing.

Rhyson’s fingers never pause, moving with agility over the strings of the guitar. His gift, his greatness as a musician, goes deeper than skill. This old guitar, barely in tune, responds to his touch like he found some hiding place where it was keeping this beautiful sound just for him. It’s like he gives some of himself to each instrument until it speaks for him, saying things Rhyson may never voice. He might be guarded in public or in conversation, but not with his music. He strips every barrier away that would separate him from the listener. I’ve heard people say this musician or that one pours their heart into the music. It’s more than that with Rhyson. I think what he gives it is his soul.

“Any day now, Pep. I’m going grey here.”

I realize he’s run through the first verse a few times waiting for me to start.

“I-it’s hard with you here.” The admission comes out stilted.

“It’d be hard for me to accompany you and *not* be here. Even I’m not that good.” Rhyson’s fingers never stop, almost absently plucking at the haunting melody, but his eyes hold still with mine. “Why’s it hard?”

“Because you’re . . . well, you’re . . . I’m . . .”

He’ll think I’m ridiculous. I’m ridiculous.

“There’s a reason you haven’t heard me sing much.” I shove my hands into the back pockets of my jeans. “I’m afraid you won’t . . .”

I hate this. It only highlights the inequities I always try to ignore.

“Afraid I won’t what?”

“You won’t like it. You won’t like my voice. My singing. Maybe I am just a dancer who sings. I’ve been working on my compressions, and I think I’m getting better and improving my tone and stretching my range, but—”

“You’re not just a dancer who sings, Pep. Don’t be nervous. I’ve heard you sing.”

“I sang like a few notes for a breathing exercise. You haven’t really heard me sing.” I study my shoes. “What if you don’t like it? If you think I’m no good?”

“I’d tell you.” Rhyson stops playing, leans the guitar against the stool, and crosses over to me, forcing my eyes to meet his with a gentle finger under my chin. “I’ve heard enough to know you have a beautiful tone, a disciplined instrument, and a trained voice. That’s more than I can say for half the people on the charts right now. Is there room to improve? There always is. As professionals, we’re always growing. So keep growing.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“I don’t do that.” His eyes hold mine as he shakes his head definitively. “Not with music. Certainly not with you. Is that why you haven’t sung for me?”

“That, and well, I just kind of wanted to put our music in a box that we leave alone and separate from our . . . our friendship for now.”

The contact of his finger under my chin doesn’t seem to be enough, so I wrap my hand around his broad wrist.

“Rhys, there are so many things that could screw up our friendship. I don’t want music to be one of them.”

His thumb caresses my jaw and emotion smolders his eyes to pewter.

“Nothing will screw up our . . . friendship.” His smile promises things that make my heartbeat stutter. “If anything, sharing our music will only add to what we have. You know how important music is to me, right?”

I nod because, obviously.

“And you know how important you are to me, right?”

I don't nod. I don't breathe. The warmth in his eyes slows the blood down until I'm sure it's merely crawling through my veins. Everything in my body pauses, waiting for his next words. He leans closer, both hands cupping my face, our eyes still connected by this sweet, fiery thread.

“I was almost glad to have an excuse to get out of my parents' house today.” Rhyson is so close that his breath begs entrance at my lips. “It was hard to leave you on Christmas Eve. This is where I wanted to be.”

He drops a hand to touch the Pepper nameplate necklace he gave me for Christmas, something in his eyes, in his fingers, laying claim.

“*You* are where I wanted to be.” His hand slips beneath my hair to stroke the sensitive skin of my neck. “That's how important you are to me.”

The door swinging open behind us shatters this fragile moment. I turn to see Aunt Ruthie at the door.

“It's time.” She waves her hand out to the hall. “Come on.”

“Already?” I squeak, my heart dropping several floors down to my feet. “But we didn't get to really rehearse or anything.”

“You've sung this song a thousand times, Kai Anne.” Aunt Ruthie opens the door wider. “You could sing your ABCs and these people would love it. They love you and have missed you. Now get that li'l butt in gear.”

“Yeah, Kai Anne.” Rhyson's smile teases me. He's loving this. “Get that li'l butt in gear.”

I narrow my eyes at him, warning of retribution later. It's not the congregation I'm worried about. They remember when I couldn't sing worth a hill of beans. I grew up in front of them. Many of them helped Mama raise me in some ways after Daddy left. It's not them. It's *him*.

Rhyson grabs the acoustic and walks past me into the hall, giving me one last smile over his shoulder.

“You'll be fine. Come on.”

And once we're on the small stage, surrounded by the familiar faces I've

missed so much, seated in the pews that gave me splinters growing up, I am kind of fine. Nerves still flutter in my belly, and my breath still comes shallow and faster than it should, but as I take the stool next to Rhyson's, I think I'll be fine. I grab one of the two mics set up for us.

"How y'all doing tonight?"

The hundred or so people gathered clap and grin and hoot and holler at me. Or maybe it's for the rock star beside me.

"As you can see," a small smile settles on my lips, and I spare Rhyson a quick glance, only his eyes are fixed on me like the crowd isn't even there, "I have a friend with me tonight. Some of you may know him."

Rhyson smiles and waves when the crowd gets louder, a few of the younger ones screaming his name. He's been so open. I don't want to see that guard drop and block all of that.

"I have a favor to ask of you, family." I smile, meeting as many eyes as I can. "Most of you know who Rhyson is, and I know it's exciting to have him with us."

I look at him, and my grin kind of falls apart when our eyes meet. Even though every look we exchange telegraphs it, I try to hide how much he means to me so everyone won't see it.

"I'm as excited as anyone to have him here." I look back to the crowd, firming my lips like I saw Mama do when she meant business. "But I'm asking you to put the phones away. He's celebrating Christmas with us and is singing my mama's favorite Christmas carol with me. I'm gonna ask that you don't record it. Don't put it on YouTube or make a Vine out of it. Don't Instagram it. Just let it be."

I soften the severe line of my mouth with a smile.

"Can you do that for me, family?"

The congregation cheers, answering with a chorus of "yes" and nods.

"Well, all right then."

Emotion drenches every part of me as I approach Mama's favorite



moment of the holidays. She said she felt closer to God on this night, during this song, than any other time of the year. And tonight, as Rhyson strums the opening notes, I feel closer to her.

I close my eyes and forget that one of the biggest rock stars on the planet is accompanying me. I've sung this song so many times, I don't even have to think about the words. I just breathe and they come out.

"O, holy night, the stars are brightly shining."

The lyrics, older than this church, older than all of us, older than this town, immediately take my heart into their grip, reminding me of how they always affected my mother. I sink into the lyrics of the first verse. As the words, the holy sentiments, penetrate my heart and settle on my soul, tears gather behind my closed eyes. I hold on to the notes, even though emotion blisters my throat. We come to the chorus, and just like he said he would, Rhyson adds a husky harmony to my voice on the plane above his.

These notes, these lyrics, these moments feel holy. Pure. Clean. Our voices twine around each other, meshing and separating, blending, bowing, and rising up, up, up until it's too much. There's no holding the tears back. The way our voices wrap around one another, joy and sorrow do the same. I feel sorrow that Mama is not here to witness this. That this year, this moment, this *life* goes on without her. But I feel joy that I am alive. I'm here. I can offer this up to the world the way she always wanted me to. And joy that I will see her again.

That climactic note of the song, the word "divine," reaches up to the rafters. Rhyson drops away and allows my voice to soar on that note alone, piercing the absolute silence that blankets the room.

And it is perfect. Tonight, together, we are perfect.

The last note drifts away, and I open my eyes to see cheeks as wet as mine all around the room. For a few moments, there is no applause. A collective reverence hangs over the crowd until the clapping begins. I look over at Rhyson, and when our eyes connect, the rest of the room falls away.

It's just us. Even in a roomful of people, it's just us. I recognize that look on his face. That's how I felt that first day in Grady's music room. Rhyson's music caressed my heart and shook my soul. And even if he never says it, the look on his face tells me this song arrested him that way. And like me, he, will never forget what we just shared on this stage.

Pastor Charles's arm around my shoulder pulls me back into the moment with the congregation. He took over pastoring when Daddy left, and has been the kind of pastor Glory Falls deserved. The kind Pops would have been proud of. He takes the mic from my tight fist and starts speaking.

"Glory Falls, it's good to have Kai home, ain't it?"

I smile back at all the familiar faces. I was so glad to get out of this town, so ready to get away from the disappointment and the pain this place held, I almost forgot how much I loved the people.

"As most of you know," Pastor Charles continues. "Kai's mama, Mai Lin, passed away a few months ago."

The hurt squeezes my heart, but somehow not as tightly. Its grip is less brutal. Is this what healing feels like? I share a small smile with Rhyson, acknowledging only to myself what a huge part he has played in the process.

"Lin was a rock for this church and for this community." Pastor Charles swallows emotion, blinking away tears. "I'll never forget how welcome she made me and my family feel when we moved here to lead Glory Falls Baptist."

I'll never forget those early days either. We lived in the parish house owned by the church, designated for the pastor's family. When Daddy left and Pastor Charles came, we had to vacate. Mama met them with a fresh apple cobbler and a pitcher of lemonade. She helped them settle in even as she had to figure out where we would live and what we would do.

"Kai took care of her mama those last days she was with us," Pastor Charles says. "And at the end, there were some things insurance didn't take care of."

Oh, no. I hope they aren't doing what I think they are. I've seen this on more than one occasion. A person stands in need, and the whole congregation rallies its resources to help the one. The thought of these sweet people with their modest incomes reaching into their pockets for me is humbling.

"We wish we could pay off all your mama's medical bills, Kai," Pastor Charles says. "We can only do a little, but it's done in love."

I don't even look at the envelope he places in my hand. I know it holds money they've collected to help with Mama's lingering medical bills. If my cheeks weren't wet before, they are now. I lean into Pastor Charles, dampening his shirt with my tears. Grammy is gone. Pops followed soon after, and my heart still sags sometimes with the grief of losing Mama. But I still have people right here looking out for me, and they are like family.

# Chapter

## TWENTY-SEVEN

### RHYSON

I'VE BEEN TIRED BEFORE. GOING ON the road touring by the time I was ten years old, I've got some miles on these tires. I know the exhaustion of staying up three days straight working on an album. All night jam sessions? Been there, done that. But this fatigue digs into my bones.

And I can't wipe this shit-eating grin off my face.

Last night after the church service, we came back to Kai's house. I thought that might mean some time alone with her, but I didn't realize Aunt Ruthie lives in the house too. I didn't realize they live on the top floor, and the Glory Bee occupies the bottom. I didn't realize they spend Christmas morning cooking and serving breakfast to a hundred people. I've never seen anything like it. And somehow I found myself serving eggs and gravy and grits all morning. Not saying I was great at it, but I did my part. And no one asked for an autograph or a single selfie. Kai made sure they got that memo.

"You doing okay?" Aunt Ruthie wipes down one of the wooden tables in the quaint dining room.

"Yeah." I glance at the register where Kai rings up a customer. "Is that the last of them?"

Aunt Ruthie presses her hand to the small of her back, stretching out muscles that must be aching.

"Yep, and now we can have *our* Christmas."

“It’s good you found someone who could take Kai’s mom’s place cooking in the kitchen.”

A sad smile graces Aunt Ruthie’s face before fading.

“No one ever really could take Lin’s place, but Marilyn does all right.” Aunt Ruthie eases down into one of the hard-backed seats and gives me a searching look. “You and Kai seem to be real close.”

I proceed with caution. I didn’t miss the look Aunt Ruthie gave Kai last night when she offered me the couch upstairs in their small living room. Of course I didn’t expect to share Kai’s bed. Aunt Ruthie looked like she wasn’t so sure. She wonders what’s going on between Kai and me. Rest assured, our first time making love certainly won’t be in Kai’s childhood twin bed with Aunt Ruthie listening through the wall.

“We’re really good friends.” I sit down too, propping my elbows on the table and coupling my fists under my chin.

“Friends, huh?” Aunt Ruthie’s skepticism sends one brow up. “But let me guess. You want more.”

Kai walks the last customer out the door and onto the porch, chatting and laughing. I’m not sure she’d want me saying this to her Aunt Ruthie, but fuck it. I’m just about done shelving what I want.

“You’re right.” I look the only family Kai has left right in the eye. “I want to be with Kai. I care about her very much.”

“You know she’s been through a lot.” Aunt Ruthie’s eyes don’t waver and her mouth is a stiff line. “I won’t see her hurt.”

“I have no intention of hurting her. If she . . .” I clear my throat. “When she’s ready to be with me, I’ll take care of her. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry.” Aunt Ruthie shakes her head, straightening the snowman salt and pepper shakers on the table. “I worry that she works too hard and won’t let anyone help her.”

I check to make sure Kai isn’t on her way back in before leaning forward and lowering my voice.

“I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“About what?” Aunt Ruthie lowers her voice too, looking over at the entrance.

“The money they donated last night for the medical bills, was it enough to pay everything off?”

Aunt Ruthie frowns and shakes her head.

“Not near enough. There’s still a balance of forty thousand. I spare what I can, but there isn’t much left over each month.”

Forty thousand? Kai is working around the clock and neglecting her music career for forty thousand dollars? I get paid that much to sneeze.

“I’d like to help.”

“Does she know about this?” Aunt Ruthie offers a heavy laugh. “That girl is as stubborn as a lid on a new jar of mustard.”

“Exactly.”

“She may not take too kindly to you doing this, Rhyson. She probably wouldn’t take your money.” Aunt Ruthie smiles. “But I will. ‘Bout time somebody looked out for that girl.”

“Why’s she so hard to help?”

“I think it goes all the way back to Jim. To her daddy. When he left, Kai’s mama fell apart. It wasn’t just the money or having to do everything by herself. She needed *him*, and when he chose somebody else, it took a long time for her to be the woman she was before. Kai’s never wants to be that dependent on anyone.”

Before I have time to answer, Kai walks up beside us.

“Last customer gone.” Kai flops into the other chair at our table, long hair scooped up on top of her head and escaping around her ears. “Dishes done and food put away. Now it’s time for Christmas. Y’all ready? Everybody’s already on their way over.”

Aunt Ruthie and I exchange a quick look, a silent agreement to finish this later. She’s given me great insight. Maybe it’s not as simple as Kai wanting

to do things on her own. Maybe it's that she doesn't want *me* to help. If that's the case, she's shit outta luck.



Christmas has never been a big deal for my family. Hell, this was the first time in twelve years I even tried to spend it with my parents, and that turned out *amazing*. I can tell, even with her gone, that Kai's mother made Christmas something special.

What I would describe as a cast of characters invade Kai's house over the next hour. Aunt so-and-so. Cousin this-or-that, none of them *actual* relatives. I didn't know people wore Christmas sweaters in real life, but they are surprisingly—or not surprisingly—popular here in Glory Falls. Aunt Bea, which is literally her name, as in Andy Griffith, wears a 3-D sweater with a red, squeezable Rudolph nose.

I'm tripping.

"If you don't stop staring at that sweater," Kai whispers from one corner of her mouth, "I'm dumping this gravy boat over your head."

I almost choke on my biscuit. I turn my head in Kai's direction, ready with a snappy comeback, but it dies on my lips.

God, she's beautiful.

Like steal-your-breath, heart-skip-a-beat, grab-you-by-the-balls gorgeous.

I've never seen anything like her. It's not even just the dark eyes, exotically slanted. It's more than the sweet slope of her cheeks. It goes deeper than the smooth gold of her skin or the dark hair she braided into some coronet thing on her head today. The long-sleeved red dress she wears fitted to her small, high breasts and the wisp of her waist so closely that I see the flex of muscles in her stomach when she laughs. It's none of that. Something has changed, almost cellularly. I don't know if it's being home again, surrounded by people she loves, or if it's just the holidays, which are her favorite time of the year. But she looks happy, and it adds something to her

physical beauty that I'll fight to keep. Even if I have to fight Kai herself.

"Are you racking your brain for a quote from *Elf* or what?" Kai slants me a smile.

"As a matter of fact, I was sitting here planning out our whole day," I deadpan. "First, we'll make snow angels for two hours, and then we'll go ice skating, and then we'll eat a whole roll of Toll House cookie dough as fast as we can."

"And then we'll snuggle?" Kai finishes the movie quote, a husky laugh parting her lips, showing me the sweet, pink tongue hiding behind her teeth.

"Hey, you said it, but I'm down if you are."

She rolls her eyes, but keeps smiling.

"So, Kai," Mr. McClausky calls from the other end of the table. "How long you been dating a rock star?"

Wow. So that's how you get this rowdy crowd completely silent. They all stare down the table at us, a menagerie of Christmas sweaters and overalls.

"Um, we aren't." Kai turns wide, panicked eyes my way. "I mean, he's not. That is to say, I'm not and we don't . . ."

Her eyes beg for help and I have mercy.

"We're just friends," I say, even though every fiber in my body resists admitting that when she's *mine*. But I don't want to fight on Christmas in front of all her friends and family who have been so nice and accepting and all around cool.

"Could have fooled me," Aunt Ruthie mutters into the silence that follows my statement. She and I share a grin because she knows all the plans I have for Kai. Well, some of them. The ones involving nudity I'll keep to myself.

"I remember when your Pops saw your Grams for the first time, Kai." Mr. McClausky nicely segues us out of awkward and into sentimental. "She wanted nothing to do with him. Said she wasn't marrying no preacher."

"Grams was kind of wild growing up," Kai tells me, grinning.



“To say the least.” Mr. McClausky chuckles, shaking his head. “It took him a long time to convince her, but once he did, they had the kind of love most people only dream about.”

“He used to keep mistletoe in the house year round,” Kai says, her voice soft with the memory. “Said he’d use any excuse he could to kiss her all the time.”

“I wish I could have met them.” I say it so low probably only Kai hears me, but that’s okay since everyone else has moved on to old stories about other people.

“They would have loved you.” Kai’s eyes are a little shy, barely meeting mine before falling back to the napkin in her lap

“You sure about that?” I make a bold move, stealing her hand from her lap and linking our fingers on my knee. “Wild, bad boy musician corrupting their sweet granddaughter?”

“You’re not that bad.” She squeezes my hand and flirts with me through her eyelashes. “And I’m not that sweet.”

Oh, she’s sweet all right, and soon I’ll taste for myself.

# Chapter

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Kai

THE LAST TIME I STOOD ON this porch, considering this inky sky dotted with dying stars, my mama lay inside and up those stairs drawing her final breaths. My heart was so heavy I could barely drag it up the steps to say good-bye. That night and the months that followed, I often thought my heart would never be light again.

And yet not even a year after Mama's passing, the first Christmas without her, I laughed all through dinner and couldn't stop smiling. I could lie to myself and say it was being back home, eating good food, surrounded by Aunt Ruthie, Mr. McClausky, and all the people who helped raise me, but I won't.

It's Rhyson. Not just today, but all the days that have come before. All the days he's made me smile and pulled my heart out of the dark. I hate that things went so badly with his parents, but I'm glad he's here. It feels right.

"Cold?"

The deep rumble of Rhyson's voice behind me dents the quiet of Christmas night.

"Li'l bit." I don't turn to see him, but I'm already smiling. "Got a coat?"

"Nope." He walks farther onto the porch bringing a smile with him. "Got an arm though."

"I'll take it."

I shift on the step to make room for his wide shoulders beside me, and notice for the first time the step doesn't move under my bottom. I wiggle again, frowning when the step doesn't wobble.

"Something going on with your hips?" Rhyson laughs and settles beside me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

"This step has wobbled for years, but—"

"I fixed it."

"Why?" I can't explain the fist tightening around my heart, but it's squeezing until I'm sure blood will leak through my dress. "Who told you to do that?"

Rhyson pulls back to stare at me, his arm dropping from my shoulder.

"It was dangerous." His words start out slow like he's still figuring out my crazy. "It was loose, and we had a hundred people coming up these steps for Christmas breakfast."

"Yeah, I mean . . ." I run a finger over the step like I have a million times sitting here, looking up that road, waiting for Daddy to appear. "I'm sorry. Thanks."

"Did you *want* the step loose?"

"No, of course not. I just . . . it's stupid."

"All the more reason to tell me." Rhyson bumps shoulders. "Your perfection is exhausting."

*God, he's great.*

He's the most unexpected gift I've ever received, and he treats me better than any guy ever has. And I'm whining because he fixed a step I could have tripped and broken my neck on waiting for my daddy to come home and repair it?

"My mama would never fix that step because it was the last thing Daddy said to her. I had a dance recital. He said I'll fix that step when we get home after the recital, but he never showed up."

I palm my knees, squeezing them until I can finish.

“He never came home.” A one-sided smile cracks my face. “She wouldn’t touch that step for years, but would never say why. I knew though. And this is where I’d sit on birthdays and Christmas, wondering if he might show up.”

My fake laugh sounds harsh even to my ears.

“The first few years, when I was still young, I’d sit right here wearing my ballet shoes so I’d be ready when he came back. Somehow, I convinced myself that if he had just seen me dance, he would have stayed.”

It shouldn’t still hurt that he never came back, but especially at Christmas, especially this first Christmas without Mama, it does.

“I’m sorry,” Rhyson says. “Not that I fixed the step. That was a hazard. I’m sorry he never showed. Sorry he ever left and missed out on you and your mom. I can tell she was something special.”

Enough talk about my sorry excuse for a father. He doesn’t deserve any of a day that has been as close to perfect as it could be without Mama here.

“You know what was special?” I drop my head to his shoulder.

“Aunt Bea’s Rudolph sweater?”

I laugh until I snort.

“Admit it,” Rhyson continues. “If I went up to your closet right now, I’d find a dozen Christmas sweaters.”

“I was much younger and it was a long time ago.”

“Sure it was, Rudy.”

“Would you be serious for a minute?” I’m still laughing. Can’t help it.

“Okay.” He reaches down to caress my hair. “What was special?”

I want to lean into him until he absorbs me and I can’t tell where he ends and where I begin. But that’s what’s so dangerous about Rhyson. I need to *begin* somewhere. I need to be my own person with my own goals and my own dreams, not get lost in his breadth. Our dynamic could get really complicated, but tonight it’s simple. Just a boy and a girl who love being together.

“You coming here was special.” I laugh a little. “You serving pancakes

was special. This whole day was special.”

“For me too.” Rhyson puts one hand over mine on my knee. “It’s been the best Christmas, maybe ever.”

That makes me happy.

“It’s gonna be hard to go,” Rhyson says.

That makes me sad.

“When are you leaving?” I study his profile in the dim porch light, the hard lines of his jaw and cheekbones softened only by the curve of his full lips.

“Probably tomorrow.”

“Why?” That sounded whiny. “I mean, I thought you could stay a little longer.”

“I gotta get ready for New Year’s Eve.”

“New Year’s Eve?”

“Yeah, I have this little performance in Times Square.”

“You’re performing in Times Square for New Year’s Eve?” I squeal. “Oh my gosh. That’s incredible. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, it’s Bristol’s doing.” He quirks his mouth and rolls his eyes. “They invited me, but I’m bringing Marlon so we can do that song from his album we’re releasing soon. Build some buzz. We need to start rehearsing this week.”

“I’ll make sure to watch.”

“I’ll give you another shout out.” He tugs his ear twice the way he did when he performed on Fallon. “Or you could come with me?”

He tempts me with a look from under those long, girls-would-kill-for lashes.

“Nah, not this time.” I shake my head. “I probably won’t see Aunt Ruthie again for a while, and I promised her this whole week.”

“So the next time we see each other, it’ll be a new year.”

“Yep.”

I'll see him in a week, so it's foolish how my heart sinks at the thought of him leaving tomorrow.

"Pep, I know you wanted to take things slow and to make your own way before we took things to the next level between us." Rhyson slides away and squats on the step below me, catching and holding my eyes. "But next year can't be like the last few months."

I gulp, pulling back from the intoxicating heat and scent of him.

"Rhyson, I—"

"Nope," he interrupts, trapping my eyes with his. "I've let you take the lead for a long time, Pep. I'm doing this."

"Doing what exactly?"

He reaches into his back pocket, pulls out his phone, and turns it around so I can see the screen before suspending it over our heads.

I don't know whether to laugh or pass out.

"A mistletoe app?" My voice is small and uncertain. "Digital mistletoe?"

"Yeah." Rhyson shrugs like this is normal. "Guess Pops inspired me. This way I can keep mistletoe around all the time too. And always have an excuse to kiss you. Starting tonight."

"Rhyson, I think we should—"

"Any last words before we have our first kiss?"

"We're not going to—"

"The hell we aren't."

He sets the phone on the step, captures the back of my neck, and pulls me so close his breath invades my mouth. The kiss starts slow, a brush of our lips together. A catch and release, him pulling back and running his eyes over my face before pressing my breasts back into his hard chest. He's kissing me again, his tongue stroking mine, sucking gently until my toes curl in my boots. He's imprinting his taste into the lining of my jaw, into the underside of my tongue, into the skin inside my lips. A sweet heat is trapped in my mouth, like lightning in a bottle. Exploding and suffusing the sensitive tissues

with delicious fire.

His thick hair curls around my fingers as they dig into his scalp. My hands drift down to cup either side of his face. I stretch my mouth wider over his, pulling his tongue in so deep it whispers across the entrance of my throat. We pant into each other's mouths, and we're so tight together, his heart slams into mine.

I'm standing at the edge of flame. Singed, not yet burned. If I don't break this kiss, there is no way back. I'll find a way to have him. Even with Aunt Ruthie upstairs, even with Mama's memory lingering in every room, even with the family Bible on the living room table—I'll have him tonight if I don't put a stop to this.

"Rhyson, please stop," I beg against his lips. "Not yet."

He pulls back a few centimeters, pressing our foreheads together, hard breaths against my mouth, palms at my throat, fingers at the back of my neck.

"Pep," he whispers against my lips. "When?"

How do I answer? My heart and my body scream *right now!* I thought I could hold out until I made it big, till I got my break, and stood on my own two feet. Had my own accomplishments separate from Rhyson's fame. My own career. But asking myself to wait is like asking my heart not to beat. Or my eyes not to blink. Rhyson is my involuntary response. I can't help but to want him, and not just physically. To want everyone to know he's mine and I'm his. To wake up with him on my mind and in my arms. I don't know how much longer I can resist him. As a matter of fact, I'm forgetting why I should, so I lay my lips against his softly and whisper the truth.

"Soon."

# Chapter

## TWENTY-NINE

Kai

IT'S A NEW YEAR, AND I'M going to Rhyson's house.

I mean, technically, he invited me to see his home studio and sit in on a session for Grip's new album. But still . . . I'm going to Rhyson's house. I've lost count of the times he's been to my apartment, but I've never been to his place. I drive across town in San's beat-up Toyota, letting Google maps lead me to Rhyson's Calabasas address.

If Google maps girl could comment on the changing landscape, she'd probably say something along the lines of, "Holy crap." The closer I get, the more exclusive the scenery becomes. Everything is gorgeous and gated. When I reach Rhyson's community, the first thing I notice is the photographers parked alongside the road, poised to jump in their cars and give chase as soon as someone famous rolls through those gates. They probably assume I'm delivering pizza or something.

The small structure housing the security guard intimidates me, though Rhyson promised to leave my name up front. Sure enough, when I show my ID, I'm buzzed right in. The closer I get to Rhyson's home, the more tangled the knots in my stomach become. I haven't seen him since he kissed me on the porch over a week ago. Between Times Square, his other commitments in New York, and all the hours I've been putting in preparing the girls for their next dance competition, we've barely spoken. And when we did, it wasn't as



natural or as easy as I'm used to. I think we're figuring out what's next. I'm not sure, and Rhyson feels like he already knows. Will we compromise? That doesn't seem to be something Rhyson's especially good at.

We're at a turning point. I know we can't keep doing this, but I'm not sure I'm ready for what a relationship with Rhyson means. Am I ready to be chased all over town, followed because of who I'm dating? Splashed all over the media any time we go out? Potentially not taken seriously in auditions, or given a chance only because I'm Rhyson Gray's girl? *Am* I ready to be Rhyson's girl? To trust him with everything? Because when he looks at me, eyes already possessive, I know he'll settle for nothing less.

A gigantic house looms ahead with its gate standing open. I park in the cobblestone driveway, San's compact car dwarfed by the beautiful Mediterranean architecture of Rhyson's home. After a few deep breaths, I get up the nerve to ring the bell.

The short, round woman who answers the door offers me a warm smile.

"Ms. Pearson?" she asks in a soft voice with a heavy accent.

"Yes." I step in when she opens the door wider. "But please call me Kai."

"I'm Sarita." She leads me through the foyer with the stone-slabbed floors and the modern chandelier glinting overhead. "Mr. Gray told me you'd be coming."

We walk down the long, wide hall with art-splattered walls and down a flight of stairs until we reach an open room with pinball machines, arcade games, a gargantuan plasma television, and a pool table, where Rhyson leans, holding a cue and grinning.

"Welcome to Chez Gray, Pep." He walks over and grabs my hand.

"Will that be all, Mr. Gray?" Sarita asks.

"Yeah, thanks." He looks down at me as Sarita walks away, his eyes devouring me. "I've missed you."

"It's only been a week." My cheeks heat and my belly somersaults under that look.

“I’ve gotten spoiled seeing you all the time.” He sets one hand at my waist and one at my neck, dipping to brush his lips over mine. I enjoy the warm contact for a few seconds before pulling away, my pulse slamming against my wrists.

“You were already spoiled, Rhyson, and it had nothing to do with me,” I say, hoping to thin the air that thickens around us when he touches me. “Where’s Grip? You promised I’d get to see a session.”

“I *may* have invited you over a little early.” He pushes back into me, sliding an arm around me again. “You think I want to share you with Marlon?”

“Rhyson.” I step back again and take a deep breath. “We need to talk about—”

“You said soon.” His voice, his eyes declare he means to hold me to it.

“I know.” I lean against the pool table. “But it’s a big step, and we need to talk about what this could look like.”

“It looks like us together.” He frowns. “It doesn’t have to be this complicated, Pep.”

“That’s easy for you to say. There aren’t photographers lined up at my door when you come to my place.” My phone ringing interrupts. I pull it out of the slit pocket of my skirt. “Geez Louise. It’s the bill collector for my mom’s hospital. I need to take this.”

“No.” Rhyson reaches for the phone. “Let it roll into voice mail.”

I pull back, shaking my head.

“Believe me, I wish I could, but they’ve called like three times today, and I’ve been ignoring.” I walk across the room toward one of the leather couches. “It’ll only take a sec. I actually meant to call anyway to make sure they got the payment I made after Christmas. I don’t want them bothering Aunt Ruthie about it.”

“Pep, I think you should wait.” Rhyson’s frown gets heavier every time the phone rings, but I answer anyway.

“Hello.” I sit on the leather couch and rest against the cool cushions.

“Hello. This is Central Financial,” the representative says from the other end. “Am I speaking with Mai Lin Pearson?”

“This is her daughter, Kai. Mai Lin passed last year, but I’m responsible for the medical debt.”

“That’s why I’m calling. We received your last payment and will be sending an electronic receipt reflecting the zero balance.”

“I did just make a payment, but it wouldn’t have brought the balance to zero.” I give a brief laugh. “That would be awesome, if it did. I’m hoping I can soon though.”

“Ms. Pearson, we received a payment for forty thousand, two hundred and four dollars and thirty-two cents last week.”

My heart stops, like the sun pausing in the sky overhead.

“That’s not possible. There must be some mistake. I didn’t make that payment.”

“It was made online.”

“Who made it?”

I already know there is only one person who has that kind of money so easily at his disposal and could have made that payment. Who didn’t want me to take this call.

“Ruthie Sherman was the name on the debit card. I believe she has access to this account too. I see a history of payments made by you both. You’re both listed as responsible parties.”

“Yes, but she . . .” I trail off. Aunt Ruthie and I talked about finances when I was home. She’s barely making ends meet with Glory Bee. There’s no way she paid this off. This representative doesn’t have the answers I need.

“I’ll be on the lookout for that receipt.”

“It should come to the e-mail we have on file.”

“Thank you.” My lips are numb, but I manage to get the words out.

I sit on the edge of the couch with my phone in my lap and frustration

rolling up from my feet and over my legs until it reaches my heart. Rhyson looks way too casual for someone who knows we're about to fight. He leans over the pool table, knocking a ball into the corner. I feel like one of those balls, rolling around at his behest, under his control. Being played by him.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

I don't even bother with all the exposition. I don't want the lies or the excuses. Let's just cut to the part where he went behind my back and did something he knew I would never ask him to do.

Rhyson doesn't budge from his position, bent over the pool table, pole sliding between his fingers before knocking the ball.

"What was me?"

"Did you pay off my mother's medical bills?"

He drops the pool stick and faces me, arms folded over his chest.

"Is the fight we're about to have in lieu of a thank you card?"

"You shouldn't have done that. I didn't ask you to."

"You should have. You could have." Rhyson leans against the table, the frown on his face showing me he's as frustrated with me as I am with him. "At any point I could have erased that debt, and would have gladly done it. You know that."

"I don't want your money, Rhyson." I cross the space between the couch and the pool table until I'm standing close enough to see how dark and stormy his eyes have become.

"Oh, so you can accept money from the good people of Glory Falls Baptist Church, who can't afford to help, but you can't accept it from me, who won't even miss it?"

"It's not like that."

"It is like that. You were fine with *them* collecting money at Christmas to help with the bills, but when you hear I gave enough to pay it off, it's a problem."

"I just needed to do it on my own."

“No, you just needed to do it without me.”

He pins me to the spot with those knowing eyes. The ones that know I can barely stand being this close without touching him. The ones that tell me he feels the same.

“You know I don’t want your help.” I drop my eyes to the floor and my voice almost to a whisper. “Not with my career. Not with my bills.”

“What is this actually about, Pep?”

“You’re not listening to me.”

He lifts my chin, taking my eyes captive again.

“You’re not telling the truth. Tell me what it’s actually about.”

“You’re getting too close.” I force myself to keep looking at him, even though it will show him more than I want him to see. “Too deep.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know how close and deep I want to be with you.”

His words wrap around me as surely as his arms would, and the squeeze is too tight. What should comfort, constrains, and I need just a little room to breathe, to figure this out.

“Rhyson, I just want a little space to make it on my own.” I look up, some of my frustration dying. “To do things for myself.”

“You know what I think this is really about?” He cups my chin, eyes softening, and strokes my jaw with his thumb. “That step on your front porch.”

“What?” I pull back a few inches, hoping it will put distance between his words and the truth I don’t want to admit to myself. “It was just a step.”

“Not the step itself, but what it represented to you. Your mother depended on your father and wanted him so badly, she left that step like that for over a decade because he said he’d come back to fix it. You don’t want to depend on me for anything. You don’t want to need me for anything. You don’t want to trust me, but that’s what a relationship is about.”

“We aren’t in a relationship.”

Yet.

“Now who’s lying? I’m not in this by myself, Pep. You may not want to call it a relationship, but I don’t want anyone else.” He presses his hand just below the small of my back, resting at the curve of my butt. “And neither do you.”

Desire fogs any rational thought, but I’m not ready to let this go. Not until I can make him see my point of view. If he doesn’t understand, we’ll never make it anyway.

“Rhyson, how did you feel when your parents controlled you?”

“What the *hell* do my parents have to do with this?” He barely opens his lips to let the words out.

I shake my head sadly. “You don’t even see the parallel, do you?”

“There isn’t one.” Rhyson’s eyes harden. “How can you compare me doing that for you to what my parents did to me?”

“It’s not what you did, it’s that you took away my chance to do it for myself. That you took away my choices. It’s as much a control move as what they did to you.”

“That’s not true.” Rhyson’s eyes go from hard to soft in a few blinks. “I don’t want to control you. I want to *be* with you. I want things to be easier for you so you can focus on your career.”

“My career. My life. My responsibilities. So maybe you’re right.” I place a hand on his chest, looking up to study his face. “I don’t want to *need* you.”

“Well, I need you.” He pulls both my hands into one of his over his heart. “I think about you as soon as I wake up and before I go to sleep. I want to call you whether I find out I’m performing in Times Square or if I beat Marlon at Madden. Little things, big things. It doesn’t matter.”

His voice falls so far, I’m leaning into him to catch his next words.

“I want to share everything with you. I want to kiss you all the time. I want to kiss you right now.”

I shouldn’t have come. All the things I felt and fought, the things I

suspected he felt too, he just spewed all over me. And as much as I want to be, I'm not sure I'm ready. I'll never forget seeing my Mama in bed for days after Daddy left. And even though she got up, I suspect a part of her never left that bed, but just stayed there, waiting. We had to leave the house where she grew up and where I spent my first years, because Daddy left us with nowhere to go. Mama learned to stand on her two feet, and I've done the same. I just didn't count on Rhyson sweeping me off of them.

"We're obviously on different pages about this." I pull my hands free and turn to leave, but he steps in front of me, blocking my grand exit. "Let's talk later."

"Enough talking."

The heat of his body grabs me before his hands do. He traps my chin between two fingers, taking my mouth in a paradox of rough and tender. I want to move. To slide away from his body pressing me into the pool table. But I can't. Not with his hand caressing my back. Not with his tongue in my mouth. Not with his erection pressing into my stomach. I can't. I won't. I have been denying myself this, and I'm so damn hungry. My mouth opens under his, ravenous and wet and hot. His groan vibrates against my lips.

"Yes. Good God, yes, Pep." His words slip down my throat.

I strain up on tiptoes, clawing my fingers into his dark hair, forcing him closer. He lifts me onto the pool table, planting himself between my knees. His fingers skim my bare thigh, working up my leg until he reaches a damp patch of silk. He pushes my panties aside, rubbing his hand into the wet flesh there before sliding one long finger and then another inside of me. I rock into these fingers which have awed millions with their skill. They own me. I'm the instrument in his hands. He's playing me. Plucking at me. Strumming me.

He tugs at the wide neck of my sweater until it falls away from my shoulder, slipping his hand in and cupping my naked breast. He brushes his fingers over my nipple, and I lose my mind and every inhibition. My head flops back and I stretch my legs wider, offering him anything he wants.

“Are you kidding me?” His question burns the vulnerable curve of my neck as he drags his lips to my shoulder. “You come here wearing no bra and think I won’t . . .”

He abandons the words, his dark, untidy head disappearing under my sweater, and before I have time to regain even millimeters of sanity, my nipple is in his mouth and he’s suckling me. Not gentle. Not soft. My breasts are so small, he almost eats me whole. Every draw, every suck, every bite sends a power surge to my core until my knees hold his hips in a desperate grip, and my nails rake across the flat surface of the pool table behind me.

His mouth at my breast. His fingers inside me. His clean scent surrounding me. I have nowhere to hide anymore. I am exposed. I want to spread myself wide open for him. That voice that has been telling me I can’t rely on him. I can’t trust him. I can’t *need* him—that voice is stunned into silence by his thorough possession of my body, by the inferno between my legs, blazing a hole right through my soul and scorching my heart.

His hands push at the sweater from inside, urging my arms above me until it is over my head and discarded on the floor. The cool air embarrasses me, reminds me how little I have to offer up top. I scoot forward, covering my breasts and ready to bolt before he’s disappointed, but he presses one wide palm to my chest, pushing my hands aside.

“Let me look at you.” His eyes are so hot on my neck, shoulders, nipples, that heat simmers under my skin. “Damn, you’re beautiful, Pep.”

“I’m tiny.” I drop my eyes to my knees. “Are you a breast man?”

“I’m your man.” His finger traces one pert nipple until it tightens and strains forward. He tips up my chin, holding my eyes with his. “At least I want to be.”

He pushes me back until I’m laid out on the pool table, knees apart, arms flung over my head, bare nipples pointed up and in the air. He flips the skirt up over my stomach and tugs at my panties until they slip past my ankles. Before I have time to think of a way out, his fingers spread me. He tucks into



the juncture at my thighs and kisses away the last of my resolve. I'm not going anywhere.

He is relentless. He bites my clit. Oh, God. No one has bitten me like that before. He licks and mouths and slides his tongue inside of me. Everything flammable below my waist incinerates, and the world goes dark before light bursts behind my eyelids. My toes clench, the muscles in my legs tighten, and I release a scream that punches a hole into the silence around us.

His breath comes heavy. His hands move quickly, urgently, sliding on a condom. He braces his hand on the table over my head. He's going to—

“Ahhhhhhhh.” That's me. Losing my breath as he slides inside. He pushes in slowly, savoring every inch of me he possesses along the way. He's so thick. I'm so full. It's too much, almost more than I can take, but my body is greedy for him.

“Okay?” He looks down at me, his forehead clumped into a frown. He's holding back. “Pep, are you okay?”

I'm not okay. I've lost so much of myself to him already, and I don't know how I will fix this. I only know I need him moving inside me. Taking me. I push my hips into him, and he groans, his eyes scrunching closed.

“Pep, you're so tight.” He leans up, eyes pinning me to the table. “This feels . . . ahhhhh. Fuck.”

His strong thrusts scoot me up the table. I hook my ankles around his waist to lock us together and I receive him. I keep my eyes open as long as I can, watching his full bottom lip clamped between his teeth. Watching his face fight the pleasure engulfing both of us. I watch until his mouth drops open and his head falls back and his neck strains against the avalanche of sensation. I can't watch anymore because I'm coming again myself. Toppling over this precipice into the inescapable pleasure I've denied myself for weeks. For months. For what feels like forever.

He leans down, dusting kisses over my bare shoulders and up my neck until he whispers in my ear.

“I didn’t want our first time to be like this, Pep. On a pool table.” His smile warm and tender, he pushes the heavy hair back from my face, following the line of my eyebrows with his index finger. “But I don’t regret it. Do you regret it?”

It’s not regret I feel, but I can’t answer aloud, I’m so shaken. I just shake my head against his shoulder. The air between us practically throbs. Our bodies still joined, sharing a heartbeat, it feels absolutely perfect. But my life, sailing right along the course I’ve set, just capitulated. The man I didn’t want to need feels like the breath in my lungs. Feels like the blood pumping through my heart. Feels like the pulse pounding in my ears. Feels like *everything* I need to survive. I can’t even find myself in the rubble, in the aftermath of that erotic catastrophe.

He stands between my legs, the skirt still pushed up to the top of my thighs, his warm hands roaming up and down my bare back.

“What’s going on in that beautiful brain, Pep?” he asks softly, his breath in my hair. “I know you felt that too, so why are you holding back?”

I could make up excuses. I could throw up smoke screens to protect myself from him, but what just happened between us makes excuses and defenses redundant. I know that, so I’m as honest with him as I’ve ever been.

“Rhys, I’m scared.”

He dips his head, examining my face with a small frown.

“Of me?”

“Of losing myself in you, yes. Of not having anything of my own.” I shake my head and keep my eyes at the point where my breasts press into him. “Of depending on you.”

The doorbell ringing splinters the intimacy holding us close. The fragile peace between our bodies, the détente of our kisses, and the intimate truce dissolve as reality invades. I pull away, hopping off the table and slipping my panties and sweater back on, just now recognizing the burn on my shoulders from the pool table. Rhysen zips up, eyes never leaving me.

“That’s Marlon.” Rhyson runs a hand over my mussed hair and rests his hand at my neck. “I can send him away so we can talk.”

“No, no.” Even though our clothes are back on and Marlon is only moments away, his hands on me comfort and incite, so I step back, struggling to think clearly with him so close. “Do you mind if I don’t sit in on the session after all?”

He glances at me from under that fall of dark hair, brows knit into a frown, and blows out a heavy breath.

“Pep, I fly out for Chicago in the morning. If we don’t talk tonight—”

“I could actually use the time.” I twist my fingers together at my waist. “A few days to sort this out. A little space.”

“I’ve given you as much space as I can.” He searches my face, eyes concerned. “This wasn’t some quick fuck, Pep. This meant something to me.”

I don’t think I can measure what it meant to me. I’m afraid to assess just how much of me he absorbed when our bodies joined. Even standing apart, I still feel connected to him, but I have to start breathing again on my own. He feels like life support right now, and I will pull this plug. I cannot *rely* on him. I’ve seen where that gets you.

“Can we just talk when you get back from Chicago?”

When we were locked together on that table, neither of us held back—not our thoughts, our bodies, our responses. There was no hiding, but at my words, Rhyson’s expression shutters. I’m hurting him, but I don’t know how to stop, not and still preserve myself.

“If that’s what you want, Pep, then yeah.” He looks toward the door as Marlon’s footsteps on the stairs reach us. “We can talk later.”

I’ve bought myself a little time, but I’m not sure for what. After what we just shared, my body and my heart, my soul won’t be able to stay away. I’m not only resisting him. I’m resisting myself. I’m resisting the inevitable. I have no idea how to stop what’s happening between us, and despite the memories that haunt me, I keep forgetting why I should.

# Chapter

## THIRTY

Kai

EXHAUSTION FROM DOING SOMETHING YOU LOVE is so different from doing something you can't stand. When I drag myself into bed after a long shift at The Note, I have nothing but tips to show for it. There's always been some satisfaction knowing I'll make a tiny dent in Mama's colossal medical debt. Since Rhyson paid off the bills, I don't even have that anymore. But this exhaustion that stems from the preliminary rehearsals for the music video Dub booked, is kind of nice. I'll take it any day over feet aching from slinging hash and serving customers.

It's not just my body that aches. Not just my feet, my core, my arms that throb from doing today's routine over and over. I ache with regret over how I handled things with Rhyson. I should have been more grateful. I shouldn't have pushed him away. Chief among my regrets: I shouldn't have had sex with him on a pool table.

I guess he has regrets too, since he hasn't called, honoring my request for space. I got used to him always moving in my direction. I thought this would blow over. Maybe we'd exchange a few texts volleying movie quotes. We'd figure out a way to get past knowing one another in the Biblical sense and get back to pretending to be platonic.

But no dice. No calls. No texts.

I enter our apartment completely spent. Aching. Limp with fatigue, but

still satisfied. San's studying his phone, leaning against the counter that separates our kitchenette from the small patch of leisure passing as our living room.

"How'd rehearsals go?"

"Great." I drop my bag to the floor and fall back on the couch. "The actual shoot is the day after tomorrow, so I have some time to polish. We just learned some basics today. Dub is a tyrant, but I caught on pretty fast because he's a great teacher."

"I'm sure you're teacher's pet." San crosses into the living room and props himself on the arm of the couch. "He ask you out again?"

I roll my eyes and drop my head back against the cushion.

"Yeah, but I still said no. I'm gonna shower before I need to leave for my shift."

"Ah, the glamorous life." San chuckles and pulls his phone back out when it dings with an alert.

"Speaking of glamorous life, how's it going with *Spotted*?" I drag myself to my feet, weary but waiting for his response before I hit the shower.

"Good." He holds up his phone. "Just got a tip about a big party tonight."

"Cool." I start toward the bedroom.

"Talked to Rhyson yet?"

I know San so well that the hesitation in his voice stops me and turns me around to face him.

"No. Not since he left."

For once, I didn't tell San every gory detail of my life. I told him Rhyson and I fought over him paying my bills, but I didn't tell him the fight ended on the pool table, with Rhyson as the cue stick and me the ball he hit. "Why?"

"No reason." San averts his face from me, which is always a bad sign.

"San, what's up?" I gulp. "Is he okay? Did you hear something? Or get a tip?"

"Nothing like that. We just ran a story today about him and Petra

Adreyev.”

That name rings a tiny, disturbing bell. Bristol asked Rhyson if he would see Petra while he was in Chicago.

“What’d the story say?”

“She’s pretty active on Instagram and just posted a picture of them out at dinner last night. Since he’s so private and we don’t get much of him, lots of outlets picked it up.”

What right do I have to be jealous of him spending time with someone else? Even so, I can’t lie to myself about what sears my peace of mind. It’s jealousy.

“Cool. Glad he’s finding time to connect with . . . old friends.”

“Well, more than friends, but yeah.”

“What do you mean more than friends?”

“You know. They did a tour together when they were younger. Dueling pianos kinda thing. They were both prodigies and dated years ago. The classical music scene loved it.”

“Dated?” I’m confused, and I’m sure my face shows it. “No, Rhyson’s only dated one . . .”

He said he dated a girl his parents wanted for him. Petra would fit that bill perfectly. And he would have known her in the right time frame.

“You got the link?”

“Pep, I’m sure it’s nothing. You don’t want to—”

“Rhyson and I aren’t dating, San. I’ve made that abundantly clear to him.” Obviously he can see who he wants to see.” I wiggle my fingers for him to hand the phone over. “I want to see.”

The picture is a selfie of them at dinner posted to Petra’s Instagram account. She’s kissing his cheek, but looking into the camera. Rhyson wears an exasperated grin, but looks like he’s enjoying himself. Her plate is empty and there’s a to-go carton in front of Rhyson. I wonder if he still only eats out with me. If he trusts that part of himself with only me. That contrary bitch

inside who won't let herself have him hopes so.

Petra's beautiful. Blonde with green eyes. Another stunning, insanely musically gifted person is walking around in the world. There are two of them, and of course, everyone would want them to couple up and clone themselves. Breathing hurts when I think of Rhyson with some gorgeous fellow genius piano prodigy who is perfect for him and whom his parents love.

The pain of losing my mother—that happened to me. I had no control over how loss raided my life, stealing one thing after another that I loved. But this? Rejecting Rhyson when he wanted me and then seeing him possibly move on . . . move back . . . to someone who hurt him before, who doesn't deserve a second chance, this I inflicted on myself.

I hand the phone to San and walk back toward my bedroom without answering the question on San's face.

"It's just dinner, Kai," he calls after me.

I close my bedroom door before he can offer more assurances that don't make me feel any better. Rhyson's been gone for days and hasn't called. I'm the one who asked for space, so calling him would defeat that purpose, but missing him feels like a sad flower growing inside of me every day—an ache that keeps budding, opening up in my soul. I'd forgotten how much fun life could be until Rhyson entered mine. As much as they tried, San and Grady couldn't drag me out of that solitary confinement my grief had consigned me to.

But Rhyson did.

Waitressing keeps me busy, blocking the depression and guilt I feel over what happened with Rhyson. My section is packed. The orders come thick and fast. The customers are demanding. It's just what I need to distract me.

I'm in the kitchen checking on table three's order when one of the other servers comes in, his face harried and irate under his pink-tinted faux hawk. How many trends can you fit onto one head, dude?

“Hey, Kai, older guy’s out there asking for you.”

My emotions yo-yo between overwhelming relief that Rhyson’s here and dread. I don’t even bother trying to freshen anything. I lost the elastic band taming my hair when the high school basketball team came through two hours ago. Haven’t seen it since, and my hair is all over the place. Oh, well. He’s seen me at my worst and he’s still here.

I walk out, scanning the dining room for him. Then I see the broad shoulders from behind, his height elevating him inches over the other customers at the podium waiting to be seated. He’s wearing a fedora I’ve never seen before. Guess he’s freshening the disguise. I walk up behind him and tap him on the shoulder, a smile already on my face despite the trepidation over what the next few moments hold for us.

“Hey, you,” I say. “I thought you were still in Chicago.”

He turns around, and it’s not the older man I expected. The grey in Grady’s goatee and the lines around his eyes aren’t a disguise. Time put those there, and he looks like he’s aged a few more years since I last saw him.

“Grady, hey.” I reach up to give him a quick hug. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Kai.” He steps out of the way of a few customers being shown to their seats. “Sorry to come down here when you’re working.”

“It’s fine.” I grab his arm and pull him off to the side. “Everything okay?”

The frown on his face and the worry in his eyes answer before he does.

“No, things aren’t good.”

“Rhyson?” I grip his hand, fixing my eyes on his face. “Is it Rhyson?”

“No, he’s fine. Well, as fine as can be expected.”

“Grady, what’s happened?” My imagination ping pongs between dire scenarios. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Rhyson’s father.” Grady presses his lips together and swallows before speaking. “His father . . . my brother . . . had a heart attack. It’s bad. They’re not sure . . .”



Grady chokes the words back and composes himself before going on.

“They had a horrible argument at Christmas”

“I know. He told me.”

“The things they said to each other.” Grady levels a concerned look at me. “As bad as their relationship has been, I know Rhyson loves his father. He’s always wanted his approval. He thinks he’s been defying his father with all of his success, but I know on some level, he’s wanted my brother to be proud of him. If those things he said to him at Christmas are their last words, it’ll eat Rhyson alive.”

I am so far from where I belong. I should be right by Rhyson’s side. I know it immediately. I can’t help but think about my emotional implosion at Thanksgiving dinner, how he blocked everyone else out and comforted me. I need to do that for him.

“What . . . where?” I can’t piece together words. The desire to go to him is like a heat-seeking missile, strong and searching.

“He and Bristol were in Chicago for a few shows when they got the news, but they’re already in New York.”

Of course. I forgot about Petra. Maybe she’s with him. Maybe he doesn’t want anything from me now. Maybe he wouldn’t even accept it from me. I pushed him away.

“I’m sorry, Grady. Is there . . . is there anything I can do?”

“Bristol has arranged a private flight for me out to New York. It leaves in about an hour.”

“Good. I’m glad you can get there right away.” I pause, studying my Converse for a moment in silence. “Please tell him I’m praying for his dad.”

Grady holds my eyes, grabs my hands.

“Come tell him yourself, Kai.”

I look up from my shoes, my eyes wide.

“He doesn’t want me there, Grady. We had a . . . a disagreement and—”

“I know.”

“You know?” Confusion twists a frown onto my face. “How do you know?”

“Because I’m the one who told him to leave you alone and give you the space you asked for. I told him to let it go for now and deal with it when he got back from Chicago. He’s wanted to call you a dozen times.”

My heart rises and falls.

“He wanted to call?”

“To put it mildly.” Grady smiles a little for the first time since he walked into the restaurant. “I nearly had to hog tie his phone to get him not to.”

“So I have you to thank for the last week of torture.” I manage a smile too, no bigger than Grady’s.

“If it was torture, why didn’t *you* call *him*, Kai?”

I drop my eyes to the safety of my shoes again.

“I don’t know what I want, Grady.”

“Are you sure about that?” I look up to find Grady’s eyes, knowing, wise, studying my face. “Or are you just afraid of having it?”

These questions in the midst of everything going on with Rhyson’s dad only muddy things more. One thing is clear. Clarion clear. I may not know what I should do about my feelings for Rhyson. If it’s the right time. If I’m ready to risk my heart to a man who will take everything I give him and anything I would try to withhold. But I *do* know where I’m supposed to be. Right now.

“Grady, let’s go.”

# Chapter

# THIRTY-ONE

## RHYSON

SITTING IN THE WAITING ROOM OF a hospital while my dad is dying behind swinging double doors is purgatory. Hell would be knowing my last words to him were “*cold, heartless, mercenary bastard.*”

The acrimonious words we flung at each other over Christmas pile up in my mind like stones until my head is too heavy to hold up. I drop it into my hands. I’m exhausted, but it isn’t just fatigue weighing me down. The guilt, the regret, the anxiety. Shit, the fear. They are all bricks tied around my neck, pulling me under. Even though I sit here in this uncomfortable chair, perfectly still to the naked eye, inside I’m flailing. Gasping. I can’t breathe.

“I’m gonna step out and get some air, Bris.”

My sister nods, but doesn’t look up from her focus point on the floor. I don’t look at her before heading out of the waiting room and toward the cafeteria. I haven’t been able to look her in the eye since my mother called. We were just about to board the flight for Los Angeles, Bristol maintaining a constant flow of shit I didn’t want to talk about. The interviews I did in Chicago. How well the shows went. What we should keep for the tour later this year. What we might want to reconsider. How to work Petra into a few cities.

All I could think about was getting home to L.A. and bee-lining for Kai’s apartment. I was prepared to sit on her stoop until she got home if she was

working.

Grady may be right. Kai probably *does* need space to sort out her feelings. To figure out what our next steps should be, but I can't leave it all up to her. A week with no word was long enough to show me I'm not that guy who does the wise thing when something I want this badly is slipping through my fingers. I'm the kamikaze who flies in knowing he may not come out successful, but dammit I go down blazing for the mission.

And, no, I wasn't planning to apologize. Fuck no. I was actually going to make sure she knew I'd do it all again. I'd pay her mother's measly medical bills off a thousand times. If anything, I would have done it months ago. And I sure as hell wasn't planning to apologize for having sex with her. I planned to force my way past that door and figure out how to do it again, only slower and in a bed this time. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not giving up. "Relent" is not a word I allow myself in anything, definitely not with Kai. It's been long enough. If there was any question about us staying in the friend zone, the Richter-busting sex should have answered it.

I was going to say all of that. Do all of that. I had a plan, but that apple cart got tipped over with my mother's frantic phone call. Shit's been rolling at my feet, out of my reach and control, getting away from me ever since.

And now I cannot fucking *breathe*. My lungs constrict, and the air I keep pulling in through my nose and blowing out of my mouth doesn't help. Doesn't relieve this suffocation of guilt and desperation. They wrap around my face like a clinging plastic bag.

" . . . *cold, heartless, mercenary bastard.* "

Those words pound in my head like hard rain. Like a hailstorm of things I wish I'd never said, but can't take back. That I may never get a chance to apologize for.

I wander into the cafeteria, not really even remembering how I got here. Maybe a cup of coffee will do me some good. I'm studying the menu up on the wall when someone squeals behind me.

“Oh my gah!” A brown-haired girl wearing—I kid you not—a T-shirt that says “Mrs. Rhyson Gray” on the front, explodes into my personal space. Her hands are on my shoulders. She’s kissing my cheeks and chin and any part of me her eager body can reach. I’m too tired to freak out. Between the physical exhaustion of the trip and the emotional turmoil of the last few hours, she could shank me where I stand and I’d barely muster enough energy to bleed.

“Jillyyyyyyyyy!” The girl bounces on her toes. “Jilly, come here quick!”

Jilly rushes over, phone already aimed at me.

“Hey, could you not take my—”

Snap and flash before I can finish my request.

“I am your absolute biggest fan,” Mrs. Rhyson Gray gushes. “I saw you in Philadelphia last year and I drove to Boston too. I’m so excited about the tour. I already have my tickets for your show in New York. Would you sign my T-shirt? Jilly, a pen! A pen!”

Jilly is so handy with the pen, I want to ask if she has a paper bag somewhere on her person I could borrow to breathe into. The pen is in my hand and poised over the girl’s nipple. I give her my “are you kidding me?” face before raising the pen a few inches to sign on her shoulder.

“Girls, my dad’s here sick.” I give Jilly her pen back and hope they’ll cooperate. “I kind of want some privacy for my family. If the media finds out I’m here, it’ll just be a circus. Could you not post that picture or say anything about seeing me here for a while?”

“I’m so sorry.” Jilly looks contrite, yet proud. “I’m really fast. I already tweeted it.”

“Well, that just happened,” I reason. “You could delete the tweet, right?”

“I cross post.” She holds up her bedazzled phone. “It’s such a pain when you have to do all the platforms individually, you know? So I’ve connected all mine.”

“All?” I slide my clenched fists into my pocket. “What we talking here?”

“Just Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and tumblr.” She snaps her fingers.

“Oh, and Pinterest.”

A few years ago, I would have ripped these girls a new one. My space, my privacy, my choices were out of my hands so young that I take as much of it back as I can every chance I get. Used to be when that was violated, I’d lash out. It only took Grady witnessing one such episode to change all that. That lecture on humility and how I owe all my success to my fans, well, it’s an hour of my life I’ll never get back. Nor do I want to relive.

“I gotta go, girls.” I manage a smile for Mrs. Rhyson Gray. “See you in New York.”

I need to get back and let Bristol know we may have a situation. We got here without much fanfare, but there’s no way I’ll get out the same way. Not with little Miss Cross Post on the job. We had a small security detail in Chicago, but didn’t bring them with us home. We should get someone down here fast.

I’m just about to turn the corner back into the waiting room, when Bristol’s voice reaches me. It’s sharp and heavy like a butcher knife. Whoever she’s talking to is lucky to still have a head.

“This is a family matter.” Bristol’s voice is slightly louder than it should be.

“Bristol, you can’t—” Grady says, but Bristol cuts into his words.

“Why is she here? She should leave before Mother lands. It will only upset her having an outsider here.”

My mother wasn’t with my father when he collapsed. Bertie alerted her, and she caught a flight from the conference she was attending in Amsterdam. She’ll be here soon. So who’s the outsider? Paps? Jilly couldn’t have gone viral that fast. I hang back until I know what I’m walking into.

“Look, I don’t know what I did to make you dislike me,” a soft but firm voice says. “But it’s obvious something about me bothers you. We can deal with that another time. I really don’t much care.”

I’d know that voice, that accent, as thick and sweet as molasses,

anywhere. When I round the corner, Kai and Bristol face off. It should be no contest. Bristol is several inches taller than Kai, but Pep isn't intimidated. Not backing down. She has her hands on her hips, and her dark eyes hold steady and hard like flint.

"I'm not here for you, Bristol. I'm here for Rhyson. He can tell me to go. If he . . ." Uncertainty briefly flickers across her face. "Well, if he doesn't want me here, of course I'll leave. If he wants me to stay, then I'm staying."

I walk fully into the waiting room, and Kai catches my eyes just over Bristol's shoulder. The last time we were together, we argued, we had sex, and she pushed me away. Maybe I handled things the wrong way. Maybe she overreacted. Truth be told, right now I don't care. I'm just glad she's here, and I make sure she knows that immediately.

"I want you."

I walk up to her, ignoring Bristol's frown and irritated sigh.

Kai reaches up and wraps her arms around my neck, tucking her head into my shoulder. She's like the eye of the storm. Chaos all around, but right here, in her arms, at the center, peace. Unreasonable, undeniable peace. I grip her tightly like my lungs grip air, because for the first time since my mother called, I can finally breathe.

I see Grady standing there and mouth "thank you." He had his doubts about me pursuing Kai in the beginning, but I think I showed him over the last few months that I don't just want a quick screw. Do I even know what I want with her? I'm not sure. I know it's more than what I've ever had with anyone else. I know that even with my father fighting for his life beyond those double doors, just having her here where I can touch her and see her, makes me feel better.

"Are you okay?" She settles back down on her feet, her slim fingers pushing my hair back and her eyes worried on my face.

I just knew the first time we saw each other would be awkward. I'd have to convince her that I was right and she was wrong. We'd circle each other

warily, and then I'd convince her we should be together. I can't entertain any other option. We'd end up in her bed savoring all the things we missed about each other the first time we made love on the pool table. But this situation with my dad eliminates the awkwardness. It means so much that even though she needed space, she set that aside when I needed *her*.

"I'm dealing." I set my hands around her tiny waist. I've missed being this close to her for the last week. I lean down and pull her up onto her toes until I lose myself in her one-of-a-kind scent, and my lips brush her ear. "I missed you so damn bad this week."

She goes still against me, gripping the lapels of my jacket. She nods her head against my chest without looking up. Now isn't the time for what I want to say. She knows it too. I force myself to focus on what we have to get through before I can dive into Kai and drown for a while. I step away, even though my body misses hers right away.

"Bris, we may have some press on us." I force myself to look away from Kai and refocus on what we're dealing with.

"We've been pretty careful." Bristol reaches for the laptop stowed beneath her seat.

"No, we've been pretty lucky." I glance around the empty waiting room. "It's a miracle no one is in here now, but they could be. I ran into some fans in the cafeteria. They took a picture."

"Why'd you go in there?" Bristol pushes a frustrated breath past her lips. "Okay, let's see if there's anything out there."

She types for a few seconds, her brows bunching then clearing.

"Let me guess." She raises and rolls her eyes. "Mrs. Rhyson Gray?"

"That's her." I grab Kai's hand so she doesn't drift off. "Maybe it'll be nothing."

"This already has a hundred retweets."

"It was five minutes ago. What the hell?"

"That's an eternity these days." Bristol pulls out her phone. "I'll arrange a



security detail and get a statement prepared for why you're at the hospital."

I scratch the back of my neck.

"Uh . . . I kinda told them my father was sick."

"Wow, did you give them the house security code too?" Bristol twists her lips into a grimace. "Maybe they'd like to pick through your trash or rustle around in your underwear drawer."

"I wasn't thinking." I sit down, pulling Kai beside me.

"It's okay. I'll handle it." Bristol stands and starts walking away. "I actually prefer a problem I can solve instead of all this waiting."

As Bristol starts her conversation with the security company we always use, I lean back in the seat, pulling Kai back with me until her head rests on my shoulder.

"I'm glad you're here." I look at Grady, who sits across from us. "You too, Grady."

"Where's Angela?" Grady looks like he left half of himself in a different time zone.

"Mom will be here soon."

I haven't spoken to either of my parents since the Christmas bloodbath. If it hadn't been for my dad's heart attack, considering our track record, it probably would have been years before we connected again. I don't know how it will feel to see her again so soon. Circumstances like these often supersede strife, at least temporarily. Look at Kai and me. I thought I'd have to beg her to even let me into her apartment, and here she is curled up against me. I pull her closer and kiss her hair. She looks up from my shoulder, her wide mouth drawing a sober line on her face.

"How you holding up?" she asks, her voice low. Her fingers lock with mine on her knee.

"I honestly don't know. I think I'm blocking it. If I let myself think too long about my dad dying . . ." I don't finish, swallowing the fear scaling the walls of my belly and making its way up my throat. "I was such an asshole at

Christmas.”

“From what you told me, you all said things you didn’t mean.”

I shake my head, unable to let myself off that hook.

“I meant every word, Kai. I bet they did too. I just wish I hadn’t *said* them. I wish we didn’t *feel* them, that we’d worked through our shit before something like this happened. What if . . .”

I can’t even voice it. If my dad dies, there’s no second chance. There’s no redemption.

“You know what’s crazy?” The small laugh I manage tastes bitter on my lips. “I had this idea that one day we’d make things right. It’d be years from now. Maybe he’d come to one of my concerts. You know. Come backstage or something, and tell me that he . . .”

I’m not saying it aloud. The weak words that would admit the ten-year-old boy who almost pissed himself the first time he played in front of thousands but did it because Daddy said he could is still inside of me. Waiting, *begging*, for approval from my father that’s never come. That now maybe never will.

“We all want our parents to be proud of us, Rhyson. Even when they’re crappy, sometimes we still want them.” Kai angles her head on my shoulder until her soft, dark eyes plumb mine. “Can I tell you something?”

I nod, lost in the brief respite her company offers. Things don’t feel as bad when she’s close, and I want to handcuff her wrist to mine in case she gets it into her head she should leave me.

“Remember that step you fixed at Christmas?” I can’t even call the little breathy sound that escapes her lips a laugh. It’s too short. Too harsh. “I told you I used to sit on that very step every birthday wondering if my daddy would come home.”

My fingers tighten around hers, sharing the little strength I have left with her.

“And he never did.” Tears pool in her eyes. “No cards, no presents.

Nothing after he left. Now, he really *was* an asshole. You were right. I hated that Mama still wanted him and still needed him after he cheated and abandoned her, but on some level, I still wanted him too. It doesn't make sense, but I can't change it."

She rubs her thumb over my hand, soothing me more.

"So I get it. Your dad was awful to you, but you can still love him. Just because he can't manage your career doesn't mean he can't be a father to you some day. That relationship may not look like what I had with my mom, but it can be *something*. You both have to want it, and it's okay that you still do."

How do I tell her I have no frame of reference for that man fathering me? I don't even remember when we realized I could play the piano the way I can. I was too young, and as soon as they knew, my parents started plotting to capitalize on it. So I don't ever really remember feeling like anything to them but a meal ticket. Like a business they had to run. Even though Bristol and I have gotten closer since she started managing me, I'm a business to her too.

The only one who has ever felt truly like family is Grady. I glance across the waiting room to see Grady's head buried in his hands. He always wanted to reconcile with my father. Rescuing me ruined his relationship with his twin brother. I know Grady took Emmy to New York for Christmas as a peace offering, but I don't know how much peace they made. I'm not the only one wondering if we'll ever get the chance to be a family again.

# Chapter THIRTY-TWO

*Kai*

I'M NOT SURE WHEN THE SILENCE we're all soaking in becomes sleep, but it does. My body finally surrenders to exhaustion, even though my mind wants to remain alert and available for Rhyson as soon as his father is out of surgery.

I blink away the last vestiges of sleep to consider the quiet waiting room. Grady is contorted into a sleeping pretzel on the chair across from us. Bristol is stretched out on a love seat. Rhyson and I lean into each other on the couch we're sharing, his arm around me and my head on his shoulder.

Waking up in Rhyson's arms is better this time. I know him differently, intimately now. I've wrapped my legs around the curve of his butt as he pushed into me. I've taken him into my body, and now I not only know his scent but also his taste. In the last week, my heart has missed him, but my body has been haunted by the pleasure we shared. I can't lie to myself. I want it again. I want him again.

I lean back, pressing into the waiting room couch so I can get a better look at him. Long lashes rest on his cheeks and his wide mouth is relaxed. I know as soon as he wakes up, all of that will change. Regret and anxiety have been boring a hole in him ever since he got the call about his father. I want him to rest as long as he can. I ease myself out from beneath his arm, careful not to wake him.

“Who are you?”

The quiet question comes from a few feet away. A woman with auburn hair and Rhyson’s eyes stands there calmly considering me. I stand, glancing down to make sure Rhyson is still asleep.

“I-I’m Kai Pearson,” I whisper, moving closer to her so I won’t have to speak any louder. “Rhyson’s friend.”

“Hmmm.” Just a sound that moves her eyebrows up in disdain or disapproval. I’m not sure which, but it doesn’t feel good, what those rising brows do to me.

“Mother.” Bristol yawns, extending her arms and legs fully. “You made it.”

Angela Gray nods, her eyes softening and warming only a little as she considers her daughter.

“I just spoke with a nurse who assured me your father should be out soon.” Angela walks over to Bristol, gesturing for her to make room on the couch. “He’ll pull through this. I know he will.”

I look for a hint of vulnerability, concern, fear. She shows none of it. She doesn’t reach for Bristol’s hand. There is no hug. No kiss. In a situation like this, my mother would have been smothering me with touches and kisses and assurances. Nothing. The thought of this cold woman raising Rhyson with her own interests in mind sets my teeth on edge. Mama always taught me not to be quick to judge, but I can’t help it. I’m not sure I’ll like her.

“Pep.” Rhyson opens his eyes and looks at the empty space beside him.

“Hey.” I walk back over to sit beside him, pushing his tousled hair back. “I’m glad you slept some.”

“I thought for a second . . .” He gives me a quick shake of his head. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

“Of course I am.” I squeeze his hand on the couch between us. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I feel Angela Gray’s eyes on us like snow, a light but persistent cold

flurry. Rhyson must feel it too.

“Mother.” That guard he keeps close slips right into place, falling over his eyes and tightening his mouth. “When did you get here?”

“Just now.” She walks toward us, and Rhyson’s fingers contract around mine. Unreasonably, I want to place myself between them when he stands to receive her hug, forcing him to drop my hand.

“I’m glad you came,” she says.

I wonder why Rhyson merits a hug, but Bristol did not. By the way Bristol’s eyes narrow on them, maybe she wonders too. Or maybe she already knows. Maybe if she could play like Rhyson does, she’d get a hug.

Angela looks down on me, and not just physically, sitting on the couch.

“Kai and I just met.”

Rhyson looks over his shoulder at me, eyes warming.

“Yeah, Kai’s one of Grady’s students and . . .” He hesitates over the next word a second too long, the pause drawing Angela and Bristol’s attention. “A good friend.”

Before Angela has a chance to respond, the doctor walks into the waiting room, pulling down his mask as he approaches. If I thought we all looked haggard, we’ve got nothing on him.

“You’re Benjamin Gray’s family?” His weary eyes fix on Angela when she nods and steps closer.

“Yes, what can you tell us? How is he?” She squares her shoulders and watches him unblinkingly, as if afraid she’ll miss a detail. Even with the red hair, I see her in Bristol and Rhyson. Other than the eyes, it isn’t physical. It’s a subtle similarity I’ll have to observe to understand.

“I’m Dr. Anderson. We performed an emergency coronary bypass,” the doctor says. “It’s open heart surgery, which is why it took so long. I am guardedly pleased, but it’s too early to say for sure what happens next.”

All the Grays around me seem to release a collective breath of relief before diving in with their questions.

“How is he?” Angela demands.

Grady, just now coming fully awake and catching the tail end, inserts himself into the conversation, stepping beside Angela.

“Can we see him?”

“Not yet.” Dr. Anderson peels his green cap off, bunching it into his fist. “He had quite a few blockages and severe damage to his heart muscle during the heart attack. He’s in ICU recovering.”

“Is he awake?” Rhyson speaks for the first time, gripping my fingers almost painfully.

Dr. Anderson narrows his eyes on Rhyson before they widen with recognition.

“Mr. Gray, I didn’t know the patient was your father.” He offers a small self-deprecating smile. “Not that it makes a difference. I promise not to ask for your autograph. I just hope you haven’t been disturbed while waiting. We could have made arrangements for you to wait somewhere more private, had we realized.”

“It’s been fine.” Rhyson glances only briefly at Bristol, who spent an hour arranging for security and checking on media presence.

“To answer your question, no. He’s not awake,” Dr. Anderson continues. “Probably won’t be for the next few hours. And even then, he will be pretty groggy and unable to talk much. There will be lots of tubes, so prepare yourselves.”

“But he’s going to be okay now, right?” Fear and uncertainty mark Bristol’s face and voice for the first time. I’ve never seen her anything other than certain.

“He has a long road ahead of him. Maybe another week in the hospital and then as many as six of supervised recovery at home or in a facility.” Dr. Anderson glances at his watch. “If you live nearby, I’d recommend you getting some sleep, change clothes, regroup, and then be here when he’s awake and ready to see you.”

“I’m fine.” Angela settles on a waiting room couch to prove that she has no intention of leaving. “I slept and ate on the plane. I want to be here if he wakes any earlier than you think.”

“He really shouldn’t, Mrs. Gray.” Dr. Anderson must see the stubborn tilt of Angela’s chin because he dips his head as a concession. “Very well, but if any of you need to freshen up, this would be the time.”

“Rhyson, you look dead on your feet.” Angela turns to assess her son. “You came straight from Chicago, right?”

“Yeah, and he was already exhausted.” Bristol pulls out her phone. “The security detail is downstairs. They’ve arranged a safe exit for you.”

“I am pretty fried.” Rhyson squeezes the bridge of his nose, briefly covering the dark shadows under his eyes. “Maybe I’ll zip home for a quick shower.”

“And a cat nap.” Angela frowns, reaching up to grab Rhyson’s hand. I’m close enough to sense how Rhyson stiffens, to see how his lips tighten at his mother’s touch.

“Okay.” He takes a step back, and Angela’s hand falls away empty.

She glances down at her hand, biting her bottom lip before pulling her mouth into the firm line I’ve gotten used to seeing even in the five minutes I’ve known her. She turns that blast of icy grey on me.

“And where are you staying, Kai?”

“With me.” Rhyson grabs my hand. “Wherever I’m staying.”

Angela pauses, glancing at Bristol before looking back to her son.

“Well, of course you’ll stay at the house, Rhys.”

“Then so will Kai.”

“I don’t want to be an imposition,” I protest. I didn’t think things completely through before I hopped on that plane with Grady. I just knew I needed to get to Rhyson.

“You won’t be,” Rhyson says. “There’s plenty of room, right, Mother?”

“Of course.” She pulls her phone from the black Celine bag at her feet.



“I’ll just call Bertie and ask her to prepare one of the guest rooms.”

Angela raises her brows, like she’s waiting for Rhyson to challenge the suggestion of the guest room. She’s still trying to figure out what Rhyson and I are to each other.

Me too, Mrs. Gray. Me freaking too.

“That sounds fine.” He turns to me, resting his palm at the base of my neck under the heavy fall of my hair. “You look beat too. Did you bring a change of clothes or anything?”

“No.” I look at Grady, who wears the same chagrined look I probably do. “Grady came to the restaurant to get me and we left straight from there. I can’t believe I brought nothing. I just wanted to get here.”

Rhyson’s eyes stay on my face until I grow warm under his consideration.

“You dropped everything for me, huh?” For the first time, he feels like the Rhyson who teases me by text and tortures me with his encyclopedic cinematic knowledge.

“Believe me, leaving The Note was no great sacrifice.” I return his smile, but am deeply conscious of his family watching us.

“We’ll figure out something for you to wear. Let’s go.” He looks to Bristol. “What’s the plan, Bris?”

“Gep is on his way.” She looks to the hall, a small smile surfacing. “Here he is. Gep, you have the route set?”

“Yeah, we’ll take the service elevator down.” Gep is a massive man wearing a long-sleeved, black T-shirt, black jeans, and boots. “Sorry about your dad, Rhys.”

“Thanks, man.” Rhyson presses his hand to the small of my back. “We’ve got an extra passenger. Kai, this is John Gephardt. Gep, my friend, Kai. She’s going with us.”

Surprise flits across the security guard’s face before he pulls the professional mask in place. Rhyson really must be telling the truth when he says he never brings girls around. Everyone responds like I’m from Mars or

something.

“Go, dude.” Bristol steps forward and hugs Rhyson around the neck. He wraps his arms around her back and kisses her temple.

“Grady, you coming?” Rhyson asks, turning to his uncle.

“I’m gonna stay for a little bit.” Grady’s smile carries more than its share of sadness. “I grew up here. I think I can find my way to the house on my own, and no reporters will bother me.”

Rhyson looks like he’s not sure he should leave. Grady crosses the small space separating them and hooks an elbow around his neck. He bends to whisper something in Rhyson’s ear. Rhyson stiffens briefly, but then nods, pounding Grady’s back a few times before stepping back. He finally turns back to me.

“You ready?”

Every time he asks me if I’m ready, I think I am. Somehow I know for sure that when we leave this hospital, when we walk out those doors, when we go to his home, when we are alone, I won’t be ready for Rhyson. So I don’t say that I am. I just let him lead the way.

# Chapter

# THIRTY-THREE

## RHYSON

ANXIETY ABOUT MY FATHER SQUEEZES AROUND my chest like a belt pulled to the last notch. We've gone twelve years without any real relationship, but the possibility of losing him for good has leveled me. This scare bulldozed my emotions, overturning my perspective completely. If he had died with our last words, angry and bitter, hanging between us . . . but it didn't happen that way. I hold on to that reassuring thought, even though I know he's not out of the woods yet.

Just getting out of that hospital helped. Those sterile walls and the antiseptic smell were driving me crazy. And my mother. She kept . . . touching me. Like we have a relationship. Like she's ever been an actual parent. It was freaking me the hell out. And I hated the way she looked at Kai, like she was a bug in her salad.

I finally have just a few minutes alone with Kai. Well, minus Gep, of course, who's driving us to my parents' house. But no one will be there except us. I need to take advantage of what little time we have, since apparently, she has to leave tonight.

I consider her in the backseat beside me. The dark hair spills around her shoulders, and if she had makeup on at any point, it's long gone. She's been wearing the same jeans and T-shirt for more than twenty-four hours. She dropped everything to be here for me, but I know she has commitments back

in Los Angeles I'm so selfish because despite everything she has already done, I want more. I want her to stay.

"So when does your flight leave?"

"Oh, uh, Grady said he'd talk with Bristol about getting me back tonight." Kai looks at me, eyes cautious. "I have that music video tomorrow and need to get back."

"Dub's video?"

"Well, the one he booked me for. It's actually that guy Luke Foster who won *Total Package* last season."

"Oh, yeah. He's a friend of mine."

I hate that show and advised Luke against going on. Guess that shows how much I know. But the producers involved are all douches, and I wouldn't let them within spitting range of my career.

"He actually invited me on set. I think this is the video for his first single since he won, right?" I keep my voice neutral. "How long is the shoot?"

"It's three days. My part tomorrow is pretty small. I'm mostly on day three."

"So . . . Dub." Our eyes catch and hold, and she knows what I'm about to ask before it leaves my mouth. "He asked you out yet?"

The fact that she doesn't answer right away is an answer in itself. The one I don't want to hear. She flips her phone over in her lap a few times before looking back to me.

"Yeah. A couple times."

"And?"

"And I told him no."

Relief pushes a breath past my lips. At least one thing is going right, though the fact that he's asking her at all kindles my temper.

"Why'd you tell him no?"

I'm pushing it, but I need something from her. Something that says she knows she's mine. That what we shared on that pool table wasn't a quick

fuck we'll always ignore and pretend never happened. I didn't want our first time to be in my rec room on a pool table, but it still meant something to me. It meant . . . everything to me, and the possibility that it didn't turn her inside out is killing me.

"Rhyson, let's just focus on your dad for now and deal with all our stuff later."

I nod, though I hate that. I know that motherfucker Dub has ulterior motives, but if I press the issue, Kai will get defensive or push me away. I can't afford that.

The SUV comes to a halt in the circular driveway of the house that never felt like home. I get out and hold the door, helping her down. I don't move back when she steps out. Her petite frame presses into me, the brief contact giving me a whiff of that cinnamon pear soap her mother made. Before I know it, my palm is at the back of her neck, and I'm dipping my head to lay a kiss on her lips. She tips up on her toes, opening her mouth under mine. God, I need to taste her. Her tongue meets me halfway, and her hand presses into my side, drawing me closer. We can talk later, but we have this right now. Our bodies have missed each other. The communion of this kiss loosens everything wound tight inside of me. This kiss is fresh air in a tight, padded cell.

The sound of Gep stepping out of the SUV disrupts the quiet, and Kai pulls back, glancing in his direction self-consciously. She steps away and starts toward the house.

"Sorry," Gep whispers, shrugging.

I roll my eyes at him and follow Kai, pulling ahead to ring the doorbell. I don't even have a key to this house anymore. How could this ever be home?

Bertie opens the door, concern and curiosity wrestling on her face. She eyes Kai for a second before turning her attention back to me.

"Rhys, you're home."

Bertie reaches up and hugs me. She's always been really good at

pretending we're a normal family.

"I heard your father is out of surgery."

"Yeah." I nod and step back. "He won't be awake for a while so they sent me home to sleep for a little bit. Bert, this is my friend, Kai."

"Hello," Kai says with a tentative smile.

"So pretty. Nice to meet you." Bertie's eyes drift between Kai and me. "You hungry?"

"Starved, but sleepier than anything else."

"I swept out the tree house for you." Bertie covers her mouth and glances at Gep and Kai, like she's made a faux pas. In a way, I guess she has since she's the only one who ever knew what that tree house meant to me.

"It's fine, Bert." I lean down to kiss her cheek and realize I've actually missed at least one person from this house. "I'll take a look."

"I'm gonna check the perimeter. Hit me up if you need me." Gep leaves the way we just came.

"I'll go get lunch started." Bertie gestures up the steps. "I'm sure you remember the way, Rhys, and the guest room is ready if you want to lie down, Kai."

She bustles off toward the kitchen, leaving Kai and me standing in the foyer and looking at each other carefully, like if we do or say the wrong thing, the fragile peace between us will shatter.

"Tree house?" Kai offers a small smile. "Somehow I didn't envision the young Beethoven climbing trees."

"Yeah, well, I didn't get to spend much time in it." I hesitate. I'd love to show her the place that held some significance for me years ago, but if she's tired, I won't. "You wanna see it? I mean, if you need to sleep now—"

"Lead the way."

We walk in silence through the kitchen to the rear of the house. I open the door to the backyard, and immediately the sight of the well-manicured lawn, an almost unnaturally vibrant green in the dead of winter thanks to our

gardener, transports me to the lonely afternoons I spent out here. At the far end of the yard, a hundred-year-old tree holds the one place I felt at home here. I grab Kai's hand and walk her across the yard, my heart growing heavier instead of lighter with every step.

I take the first rung and then the next, glad to see Kai right behind me when I look down. She doesn't break the silence, but her eyes show her concern.

It hasn't changed. Other than Bertie's sweeping, it's like no one has been here since the last time I was at sixteen years old. Grady found me up here that Christmas, sick and shaking, fiending for Xanax. Trying to quit on my own, but having little success. That night set into motion all the events that saved me, but ruined my relationship, and Grady's, with my parents.

Even with my father in the hospital, still fighting for his life, and even with a possible second chance to restore our relationship, I can't hold back the bitterness that almost chokes me. The small space at the top of the tree is empty except for a few music books, a composition notebook, and a sleeping bag. So bare, but it was all I needed. With that beautifully decorated house just yards away, I preferred it out here because it was my only escape from my parents. From their agenda. From the demands of a career I never asked for.

I sink to the sleeping bag, my back to the wall and my legs stretched out in front of me, and can't help but remember all the nights I spent here alone in the dark.

"What's going on in there?" Kai taps my temple with one finger.

I grab her hand and press my lips to her knuckles. She's so sweet. She's everything I never thought I would deserve. I *don't* deserve her, but the idea that I might not ultimately have her turns a knife in my chest.

"Rhyson, talk to me." She settles beside me, not pulling her hand away, but linking our fingers on her thigh. "Tell me what you're thinking. Tell me about this place and what it means to you."

I don't want to. I don't want her to know how pathetic and weak I was. How I allowed them to control me with music and medication. How they withheld their approval to keep me coming back for more. But it's Kai, and she is my irresistible force.

"When I was twelve, I told my dad that I wanted to go to school." A half smile twists itself on my face. "Not like tutors, but like school with other kids my age. He said I'd be on the road too much for that but promised to consider it later. He got me this tree house as some kind of compromise. I guess to make me feel like I had something other kids had. I was already too old for it, but I wanted it. I loved it because they never bothered me here."

I squeeze her small hand in mine.

"I used to pretend I had friends coming over. I used to imagine how we'd roast s'mores down in the yard and then sleep up here at night."

"Sounds like fun," she says, her voice small, her head resting on my shoulder. "Where was Bristol in all this?"

I frown, struggling to place Bristol in my life all those years ago.

"We weren't your typical twins. We weren't close at all in anything but looks. She wanted my life, or at least she thought she did. The supposed glamour of being on the road, earning money, having my picture taken, and being respected by adults." A short laugh ruptures my words. "But I wanted what she had. She went to school. She had friends. She had a *life*."

"And every time we'd come home off the road, I'd come out here, hoping my dad would come looking for me, but he never did. He just bribed me with it and forgot it was even here. Once we were off the road, he forgot *I* was even here."

The tears burning my throat make me so angry. I'm not some punk ass kid with no friends falling asleep in this dumb tree house anymore. What the hell do I have to cry about? I escaped this glittering prison. I made my own way. I made my own money. I even made real friends. Does remembering the cold past hurt that badly? Is it the uncertainty of my father's health? The



relief that he pulled through surgery? I'm not sure where this flood of emotions comes from, but I don't want it. I fight it.

"It's okay," Kai whispers, reaching one hand up to cup my jaw. She crawls onto my lap, straddling one knee on either side of my legs. She presses our foreheads together, her breath cool on my lips. "It's okay if it still hurts. It's over, but it still hurts, and that's normal. Don't bottle it up, Rhys. Whatever it is, you can let it out with me."

I know that. I believe that. As I bury my head in her neck, my whole body relaxes into her. My arms wrap around her, squeezing at her back. She doesn't complain. She just squeezes me in return. The hurt is draining away with every second I have with her. I'm sure it's not gone completely. I know it doesn't work like that, but she is a balm to my wounds and makes everything feel better.

A snapping sound startles us. I look over her shoulder just in time to see the lens of a camera as someone backs down the ladder of the tree house. A flash makes us both squint and throw our hands over our faces, but too late.

"Fuck!" My head falls back to bang against the wall. "Photographer."

I know I should chase them, but I don't have the energy. So they got a picture of me collapsing all over a dark-haired girl. I just hope they didn't see Kai's face. I don't care anymore what they say about me.

"A photographer?" Kai's eyes go wide, and she springs off my lap and out the tree house door before I can stop her.

"Kai, it's okay."

"No, it's not," she yells back up. "How dare they invade your privacy at a time like this."

I rush to the door and almost fall out of the tree house with shock. Really, with laughter.

My girl, no bigger than a minute, all five feet two inches of her, has caught that poor, unsuspecting pap. She is on his fucking *back*! I should go help, but this is just too entertaining, and she seems to have it under complete

control.

“Get off me!” the photographer screams, shaking his back like Kai is a pesky spider monkey he can’t get rid of.

“Give me that camera!” Her legs clench him, and her slim arms have his neck in a death grip. She finally grasps the camera strap and tugs until the camera hits the ground, breaking into pieces. She’s immediately off his back, scooping up a chunk of it and sprinting back toward the tree house. He grabs Kai around her waist, lifting her off the ground so her feet dangle and kick.

Motherfucker just crossed the line.

I’m down the ladder so fast I almost lose my shoe.

I grab Kai’s waist, pulling her from the ballsack who is by now red in the face and sweating.

“Keep your hands off her,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Little bitch broke my camera.”

My fist is halfway to his face when Kai grabs my elbow, stepping between me and this lowlife.

“Your camera is broken and you’re trespassing,” Kai snaps. “So let’s call it even. We won’t press charges if you don’t.”

Gep comes rushing through the back door, gripping the piece that’s usually concealed in his boot or at his back. The pap starts stuttering as soon as he sees Gep’s nine.

“Uh, yeah. Sounds good,” he gulps, one eye on my fist still checked only by Kai’s small hand, and one eye on Gep’s Glock.

“’Bout damn time.” I narrow eye Gep, and he has the decency to look slightly embarrassed. We’re in the middle of Nowhere, New York. He can’t keep one half-assed pap out of my backyard?

“Sorry, boss. I was—”

“Checking the perimeter, yeah, I know.” I jerk my fist free of Kai’s hand, pulling her to my side and slipping my arm around her waist. “Maybe you should have started a little closer in.”

“He said he was sorry, Rhyson.” Kai gives me a look that tells me she thinks I’m mistreating the help.

What the fuck ever. Instead of being a harmless pap, it could have been a stalker. Someone packing real heat. For me, I’ve never worried about security much. I know it sounds reckless, but I always feel like I can protect myself if it comes down to it. But now that Kai is in the mix, it’s a different story. I need to make sure everyone on my team knows that.

“Get this trash out of here, Gep.” I glare at the red-faced photographer. “I’m sure you have insurance for your camera, right?”

The pap nods, glancing between Kai and me.

“What are you looking at?” I demand.

“This your new girl?” the pap has the nerve to ask.

“Are you kidding me?” I take a menacing step closer. “You’re still trying to get a story? Seriously?”

“Just thought you should know I wasn’t alone.”

“What do you mean?” Kai frowns. “There was someone else?”

“Yeah, he got away.” Pap shakes his head. “Never seen him, but he got shots of you guys. If you’re trying to keep whatever you got going a secret, just thought you should know it’s out. Those shots will fetch high dollar.”

“That’s enough.” Gep tightens his meaty fingers around pap’s arm, making him wince. “Time to go. You’re lucky we aren’t calling the cops.”

Under Gep’s escort, the pap leaves the way I assume he came, through the back fence that can be accessed from the sidewalk.

Kai turns worried eyes up to me, a frown crinkling her pretty face.

“If those pictures get out, everything could change.”

She’s right. If they got a clear shot of her face, she’ll have paps at her house maybe by the time she returns home. The intimacy between us was obvious. There’s no playing that off or spinning it. We could say we’re just friends, and she was comforting me because of my dad. That’s true, except I’m so tired of that. We’re not just friends. I can’t help but remember how

Kai rushed down that tree, no thought for herself.

“What are you grinning about?” Kai asks, eyes suspicious.

“You should have seen yourself on that dude’s back.”

Despite the lingering worry about my dad, the close call with the pap, and the pictures probably releasing soon, I laugh. It starts as a chuckle, but it builds and gains steam until I can barely stand. Maybe it’s hysterics, and I’m finally cracking. Maybe it’s exhaustion. I don’t know, and I don’t care. All that really matters is that on one of the shittiest days of my life, I’m still laughing.

And I know it’s because of Kai.

She sees the humor in it too. Laughter lights her face up, stretching her mouth wide and squinting her eyes until tears run down her cheeks. We’re both caught up in this ridiculous day that has roller coastered me from exhaustion in Chicago, to fear at the hospital, to anger and frustration in these last few moments. There’s no one else I would want with me on the ride this day has been.

On the verge of a huge music video, the kind of opportunity she’s been waiting for, she dropped everything to be with me. She endured Bristol’s and my mother’s downright rudeness to stay by my side. She took off after that pap like her life depended on it because she thought *I* depended on it. Grady is the only person who has ever fought for me, ever put me first, and he has earned my undying gratitude. He’s earned my love.

And so has she.

The laughter drains away, leaving only that shake-me-to-the-core revelation and a rock solid resolve behind. A resolve to do something I should have done, should have said a long time ago.

“Pep, things are about to change.”

A grin lingers on her lips, fading slowly as she realizes the shift in my mood.

“You mean because of the pictures?” She nods, twisting her lips to one

side. "I bet Bristol can spin it. Say we're just friends, and that I was—"

"We're not."

She frowns up at me, slipping her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

"We're not what?"

"Just friends. We're not just friends."

Caution takes over her face, and I can already see excuses and rationales lining up in her head.

"Rhyson, let's talk about this. Listen to me."

"No, you listen." I stroke a finger over the curve of her cheekbone. "This all started with your ultimatum, but it's ending with mine."

"Ending?"

I wonder if she realizes she's leaning into my hand or that her face softens when she looks up at me. Every touch between us, every look, tells me she wants this as much as I do, and I'm going to give it to her. It goes completely against my nature to allow anyone to control anything in my life. I've bucked my better judgment long enough.

"You have a decision to make, and you need to make it now. I've given you time. I've given you space, now I need you to decide." I pull in and exhale a quick breath. "Either I'm yours, and you're mine, or we're nothing."

"What?" She blinks her confusion.

"I said," drawing out the word and giving her a few seconds to get accustomed to our new reality. "Either I'm yours and you're mine, or we're nothing. I don't want to be your friend. I want to be . . . yours."

"I think—"

"Rhyson." Bristol's voice cuts in from the patio where she stands at the edge of the yard.

Seriously? If we're interrupted one more time . . .

"What, Bris?" I snap.

She lifts her brows before dropping them into a frown so like my

mother's it's eerie.

"Your *father* is awake and wants to see you." Her voice bites me even across the yard. "Forgive me for thinking that's why you're here."

"I'm sorry." I'm so twisted around right now. One minute all I can do is worry about my dad, and the next, I'm lost in Kai. "Of course."

Kai walks with me across the yard. I shove my hands in my jeans pockets to keep myself from reaching for her. In my head, I keep hearing Grady harp on space. He's forgotten more about life than I know, so maybe I'll listen. I told her what I want. Now she has to tell me what she wants, and I have to let her.

"The car's waiting out front." Bristol looks between Kai and me, speculating or judging. I'm too tired to tell which. "We blocked off the street so no one can get down here. The neighbors aren't happy, but they'll be all right."

"Great." I step into the kitchen, grabbing one of Bertie's still-steaming blueberry muffins from a basket on the counter, offering one to Kai. "Muffin?"

She doesn't look me in my eyes, accepting the muffin and perching on one of the high bar stools at the marble island in the center of the kitchen.

"Picked up a few things for you, Kai." Bristol sets a GAP and a Victoria's Secret bag on the counter. "Everything you need to change before you leave should be there."

"What time does her flight leave?" I bite into my muffin and take the stool beside Kai.

"In a couple of hours." Bristol raises both brows at Kai. "That okay? Grady said you need to get back for a video or something."

"Um, yeah." Kai sets her unfinished muffin down on a napkin. "Thank you."

"Sure." Bristol nods briskly, returning her eyes to me. "The car's still waiting."

I flick a glance to Kai's profile, hoping she'll give me some sign of what she's thinking, but her face is a blank page. I know she feels my eyes on her, but refuses to look up from the muffin she's shredding on her napkin.

Fuck it.

Without even a good-bye, I follow Bristol out of the kitchen and to the SUV parked in the driveway.

I'm such a pussy. I've fully given Kai the reins since the first time we met. I've known what I want all along, but I compromised and took whatever she wanted to give. The one time I assert my will, which is what comes most naturally to me, I'm not even sure I'll be able to stick to it. I gave her an ultimatum I'm not sure I can enforce. The thought of being without her strips away all my bravado. She has no idea how much power she has over me. I'm the famous one. The rich one. The one who has nothing left to prove, but she holds every card. Especially the ones with hearts.

# Chapter

## THIRTY-FOUR

### RHYSON

MY FATHER MADE IT A POINT to never miss my performances when I was a child. I knew even then that it wasn't because he was so proud of me. It was because he needed to make sure I did well. I made a lot of money for our family, and as soon as I was old enough, my parents made sure I grasped the significance of that. But this one time, my father had pneumonia, and doctors said he couldn't travel to Munich for my concert.

It was the worst performance of my life.

I missed notes. I rushed passages. I played with no emotion. Something was missing, and I knew it was my father.

And as I sit by his bed in this cold, sterile room, I realize that he has been missing. I've convinced myself that he doesn't matter. That I don't want his approval. That I don't love him.

But he does. And I do.

I drop my head to the metal bar flanking his bed. He's drifted back into unconsciousness, and they say when he wakes up, he may not be able to talk much or right away, but I'll wait. If nothing else, he'll be able to hear. If nothing else, he'll hear me say I'm sorry for the bitter words we hurled at one another over the dinner table like javelins across a battlefield. If nothing else, I'll empty myself of this acidic regret ulcerating the lining of my stomach.

At an unexpected touch, I raise my head. My father's big hand brushes



my hair back like he did when I was a little boy. His eyes, so like Grady's, stare back at me, glazed and drugged with meds and pain, but with a clarity I'm not sure I've ever seen. And he steals all my thunder when his chapped lips open just barely over a word my ears aren't sure they hear, but that land on my heart.

“Sorry.”

# Chapter

## THIRTY-FIVE

Kai

I JUMP WHEN THE FRONT DOOR slams shut downstairs. Voices drift up the stately staircase of the Grays' home. I pick out Rhyson's husky baritone from the trio of voices below, Grady's and Bristol's accompanying him. They talk for a few minutes at the base of the stairs. I can't decipher what they're saying until they make it to the landing.

"We'll see tomorrow," Rhyson says, right outside his bedroom. "Good night."

The door opens, and he stops on the threshold.

"Kai." He eyes me sitting on the edge of his bed for a second before glancing at his watch. "I thought your flight already left."

So Bristol actually did what I asked her. She didn't tell him.

"I asked Bristol if there was a later flight that would still get me back to L.A. for my call time. The time difference helps." I stand up, brushing my damp palms over the chinos Bristol bought me from the GAP. "I thought you might need to talk after you saw your father."

It's only half the truth, but the other half scares me to death, so I keep it to myself for now. Rhyson just stares at me, questions hiding behind the cumulus clouds in his grey eyes.

"So you stayed back to ask me about my dad?"

"How was it? How is he?" I fix my eyes on the intricate pattern in the

rope rug under my feet, wishing I could disappear into the tiny fibers. “Are you okay?”

Rhyson slips off his jacket and tosses it toward an armchair across the room. It misses, falling to the floor, but neither of us moves to pick it up. He runs weary hands through the burnished hair flopping into his eyes. I sit back down on the bed, patting the space beside me.

“Come tell me.”

He hesitates for a moment before taking me up on my offer. The bed dips under his weight, and his shoulders occupy much of the space between us, making me aware of how much smaller I am than him.

“I’ll never forget seeing him like that.” Rhyson flops back onto the bed, linking his hands under his head. “There were tubes everywhere, and he looks like he’s aged a hundred years in just a day.”

“I know how it feels to see your parent debilitated. Weaker than you’ve ever seen them.” I lie back too, tucking into his side. “It shakes everything up. Makes you question everything.”

“He couldn’t talk.” Rhyson fixes his eyes to the ceiling like the hospital scene replays there for him to see again. “Well, just a little. He said . . .”

Rhyson clamps his lips over the words he may not be ready to say.

“What’d he say?” I press, knowing if I don’t no one will. As much as his friends may love him, I don’t get the sense that anyone ever forces Rhyson to do anything, much less deal with emotions that will fester if he keeps stuffing them.

“He said sorry.” Rhyson clears his throat. “He said that he was sorry. I don’t know if he meant for the argument we had at Christmas, or . . . or for everything.”

“Is that all he said?”

“Before I left, he said, ‘Let’s try.’ I think he wants us to try again.” Rhyson smacks his lips. Derision, maybe for himself, maybe for his father, marks his face. “Grady wants us to go to family counseling once my dad is

well enough.”

“And you think that’s a bad idea?”

“I think a heart attack doesn’t necessarily change your *heart*.” Rhyson expels a hard breath. “This made me want another chance, but I have no idea what to believe.”

“A brush with death *can* change people.” I subtly wiggle a few inches closer until the heat from his body touches me. “If Grady thinks—”

“Grady *thought* at Christmas, but Grady was wrong then, and he might be wrong now.” Rhyson presses his lips together and closes his eyes before opening them again, as if he’s hoping the view will be different. “It’s just Grady wants to reconcile so badly with my dad that it may color his perspective. He’s still looking for the kid he grew up with, the twin he was close to years ago. That kid may be gone forever.”

“Maybe.” I nod and cross my feet at the ankles. “But if your father legitimately wants to try again, to make things right, maybe it’s worth the risk.”

Rhyson flips onto his side to face me, head propped in his hand.

“Am I worth the risk?” His deep voice caresses my senses in the semi-dark of the room. “Is that why you stayed? Why you’re still here? To tell me I am? Or that I’m not?”

Even knowing this was coming, knowing this is the conversation I stayed for, his questions make my breath come faster. This must be how skydivers feel just before they fall.

“We were talking about your father,” I say, my words barely a breath.

“And now we’re talking about you. About us.”

As much as my fears urge me to scoot away from the subject, unsure if these steps are wise, I only have my gut to rely on, and it propels me closer to Rhyson.

He pushes my wild hair back. After the blessed shower I finally got to take, I didn’t bother blow drying it, and it fans out behind me on the bed.

“I know you want to make it on your own, and you’re afraid people will think I got you where you’re going,” Rhyson says. “And I know your dad left you with a shitload of trust issues, and that you don’t want to depend on me.” He pauses, leaning in to nuzzle his nose into the sensitive skin behind my ear, sending shock waves over my nerve endings. “But I ask again, am I worth the risk?”

Those pictures are coming out. We won’t be able to stop them, and soon everyone will be speculating about who I am to Rhyson. I want what Rhyson wants. I’m his and he’s mine. I’ve been overthinking it. So afraid that Rhyson is a hazard to my heart that I hadn’t acknowledged how much he’s been *healing* it. I’m not actually sure that I’m ready for what being in a relationship with Rhyson really means, but the alternative—being without him—is no choice at all.

“You’re worth the risk.”

The words barely make it past my lips before Rhyson is hovering over me, supported on his elbows to spare me his weight.

“Then I’m yours,” he whispers over my lips, trailing kisses down my neck. “And you’re mine.”

“I’m yours and you’re mine,” I echo back to him, knowing we both feel the promise weighting my declaration.

“Can I tell you something?” he whispers.

“Is it a secret?” I laugh a little, my heart feeling lighter already, buoyant in my chest.

“Only to you.” He pulls back, his face serious. His eyes probing mine, searching for something I hope he’s finding. “I’m pretty sure everyone who’s ever seen us together already knows. Hell, Gep just met you today, and I think he already knows.”

“What is it?”

He drops his head until our temples rest against each other, his warm breath floating into my ear.

“I’m in love with you.”

Nothing could have prepared me for those words from this man. Not the rock star. Or the child prodigy. The masterful musician. The celebrity. But this guy who has systematically taken possession of my heart, day by day, piece by piece, until I have half and he has half, and one part doesn’t work without the other. My throat holds my breath hostage. And my heartbeat? *Prestissimo*, my music instructor called it in high school.

Very, very fast.

Rhyson’s words set my heart free like a stampede of wild notes across a music staff, falling off the lines, running off the page. I’m a composition out of control, without form. Freestyled. Improvised. Unsure of where we’re going, but certain that it’s right. Sure that in the end, it will be a thing of beauty.

“You don’t have to say it.” Rhyson’s uncertainty is an anomaly, like a discordant note, but that’s the look on his face. Not sure. Not sure of me.

“Can I though?” I push my fingers into that glorious mess of hair that never stays tamed for more than five minutes. “Can I say it?”

Rhyson leans back a few more inches, until his arms are straightened, pressing our hips together. Rhyson pushes into the juncture of my thighs, separating them. Parting me like water.

“If you feel it, you can certainly say it, but I don’t want to pressure you.”

“Oh, *now* you don’t want to pressure me, Mr. Ultimatum.” I can laugh now even though his words this afternoon struck fear in my heart. Fear that I would lose him for good.

“Since we’re sharing secrets,” he says, a smile splitting those full lips I’m not sure I can resist much longer. “I was probably bluffing this afternoon, but now we’ll never know.”

“Well, I love you, so it’s a moot point, right?” Any leftover laughter dissolves under the heated intensity of his stare.

“You love me?” he demands, eyes locked with mine.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“I just want to be sure so when we make love you can’t pretend it didn’t happen this time or push me away or say you need time.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice falters. “I was so scared to depend on you. So scared to need you. I was afraid leaning on you would make me weak.”

I want to confess that in some ways, I still am, but I want him too much not to try.

“I know that.” Rhyson kisses my nose and then my lips and then my neck, lighting small fires over every surface of skin he touches. “I knew it then, even though I was so damn frustrated with you. I knew what was behind it. This time, we’re going to be absolutely clear about what this is.”

His fingers nudge the T-shirt I’m wearing up until cool air kisses my breasts in the push-up bra Bristol gave me. Not sure if that was a jab at my small breasts, but I can’t care right now because Rhyson looks at me like I’m a dream.

“The first time we made love was on a pool table.”

“I do recall,” I whisper, propping myself up on my elbows so that our chests almost touch.

“I think we can do better.” Rhyson rolls the cups of my bra down until my nipples peek out, pink and tight with anticipation. “When does your flight leave?”

“In three hours.”

Disappointment settles on his face for a moment, but with one glance at my breasts, his expression changes. Intensifies. Ignites me.

“We’ll have to make do.”

I’m not ready for the slow love he makes to me. The hurried coupling on the pool table exceeded any of my previous experiences, limited though they admittedly were. This deliberate seduction unravels me, starting with his lips at my breasts, tugging and biting and sucking until my head rolls back and forth on his pillow, frantic for a release he keeps just out of reach. He shoves

the shirt completely over my head and reaches behind me to undo the clasp of my bra. His heated stare is foreplay, the way his eyes eat at my breasts, a promise of what's to come.

I want in. I can't be a spectator with this beautiful man whose desire is a palpable thing lapping at my body. I pull his T-shirt over his head, until his broad shoulders and the lean muscles of his abs are exposed for my touch. I run my fingers over the rungs of muscle in his stomach and brush my fingers over his nipples, over the musical notes and lyrics tattooed around his ribs and sketched over his arms. He sucks in a harsh breath.

"Pep, yes. Touch me."

My eyes flick to his face, and I love the anticipation there. I reverse our positions until he's on his back and I can straddle him, feeling decadent with my breasts hanging naked above him. I lean down, suckling at his chest, satisfied by the way he writhes beneath me, as desperate for me as I am for him. His nipple goes tight in my mouth, and I reach down to grip the stiff bulge through his jeans. His head snaps back, exposing the strong muscles of his throat.

"Damn, Pep. You're gonna have to do something about that."

Oh, I plan to.

I work the buckle on his belt, scooting down to slide away his jeans and the briefs clinging to the hard muscles of his thighs. My mouth waters at the sight of him, erect and already wet at the tip. I've never felt possessive of another person in my entire life, but I know that's what I feel right now. This is mine. *He* is as much mine as I am his, and without a moment's hesitation, I lean down and take him in my mouth.

I've never done this. Never wanted to. His gasps and groans guide me. I tighten and loosen my lips, play my tongue over him by instinct. His hands set the pace, twisting in my hair as he pumps into my mouth, the tempo at first slow and measured, then building to furious and urgent. My jaw stretches around him, and he's tangy on my tongue.



He pulls back abruptly, and I'm immediately insecure.

"I did it wrong?" I can't meet his eyes, thinking of all the groupies who have probably sucked him off in bathroom stalls and behind stages.

He tips up my chin, his eyes searching my face.

"Was that the first time you've done that?"

I hesitate, tempted to lie, but unable to in the honesty pressed between our nearly naked bodies.

"Damn, Pep, I hate to see you with experience." He pulls me up until I'm flush against him. "On second thought, if that's novice, I can't *wait* to see you with experience."

He leans into my ear.

"Do you know how it makes me feel that you've never done that to another guy before?"

I shake my head no, and he pulls my chin gently between his fingers.

"Like the luckiest guy in the world."

"Then why'd you stop me?" I ask, embarrassed but curious.

"Because I want to be inside you."

His words land on me like hot needles. He scoots to the end of the bed, taking me with him and standing me on my feet. He peels the chinos down, sliding his fingers beneath the tiny strips of lace hugging my hips and pulling down until they puddle around my ankles. His fingers brush across my nipples, tracing the words scripted under my breast and down the muscles in my stomach, lingering on the belly ring.

"You remember that day at Grady's when I was teaching you that breathing exercise?"

I can only nod dumbly at this point because my body is livid. Passion leaks down the inside of my thighs. My fingers tremble with the strain of not touching him.

"I thought this belly ring was so damn sexy, and I thought about doing this for days after."

He leans forward, flicking his tongue into my belly button, curling it around the metal piercing the flesh. He sits back, his eyes making a slow journey from the tips of my toes past my legs over my hips and breasts until they rest on my face. I quiver under that look because it's not just lust. There's so much love in his eyes it almost hurts me to look into them. These moments feel so perfect they frighten me. In my experience, nothing perfect lasts, and I want this to swell into infinity.

He lifts one of my legs, pulling it over his shoulder, and buries his head between my thighs, licking at the juices trickling out of me. Tonguing me. Biting me. Driving me out of my mind with the way his mouth worships me. The explosion starts low in my belly and lights a path through every fiber of my body, like a lit stick of dynamite chasing fire over my skin and through my muscles and nerves, until I slump against his mouth still working between my legs. I clutch his head, tugging with numb fingers at his thick hair. He must know my knees are trembling and on the verge of collapse because he lays me down gently on the bed. In a daze, I hear him sliding on a condom.

"You're on the pill?" Passion strains his voice, harshening it in the silence of the room.

"No, I'm not on anything," I whisper. "I just . . . since I moved, I just haven't . . ."

"We need to fix that soon. I want you raw, Pep."

He pushes into my tightness slowly and carefully. My body remembers this. This sense of being so full I'm on the verge of pain, but dragged back by unfathomable pleasure. Pleasure that turns my mind to mush and drops my mouth open on a gasp. He pushes my leg back, holding my knee against my shoulder. The other leg I wrap around his thigh, twisting us together, opening myself up wide for him. He wastes no time pushing in deeper until I'm sure there is no farther he can go. I feel his knee behind my thigh, finding leverage in the soft mattress to press deeper and harder, and my hips keep tempo with the furious pace he sets. The headboard knocks wildly and loudly into the

wall with every thrust, and the sound of it drives me higher and madder for him.

Another orgasm gives birth to a scream that bursts past my lips. He immediately covers my mouth with his, kissing the sounds into silence. He buries an elongated groan in my hair. His hands grip my butt, only intensifying the pleasure. We both go still, holding each other and whispering words of love and adoration.

And we take time. Time to explore each other's bodies. Time for him to tell me my small breasts are a perfect mouthful, and that he loves the prayer wrapping around my body. I sight-read the music of his tattoos—a patch of Bach on his ribs, Chopin and Beethoven on his back. Rachmaninoff on one shoulder, and Mozart on the other. His chest he keeps clear because he's waiting for the song that belongs on his heart. It may not be visible to the naked eye, but he's written a song on my heart tonight, and I'm afraid the ink's indelible.

# Chapter

## THIRTY-SIX

### RHYSON

SO I'M HERE ON THE SET of the music video Kai's doing. Stop me at the part where that's a bad idea. Oh. I already passed it?

Yeah.

In my defense, I like Luke, but I don't trust his people. Specifically, John Malcolm, the mastermind behind *Total Package*, is a bottom feeding, manipulative, ruthless bloodsucker who never hesitates to take advantage of other people's talent to further his own ends.

Him within ten feet of Kai makes me break out in hives because one thing he does have going for him is an exceptional eye for talent. That being said, I made sure things were settled at the hospital with my dad and promised to return soon. He's speaking now, and I have to admit, he does seem sincere in his desire to repair our relationship. Maybe Kai's right. Maybe the brush with death changed something in him so drastically that his priorities have shifted. Maybe a real relationship with me, not based on profit and gain, is something he will work for. Grady seems to think so.

My mother didn't have a heart attack, and I'm not sure she's had a change of heart, but she wants me to think so. Bristol calls me cynical. Oh, the irony. She'd double-check Mother Theresa's credentials, so don't get me started on just how jaded my twin sister is. She wasn't pleased about me flying back to L.A., but she'll have to get used to Kai being a priority for me. I haven't

actually told her anything about us yet, though it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure how gone I am for Kai.

Bristol knows something's up, but I'm not ready to talk about it with her. One, I don't want to hear her doubts or her skepticism about Kai. If she had any clue how hard I've had to fight to get this girl to take anything from me, she wouldn't be so worried about Kai's potential opportunism. Two, what Kai and I shared in my parents' house that night will go down as one of the best nights of my life. And I've had some great nights. What we have, what we've built, isn't something I want to share with the world yet. Not even with my inner circle.

"Rhyson, we didn't know you were coming," Delaney, Luke's publicist, says to me by the Craft services table loaded with food for the break. "Let me get you a badge. They're being kind of tight today."

It's been a while since anyone offered me a badge. You reach a point where identifying yourself feels redundant because everyone knows who you are. I've been there for a long time and take it for granted.

"Luke invited me." I slip the generic badge over my head anyway. "I hope it's okay."

"Rhys, any time you wanna come around, it's fine. I've told you more than once."

Her big blue eyes tease me, but I'm not playing. Her eyes aren't dark and tilted. Her tits are too big. She's too tall. Her scent is off. Nothing is right about her because she's not my girl. I just want to slip her a note with the word "no" written on it because she has never taken any of my hints.

"Are they on lunch break?" I hope she'll lift her eyes from cock level and look at me when I'm talking to her.

*That's not yours, sweetie. Eyes up.*

"Yeah, they're on break," Delaney finally drags her eyes up from my zipper to look around the set. "Luke is here somewhere. He'll love having

you. I'll go find him."

"That'd be great." I smile as she walks away, relieved that I can now find Kai and hope she doesn't pull my balls through my nose for this stunt.

I see her before she sees me. She's chatting with Dub by the fruit spread, munching on a handful of grapes. Her hair falls down her back in loose waves, dark against the white robe covering her down to her ankles. The high heels give her a few inches, but she still looks tiny beside Dub's bulk. She laughs up at him, her face more dramatically made up than I've ever seen it. Even though she looks so gorgeous I'm hard in my jeans in seconds, I want to scrub her face free of the paint. I love her natural.

Dub starts demonstrating a move for her, and she pops the last of the grapes in her mouth so she can mimic his motions. As she's executing a turn, her eyes meet mine across the room. They go wide and then narrow. She says something to Dub before heading in my direction.

Fuck. This could be bad.

"Rhyson, hey." She glances at the crew milling around, setting up for the first shot after the break. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Yeah, Luke invited me. I think I told you that."

"You didn't say you were leaving the hospital to come here though." She gives me a careful look through the false lashes they've put on her. "How's your dad?"

"Better. Improving. I'll go back when he goes home."

She speaks after a brief pause.

"I wish you'd told me you were coming."

"Is it okay?" I can only be around her for so long without touching her, so I grab her hand. "I wanted to see you perform."

She looks from our clasped hands to the people around us. I feel their stares too. People have been pointing and staring at me since I was the three-year-old freak who could play Beethoven with my eyes closed, so I'm used to it. But I know this is more than recognition. This is rabid curiosity. They

thought she was just some dancer, new on the scene. Me showing up, holding her hand propels her into a new stratosphere of interest. Exactly what she wanted to avoid. Maybe I shouldn't have come.

"It's fine. It's just . . ." Her words disappear behind a small frown.

"It's just what?"

"This is a very sensual song, and the routine is pretty . . . provocative."

Sensual. Provocative. I need blood pressure meds.

"What are you . . . what do they . . . uh . . . have you doing exactly?"

"I'm dancing." She tucks a chunk of hair behind her ear, eyes dropping to the floor. "You know that."

"Like dancing how?"

They'd have to drag me out of here now. There's no way I'm leaving until I know what my girl is doing. What kind of *sensual* and *provocative* shit are we talking?

"It's just—"

"Kai, it's time." A petite, pink-haired girl reaches up to slide the robe from Kai's shoulders.

Kai's anxious eyes find mine, and I already know I'm going to hate whatever she was hiding under that robe.

I'm so right.

It's mere scraps of material masquerading as a decent outfit. A strip of silk binds her breasts. Another strip of studded fabric bisects her torso leaving everything else bare. The black bikini bottom cuts high on her hips, leaving her round, firm ass completely exposed. I yank the edges of the robe closed over her small body, looking around to see if anyone saw all that flesh.

"Rhyson!" Kai's voice is a low, outraged hiss. "Stop it."

"What the *fuck* are you not wearing?" I snap. "You can't wear that, Pep. No way."

"I've been wearing it for the last four hours, so I think we've all gotten past the shock by now."

“Four *hours*?” My fingers tighten around the terry cloth lapels. “You’ve been prancing around this set for everyone to ogle your naked ass for *four* hours?”

“Kai, Dub was asking for you.” Pink hair’s eyes flit between my tight fingers and my scowling face.

“Give me just a sec, Ella.” Kai offers the girl a phony smile, waiting for her to walk off.

“Such a huge fan, by the way,” Ella whispers to me before leaving. “Already got tickets for your show at Staples.”

She walks off, leaving Kai and me in a tight angry silence. This isn’t how it was supposed to be. The last time I saw her, she was against a shower wall at my parents’ house. I was sinking into the bliss of her sweet pussy, counting the hours until I would see her again. This isn’t how it was supposed to be, but this is how it is.

“You shouldn’t have come if you were going to act this way, Rhyson.” Kai frowns, biting her lip. “Look, I know it’s skimpy.”

“Skimpy? It’s indecent.”

“And if a girl in one of your videos were dressed this way?” she fires back, dark eyes hot and slitted. “Would it be indecent then? Or would it be the job?”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is.” Kai’s face softens, and she takes both my hands between hers. “Let me do my job. We’re only just starting, but this is exactly the kind of behavior that will sabotage us.”

“Sabotage?” The word ice picks my heart.

“I’m just saying it’s situations like these that made me hesitate in the first place. You interfering and controlling. Just like you did with my mother’s bills.”

“Oh, excuse me for making life easier. For clearing the way for you to do jobs like this without massive debt hanging over your head.”



“That’s what I mean!” A long, fake red nail tips the finger she points at me. “That is exactly what I mean by if you give it to me you can take it away. You can take credit for it. It’s not mine, it’s yours.”

“I’m not taking credit. I’m just saying don’t threaten me by saying that my concern over this . . .” I gesture to her robed figure, “Nudity is sabotaging our relationship.”

“Nudity!” Her disbelieving laugh cuts into the thick air between us. “I’m not nude, and I’m not some little girl who needs your protection or your guidance.”

“*Someone* needs to tell you that gyrating on a pole isn’t exactly your big break.”

“Everyone’s gotta start somewhere, and it’s a lap dance, thank you very much! Not a pole.”

“The fuck!” I explode, gripping my head with both hands. “Who the hell are you giving a lap dance?”

“Your friend, Luke. Now if you’ll excuse me.” Kai slips off the robe and lays it over one arm. “*He’s* the star on set, and I’m keeping him waiting.”

She stalks off without another word, her bare ass and high tits and taut waist drawing all eyes as she strides over to Dub for last-minute instructions.

The last thing I need is Luke, the guy who is about to get a lap dance from my girl, coming over to me, but that’s exactly what I get.

“Dude.” Luke fist pounds me. “Glad you could make it. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Yeah, it was kind of spontaneous.” I hope he doesn’t notice how plastic my smile is. “But I don’t think I can stay.”

“Oh, you want to stay.” He leans in, eyebrows raised like he’s passing on a secret. “You gotta see this dancer they got for me.”

“What?” The blood congeals in my veins and then rushes hot like boiling poison. “What dancer?”

“You know I love short chicks, right?” A grin complements his All-

American look, the blonde hair and blue eyes. “She’s all curves and muscles and kinda Asian eyes. I—”

“Stop. I gotta stop you before I have to punch you in the face.” I run agitated hands through my hair. “The dancer’s mine. She’s my girlfriend.”

Luke holds his hand up only so high, to his shoulder.

“Short girl?” His eyes go wide. “That’s your girlfriend? You lucky son of a bitch! Wait. You have a girlfriend? Since when do you do girlfriends?”

I don’t have time for this.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll stay, but I’m gonna go say good-bye.”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

“Yeah. I mean, I won’t.”

I spot Kai in deep conversation with Dub, and I hesitate to interrupt, but I can’t leave things like this between us.

Dub looks up from their conversation, a frown pulling his dark brows together under the shock of his platinum hair.

“Gray, what’s up?” He doesn’t bother with any other greeting. “You need something?”

This guy just keeps rubbing me the wrong way.

“I need to speak to Kai for a minute.”

“We’re in the middle of a shoot,” he says, the Irish lilt more pronounced with his irritation.

“I’m so sorry, Dub.” Kai crosses her arms under her breasts. “Could we just have a minute? I’ll be quick. I promise.”

“We only have this space today, sweetie.” Dub’s voice softens some, even though his expression stays hard.

*Sweetie?*

“I know. “ Kai takes a step closer to me. “Just a few minutes.”

He gives me one more considering look before walking just a few feet away.

*Dickhead.*

“I’m an asshole.” I may as well lead with the apology she deserves. “You were right. I shouldn’t have just shown up like this. I compromised your professionalism. It wasn’t a good look, and I’m sorry.”

“Rhyson, we just started.”

Her voice wavers. She better not cry. Fuck me if she cries. She has no idea that her tears are a weapon of mass destruction that would take me out in seconds.

“I don’t want to be fighting with you already over my job.” She looks up at me, her mouth and eyes unsmiling. “Just like you have a job to do, so do I. I need you to let me do this.”

“Okay.”

I capture her hand, bringing it to my lips for a kiss. I couldn’t care less who’s looking or taking pictures. They can Snapchat it for all I care.

“Are you leaving?” she asks.

She steps closer, and the fact that she still smells like pears and cinnamon comforts me. Under all the makeup, the false eyelashes, red talons, the elevator heels, she’s still my girl who wants to make her mother’s soap. Who bakes the best biscuits I’ve ever tasted. Who makes me want to be the best man I can be. For her.

“Yeah, if I stay I might strangle someone. Luke would definitely die.” My laugh is a short bark. “And I need to swing by Wood. Supposed to be helping someone with a track. Not sure how long that’ll take.”

“Can I see you tonight?”

Her voice is so soft I barely hear it. Did she really just ask me that? I can’t help it. I have to touch her. I palm the smooth, bare curve of her waist, and she doesn’t stop me. She doesn’t pull away, even with the weight of all these eyes on us. I lean down until my lips brush her ear.

“Text Gep when you’re done, and he’ll bring you to the house.”

“Kai, we need to do this now,” Dub says sharply from a few feet away.

I turn a glare on Dub that should level him, but he just stares right back at

me. Reckless bastard.

“Does he always talk that way to you?” I demand.

“Only when I’m being unprofessional and cuddling with my boyfriend instead of doing my job.”

“We can cuddle when you get home.” I bury my nose in the hair by her ear. “After we fuck, of course.”

I pull back just so I can see her cheeks bloom pink.

“You actually blush.” I laugh into the sweet smell of her neck. “That’s adorable.”

The glare she angles up at me doesn’t carry much fire with her mouth fighting a grin.

“I need to work, Rhysan. They’re almost ready.”

“Okay, don’t forget to text Gep when you’re done.”

“Can I swim?”

“You can redecorate the whole house for all I care, as long as you’re there when I get home.”

“You won’t be there?” She pulls that kissable mouth into a pout.

“Like I said, I gotta get to the studio. I’ll be late getting in.”

“I’ll see you when you get home.”

Home. Hearing her say it makes me realize how much I want my home and her home to be one and the same. Is this really happening? Me, notorious commitment-phobe, wanting a girl in my house all the time? After one night together? The irony is that if I said this out loud, she’d be the one freaked out. So I’ll keep it to myself and give her the time and space Grady keeps saying she probably needs.

I’ll ask her . . . what? Like next week?

# Chapter

## THIRTY-SEVEN

Kai

EVERY INCH OF MY BODY ACHES, but I slice through the warm water lap after lap until my arms and legs burn with exertion. Today I got another taste of what I'm meant to do. Just the tip of a glorious iceberg that is my destiny, but it was addictive. The lights. The cameras. The music. Even though I wasn't the star. The dance moves challenging me to the edges of my ability and discipline.

The dance wasn't as salacious as Rhyson assumed it would be. It was sensual, but not trashy. I think once the video is finished, it will be something I can be proud of. Dub thinks it will definitely get me noticed and booked for other jobs. Maybe I can quit The Note soon. I wouldn't even be able to entertain the thought if Rhyson hadn't paid off my mother's medical bills.

In retrospect, I overreacted about that. I jeopardized our relationship holding onto my fears and insecurities about the past. Rhyson is not my father. I am not my mother. I want to depend on him, and I want him to depend on me. I can *trust* him. We can trust each other.

Our argument on set today did nothing to calm my other concerns about our career paths clashing and the speculation from others about his involvement in my career.

I reach the pool wall, ready to collapse. My arms tremble when I pull myself up, resting my elbows on the lip of the pool, heaving harsh breaths in

through burning lungs.

A long body slices up through the water behind me, muscled forearms bracketing my shoulders. A warm, hard chest flattens to my back. Panic grips me for a second, accelerating my already-rapid heartbeat. Then firm lips skitter down the back of my neck, leaving a familiar tingle I've only felt with one person. There's only one match that lights me like this.

"Rhyson?" I whisper, even though we are the only ones in the backyard, with its towering wall protecting us from prying eyes.

"Better not be anyone else," he laughs, his breath heating my neck.

I lean into him, tipping my head back until I can look into his eyes upside down, barely illuminated by the lights rimming the pool.

"You're home." My smile melts under the heat of the look he's giving me.

He nods, his fingers working at my back, undoing the clasp on my bikini top. His hands slip beneath the cups, and he brushes his palms over my nipples, sending desire spearing down my middle and tightening at my core. My breath comes fast and shallow. Underwater, my knees liquefy, barely holding me up. Rhyson slides one hand down my side, slipping beneath the band of spandex sheathing my hip. He slides the bikini bottoms down my legs.

"Rhyson, the cameras," I pant, my eyes picking out the shiny glass lenses I noticed when I came out earlier to swim while I waited for him to come home.

"I turned them off."

He presses into my back, hard and naked. Stiff and erect, he nudges between the exposed cheeks of my butt.

"Well, look at you thinking ahead." I can barely speak. I can barely stand. I can barely think. The need to have him buried to the hilt possesses me. I push back against him, feeling him slick and ready.

"Are you wearing a condom?" A startled laugh breaks past my lips,

swollen and trembling waiting for his kiss.

“I knew I couldn’t wait.” He sucks at my shoulder and slips his fingers between my legs, squeezing my clit and penetrating me with his middle finger. My hips thrust in time with the cadence of one finger, two fingers, three buried inside of me, his thumb occupied with caressing the button of flesh where all my pleasure has centered.

“I could barely concentrate in that session thinking about your ass in that non-existent outfit on set,” he says, and I go limp against him. “I’ve been hard all day.”

His fingers leave me, and the void left behind draws a tortured moan from my lips. He cups my butt, one cheek in each hand, lifting me until my feet leave the pool floor. He bends me over the edge, my elbows supporting me, giving me leverage. He squeezes and separates my cheeks, making room for him to slide in, like hot steel. We both gasp at the tight fit. At the perfect friction.

“Where has this been all my life?” Rhyson groans into the curve of my shoulder.

He pumps into me from behind, every thrust rasping my bare stomach against the smooth edge of the pool. My head drops back, the pleasure too much. One hand comes around, toying with my nipple while he slams into me, hitting a secret passage no one’s ever found, over and over until the sky above is spinning. The stars blur, melding into one bright celestial ceiling overhead. I slide my hand up and into his hair, gripping, holding on, and tethering myself to this world when everything inside me would spiral out of control.

“Pep, yes.” He grunts behind me, sliding one hand down my stomach and into the throbbing space between my legs. “I love you, Pep. I love you, baby.”

I can’t even answer with words, only managing a frantic nod as he shudders against my back, long and violent. His passion reverberates through

my skin, through my bones, through my soul, shaking me to my heart.

“At least we made it to a bed the last time.” He laughs, slowly pulling out and bending behind me to scatter kisses between my shoulder blades.

I laugh too, my hands roaming through the water, searching for my bikini.

“Leave it.” He picks me up by my waist, turns me and sets me on the pool’s edge. My legs fall open, and he steps in until our bodies are flush. “No clothes.”

“Rhyson, we can’t—”

“No cameras.” He grins, running one finger from my ear, between my breasts and over the top of my thigh. “I want you naked.”

“It’s January.”

“January in L.A. . It’s not even that cool tonight.”

“You’re crazy. Okay, I guess I can be naked a little longer. I can’t be hungry though. You gotta feed me.”

Twenty minutes later, we devour the bounty of chicken breast, cheese, nuts, hummus, and vegetables Sarita left in the refrigerator.

Rhyson reclines on the patio lounge, one long leg folded under him, and the other planted to the side. I face him, naked and cross-legged, chomping on the food on platters between us.

“So how’d the shoot go?” He glances at me from beneath his lashes, dark hair flopping into his eyes.

“S’good.” I roll my eyes. “Long, but good.”

“You felt good? You did well?”

“I guess I did okay.” I shrug, dipping a cucumber into the hummus.

“Pep, it’s me.” He leans forward and grins. “You can tell me. You were amazing, right?”

I love that he doesn’t condemn my ambition or my confidence. How could he? The guy who’s been working toward his dream in one form or another since he was three years old? A deep laugh rises from my belly through my chest and erupts in the quiet of the night.



“I was freaking amazing!”

We laugh together until he grabs me by my nape, tugging my face to his.

“You are so damn talented, Pep,” he whispers against my lips. “It’s dangerous to be as gifted and beautiful as you are in this town.”

I draw back just enough to look into the dark eyes that aren’t laughing anymore.

“Why?”

“You’re a goldmine, and everyone will want in.” His eyes harden, the muscle in his jaw flexing beneath the skin. “But I’ll crush anyone who tries to take advantage of you.”

“Rhyson, no one’s trying to take advantage of me.” I pop a handful of almonds in my mouth. “I can take care of myself. I don’t want you fighting battles for me, okay? That will only play into people thinking of me as Rhyson Gray’s girlfriend.”

“You *are* Rhyson Gray’s girlfriend.” His eyes dare me to deny it.

“Of course I am, but I don’t want to be *just* that. I don’t want that to be the first thing people think about when they see me. When they work with me. I—”

My phone ringing beneath the lounge chair chops into my sentence.

“Don’t answer it.” Rhyson frowns, placing a hand over mine reaching for the phone. “We’ve had no time together.”

“I know, and I want an update on your dad. We haven’t gotten to really talk about how he’s doing.”

I glance at the screen.

“It’s San.” I lean forward to peck a kiss on his lips. “It’ll be quick. Promise.”

I grab the phone, turning away from Rhyson to plant both feet on the flagstones.

“San, hey. What’s up?”

“I promise it wasn’t me.”

“What wasn’t you? What are you talking about?”

“*Spotted* just broke the story about you and Rhyson. The pictures are out.”

“The story broke?” I ask. “Pictures from New York you mean?”

Rhyson’s fingers, tracing lines up and down my naked spine, go still. He jumps up and strides over to his pile of clothes near the pool, naked, digging around in a pair of cargo pants for his phone.

“Yeah.” San heaves a sigh. “We aren’t the only ones who ran it. Apparently that pap sold those pics to several outlets.”

“Is the . . . I mean, it’s not bad or anything, right?” The knot in my stomach tightens.

“You look great, actually.” San laughs. “It’ll probably make folks want to see Luke’s video even more.”

“Video?” I push my fingers through my still-damp and tangled hair. “What about his video?”

“There’s pictures of you and Rhyson on the set of Luke’s video from today.”

I press the phone to my chest and close my eyes. Before I’ve even had a chance to prove anything, my abilities will be called into question.

“You there, Kai?” San’s voice echoes from the phone pressed to my breastbone.

I pull the phone back to my ear to respond, needing to end the call and see it for myself.

“San, yeah. I’m gonna go.”

“You aren’t planning to come home tonight, right?”

“No, I’m staying at Rhyson’s.” Something in San’s voice prompts my next question. “Why?”

“Our place is crawling with paps. Get used to it.”

As soon as we hang up, I go to the *Spotted* website. No need to search because we’re the front page story. There are pictures. The picture of Rhyson

and me in the tree house. Me straddling him and looking over my shoulder, my face clear as day. We knew those were coming, but the pictures from today on set floor me. We're standing close, intimacy and affection apparent between us. Rhyson's face is buried in my hair for one shot, our hands clasped. In another I'm looking at him like some lovestruck puppy, my adoration clear.

"I don't care, Bristol." Rhyson's voice breaks my concentration. "I told you those pictures from New York would surface sooner or later, and I have no idea who took the pictures today on set. I guess it could have been anybody."

He nods, listening to her response, dressed now in cargo pants, feet and broad chest still bare.

"Don't tell me to be careful, Bris. Fuck careful. I don't care who knows. You can tell them that . . . hold on."

He walks over to me, squatting at my feet by the lounge chair, setting the phone down on the ground.

"Bristol's getting calls and texts about the story. About the pictures. About us." He tips up my chin, studying my face. "Can she confirm?"

I didn't think we'd have to do this so soon. We just got back from New York. He popped up on set, we fought, we made up, he came home, we made love in the pool. Cheese, hummus, chicken, nuts. Now I'm splattered all over the interweb. Things are moving fast. Things have broken the speed limit. Things are traveling at the freaking speed of light.

"Pep?" Rhyson flips the length of hair over my naked shoulder, his warm hand cupping my jaw. "I *want* to confirm. Can I?"

Our eyes lock. A lot hinges on this moment, on my next words.

"Remember I'm yours and you're mine." He leans up and kisses me, one hand slipping under my hair. "I kinda want the world to know."

A part of me wants that too. Other parts of me want time to get used to this. Time to adjust to adjacent fame. Time to create my own. But it looks

like I won't get that now. Every time he kisses me, I fall deeper. Fall further. My reasons for resisting him disintegrate.

"Baby, can I confirm?"

I press my forehead into his, nodding and running my fingers through the wet, silky hair clinging around his ears. He grins, giving me one more kiss before returning to Bristol on the phone.

"Confirm, yeah," he says.

I slip on his long-sleeved T-shirt, looking back to my phone to read the story beneath the pictures.

*"Notoriously media-shy rocker, Rhyson Gray, isn't hiding his new relationship with aspiring singer-dancer-model, Kai Pearson."*

Model? I'm five foot two. I couldn't model my way down a grocery store aisle.

*"Sources close to Gray confirm that he has been seeing Pearson secretly for months".*

No sources close to Rhyson have confirmed anything. The only "close source" is the one he's on the phone with now. Load of crap reporting.

*"Pearson, a Georgia native, recently moved to Los Angeles, teaches dance classes at a Los Angeles rec center, and works at L.A. eatery, The Note. Some speculate the two met through Gray's uncle, Bentley Gray, who is also Pearson's vocal coach. Pictures were obtained today on the set of Luke Foster's new video, in which Pearson stars as a dancer. Pearson has appeared in one other music video, Drex Martin's single, 'Candy.'"*

"You were in Drex Martin's video?" Rhyson stands over me, scrolling through the same story on his phone, a frown puckering his face.

Drex hasn't entered my mind in months. Seeing my name linked to his in print rattles me, floods my mind with fractured images from a dark night I'm glad I barely remember.

"Yeah, it was a fluke, but yeah."

"Fluke?" He tosses the phone onto the lounge chair and returns his eyes

to my face. “How do you mean?”

“It was my first month here.” I pick at a few chunks of cheese, but my appetite is suddenly gone. “I was taking a dance class at the rec center, and one of the instructors was booked for Drex’s video, but sprained her ankle.”

I shrug, giving up completely on the food and lying back in the lounge, crossing my ankles.

“She’d seen me dance and recommended me to take her place. It wasn’t a big deal. Didn’t get much attention since the song didn’t do that well.”

“His songs never do.” Rhyson’s voice is heavy with disgust.

“You guys know each other?” Dread creeps over me as I wait for his response.

Rhyson scoots behind me on the lounge, coaxing my head back against his chest so he can run his fingers through my tangled hair.

“Let’s just say if life was a Marvel comic,” Rhyson says, pulling my elbows up on his knees so I can get more comfortable between his legs. “Drex and I would be arch nemeses.”

The dread that was creeping over me freezes into a sheet of ice covering every inch of my body.

“Wh-why? What do you have against him?”

“Plenty, but it started with what he had against me.” Rhyson pushes my hair to the side, dropping a kiss on my neck.

“I met Drex at the School for the Arts, same as Marlon and Jim. He assumed I would be an entitled, arrogant prick and hated me on sight.”

Rhyson laughs behind me.

“When in all actuality, I was a total and complete dork. He tried to make life hell for me. Petra and I were still dating, even though she lived in Russia. We were basically glorified pen pals. I mean, my parents kind of orchestrated it. But we were dating, and she was on tour here, so she visited.”

“What happened?” I ask, afraid of how this is unfolding.

“He fucked her.”

Oh. God.

“He wh-what?” I turn, twisting around to see his face.

“Yeah, he’s the one she cheated with.” Rhyson’s mouth tips in a wry grin. “We weren’t in love or anything, but it still hurt and was embarrassing as fuck.”

“So *that’s* why you hate him.”

“Oh, it goes much deeper than that.”

Deeper than Drex screwing his girlfriend? How much deeper could it go? I’m afraid to find out.

“Not sure if you remember when my first album dropped,” Rhyson says, “but there were several tracks leaked. And they weren’t even mastered. They sounded awful. It almost ruined my release. Definitely cost me sales. I know he was behind it.”

“No way. Oh my gosh, Rhyson, are you sure?”

“I can’t prove it, but he was in the studio a few nights, and one of his boys was an engineer on the project. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

This is so much worse than I thought.

“Even now,” Rhyson continues. “If he’s at Wood, they give me a heads up. I’m not the only owner, and he and I are cool with some of the same people even though we aren’t cool with each other. But everyone knows we can’t be in the same room. If he’s booked, they let me know.”

“Why do you think he hated you so much?”

“I don’t know how it started, except jealousy maybe. He had no idea that I’d been through hell. From the outside looking in, it probably seemed to him that I had it all. He just always wanted what was mine.”

His phone rings, and Rhyson grunts, glancing at the screen.

“I promise this is the last call.” He swings one leg over the lounge, standing up. “It’s Bris again.”

He leans down, teasing me with his eyes before kissing my lips quickly.

“Apparently everyone’s really interested in my new girlfriend.”

He walks a few feet away, giving me just enough space to draw a deep breath and consider all that he just told me.

*He just always wanted what was mine.*

How can I tell Rhyson that Drex had something else that was his? How can I tell him that Drex had me?

# Chapter

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Kai

I'M TIRED OF THIS ALREADY. IT'S been a week since the pictures posted and the story broke, and photographers still seem to be everywhere I am. I keep telling myself it will die down, but as soon as I step out of the rec center after my dance class, a pack of photographers swell forward, hurling questions at me, shoving cameras in my face.

"Kai, how long have you and Rhyson been together?"

"Are you living with him?"

"Will you be going on the road with him?"

I ignore them, just like Rhyson told me to, lowering my head even though my hair is pulled up and doesn't shield my face from the cameras' flashes.

I estimate how long it will take me to run to the bus stop, already regretting telling Rhyson I'd be fine without Gep. The girls from my class laugh and squeal behind me, but I don't turn to say good-bye. I take off running, partly to put distance between me and the paps. Partly because I can't afford to miss the next bus.

A few of the persistent ones chase me for a little bit, but honestly, I'm not that big of a deal. I expect this rabid interest to pass soon. Rhyson's the star. Not me.

Not yet. Maybe after this lunch meeting, I'll be one step closer.

As soon as I sit on the bus, my phone rings.



“What took you so long to call me back, San?”

“I do have a job and all, Kai. I mean, I know I’m not dating a rock star like you, but you’re not the only one with a life.”

“San, this is serious.” I can’t believe I’m having to swallow back tears on the Metro, surrounded by people who could have been Googling me this morning.

“What’s wrong, pipsqueak?” His voice holds concern that undoes me even more, forcing a tear down my cheek.

“I’m going to lose him,” I whisper, lowering my head and cupping my hand around my brow to shield my eyes.

“Kai, calm down. That guy’s nose is wide open for you.”

“No, listen to me. D’you remember Drex Martin?”

“I thought you said we weren’t ever to talk about him again?” San slows his words down because he knows for me to bring up Drex this must be serious.

“Rhyson hates Drex. Like despises him to the point of won’t be in the same room with him.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“No, it is.” I close my eyes, replaying my conversation with Rhyson and the horror I felt the more he shared. “Petra, Rhyson’s only other girlfriend, cheated with Drex in high school.”

“Damn. That’s bad, but it was high school. I’m sure Rhyson’s not still stuck on that.”

“And then Rhyson’s convinced Drex leaked those tracks from his first album.”

“Aw, hell. That is bad.”

“If Rhyson ever finds out I . . .” I look around the bus, not sure who might be listening or have their phones recording me. “He can’t find out, San.”

“I think you should just tell him, Kai.”

“No, you don’t understand.” I press a trembling hand to my forehead. “We just started, and I love him, San. Like, I *love* him. I can’t lose him now.”

“You won’t. Rhyson’s not unreasonable. He’ll understand that you and Drex had your thing before you even knew him. Just—”

A beep from another call cuts off whatever San would have said. I glance at my screen. My heart lifts and falls when I see R. Geritol.

“I gotta go, San. It’s Rhys. Can you still drop me off at his place later?”

“Yes, and tell him!”

“Bye, San.”

I switch over.

“Hey, baby,” I say quietly.

“Hey, Pep. You okay?”

I try to steady my voice and sound as normal as I can.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just leaving class.”

“How was it? Any trouble with reporters?”

“Just a few, but it was no big.”

“Where you off to now?”

How to answer? If I tell him I’m meeting Dub, we may argue, and things have been perfect between us. I’ve been staying at his place for the most part, falling deeper and harder every day. Between the one-night stand with Drex and meeting Dub for lunch, the things I’m keeping from him are piling up, and I hate it.

But I have to. On both fronts, I have to.

“Just grabbing lunch.”

“Then you’re coming home?”

Home. It sounds so good when he says it. Would it freak him out if he knew home for me is wherever he is? That I’d move in tomorrow if he asked me? Where is that girl who was scared to trust him? Who wanted to take things so slow? After little more than a week together, my heart is unreservedly his.

“Yeah. Then I’ll be home.”

“Can Gep come get you?”

“Um, I’ll be fine.”

“Pep, I don’t like you taking the bus.”

“San will bring me to your place later. I need to swing by my apartment to grab a few things.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Someone tugs the rope to stop, and I realize I need to get off too. “Hey, this is my stop.”

“Okay.” His voice drops. “I’m at home writing. Missing you.”

“I miss you too.” I look around at the other passengers, wondering if any of them recognize me. Wondering if any of them are surreptitiously aiming their camera phones at me. “I need to go.”

“Love you.”

I catch the eye of a girl staring at me just a tad too long for comfort. Does she know who I am? Or at least who I’m dating?

“Pep?”

“I heard you. Me too. I’ll see you later.”

There’s a pause before he answers.

“Okay. See you.”

As soon as I’m off the bus, and oriented to where I’m supposed to meet Dub, I pull my phone back out and text Rhyson.

***Me: There were people all around and I wasn’t sure if any of them recognized me so I didn’t want to say it, but I live you too.***

***R. Geritol: You LIVE me? Thanks, Pep. I live you too.***

***Me: LOL! Damn autocorrect. I LOVE you, idiot. TTYL.***

I scan the tables lining the sidewalk, searching for Dub’s broad shoulders and platinum hair.

“Kai, over here.” He waves me over to the table where he’s already

seated.

I sit across from him, and immediately wonder if it was a good idea to meet in such a public place. This needs to be fast. I don't want to be rude, but we need to cut to the chase. I ignore the menu at my elbow and meet his eyes directly.

"So you got the footage?"

He raises his brows and turns his mouth down at the corners.

"Well, aren't you all business?"

"Sorry. I don't mean to be." I glance around at the other diners on the patio. "Just been kind of crazy for me the last week, and being out has been tough."

"Oh, yeah. You and Rhyson."

I look up at him, not responding with anything but a nod.

"Look, I know it might be a little awkward now that you're dating Rhyson," Dub says, "Seeing as how I asked you out a couple of times before."

*A couple? Try six, but who's counting?*

"Okay, more than a couple." His self-deprecating laugh reaches me across the small table. "But I didn't know you were Gray's girl."

"I wasn't at the time. We were just friends."

"I'm not sure you were ever just friends." Dub lifts one dark eyebrow, a wide grin showing off his white teeth. "Even when I saw you at Jimmi's party, he was pissed off when we danced together."

"You knew that?" I tilt my head and consider him. "Did you provoke him on purpose?"

"Maybe a little." Dub shrugs those massive shoulders and grins. "Not many people in this town seem to have the balls to go head to head with him, but I got my start boxing in Ireland. I don't back down from nobody."

"Yeah, well, now you know, and Rhyson knows that you and I are just friends."

“If things change between you two . . .” He lifts and lowers his dark eyebrows suggestively.

“They won’t.” I laugh like he knew I would and pick up the menu. “Now what’s good?”

After we’ve both ordered our salads and mineral water, Dub pulls out his phone to show me some of the footage from the video.

“Oh, wow.” My hand covers my mouth. I can’t believe that’s me. I look like . . .

“You’re a star, Kai.” Dub nods when the video ends. “It’s obvious.”

“Thank you so much for the opportunity. I can’t believe how well it’s turned out. Is Luke pleased?”

“Oh, hell yeah. Everyone is, including John Malcolm.”

“John Malcolm?” I take a sip of my water, trying to place the name. “Who’s that?”

“He’s one of the executive producers on *Total Package*. He flipped when he saw you dancing. When I told him you sing too, he said he had to hear for himself.”

“Are you serious?” Excitement dries my mouth out, so I take a giant gulp of my water.

“Can you be ready to audition for him in a couple weeks?”

I almost spew my water, catching the dribbles with a napkin.

“Sure, I can.”

“He wants you to audition for this season.”

“I can’t believe it.” I shake my head, unable to fully absorb this opportunity.

“Believe it.” Something catches Dub’s eye across the street. “Looks like we got company.”

I follow his glance. The camera lenses reflect the sunlight, blinding me for a moment. At first it seems to be just a few, but then I realize there are several more gathering up and down the sidewalk. They start snapping

pictures.

“This won’t look good.” Dub doesn’t look upset. He tosses a few bills down on the table and stands up abruptly.

I stand up too, conscious of my capri workout pants and the cropped top. My hair is scooped up in a high ponytail and I’m wearing no makeup. I’ve never thought so much about what I’m wearing than in the last week with my own photo booth trailing my every move.

Dub and I cross the street, headed for the lot where he’s parked.

The questions bounce off us like pellets.

“Are you still with Rhyson, Kai?”

“Does he know you’re seeing someone else?”

“So are you exclusive or not?”

Their line of questioning shows me just how dangerous lunch with Dub was. This could have ended really badly. Fortunately, Dub’s car is close by. He grabs my hand so that when he increases the pace, I can keep up. He has me in his car and we’re pulling off before they get many more pictures.

They really blindsided me that time. I don’t get their interest in me. I mean, maybe I do. Rhyson’s never shown any interest in one particular girl, and they probably wonder what’s so special about me. As we zip through the streets toward my apartment so I can pack a few things and go to Rhyson’s house, I can’t help but wonder the same thing.

# Chapter

## THIRTY-NINE

### RHYSON

I'VE TRIED THE SONG IN A different key. I've rearranged the notes. Adjusted the rhyme on the lyrics. I've done everything I can think of, but it's still not working. My fingers fly over the piano keys, reverting to Chopin like I always do when I'm stuck. Something about the technical demand of his pieces forces my mind to work and maneuver around musical problems until I find the solution.

"Stuck, huh?" Marlon asks from the doorway.

"Nothing Chopin can't handle." I gesture toward the floor cushions scattered around my music room. "Pull up a chair."

"So we working on my song today or what?" Marlon leans back, folding his hands behind his head.

"I'm kind of lodged in this song." I pick out a medley using only the black keys. "Tomorrow?"

"Nah. I got shows. Leaving tomorrow." Marlon grabs another cushion, sliding it behind his back against the wall. "Can you do next week at Wood?"

"Yeah, that works."

"So what you working on?"

"My album actually." I abandon the keys, turning on the piano bench to fully face him.

"Nice to see you writing again."

“Yeah. Feels good.”

I can't catch the grin that sneaks onto my face. I'm so fucking *happy*. Having Kai in my house, in my bed, in my life, makes me the happiest I've ever been. I've always been able to talk to Marlon about most things, but this not so much. He still doesn't trust her, and if he starts talking shit about her again, it will shove a wedge between us. Nothing has ever separated Marlon and me. It feels weird to know a girl could come between us, but Kai isn't just some girl. She is *the* girl. There was no “the” before her. And I don't think there will be another.

“Please tell me that goofy grin is not because you're writing songs about your girlfriend.”

“Matter of fact, I am.”

“I think my dick just shrank on your behalf.”

“Don't blame me for your tiny dick. From what I hear, it's always been underwhelming.”

He grips his junk through his jeans.

“Nobody's ever been underwhelmed by this dick.”

We share a grin because that's probably true.

“I'm gonna take your word on that,” I say.

“So am I.” Bristol strides into the room, eyes glued to her phone.

“Oh, you could find out for yourself, Bristol.” Marlon jumps to his feet, reaching for my sister, but she sidesteps, never raising her eyes from her phone. “And I promise you wouldn't be underwhelmed.”

“Save it, Grip.” She finally looks up, zeroing in on me with a frown. “We got trouble.”

I'm never getting this song done.

“What kind of trouble?”

“Your new girlfriend kind of trouble.” She rolls her eyes. “That girl is a thorn in my side already.”

“I'm actually starting to like her.” Marlon gives me a wink and flops back



onto a floor cushion.

*About damn time.*

“Maybe I’d like her too,” Bristol says, “If she weren’t cheating on my brother.”

“Cheating?” I try to hold my face together when my heart is screeching inside my chest. The word “cheat” anywhere near my girl makes my blood run cold. “What the fuck are you talking about, Bris? Talk fast.”

She doesn’t talk. Instead she hands me her phone. I take my time looking at the screen because what I see there could crush me.

It does.

It’s a series of pictures on *Spotted*, all featuring Kai and Dub. Eating lunch. Looking at something on a phone together at the table. And then walking down a sidewalk holding hands.

The sight of Dub touching her almost undoes me. Almost unravels all the carefully constructed fibers holding me together.

“That’s today.” Bristol jabs her finger at the screen. “Just hours ago.”

“There’s an explanation for this.”

I say it because there has to be. I can’t entertain the possibility that the most real thing I’ve ever had is counterfeit. That kind of betrayal by Kai would slice through me like glass.

“It’s exactly what it looks like, Rhys,” Bristol spits at me, hands on hips.

“Man, just when I was feeling her,” Marlon chimes in. “Don’t ignore what’s right in front of you. Maybe she wants you to put her on, but wants to see what Dub can do for her too.”

“You guys don’t know her.” I keep my voice strong, even though the longer I see the pictures, the louder the doubts scream in my head.

“Rhyson, that naïve bullshit was acceptable when you were seventeen and Petra fucked around on you.” Bristol grabs her phone, holding it up in the air like Exhibit A for a jury. “The stakes are higher now. You’re a global superstar. If you won’t protect what you’ve built, at least respect the team

that's helped you build it."

"Rhyson!" Kai's voice drifts down the hall. "Rhys, where are you?"

She walks in the room, and I want to be alone with her. She's wearing the same outfit from the pictures. The thought of Dub with her sets off tiny explosives in my heart. I'd punch my hand through my piano if it wasn't priceless.

"Oh, here you are." She walks in farther, stopping beside me and tipping up on her toes until her lips touch my cheek. "Hey, Grip. Bristol."

And she slams into their brick wall of silence. Marlon and Bristol are obviously waiting for me to lay into Kai. I don't know if I can. I love her too much. I need her too much. If she denies it, can I believe her? If she admits it, everything else means nothing. I don't want Bristol and Marlon to know how vulnerable I am to her. For that matter, I don't want Kai to know.

Kai triangulates a confused glance between me, Marlon, and Bristol.

"Rhyson, is everything okay?" She presses into me, gripping my hand and tipping her head back to plumb my eyes with concern. "Is it your dad, baby?"

"Oh my God." Bristol sucks her teeth and throws her hands up in the air. "I assumed it was her magic pussy that had you whipped. I didn't know she used damn heartstrings. Insidious."

"Bristol, shut up." My words fight their way through tight lips.

"What's she talking about?" Kai pulls back another few inches to look at me more closely.

"Did you actually think you could get away with it?" Bristol demands.

"Get away with what?" Kai frowns, looks at Bristol, and drops my hand completely. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"This, honey." Bristol pushes the phone in Kai's face. "You can't go running all over town cheating on my brother. I know you're used to living under a rock in Georgia, but here in LA, it doesn't work like that."

Kai scans the phone screen, her eyes going wide and flying to my face.

“Rhyson, you know I wouldn’t do this.”

“Well, looks like you’ve got some explaining to do.” Marlon’s laugh is harsh from his spot on the floor cushion. “You’re denying it when we’re looking right at the pictures. That takes balls. Gotta give you that.”

I hate this. I hate that we’re ambushing her with these pictures, almost as much as I hate the fact that the whole world assumes all the things Marlon and Bristol are saying. Kai’s eyes beg me to believe her when she hasn’t even offered an explanation yet. I have to look at the pictures again just to keep myself from giving in to those eyes.

“Do you know how this looks?” Bristol takes another step into Kai’s space, until only inches separate their faces. “Do you have any concept of who you’re dating? You’re some wannabe multi-hyphenate nobody. How dare you?”

Kai ignores Bristol’s insults and looks right at me.

“My only mistake was not listening to you, Rhyson.”

“Oh, you had to tell her not to fuck other people?” Bristol barbs the question with sarcasm.

“Bris, shut up,” I snap.

“You don’t know me, Bristol.” Angry fire lights Kai’s eyes. “You have no idea who I am or what I want. Rhyson and I were friends before we were —”

“Fucking?” Bristol cuts in.

“Shut the hell up,” I warn. “This is between Kai and me.”

“It would have been if she’d kept her secret lunch with Dub a secret and not broadcast it to the whole world,” Bristol says. “Now it’s between you, Kai, and everyone who has the Internet. And that’s everyone, by the way.”

“It wasn’t a secret lunch,” Kai says with a frown.

“I didn’t know about it.”

I can’t hold that back, even with Marlon and Bristol still here. Kai’s eyes meet mine, and the guilt I see there is like a cold fist upper-cutting through

my heart. I know her too well to not know it's guilt. What the hell does she have to feel guilty about if this isn't what it seems?

"I know, Rhyson, and I'm sorry." Kai shakes her head. "But you know I wouldn't do what they're implying."

"These sites aren't *implying* anything. They're out and out saying you're cheating on my brother. It's damaging." Bristol says. "He's not Joe Blow. He's a brand. He's Rhyson fucking Gray."

Kai snaps around to face Bristol, her face rigid with anger.

"You don't get it, Bristol. I don't care if Rhyson's bagging groceries," Kai says. "I fell in love with a man, not a brand, and I wouldn't ever do anything to jeopardize that. Certainly not cheat on him in broad daylight. Or at all for that matter."

Damn, I love this girl. I don't know what the explanation is, but there is one. I don't understand the guilt I saw in her eyes yet, but I will.

"Both of you get out."

My words are quiet but fall heavy like a hammer in the room.

"Rhyson, we—"

"Shut up, Bristol." I look at Marlon, still lounging on the floor cushion. "Out, dude. I need to talk to my girl."

Marlon slides a glance between Kai and me, and raises his eyebrows, silently asking if I know what I'm doing. I just nod, needing them gone. Marlon stands and grabs Bristol's hand. He'd use any excuse for that.

"Come on, Bris. You heard the man."

"Rhyson, don't fall for a line of bull and a good lay." Bristol holds up her phone. "These pictures don't lie."

"*She* doesn't lie." I look at Kai, and I know I'm right. I know Kai like I know music. In my blood. In my heart. Woven into the fibers that connect us.

Bristol and Marlon leave a waiting quiet behind in the music room. I'm waiting for Kai to speak, waiting for her to explain. Waiting for her to touch me. To remind me of how perfect her skin is against mine.

I sit on the piano bench. She looks at me from under her lashes for a few seconds before sitting down beside me, leaving a space between us.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was having lunch with Dub.” Her quiet voice wavers. “I am so sorry I put you in this position. That people think I’m cheating on you.”

“I don’t care about that.” I pause, fighting the burning in my chest when I consider anyone thinking she belongs to someone else. “I mean, I do, but I’m more concerned about you keeping it from me than about what everyone else thinks.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I was completely blindsided, Pep. I couldn’t even defend you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry and tell me why you did it,” I say, my words staccato.

She sucks in a breath, her cheeks flushed, her full pink lips pressed tight together.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“That’s a shit reason for not telling me. And you’re damn right I don’t like it. Videos and jobs are one thing, but meeting Dub outside of that, not cool.”

“This *was* work. What else would it be?” She turns on the bench to face me, folding one knee under her. “I know you don’t like him.”

“I don’t like him because he likes *you*.”

“We talked about that.”

“Oh, did you? So he admitted he’s using jobs to get closer to you?”

“He’s not, Rhyson, and for you to say that makes me think you don’t believe in my talent.”

“Bullshit.” I stand up and pace away from the piano. “I offered to sign you to Prodigy months ago.”

“You’d barely heard me sing when you offered, and warned me against

being a dancer who sings.” Her eyes narrow and her nostrils flare. “So consider that before you accuse someone *else* of making me offers just because they want to fuck me.”

I won’t be sidetracked by logic.

“Why were you out with him?”

“He wanted to show me some of the finalized footage from the video and to talk about some other jobs he’d like to book me for.”

“No agenda there.”

“I knew you’d respond this way.” She turns to put both feet on the floor, dropping her head in her hands. “That’s why I didn’t tell you we were meeting.”

I hate her keeping things from me.

“So what happened?”

“We were done eating and all these photographers crowded around.”

“Shocking. That’s why I told you—”

“I know. To take Gep.” She looks up at me. “I should have.”

“So then what happened?”

“We took off for Dub’s car, and obviously he’s faster than I am. He grabbed my hand—”

“Sure he did.”

“So I could keep up, and that’s how they got those pictures of us holding hands.”

“His car? You rode with him?”

“He dropped me off at my apartment so I could pick up some things, and San brought me here, just like I told you.”

“You brought things to stay here?”

“Yes, of course.” She sits up, leaning her back against the piano, locking our eyes together. “I told you I would.”

I make my way back over to the piano bench, settling beside her and walking my fingers across the small space separating us until our hands clasp.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen,” she says, eyes sorry and sober.

“I know, baby.” I pull my hand over her silky ponytail, passing my open palm over her shoulder. “But you have to remember, the stakes are so high at this level. It’s the cost of playing this game.”

“I don’t want to play a game. I just want to be with you.”

I smile at her, leaning in to drop a kiss on her lips.

“Same here, but it’s not that simple for me. You’ll see soon enough. It’s only a matter of time before things break for you.”

A wide grin spreads across her face.

“Speaking of, I’ve got some great news.”

“What news?”

“Dub said—”

“It’s already awesome.”

The look she warns me with threatens bodily harm.

“Dub said Luke’s team loved me in the video, and when he told them I sing, they invited me to audition for *Total Package*.”

Great. This just gets stickier and stickier.

“I don’t like that show, Kai.”

“Rhyson, *come on*.”

“No, Pep. I’m serious. I don’t like John Malcolm.”

“You don’t like anyone. That’s the guy Dub said wants to meet me.”

“I’m sure he does. They invited me to guest judge this season, but I turned them down. I didn’t want Luke to go on, and I don’t want you to do it.”

“You can’t make these decisions for me.” Her face falls, and she breaks the contact between our hands, claspings hers in her lap, a sigh leaving her lips. “You don’t get to map my career out like some Svengali.”

“I’m not.”

“No, you’re not.” She glances back up at me, a stubborn set to her mouth. “You’re my boyfriend, not my manager.”

“I want what’s best for you, Pep.”

“I bet that’s what your parents said to you too, right?”

“Don’t do that.” I clench my fists on the piano bench on either side of my legs so I don’t shout at her. “It’s not the same.”

“It is. You needed to make your own way, and so do I.”

“I know what this industry can do. How it can eat up people and spit them out. I won’t let that happen to you. I won’t risk you. You’re the most important thing in my life, Pep.” I pause before looking her in the eyes. “Do you know that? Can *you* say that?”

I immediately regret my confession. Little by little she has crept into even the broken places of my heart. She has taken me over, usurped even my music, and it shakes me how completely I love her. And there’s not a doubt in my mind that she loves me too, but not like that. Not over her career. Not yet.

“It’s not fair of you to ask me that from your position, Rhyson.” She runs her hands over the hair smoothed into a tight ponytail, looping her fingers at the back of her neck. “Like Bristol said, you’re already a star. A brand. You’ve got nothing to prove and nothing to lose.”

She swallows and drops her hands back to her lap.

“We both have an incredibly strong desire to perform. To create. The difference? Yours has been at full boil most of your life, and mine has been simmering. Delayed over and over. You can say I’m more important because you’ve had it. You’ve tasted it. I haven’t.” She quickly swipes at the tear rolling down her cheek, but not before I see it. “At least let me taste it before you ask me to choose you over it.”

“I would never ask you to choose me over it.”

She blinks at me through tears, wrecking me, condemning me because on some level, that’s exactly what I want.

“When you try to dictate to me, to tell me what I can and can’t do to advance my career, you ask me to choose. I want to please you more than



anything, Rhyson, but I have to do this. I'm auditioning for *Total Package* and doing anything else I feel will give me a shot."

This is a battle I can't win.

Yet.

I know I'm right. John Malcolm is slimy and opportunistic, and the thought of him exploiting Kai makes me want to beat him like a piñata. But I have to be careful how I help her. If I push her on this, I'll lose her. I know it, but everything in me wants to protect her from those who would hurt her, who would use her. I want to cut off those roads I know from experience have bridges that are out, but I can't if she won't let me. So for now, all I can do is love her, and show her in every way she'll let me.

I pull her across the bench, settling her softly curved body onto my lap. She lays her head on my shoulder, pushing her fingers up into my hair. I kiss every part of her I can reach. Her cheeks, her chin, her neck. And she kisses me back, desperation in every touch between us. It's taken all my life to find this, and there's no way I'll relinquish it. She grew up with unconditional love, but no fame. I grew up with fame, but no unconditional love. I don't know when we'll be in sync or when we'll need the same things at the same time, but until we do, I'm determined nothing will separate us.

"I want to play something for you." I intersperse the kisses I leave on her lips with my words.

She snuggles closer, pulling her knees up under her in my lap and running her nose along my neck.

"Let's hear it, Beethoven."

With my inspiration pressed against my heart, the song that's been blocked all day flows out of me like I sliced a vein open and let it run out of my own body. My fingers find the notes that have eluded me. My lips find the words.

*You're hot like Pepper on my tongue*

*Baby, you've singed me*

*And everything that I've become*

*Is from this heat you feed me*

*You burn*

*You burn*

*You burn*

*A hole straight through my heart*

*And I yearn*

*I yearn*

*I yearn*

*For you to consume me*

I keep playing the melody, oscillating from tender to sensual even when I run out of words. The notes speak for me, and I lift my eyes from the keys, waiting for her to hear. Hoping she hears.

“Pepper?” Kai pulls back, her eyes wide and awed. “Is that . . . is that song about me, Rhyson?”

How do I tell her my whole album is about her? That every song in my head, every lyric I conceive lately, grows out of the intimacy we share? The connection we have?

“Yeah, it’s about you.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Her lips tremble. She bites the bottom one, looking at me like she just saw her first sunrise. “Thank you.”

“Promise me something, Kai.”

“Anything.” She should be more careful with that smile because it makes my heart stop.

“No more secrets.” I brush a finger over her dark, straight silky brows. Over the high cheekbones. Over the lush line of her lips. “We choose to believe each other. To trust each other no matter what. Deal?”

Something flickers across her face before she shuts it. I don’t want to question it because questioning it would mean she may have more to hide. Questioning it may mean I have reason to doubt her when she nods yes.

When she smiles before she finally speaks.

“Deal.”

I’ve never been a guy who fantasized much. By the time I fantasized about something or someone, I had it. I owned it. I fucked it. But this girl, her I didn’t even dream about because my subconscious didn’t think she was possible. What’s between us, I didn’t know was out there. And now it’s all I want.

I turn on the piano bench until my back is against the piano, ignoring the discomfort of the keys pressing into me. I reach for her, lifting her until she sits across me, one leg on either side, her chest pressed into mine. I push the small top with its built in sports bra over her head, leaving her breasts high and naked, the nipples tight and pink.

“That’s probably a platinum single I just wrote for you, young lady.” I bend my head to suck on one nipple and then the other, waiting for it to go hard in my mouth and for her to shudder against me. “I think you should thank me better than that.”

A wicked grin looks surprisingly right on her sweet mouth. She leans away from me, sliding off the bench and to her knees between my spread legs on the floor. She flicks my belt buckle open, eyes melded in a glance with mine.

“I think you’re right.” She slips her hand inside my jeans, squeezing and sliding me less-than-gently, the roughness of her touch exactly what I need. “I really want to thank you, and I have a lot to be grateful for.”

God, that feels good already. My voice scratches in my throat, but I manage to rasp out the last intelligible words I’ll say for a while.

“Well, Pep, you better get started.”

# Chapter

## FORTY

Kai

“YOU COMING OR WHAT?” RHYSON POKES his head into the music room.

I’m at his piano, even though I don’t play. This spot always seems to inspire him, and maybe it will help me by osmosis. I’m seated on the bench, head phones in my ears, phone in my lap. Song on repeat. I pull one earplug out, tilting my head.

“Coming where, babe?”

“Remember you said you wanted to roll with me down to Wood.” Rhyson pulls a navy blue beanie over his messy hair. “Marlon and I are working on his song. You still wanna listen in?”

“Oh, yeah.” I roll the headphone wires up. “I was just listening to my song for the *Total Package* audition next week.”

He doesn’t respond. He just drops his head and fixes his eyes on the floor. The audition has remained a point of contention between us. Dub confirmed the details for Tuesday. I’m singing Jessie J’s “Masterpiece.” Ironically, it was Rhyson’s suggestion. He heard me practicing Christina Aguilera’s “Beautiful” and in bed that night told me it was trite and predictable. This while my eyes were rolling in the back of my head from a third orgasm. I asked him—after, of course—what he’d suggest instead. I was shocked when he actually gave me his honest opinion. He’s kept his distance while I’ve

rehearsed it, though, leaving me to Grady's tutelage.

Which is fine by me. The more space between Rhyson and my career, the better.

"How did the production meeting go?" I'm eager to change the subject.

"It was okay." He leans against the doorjamb, folding his arms across the Nike logo on his chest. "At this point, they have everything planned out. It's me and a piano. Not a ton of stuff. But lights and video and all the other things they want to add will be cool."

"Sounds exciting."

"The shows Petra's doing with us will be kind of fun." Rhyson links his hands behind his head. "We'll do just a few pieces together since my audience isn't exactly into classical. Just enough to make them ooh and ahhh a little."

Petra. Again. If my ugly insecurity were visible, I'd need a bag over my head.

"It's so soon." I chew on my bottom lip. "Two weeks, right?"

He walks over and sits beside me, pulling my legs across his lap.

"I've been thinking," he says.

"Uh oh." I smile at him, running my hand over the stubble on his chin and jaw.

"What do you think about coming on tour with me?"

My hand falls from his face and into my lap.

"And do what?"

"Be with me?"

Be his girlfriend. Leave all the opportunities popping off here for myself to watch him from the wings. I'm not sure what to say without starting an argument.

"It's not a long tour," he continues. "It's like six weeks. Just a few shows."

"Aren't you going to Europe?"

“A little.” He squeezes his thumb and index finger together, leaving a tiny continent-sized space between.

“You’re going to Europe *a little*?”

“It’s just six weeks.” He hesitates, pulling my fingers between his, not looking at me until he has to. “If you come, maybe we could do some songs together.”

I know any other girl in my position would be thrilled, but all I can think about is what I would assume if some unknown took the stage with Rhyson. Some girl I’d never heard of. Some girl he’s sleeping with.

“Are you bribing me to come on tour with you?”

“What? No. You’d be great. I’m doing stuff with Marlon to build buzz for his new solo album.”

“Grip has platinum collaborations with other artists. He’s already proven himself. I keep saying this, but it’s like you don’t hear me. All I want is the chance to do the same. To prove myself.”

“I do hear you, baby, and this is an excellent chance to prove yourself to a worldwide audience.” He grabs my hand, his fingers playing some melody I don’t hear on my arm. “Pep, if I’m on this tour and you’re here, we’re apart for six weeks.”

“We’re both in the business. There will be times when our commitments separate us.”

He frowns, dropping my arm. I give him a hopeful smile.

“Let’s see what happens with my audition and then talk about it later.”

His face steel traps as soon as I mention the audition. He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, biting down on whatever he would say.

“Is that hummus?” Rhyson conveniently turns his attention to the bowl of hummus I left on top of the piano.

“Yeah.” I hold my breath while he scoops up some of it on a cucumber. “Taste.”

“Shit.” He screws his handsome face into a grimace. “What the hell?”

Sarita made that?”

My face falls and my shoulders slump.

“I made it.”

“You . . . you made it?” He laughs, dropping the half-eaten cucumber back to the plate. “It tastes like butt.”

“Rhyson, it does not. It’s made with fresh chick peas.”

“Tastes like it’s made with fresh butt.”

“I wanted to make one of your favorites. Something healthy, and this is what I get?” I can barely hold on to my offended face because he always does this to me. Makes me laugh when I should be mad at him.

He grabs me, squatting and snatching me close, arms under my butt until my heels leave the floor and I’m on my toes.

“I don’t care if you can make hummus, babe.” He sucks my earlobe into his mouth, and my fingers cling to his shoulders because it feels so good I might fall if I don’t hold on. “You do everything else well. Especially that magic trick you’ve been working on.”

I pull back, looking at him suspiciously. Because it’s Rhyson and there’s always a catch.

“What magic trick?”

“You know.” He grins and bends to whisper in my ear. “That one where you make my dick disappear in your mouth.”

“Rhyson!” I drop my forehead to his chest, face on fire.

“I’ll never get tired of making you blush.” A deep laugh from his chest reverberates between us. My favorite sound, next to him singing. “I’m sorry, by the way.”

“For what?” I ask, frowning.

We haven’t had much to apologize for since our big argument last week. Things have been unbelievable. I’m almost scared to leave the house because it’s all the outside forces that tear at us.

“I’m sorry I haven’t told you I love you today.” He shakes his head from

side to side, eyes locked with mine. “So remiss. Bad boyfriend.”

I’m convinced half my laugh lines will be because of him. After Mama died, I thought the closest I would come to joy would be the absence of pain. I was ready to settle for that. To just not feel that black hurt that hovered over every part of my life and seemed to occupy my very soul. Rhyson has taught me that joy has its own space. It is not the absence of anything, but its own presence. Its own entity. It fully inhabits us if we let it, and I have it with him.

“Does it feel weird to be somebody’s boyfriend?” I caress the hair not shoved haphazardly under the beanie.

“Not yours.” He leans down, licking into my mouth. Pulling my lips between his. Scrolling down to suck at the underside of my jaw. “I could eat on you all day. Just nibbles here and there until you’re all gone. All mine.”

“I’d like that,” I say, voice husky with passion and emotion because the two are inseparable when it comes to Rhyson. I’ve had sex before, but I’ve never had this. This melding of the deepest love I can fathom and passion I never imagined. They twine around each other so tightly that every time he’s inside of me, I hand over more of my heart. More of my soul. I always think he has it all, and he always finds more. Takes more. Gives me more.

Rhyson walks us backward to the piano bench, sitting down and settling me on his lap, his erection poking between my legs. I know where this leads. It’s led there on this very bench several times.

“Rhyson, we don’t have time.” I still press my breasts into him, just because I want him to regret it as much as I do. “Grip’s waiting.”

“I know. Ignore the wood. That’s my constant state when you’re around.” He pushes my hair over my shoulder, his eyes unexpectedly serious when they meet mine. “I want to talk to you about something. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Is everything okay?” I pull back. “Your dad?”

His face changes, hardens like it always does when we talk about his family.



“Dad’s recovering. Grady still wants us to try family counseling when he’s well enough.” His eyebrows shoot up and he rolls his eyes. “Oh. I forgot to tell you this—my mother wants to move here.”

“What? Wow.”

I don’t know how to feel about that. She wasn’t exactly a welcoming presence the first time we met.

“Yeah, she says she wants the family to heal, and nothing is holding them in New York since all of their family is here.” He shakes his head and seems to want to shake off the subject. “Save all that for later. That isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh. Then why so serious?”

“Was that a *Dark Knight* movie quote? Or were you actually asking why I was being so serious?”

“Little bit of both.”

We smile at each other because even with the sex we can’t get enough of, even with the cameras that seem to follow us if we step outside this house, even with the tension over my next career steps, we’re still great friends. I hope that never changes.

“I want you to move in with me.”

Whoa. Didn’t see that coming. I go from an easy smile in a tender moment to the breath ragged in my chest and sweat popping out on my forehead. Even though I thought I was ready for this, thought I wanted it, now that he’s actually *asking* me, I’m not sure I can.

“What? Rhyson, I . . . that’s a huge step.” I slide off his lap, pacing back and forth in front of the piano, running my hands through my hair. “And we haven’t been together long at all.”

“We may have only been officially dating for a few weeks, but we’ve been together for months.” He persuades me with the charisma of those eyes and that smile. “Come on, Pep. It makes sense. You’re here all the time anyway.”

“I know, but—”

“And I know San’s your best friend, but you living with a *Spotted* reporter isn’t a good look. I know he’d never expose anything on purpose. He’d never hurt you on purpose.” Rhyson’s mouth flattens into a hard line. “But if he ever hurt you just by being who he is and working where he works, it would be very bad for him.”

“Rhyson, that look scares me.”

I see it in Bristol. I saw it in his mother at the hospital. There is a ruthlessness inextricably tangled into their DNA. I’d never want to be on the other end of it, and I don’t want San to be either.

“That look isn’t ever for you. You don’t have to worry.” He walks over to me, taking my hands in his. “But anyone who ever tries to hurt you, they should worry.”

He dips his head until I can’t look away, and neither of us blinks. He’s showing me something he doesn’t show everyone, and I’m not sure I can handle it, but he thinks I can. So I will.

“Move in with me, Pep.”

“I just . . . I have to—”

“What’s the real issue? There’s always a real issue behind what you actually say.”

I heave a weighted breath because he’s so right.

“I watched my mom pack up our lives and start from scratch when my dad left. I promised myself I would always have my own space. That I would never be at the mercy of a man like that.”

“You don’t trust me to take care of you?”

He frowns, bending closer, eliminating the space between us. I pull back enough to think. Enough to make my point.

“I don’t *want* you to take care of me.”

*Why does he still not get that?*

“Pep, but I can. While you are making your way, I can. Have you thought

any more about quitting The Note?”

I have considered it. Not for the reasons he probably thinks.

“I’m quitting.” I raise a hand when his face lights up. “I’m quitting because it’s a circus. Photographers come in since it’s a public place. All the customers take pictures of me. Everyone asks about you. It’s just . . . a joke.”

“Can’t say I’m sad about it.” He tries to seduce me with those long lashes, going in for the kill. “So about you moving in . . .”

“I thought we were going to the studio.”

“Oh, yeah. Marlon’s gonna kill me if I’m late.” He grins, slapping my butt. “I can just blame it on you.”

“Oh, yeah, because he’s such a fan of me already.”

It upsets me that Rhyson’s best friend doesn’t trust me. Bristol, I can’t make myself care about because she’s probably an apple that didn’t fall far enough from her mother’s cold-hearted tree. But Grip is like a brother to Rhyson, and I know he only wants what’s best for him. For him to think that isn’t me hurts.

“I don’t care if he isn’t a fan yet. He will be. Soon everyone will be a fan of you. But I’m your biggest fan.” Rhyson drags me out of the music room by one hand, looking over his shoulder with that irresistible grin. “Don’t forget that when you’re big time.”

By the time we pull up to Wood, Rhyson is fifteen minutes late. He’s such a consummate professional, it does bother him. The whole way there, he’s tapping the steering wheel, honking at slow drivers, and driving too fast. I can barely keep up with his long legs on the best of days, much less when he’s speed walking to get to this session. He barrels through the front door of Wood, and I barely have time to take in the glass reception desk with mahogany accents or appreciate the mural of famous musicians painted on the walls before we are down a long carpeted hallway on our way to the studio.

“So each studio has a theme,” Rhyson says over his shoulder, giving his

version of an abbreviated tour. "Oak. Mahogany. Pine. You get the picture."

"Hey, Rhyson!" A girl calls from the end of the hall we just left.

We both turn to look at her. She looks ethnically mixed, her light caramel skin, smooth and unblemished. Blonde dreadlocks fall past her shoulders and to her waist. Her grey-green eyes are clear and a little too warm when they settle on my boyfriend.

"Kai, this is Amber, our receptionist," Rhyson says, his voice impatient. "Amber, Kai, my girlfriend. What's up?"

She looks at me an extra moment, those beautiful eyes cooling before she speaks.

"Just wanted you to know Marlon moved from the Maple room to Cherry." Her eyes go wide. "Oh! And nemesis is in Birch."

"Great," Rhyson mutters. "This night just got better."

"Problem?" I hold his hand as he negotiates the maze of hallways, passing various studios with their huge soundboards and the booths I would kill to get in.

"No, she was just giving me a heads up that Drex is here."

Rhyson stops because I have. He tugs on my hand, but I've dug my heels into the hallway carpet like they've dried into cement.

"Pep, I'm already late." He gives me a quick frown. "Come on."

"I'm-I'm not feeling well."

I have to get out of here. As vindictive as Rhyson says Drex has always been toward him, it's a small miracle he hasn't already made sure Rhyson knows about our one night together. Everyone else knows we're dating. I know Drex knows. And I know he remembers me. If he hears Rhyson and I are here together at Wood . . . I can't take the chance.

"What?" Rhyson leans in, cupping my face, frowning, concerned. "What kind of not feeling well? Like fever? Stomach? What's wrong?"

I ignore the guilt gnawing at my insides and clutch my stomach.

"I think it was that hummus." I grimace, biting my bottom lip.

His face clears and he grins ruefully.

“I hate to say I told you so, but I did say that hummus tasted like butt.”

I give a weak grin, pressing my hand deeper into my stomach.

“I’ll take you home.” He starts us back down the hallway.

“No, Grip’s already waiting for you.” I place a staying hand on his chest.

“I’ll catch a bus. I saw a stop just up the block.”

“No way.” He looks torn for a second. “I’ll have Gep come get you. He’ll take you home, and I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

I’m not crazy about it. I want out of this place like right now, but it’s probably the best I’ll do.

“Tell him to hurry.” I fake a stomach cramp. “I need to lie down.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

He pushes a door open behind him. The only noise in the room is the hum of a refrigerator. It’s a break room of sorts, furnished with just a few chairs and tables, a water cooler, and a couple of couches against the wall. He walks me over to a couch, pressing my shoulder until I’m horizontal.

“Just lie down here for a little bit. I’ll call Gep.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. “Let me find Marlon. I’ll be back.”

I lie down, staring at the tiles above me, wondering how my life got this complicated. My eyelids drift closed, for a few minutes blocking out all the threats to the best thing in my life. A finger tickles across my eyebrows.

*Rhyson.*

I open my eyes, and my worst nightmare stares back at me, wearing a disguise of blue eyes and dark brown hair, prone to curl. Most women would think he’s handsome. I did the first day I met him on set.

“Drex, hi.” My voice dries up. I swallow to irrigate the words. “I . . . it’s good to see you.”

“Is it really?” His grin is made of trouble and malice. “Long time, no see. You never returned my calls or texts.”

“I was busy.”

I sit up, putting distance between us, scooting to the other end of the couch. He follows, his body crowding me. I walk over to lean against the wall by the refrigerator.

“Where’s your boyfriend?”

I keep my face straight, raising my lashes to stare back at the man who can send everything tumbling down with just a few words.

“Drex, please don’t.”

“Oh, I’ve been watching you, sweet girl.” He walks over to me, and my heart thumps harder with every step he takes closer. “All over the blogs and tabloids. Rhyson Gray finally found his girl. How shocked was I when I realized it was you, my little dancer from months ago. A night I’ll never forget.”

He rolls a knuckle down my cheek, leaning forward, until his breath feathers across my lips. I tolerate his touch for a second, before pulling away ready to reason with him.

“Drex, you don’t have to—”

“Did you know we hate each other?”

I don’t nod or acknowledge his question. There isn’t a right way to respond. Anything I say or do, he’ll use against me.

“And knowing that, didn’t you wonder why I hadn’t rubbed it in his face already?” He smirks. “Our night together, I mean.”

I answer with one blink.

“I was waiting for the right time.”

A movement at the door draws glances from both Drex and me. It’s Rhyson.

Drex looks back to me, smiling like the devil.

“In case you’re wondering, this is it.”

“Kai, Gep is on his way.” Rhyson steps deeper into the room, Grip right behind him. “Drex, shouldn’t you be in Birch?”

“You know what, you’re right.” He walks to the door, pausing in front of

Rhyson. “Did your girl tell you we know each other?”

This awful man holds my happiness in his careless hands like a child skipping with Ming porcelain. I already feel it shattering around me, even though he hasn’t dropped it yet.

“Yeah, she was in that video of yours, right?” Rhyson shrugs. “Sorry, I don’t really remember that song. Not sure many people do.”

Drex’s narrowed eyes flick between Rhyson and Grip, who has flipped a chair, straddling it, elbows folded across the back.

“Yeah, that video wasn’t very memorable either. The director was a joke.” Drex nods. “The most memorable thing about that shoot was the night it wrapped.”

Fear and anxiety vice my chest. I want to crawl into the refrigerator and hide under a leftover, something with green fur growing on it.

I know Rhyson sniffs out Drex’s malevolence, trying to discern where it’s coming from and where it’s headed. I want to run across the room and insert myself between them, protect Rhyson from what’s coming, but some naïve part of me holds out hope that Drex won’t do it.

“Whatever.” Rhyson walks over to me, taking my hand and checking my eyes. “You okay, Pep?”

“That’s so sweet, Gray,” Drex says, looking at us, malignant anticipation building behind his eyes. “You’re trying the girlfriend thing again. Remember how I fucked that other one? The Russian? What was her name? Petra?”

“Shit.” Grip lowers his head to the arms he has folded across the back of the seat. “Drex, you got a death wish, dude?”

Rhyson stiffens beside me for a moment, but I can practically see him make a conscious decision to let it go.

“Drex, that was high school, and Petra’s ancient history.” Rhyson puckers his lips, like he’s meting out the words, one by one. “Like I said, I think they’re looking for you in Birch.”

“You’re right, high school was a long time ago. Petra was a long time ago.” Drex walks to the door, looking over his shoulder at us. He winks at me, a smirk dirtying his face. “Kai, though, she wasn’t that long ago. You should ask her about it.”

He leaves behind a silence so heavy I’m suffocating under it. It smothers me, sits on my face, blocks my air, squeezes my throat.

Grip looks from me to Rhyson, shaking his head, dark eyes narrowed.

“You have got to be shitting me,” he says. “Rhys, man, if she—”

“Get out, Marlon.” The knife-sharp edge on Rhyson’s voice already drips blood.

I want to cover my face. I want to hide, but there’s nowhere to go. The one secret I knew could ruin everything is out, and I already miss Rhyson’s trust. His love. His affection. It’s floating past me like mist.

“I’m getting tired of you telling me to get out, man,” Grip says. “You need to listen to me on this.”

“I said get out, Marlon, and lock that door.”

The look Marlon shoots me as he leaves boils with suspicion and mistrust. I can’t buy a break with the people who love Rhyson. Maybe after this, I won’t even be able to buy a break with him.

When it’s just the two of us, Rhyson swallows. Draws a shallow breath through his nose. His lips part to speak, but he snaps them shut.

“I want to ask you . . .” His words fall apart. He clamps his lips over what’s left of them.

“You can ask me anything.” The words tremble on my lips. “You know that.”

He’ll have to ask because I can’t volunteer it. I can’t hand over my happiness that way. Maybe he can get past this, but if he can’t . . . God, what if he can’t?

“You see, the thing is I feel like I already know what your answer’s gonna be.” Rhyson looks down at the floor, closing his eyes tightly like



inescapable images are burned there, already torturing him. “And I have no right to feel the way I’m gonna feel if you say what I think you’re gonna say.”

“Baby, I just—”

“But we said no more secrets, so you wouldn’t keep this from me, right?”

He looks back up at me, and it’s the hurt in his eyes that undoes me, that makes my eyes water.

“Rhyson, I wanted to tell—”

“Yes or no, Pep.” Rhyson lasers a look at me, pinning me to the wall with the sudden intensity of his stare. “Did you fuck Drex?”

I thought I could just say yes, but I can’t leave everything hanging on just that flimsy word that doesn’t begin to describe the dark loneliness of those foolish moments I can’t ever take back. That one word, those three letters, cannot convey how low and desperate I was that night. Mama’s birthday.

“Rhyson, I was in such a—”

“Yes or no.” Storm clouds build in his eyes.

“It was before—”

“Yes. Or. No.”

“Yes.”

He plummets to his haunches, elbows on his knees, head buried in his hands. His fingers tear at his hair, and a growl rips past his lips.

“Rhyson, you and I hadn’t even met then.”

He holds up one hand, silencing me, head still lowered.

“God, Pep.” He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Anyone else. Just . . . not him. Not that piece of shit.”

“I can’t change this, Rhyson.” Tears drown everything I would say. The words bob up in my throat, desperate to break the surface, only to go under again. “You and I didn’t even know each other then.”

He explodes to his feet, veins in his neck straining, fists clenched at his sides, face radioactive red. I’m standing in the heat blast of his nuclear rage,

absorbed in the violent shock of something unreasonable and out of control.

“It doesn’t matter!” He screams it. The words rattle in his throat like in a cage. Like trapped things behind bars clamoring to get out. “He fucked you. He had you, and I . . . I just don’t . . . I just can’t . . .”

His eyes fall to the ground. He looks at the goofy *Family Guy* magnets on the refrigerator. Looks at the locked door, like he’s held hostage in here with me. His eyes are wild, everywhere but on me. In a matter of minutes, he’s gone from looking at me like he can’t get enough, to now not being able to look at me at all. Like I’m some soiled rag someone else wiped their ass with.

His phone dings with a text, and he pulls it from his pocket to look at the screen.

“Gep’s outside.”

That’s all he says. My heart has atrophied in my chest. A muscle that has forgotten how to work, it doesn’t bother beating. I’m not even sure it’s pumping blood. I wasn’t married to Rhyson like Mama was to Daddy. We don’t have kids or much of a history, but I can’t imagine she hurt any more than this when he left her. He walked away. Is it easier to be the one doing the walking? Rhyson doesn’t tell me to go, but I know he wants me to.

So without another word, I do.

# Chapter

## FORTY-ONE

### RHYSON

IVAN GORSHKOV, HIGHLY RESPECTED RUSSIAN PIANO instructor, hated me. I knew it right away. He resented that there was so little he could teach a nine-year-old. He would rap my knuckles with a bamboo wand for minor mistakes. He'd set this metronome on the piano facing me. It ran constantly for the hours I studied with him. This perennial, steady, annoying tick.

In some twisted, Pavlovian way, that metronome is the sound of my fury. I've only experienced it a few times in my life, but when I'm enraged, that steady tick is in my head. It's my pulse. It's the aural expression of my rage. It's ticking in my chest like a bomb, primed to detonate. And God help anyone in my vicinity.

Thank God Kai left. I couldn't focus with her here. The thought of that vermin trespassing inside my girl has my stomach heaving. For him, that piece of shit, to have ever even touched her with those lying lips, to have had his mouth, his fingers near her, inside her. I'm tortured imagining the positions he had her in. If he took her from behind. If he came inside of her.

I'm a storm in motion. Thunder rumbles under my skin. Lightning strikes behind my eyes. I rush past the studios and down the halls, the metronome in my head marking my steps. Tick fucking tock. I don't even want to check this fury. I want to unleash it gale-force on that shitbag.

When I reach the Birch studio, I barely take note of the producer, the engineer, the singer at the board. My eyes zero in on the booth where Drex stands behind the glass and at the microphone, eyes closed and listening back to a track in the headphones.

“I need the room.” My hoarse voice barges into their conversation.

“What?” The singer Drex is collaborating with stands from his seat at the soundboard. “We paid for this session, Gray. What do you mean you need the room?”

“Session’s on me.” I’m struggling to contain my anger long enough to get witnesses out of here. “And I’ll throw in another for free.”

“You’ll throw in another?” The singer asks. “What do you mean?”

“I’m part owner of Wood.” I deliberately slow my words. “And I need the room. It won’t take long. Fifteen minutes tops I need with Drex.”

Understanding dawns on their faces. The enmity between Drex and me is well-documented in our circles. One by one they stand and drift off.

“This is between you and Drex,” the singer says before he walks out the door. “But when I come back in fifteen minutes, I need him still able to sing. We’re finishing this song tonight.”

I nod, but who knows what will happen?

I walk into the booth and close the door.

Drex opens his eyes, sliding the headphones off his head and around his neck. I don’t have anything to say to him yet. Instead, I slam him against the soundproofed wall, manacled his wrists in one hand and wrapping the wires around his neck with the other, pulling them taut. Red invades his face, and his eyes stretch until I think they may pop out of his head. I want them to pop out of his head. I tighten the wires more, drawing his ears closer to my lips so I can whisper to him.

“Do I have your attention, you loathsome piece of shit?”

He can’t speak. His oxygen is choked off. He sputters.

“Nod.”

He does, frantically.

“You probably think I’m going to say that if you ever touch her again, I’ll destroy you, right?” I hiss into his reddened ear. “That’s what you’ve heard, isn’t it? That when people cross me, I make them pay because I have influence in this town. Is that what you’ve heard?”

He nods and whimpers.

“In your pathetic mind, you probably think your career is tanked because of something I’ve done. Some strings I’ve pulled. Nope. You’re just a low-rate, mediocre no-talent. I didn’t have to lift a finger to ruin your career. You do that just by sucking.”

He jerks at me, like he can do something, but he can’t

“That’s not what I’m here to tell you, fucker.” Anger makes me pant. Makes me sweat. “I’m here to tell you—now listen close to this part because I’m not ever saying it again—I’m here to tell you that if you ever touch her again, come near her again, or even talk about her to anyone, I’ll kill you.”

I pull back to peer into his panic-stretched eyes.

“Kill. Dead. Not metaphorical. Do you understand?”

The booth door flies open, and Marlon rushes in, pulling me off the douchebag. Drex slides down the wall to land on his ass, hauling in air like his life depends on it, clutching his neck.

“What are you doing?” Marlon shoves at my chest. “You’re trippin’! You can’t just go around—”

“I can. I just did.” I jerk back and stare at Drex. “Don’t forget what I said, motherfucker.”

And I’m out. I hear Drex hurling obscenities and empty threats at my back. Thinking I give a fuck. The thought of that lizard having sex with my girl is a buzz saw right down the center of my brain, but that isn’t the worst part. The worst part is he knows, everybody knows, I’ve never bothered committing to anyone. I haven’t been serious about anyone since Petra, and that was high school. When I went public with Kai, I had no idea what he had

against me. Against her. Any scruples he has, he sets aside to get at me. I've seen it before. And for him to know how much Kai means to me, to know he slept with her, it doesn't just anger and disgust me, it flat out petrifies me. How will he use this against *her* to get at *me*?

I climb behind the wheel, phone to my ear.

"Gep, she still with you?"

"No, she went home."

"Good. I'm on my way there now."

The silence on the other end feels off.

"Gep, what?"

"Not your place. She went back to her apartment."

I should have seen that coming, but it still jolts my heart. I turn the SUV around and head for her place.

"How was she?"

"Not good. Maybe you should, you know . . ."

"Don't say give her some space. That shit's not happening."

I hang up before he can bestow more of his sage relationship advice on me. When I pull into the parking lot of Kai's apartment, I don't know why I'm surprised to see a few paps camped out.

My damn life.

Oh, well. They might just get a show because there's no way I'm letting this go tonight.

One of them approaches me, shutters snapping.

"Did you and Kai have a fight? She looked upset when she got home."

I ignore him, stabbing the doorbell.

"Rhyson, how do you feel about Kai living with another man?"

"Can you address rumors that she's also seeing Dub Shaughnessy?"

I'm about two seconds from shoving that camera up a very dark hole in that little gremlin's body if he doesn't back off me.

The door cracks open, chain on, to reveal a sliver of San's face. He

doesn't look happy to see me. I'm not happy to see him either.

"I need to come in."

"I don't think so." He slits his eyes at me. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Tonight. Now. Open the door, San." I glance over my shoulder. "I really don't want to give these carnies a freak show, but I will."

"What did you do to make her cry?"

Something as hot as acid burns my throat at even the thought of her tears, but I gulp it back.

"Nothing," I lie. "I didn't do anything. It's a misunderstanding. Let me in so we can talk about it."

"Rhyson, dammit."

"I love her." I trap his eyes through the tiny space the chain allows, not even caring if the reporters behind me hear. "You know I do. I'd never hurt her."

He bangs his forehead against the door three times before slipping the chain off and cracking the door open just enough for me to slip in. I hear cameras snapping behind me.

"They always out there like that?" I glance around the small space where I'd courted Kai for months. I'd never really thought of it that way, but that's what it was. Courtship. Taking time to win her. Best investment of my time ever.

"Not always." San shrugs. "I think they saw her in that bodyguard's SUV and probably thought you were with her."

"I don't like her here anymore. It's not secure enough."

"Seems to me you're the greatest danger to her." San frowns at me. "Before I let you see her—"

"Oh, you're on one if you think you're *letting* me see her." I brush past him, but he grabs my arm. "Dude, let go."

"That girl back there is the best friend I have in the world." San tightens his fingers around my arm. "We've been through everything together. I've

seen her when her dad left and when her mom died. I don't know if I've ever seen her cry like she's crying in there now, so yeah, I'll be deciding if you get to see her."

That I can respect. I can appreciate someone who cares about her that way.

"Drex Martin was at the studio tonight."

San's response says it all. Damn Kai and her secrets.

"Yeah, I see you already know what that means. He couldn't wait to tell me about the two of them. I needed to handle him first, and I think she thought I . . . I didn't make it clear. I'm an asshole."

San nods, slowly releasing my arm.

"She was in a dark place that night."

"Don't tell me." I shake my head. "I don't wanna know. I don't ever wanna know."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving her."

"That's fine." I shrug. "You might hear a lot of yelling and screaming and shit. Who knows what it will take to make up with her? For sure, you're gonna hear us fucking like animals before the night's out. If that's how you get your rocks off, stick around."

San nods slowly, lips twisting sideways. He slides his hands into his front pockets. Upon further consideration, he grabs his backpack from a nearby table. He turns at the door.

"I'll lock up on my way out."

"You do that."

His prerogative, of course.

I'm surprised when the doorknob to Kai's room turns under my hand, and the door swings open. The room is completely dark. Sobs come from the small, shaking lump on the bed, the sound paring away the protective layers of my heart until, even though I'm not crying, I'm as vulnerable as she is. I measure my steps over to the bed. She's sobbing so hard she doesn't realize



I'm approaching, or maybe she does.

"San, go away," she mumbles into her pillow. "Please, just leave me alone for a little while."

I touch her back and caress her hair.

"Pep, it's me."

She goes stiff, but doesn't sit up. If anything she burrows deeper into the pillow.

"Rhyson, go. Oh, God, why are you here?" Her voice breaks so badly I can barely understand her. "Just go. I don't want to see you."

I stretch to the table beside her bed, flick on the lamp, and reach back to gently turn her over. I don't know who I want to kill more, Drex or myself, for doing this to her. Her beautiful face is mottled red. Those eyes that seduce me without even trying are swollen almost shut.

"I'm a mess," she whispers, covering her face. "Don't look at me."

"Oh, I'm looking at you." My throat is so sore with the emotions I'm holding back, I couldn't sing now if my life depended on it. "I haven't been able to stop looking at you since you walked into Grady's music room that first night."

She folds her body in half, pressing her face to her knees.

"I wanted to tell you, Rhyson, but I was so scared I'd lose you." Tears mangle her words. She sniffs, but it doesn't help. "It was my mom's first birthday since the funeral, and after the shoot, Drex invited me out for drinks. I . . . I was so lonely and desperate to just feel."

"I don't want to know this, Pep." I wish I was big enough to let her get this off her chest, but the more details I know about that piece of shit fucking my girl, the worse it will be.

"But . . . I don't even remember it, Rhyson." She closes her eyes tightly, bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "I remember him taking me to his place, and then—"

"Pep." I place my index finger over her soft lips, shaking my head. "I

can't. I don't ever want to know. Those images in my head would be too much. I can get past this because I don't know anything. Hearing the details, seeing it in my head, I don't know what that would do."

Tears stream down her cheek, and she covers her face with both hands.

"The one person you hate more than anyone, and I . . . and I . . ."

"Baby, listen to me." My arms literally ache from not holding her. I slide to the top of her bed, back against the headboard and pull her beside me, tucking her head into my shoulder. "It's shit luck. That's all. It's like the universe played the worst trick on us it possibly could. I hate Drex, and the thought of him . . ."

The words die in my mouth, poisoned by a toxic mix of nausea, fury, and disgust. I'll block even the thought of it.

"You're the one thing I can't give up. I've been hooked on Xanax. That was bad, but Grady sent me to rehab, and I kicked that habit."

I pull back to look into her teary, bloodshot eyes.

"There's no kicking you," I say hoarsely. "You're in my veins. In my blood. In my bones, and I just want you deeper. I want you so close that nothing and no one, certainly not that douchebag, could ever come between us."

"I thought you would never want me again." Her mouth wobbles. Tears course over her flushed cheeks. "I thought you couldn't look at me. That you were disgusted by me now that you knew I had been with him."

Not want her? Hell, I'm hard as ice right now with her this close.

I press her hand to my cock so she can feel for herself. So she can know that nothing has changed between our hearts or our bodies. Her eyes meet mine, wide and wet and dark. Without looking away, she rolls her hand up and down on me. I stiffen in my jeans under her fingers to the point of pain. My head falls against hers.

"Yeah, Pep, that's it," I husk into her hair.

Her pull goes faster, harder, and I'll be damned if I'm coming in my pants

after a night like this. I pull her hand away, my hands trembling to get my zipper down and my pants and boxers over my legs. She's just as urgent, slipping her jeans and panties off, positioning her knees on either side of me on the bed, poised above me. I reach down to my jeans pocket for a condom, but she grabs my wrist, and shakes her head, eyes steady and hot on mine.

"I took care of it."

She slides onto me, tight and creamy. I've never done this. Not one time in my life have I been inside a girl raw. The hot, liquid slide of flesh on flesh is addictive and intoxicating, like her pussy is lined with liquor. The ride starts slow, our eyes connected as she eases up and pushes down. But the pace builds from steady to frantic, so vigorous her small breasts bounce. I grip her hips and take one breast into my mouth, suckling the nipple until it swells hard. She moans and throws her head back, bracing one hand on my shoulder. I fall back onto the bed, and she keeps riding me, lording over me like a goddess. I reach up and palm her breasts. I pump up into her, and her mouth falls open with short, hot breaths.

"Harder, Rhys," she pants. "I need . . ."

I know what she needs. I pull out and flip her onto her knees, positioned behind her on the bed, entering in one strong stroke. I'm in so deep she screams. I want to scream too. She milks me, grips me like a fist, clutches me.

Did he have her like this?

The thought intrudes on this intimate moment like a searchlight, harsh and bright. I won't let him do this. I won't let him spoil this for me. He won't spoil *her* for me. I push deeper, ramming my hips against her ass. It's mine. Reaching around to squeeze her breasts. They're mine. I slide my fingers down the sleek plane of her belly and plunge my fingers between those thick, wet lips. They're mine. I pinch her clit. It's mine.

Every time I mark a piece of flesh, she cries out. She's jerking beneath me, weeping. I don't know if it's the intensity of the pleasure, or relief that

we still have this, still have each other despite how Drex tried to break us, but I understand her tears because emotion swells in my chest.

I will die if I don't come soon, but I want to come looking into her eyes. I pull out again and lay her on her back, spreading her for me. I only take time to glance at the strong dancer's legs dropped open and the subtle line of muscles in her stomach, the pink lips between her thighs, dripping for me, before I plunge back in. I capture her eyes and grip her thigh. I trace up her waist and over her breast and up her arm until I reach her hand, marrying our fingers.

There's no barrier, nothing between our bodies. Nothing between our souls. The house could be on fire, maybe it is, but I can't look away from her. Tears roll down her cheeks and into the corners of her mouth, down her neck. I bend, licking the path of her tears, groaning when the salty taste of her love bursts on my tongue.

Her breasts press into my chest. Our bellies kiss. I push in as deep as I can, seeking out every secret her body would withhold. I must know it all. Her head jerks back, the velvety skin of her neck stretched and exposed. Her body's spasms ricochet through me.

I don't even try to squelch her screams. I don't care if the paps outside hear it and record it and it goes viral. It's *my* name, dammit, ripping a hole in the quiet. *My* name claiming the air around her. She's my girl. And I am so completely fucking hers. Because all the while I've been claiming her, she's been claiming me. Her hands gripping my ass, running over my chest, clutching my shoulders. With just touch, we've discovered a new intimacy. A path sprang up that no one but us can follow, taking us to a place that no one else can find. And there, with only our hearts as witnesses, our bodies make a vow that our souls will keep.

# Chapter

## FORTY-TWO

### RHYSON

I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT FAKING casual. From very early on, my pace was almost frenetic. Between shows and tours and lessons and special appearances, I got used to a kinetic lifestyle. It was only when I went to live with Grady that I learned to appreciate kicking it. Playing video games. Riding dune buggies. Surfing at the beach. Still sometimes, it doesn't come naturally to me. Especially when I have a performance or an audition.

I haven't had an audition in years, but Kai auditions for *Total Package* today. And pretending I don't care is wearing my ass out. I'm on the couch in the rec room, reading some magazine. Some *GQ* shit that Marlon left the last time he was here, which should tip her off right away because me reading *GQ*? Like that's happening. She's too nervous to notice though. She shouldn't be. They'll want her. I know they will.

That first time I saw her teaching her dance class, saw the command she had of every movement, I knew she was a star. The night we sang together at her church in Glory Falls Baptist, and I heard that unique husky purity of her voice, I knew she was a star. And looking at her now, eyes smoky, lashes long with mascara, mouth a vivid red, wearing leather leggings and this tiny top that shows those muscles in her stomach, that sexy belly ring, and the elegant script of a prayer tattooed across her ribs—yeah, they'll know she's a star too.

The question isn't will they want her. The question is will I let them have her. I want her for Prodigy. She thought I was being benevolent when I offered her a spot on my label. When it comes to business, especially music business, I'm *all* business. If I didn't think she would blow the top off this industry, I wouldn't have offered her a deal. I believe in her. The only thing that runs deeper than my unequivocal belief in her, is my determination to protect her. There are sharks out there, and John Malcolm has the sharpest teeth.

"How do I look?" She bites her bottom lip, glancing down her body and pushing back her hair.

What amazes me about Kai is that she's really asking. Other girls would be fishing for compliments. Don't get me wrong. Kai understands her attraction, but there isn't a vain bone in that petite body. How that happened, I don't know. Yet one more thing her mom did right raising her.

"You look great," I understate. "You nervous?"

"So nervous." She walks over to me, nudging my legs apart to stand between them and slide onto my lap, lying against my chest. "What if I mess this up? This is the kind of shot I've been working for all my life."

I toss the magazine to the floor and pull her hair away from her neck, planting a kiss there. I push her shoulder back gently until I can tip up her chin and force her to look at me.

"Baby, you are inevitable."

Her eyes soften and smile back at me.

"Rhyson, that is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"I mean it. If for some reason these idiots don't see it, the next ones will. Or the next ones after that, but you are too talented to go unnoticed."

"I don't deserve you." She leans forward to kiss me quickly before popping up and off my lap. "I'll be late."

"Is Gep taking you?" I ask, frowning.

"Yeah, he's waiting out front." She strides to the door, high-heeled boots

clacking on the floor. "I live you."

I chuckle at our private joke about her damn autocorrected text.

"I live you, too."

As soon as I hear the front door close behind her, I'm galvanized, off the couch and dialing Marlon on my cell.

"Okay, I'm ready. Come get me."

Fifteen minutes later, I'm ducking down in the backseat of a rusting Honda Civic with a pizza delivery sign on the roof. Marlon, dreads spilling from beneath a baseball cap, drives through the gates of my neighborhood and past the unsuspecting paps.

"This is stupid," Marlon says from the front seat.

"I'm just playing it safe."

"You're playing it stupid." He glances back at me.

"Don't look back here."

"What exactly do you hope to gain by seeing her audition?"

"I just need to see what happens. I want to be there for her, but I don't want to make her nervous."

It's quiet in the car for a minute, and I'm just about to ask him to turn on the radio when he speaks. Quietly, but he speaks.

"Like, you really love her, don't you?"

How do I answer honestly without sounding like a pussy?

"You could take away my Grammys and the money and the fame, everything I have, and if you told me I could still keep her, I'd be fine with that."

How'd I do?

"Damn, you *are* pussy whipped," Marlon sniggers. "I mean, I like your sister and all, but gimme some Grammys."

"What you feel for Bristol is all below the belt, Marlon. I wouldn't put it in the same category as my relationship with Kai."

"Hey, you're talking to the unfortunate, scarred soul who walked in on

the two of you banging on the piano bench last week, so you're not all above belt yourself."

"Okay, that was . . . awkward, but you know what I mean."

"So you don't care that Drex tapped that?"

To even hear him talk about her with Drex that way claws at my reason. Even him being my best friend, I want to leap over the backseat and scrape his skin off. I hate that he even knows. I don't want anyone to know. I actually can't believe Drex hasn't told anyone yet, hasn't exploited the information for his purposes. Unless he took me seriously when I had that cord wrapped around his neck

Which he should have.

"She's mine." I say it quietly and with fierce certainty. "It doesn't matter who came before me. No one else is coming after me."

"Not ever?"

He's asking if I want to marry Kai. I want to lovingly chain her to me any way I can. Legally, sexually. I want her wearing my rings. I want her having my babies. Anything that welds us together is fine with me. I know she's not ready for that, and there's no rush. She wants to get her career off the ground, and I respect that. We can go at this pace, as long as we're going together.

"I said, not ever, Rhyson?"

"I heard you." I peer over the seat, looking into the backlot where *Total Package* records. "Look. We're here."

I grab my trusty disguise, the pervy moustache, a thrift shop hat and coat, slipping it over my jeans.

"All you're missing is the white kidnapper van." Marlon gestures to my top lip. "Total creeper."

"Hey, it does the job. Let's find Luke. He's my hook up."

Luke has me set up backstage, behind a curtain, stage right. I have a clear line of vision to Kai, pacing directly across from me, backstage left. She's chewing on her thumbnail and biting one side of her pouty bottom lip.



I don't know how to feel. On the one hand, of course I want her to do well. On the other, these guys not only don't deserve her, I'm not sure they'll know what to do with her, how to best showcase her talent. Maybe it's arrogant to think I do, but I know her and I know music. I love her and I love music.

"Ms. Pearson, we're ready for you," one of the producers down front calls.

Kai draws a deep breath and then does something that makes me want to throw her over my shoulder and drag her out of here in Marlon's borrowed rusty Civic. She lifts the nameplate necklace I gave her for Christmas and kisses it, eyes closed tight.

I've purposefully avoided her rehearsals, but I've heard her doing compression exercises, working on her tone, and stretching her range. It's paid off. No one would accuse her of being a dancer who sings. She's a great vocalist. Grady's been coaching her for this audition. He's done a great job preparing her, but he had nothing to do with what arrests me, and I'm sure the producers, almost from the moment she steps onto the stage.

All signs of uncertainty, tentativeness, dissipate. Even tiny, barely clearing five feet, she commands the stage from the first step, her wide smile and easy confidence creating a force field around her that nerves and jitters can't penetrate. She speaks into the mic, her Southern drawl sweetening the air.

"How y'all doing?"

No different than the night we sang a Christmas carol at Glory Falls Baptist for a roomful of people she'd known all her life. As bright and genuine and magnetic.

She gives the nod to the engineer running sound. I know she's using a track. I would have probably advised her to go live and pared down for the audition because the song is so produced, maybe a simple piano or acoustic arrangement, but as soon as she starts, I understand why she made this

choice. She needed the full instrumentation and the background vocals as the base from which she can spring. The bass and grit of the original arrangement allow her to showcase not only her vocal abilities, but in a subtle way, the fluid athleticism of her body. She starts center, but doesn't stay there long, moving from one end of the stage to the other. Kai can be reserved, but the spunk and fire and energy I get to see when it's just the two of us, she pours into this performance.

When I suggested the song, I knew it would highlight her vocal ability. When it soars, she can stretch into her range, full-voiced and rich. When it ebbs, she showcases the control and discipline of her vocal instrument. I didn't realize though, how well it fit her story, her journey. Truth sets every lyric ablaze. When she sings about it being worth the wait and says we haven't seen the best of her, we know it's true. We know it's only a matter of time.

As a professional, I can dissect all the technical things she executes beautifully that make the performance work. Yet, as someone who is seeing her sing and move and emit this riveting stage presence—the whole package onstage really for the first time—I'm awed that I've been friends with this girl, been dating this girl, sleeping with this amazing star right under my nose this whole time and had no idea. No fucking idea that she is literally going to jettison past everyone else and explode into the cultural landscape like a meteor.

Me included.

Her last note uncorks applause from the producers. I can't easily see them from my position, but if I were them, I'd be on my feet. Kai grins, obviously a little overwhelmed by the response, pressing her hand to her forehead and then her chest. Then her stomach. I know that feeling after you've given everything, drained your gift for an audience. You don't know what to do with yourself sometimes when you stop. Nothing else feels as natural as pouring yourself out for them. When you stop, you wonder what else they

want, what else you could give.

Luke pulls my arm, jarring me out of the moment.

“You need to get out of here.” He smiles at the few stagehands milling around. “This is a closed audition. It’s a miracle I got you in here. And a bigger miracle that no one has recognized you yet. Let’s go.”

He’s right. I should go. Kai would probably think I’m interfering. She’d be right. I hoped seeing her audition would make my decision easier, my way clearer, but things are murkier now than they were before. Either way I go, I’m afraid she’ll end up hurt. One way, the hurt I control. I inflict. The other, someone else does. When she’s cut, I bleed, so it’s not much of a choice at all.

# Chapter

## FORTY-THREE

Kai

I'VE RAISED THE PRIVACY PARTITION IN the SUV. Gep and I usually chat some, but I need time alone to process what happened. I just gave the performance of my life. I feel it. I know those moments are pivotal. They will change my trajectory. I lift Grammy's gold chain to my lips, hanging beneath the nameplate necklace Rhyson gave me. Tears gather at the corners of my eyes, and no matter how much I blink, they defiantly fall.

Grammy, Pops, and Mama would have been proud of me today. I know it. There's plenty in my life they would never approve of. My faith is a path overgrown with weeds and briars. The people of Glory Falls would probably condemn me for practically living with Rhyson and for how I've given myself to him. I don't know. Somehow right now, I can't care. Everything I grew up believing is in a box under my bed, and maybe someday soon I'll take it out and sort through what was mine and what was Mama's, but right now, today, I know she is with me. All three of them looked down from Heaven, and they were with me. I sang for them. For all the sacrifices they made so I could arrive at that moment and make the most of it.

And they were pleased.

The partition lowers, and Gep looks back at me.

"We're here."

I glance up the driveway in front of Rhyson's house. How long have I

been sitting out here replaying that audition? Probably a while for him to have to tell me we've arrived. He steps out and opens the door for me, helping me down.

"You were amazing," he says when I walk past him.

I turn around and stare.

"You were there?"

He gives me a wink.

"I'm always there."

I'm not sure if I'm comforted or freaked out. I'll have to talk to Rhyson about this. I thought Gep just drove me around sometimes. I want to make sure he's not doing more. I still don't think I need more.

I walk from room to room, looking for Rhyson, so amped to tell him what just happened. I finally find him in the rec room right where I left him. For a man with a "little" world tour coming up, he sure has been relaxing a lot today. He's reading the same magazine he was when I left. *GQ*? Rhyson? Oh, well.

He glances up from the magazine, tossing it onto the table and leaning forward, eyes fixed on me.

"How'd it go?"

I know in his heart of hearts, this isn't what he wants for me and that he doesn't like *Total Package*, but I can't hold my exuberance back. I run across the room past the pool table where we first made love, and dive into his lap on the couch, sending him back into the cushions. My arms loop around his neck, and his hands immediately touch the skin left bare by my top. I press my lips to his, needing him. He was the only thing missing from today, and I'm so glad to be with him now.

"Rhyson, it was like everything I've worked all my life for came together in that audition today." I lean my shoulder into his chest, tucking my head under his chin and stroking his abs under his T-shirt. "At least that's how it felt."

We're too close for me to miss how he stiffens beneath me.

"They offered you a spot on the show?" His voice holds no emotion, just the question, but I know how loaded it is.

"Not yet," I say quietly, looking up to meet his eyes.

"I'm sure they will." He drops a kiss on my nose. "How could they not?"

"You'd be happy for me?"

"Pep, I know you don't believe me, but I want your success more than I want my own." He pushes one strong hand into the hair at my neck. "And I know you probably say that's easy for me to say because I already have my own."

I chuckle because that sounds exactly like what I would say.

"But if this happens," he says, stretching his thumb to trace the curve of my mouth. "I'll be dialing those eight-hundred numbers every week with the rest of America to vote for you over and over."

"You would?"

"I'd even make Bristol vote for you."

I shake against him laughing. He pushes the hair back off my face, bending to kiss me. His hand cups my jaw. Our tongues get tangled up. He leisurely, slowly, wetly, sweetly fucks my mouth into submission until I'm limp against him and basically just receiving his tongue.

He pulls back, eyes glazed, lap hard beneath me.

"You'd better tell me how it went before we get started, or I'll never hear the story."

What is he talking about? What story? I lean up, pulling his head back down to me, sucking at his chin, the stubble harsh against my tongue. He smells so good. I follow the scent down his neck and pull his warm skin hard into my mouth. I want to mark him. I want all those little fangirls wearing their Mrs. Rhyson Gray T-shirts to know he has a girl and she sucks hard on his neck.

"Baby," he laughs, pulling back. "The audition."

Oh. The audition. That story.

It takes me about thirty minutes to tell him about a five-minute audition because I walk him through every emotion, every drop of sweat, every expression on the judges' faces.

"I wish you'd been there." I link our fingers on my thigh and lean my head on his chest. "You were the only one missing. I felt Mama, Grammy, and Pops there with me. I know you don't believe in stuff like that, but I know what I felt."

He's so quiet, I look up. I can't read his face.

"Rhyson?"

"No, yeah. I believe you. I wish I could've been there too." He smiles, brushing his thumb over my wrist. "So you were at the end. Then what happened?"

"Oh my gosh." I sit up, turning to face him, my knees on either side of his thighs. "This is the best part. John Malcolm himself comes up to me."

"He did, did he?" His eyes narrow.

"Rhyson, be nice. I know you don't like him, but he was really nice."

"Of course he was. What'd he say?"

"He said, and I'm not making this up, 'I look forward to working with you.'" I let out an *eeep*. "Can you believe that? He actually said he looks forward to working with me."

"That's amazing, Pep," he says quietly, lashes lowered, hiding his eyes from me.

"Hey, I know you wanted me to come on tour, but Luke says things start pretty soon for the show. The rest of the group has already been selected."

"Luke was there?" His lashes lift, eyes sharpening. "You spoke to Luke? When? What'd he say?"

Surely he's not jealous of Luke? Or still feel weird about that lap dance in the video?

"Baby, I barely spoke to Luke. He was there talking with John Malcolm

because he's about to go on tour himself in the next few weeks." I place my hands on either side of his face, dropping a light kiss on his unsmiling mouth. "He just mentioned that they do a lot of pre-production stuff before the live shows start airing next month."

"So when do you think you'll know for sure?" Rhyson asks.

"They said very soon since they're down to the wire." I shrug my shoulders. "Could even be tomorrow."

Rhyson nods, his face neutral. I'm not used to it. He's so expressive with me, holding nothing back. And right now, for whatever reason, that guard I remember seeing slam up after he played the piano that first night, is blocking me out. I'm ready to probe when my phone rings from the leather ottoman where I dropped it. I look at the screen lighting up with a number I don't recognize. What if it's them? What if it's John Malcolm offering me a shot that could catapult me into the destiny I've been working for all my life? I can't move.

"You gonna get that?" Rhyson grabs the phone and hands it to me.

I nod and answer, walking a few steps away to lean against the pool table.

"Hello?"

"Is this Kai Pearson?" A woman asks from the other end.

So not John Malcolm. I'm sure he's busy.

"Yes, yeah. Hello, this is Kai."

"Kai, this is Julie Schwimmer, one of the producers from *Total Package*."

"Hi, Ms. Schwimmer." The words get locked in my throat for a second, so I take a deep breath. "How are you?"

"I'm great. I gotta tell you, we were blown away by your performance today. You were one of the strongest auditions we had this season."

*Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.*

"Thank you." I grin so hard it hurts. "Thank you so much."

"Unfortunately, we're going in a different direction," she says. "We have no doubt we'll see you again. Your talent is truly remarkable and will take



you so far.”

But not this season. Not with them. Not on this show.

This conversation started with my heart as a balloon so inflated with joy I thought it would burst. And it just did. She stuck a pin right through it, but the sound of it popping didn’t even make me jump. I guess on some level I knew to brace for it. Another delay. More waiting. Still not my turn.

“Kai? Are you still there?” Julie Schwimmer asks, her voice soft.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” Hurt and disappointment take turns pushing a lump up my throat, but I gulp it back down. “Yes. I heard you. I understand. Thank you for . . . for listening. For the opportunity. Um, for the chance, I mean.”

Lord, get me off this call without blubbering. Rhyson comes to stand in front of me, frowning so hard his eyebrows almost meet.

“What are they saying?” he whisper-demands. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head, dropping my eyes to my boots to give me time to clear away the tears.

“You’re really talented, Kai,” Julie says. “It was a tough decision. Good luck.”

I stand there with the phone against my chest for a few seconds, feeling the last of my hope drain away. What happened? I just *knew*. I felt them there with me. John Malcolm said he looked forward to working with me. I don’t understand.

“Pep, talk to me. What happened?”

Rhyson unwittingly echoes my question. I don’t know what to tell him, so I just tell him what they told me.

“They went in a different direction.”

His arms immediately encircle me, pressing my head to his shoulder. As soon as he touches me, whatever was holding me together, lets go, like it was waiting for him to take over. And the tears won’t stop. I cry so hard my chest hurts. My eyes burn. My stomach muscles ache. Rhyson sits up on the pool table and brings me with him, sitting me across his legs and letting me soak

his T-shirt.

“It’s their loss, baby.” His cool fingers wipe at the tears on my hot cheeks. “Your big break is soon. Someone will see what you’ve got, just like I see it. And you’ll be ready.”

God, I love him. Why am I refusing to go with him on tour? I’ve quit The Note. The girls’ dance competition is over. I could quit teaching too. Grady’s already found a new assistant. Mama’s medical bills are paid off. San is making good money at *Spotted*. He could handle the rent by himself. I could move in with Rhyson. Go on tour with him for six weeks. Come back here and start grinding again. Dub has several dance jobs lined up for me, and I’ll have more time to audition if I’m able to focus without the distraction of three jobs.

“Rhyson?”

He strokes my hair back and rubs a hand up and down my thigh soothingly.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Does your offer still stand?”

His hand stops on my leg. I can almost see him holding his breath. He leans forward, tipping his head down to hold my eyes.

“Which offer would that be? I’ve made so many that you’ve turned down.”

I laugh because it’s true. At every turn, I thought he was trying to control me. Thought I couldn’t trust him. Thought I’d be foolish to depend on him, but all along he’s been true. All along, he’s had my best interest at heart. Who cares if people think I made it because of him? I loved singing with him at Glory Falls Baptist that night. And while I wait for my big break, I may as well have some fun onstage with the man I adore. Even if it is in front of his legions of fans.

I kiss one side of his mouth.

“Can I go with you on tour?”

I kiss the other side.

“Can I sing with you?”

I kiss the middle, loving the firm lips opening under mine to share a breath with me before I pull away.

“Can I move in with you?”

He pulls back, closes one eye, and turns up his lips in fake consideration.

“Can I think about it?”

God, I love him.

# Chapter

## FORTY-FOUR

Kai

I NEVER REALLY UNDERSTOOD “FINDING PEACE.” I used to think peace had to find us. That when we’re lost, we stand still long enough, and peace will find us. But when we are lost, peace doesn’t come looking for us. It doesn’t settle on us like a cloud, gentle and sweet. It’s not this passive process. At least it wasn’t for me.

Sometimes we have to fight our way out of the dark because the light doesn’t come looking. I half crawled and was half dragged out by the people who love me. And once I was out of the dark, the light still didn’t offer much peace. I worked and went through the motions of life in broad daylight, still numb with grief.

I can’t help but remember that last night with Mama, sitting on our front porch, shivering in the cold, watching a dark sky, waiting for the break of dawn. The hope of a new day, a light in the sky that never came for her. In some ways, I’ve been looking for that break in the dark ever since. It took a long time for me to see it, for me to find that hope, that peace. But something, someone, made me *want* it. Made me want to make the most of the light. Made me want to open my heart to all that life *still* has to offer, even though death took so much. And that someone takes my breath away.

I stand in the wings, backstage at Club Nokia, watching my boyfriend end his set. The last two weeks have been crazy. I’d already left The Note. I gave

my notice at the studio last week and taught my last class yesterday. The last thing tethering me to my old life is the apartment. I don't have much, but what I do have is packed up and ready to go to Rhyson's. San pretends he is happy that I'm leaving because now he can have all the booty calls he wants, but I know he'll miss me. I'll miss him. It's kind of the end of an era for us. I guess I'm becoming what I promised myself I'd never be—a kept woman.

At least until I become a superstar.

Rhyson and I walked the red carpet together for the first time tonight for this benefit concert. Even though it's so close to the tour, Rhyson wanted to do it because it benefits the high school for the arts he attended. I want to hang back, but he wants me with him all the time. He says he wants everyone to know that he's taken, that I'm taken. That we've taken each other.

I gotta admit, it feels right. The lights and the cameras. The screaming fans. I don't even care that they're not cheering for me. One day they will be. One day I'll have a stage of my own. A tour of my own. For now, I love him so much I just want to ride with him. It felt right being with him.

Bristol walks up beside me. I wouldn't recognize that girl without her phone, and sure enough, it's the main accessory for the silver dress sheathing her lean body. Her dark hair falls around her shoulders, coppery in places like Rhyson's. She looks so much like him, but more and more, I see how different they are.

They always fight like titans, but can only hold on to it for so long. I don't want to come between them. I guess the same way Rhyson had to win me, had to prove himself to me over time, I'll have to do the same with his sister.

"You all packed and ready to go on tour?" Bristol asks with her eyes fixed on her phone.

I draw a careful breath before I answer.

"For the most part."

A tight silence closes around us. I can't remember a time when it's just

been the two of us.

“You guys have been incredible,” Rhyson says from the piano onstage, wrapping up his set. “The School of the Arts changed my life, and I’m so honored to be here tonight. It’s events like this that make scholarships possible for students who might not otherwise be able to attend. That’s how I met my best friend, Marlon.”

Rhyson leans closer to the mic and looks over the crowd.

“I think you call him Grip.”

The crowd cheers and chants Grip’s name. One girl waits for the response to die down before yelling out, “I love you, Rhyson!”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” He grins up in the direction the shout came from. “I’m going on tour in a few days, and Grip’s coming with me. Maybe some of you have tickets for the show at Staples in a few weeks?”

Ear-splitting screams fill the room. Rhyson nods, his fingers drifting over the piano keys, easy as breathing.

“Nice.” He transitions into a melody I vaguely remember, but can’t place from where. “There’s a song I wanna do out on the road. It’s going on my new album. It’s called ‘Pepper.’ I wrote it for my girlfriend.”

A chorus of “awwwws” makes Rhyson roll his eyes.

“You guys are funny.”

He turns his head away from the audience, his eyes searching in the dim light backstage where I stand. He tugs on his ear twice and smiles for me before launching into the song I heard in its embryonic stages.

*You’re hot like Pepper on my tongue . . .*

The words find their way into every crack left in my heart. He is filling me. His love washes over me. This man, this remarkable man who is more gifted than anyone I’ve ever met, saved all of this for me. The longer he sings, the weaker my knees feel. The shorter my breath comes. I want to be alone with him and show him in every way I can that I feel the same.

“I’m gonna go check on the press room,” Bristol says, clearly not pleased

at Rhyson publicly acknowledging our relationship.

She walks away, but even her coolness doesn't take me out of this moment.

"He's something else, isn't he?" Someone says from the spot Bristol just vacated.

I turn to answer with a smile, but it disappears as soon as I see John Malcolm.

"That he is, Mr. Malcolm."

I look back to the stage, focusing on Rhyson instead of this instant awkwardness. Sometime between telling me he looked forward to working with me, and Julie Schwimmer's call, John Malcolm changed his mind about me. I've been turned down a lot since I moved here, so I shouldn't take it personally, but that day, that performance, fooled me. I felt something that wasn't real. I thought all my hard work culminated into that moment, that I was turning a corner, but I wasn't. It was just another delay.

"That'll be you someday, Kai," Malcolm says. "You've got what it takes in spades. I've rarely seen anyone with as much as you have."

Now he's just rubbing salt into a very fresh wound. I turn to face him, folding my arms across my chest and cocking my hip.

"Then why'd you pass on me?"

"I wondered when you'd ask." A slow smile hangs between his jowls. "I wanted you on the show, but I'm only one of five executive producers."

"Well, I guess if they didn't want me then—"

"Oh, they did."

I jerk my glance to him, a frown pinching my brows.

"What do you mean?"

"They just wanted him more." He nods his head toward the stage where Rhyson is still singing my song.

"I don't . . . what do you mean they wanted Rhyson more?"

"We asked him months ago to appear this season as a guest judge."

“Yeah, but he turned it down.”

John Malcolm nods, turning his thin lips down at the corners.

“So he *did* tell you that part.”

“That part?” I shake my head to clear it. “I don’t . . . what do you mean?”

“We got a call from him personally, not even his manager. That sister of his.”

“Bristol?”

“Yeah, before, we only dealt with her. He wouldn’t talk with us at all.” One side of Malcolm’s mouth creaks into a grin of sorts. “So knock me over with a feather when he called us himself not even five minutes after your audition.”

“Five minutes?” I look from the man I love onstage singing to thousands about how he yearns for me, back to the calculating eyes of John Malcolm. “I don’t understand.”

“He told Julie Schwimmer that if we passed on you, he’d guest judge for us this season.”

“No, he . . . he couldn’t have because he . . .”

He held me when I cried. He wiped my tears. He assured me my time was coming. He got me through this failure. There’s no way he orchestrated it.

“Why are you telling me this?” I swallow my hurt long enough to ask the obvious question. “I’m sure Rhyson wanted some assurance that you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, if we talk, he walks.”

“Then why are you talking?”

He pats my shoulder, almost avuncular, if it weren’t for the hardness of his beady eyes.

“Because I, unlike the rest of my team, know that having you is worth more than one guest appearance from Rhyson Gray.”

“So you want me to come on the show after all?”

“Oh, we filled that spot right away. I have something better in mind for



you.”

Even as he details the opportunity, something that is beyond my wildest dreams for this stage of my career, I’m only half listening. My heart is fully occupied with breaking. My illusions waste no time shattering into a billion pieces scattered all over this venue. I trusted Rhyson. I let him lull me, just like I thought he would, to put myself second. I’ve forfeited my independence and positioned myself to depend on him, all because I trusted he’d never do anything to hurt me. I was actually about to go on tour and sing a pity duet with him, enduring the behind-the-hand snickers of those who speculate how good my pussy must be to score a spot on Rhyson Gray’s tour. And for what? For who? A liar? A fraud?

I just stare at John Malcolm while he offers me a golden opportunity on a platinum platter. It’s only when the applause filters into my hazy consciousness that I realize the song and Rhyson’s set are over.

He’s walking offstage, eyes on me and a smile on his face. His eyes slide to John Malcolm, and I see it. I see that moment of panic before he sheaths it. His eyes go wide and then narrow. His mouth drops open and then snaps closed. His fists clench, and then slowly, deliberately relax at his side. But I know him too well. Or I thought I did.

“Hey, baby.” He bends to kiss my forehead, eyes still on John Malcolm. “Malcolm, what are you doing here?”

“Luke is an Arts School alum too, remember?” Malcolm offers a plastic smile. “Just here for my artist, but I’m going.”

He turns to me, reaching for my hand.

“I hope to hear from you.”

There is one last moment of silence between my lover and me. The sad part is that if I could eradicate the last five minutes, I probably would. Go back to that bliss of not knowing the lengths to which Rhyson went to manipulate me. To bend me to his will. To crush me so he can mold me into what he wants. But I do know, and there’s no way I can pretend.

“Is it true?”

He drops his lashes, shielding the truth from me, hiding behind this curtain of lies a little longer.

“Is what true?”

But his voice is too quiet, and doesn't actually hold a question. He already knows that I know.

“Rhyson, how could you?”

I expected anger, but my voice withers in the air, the words swallowed by a tiny sob. I cup my hand over my mouth to suppress it, but little whimpers slip through my fingers.

“Kai, I can explain.” He extends his hand, but I step back, out of his reach. My body will turn on me. I can't trust him, and I can't trust myself.

“Don't.” I stretch the word over a tight rope between us. “Don't touch me.”

“Baby, you've gotta listen.”

His voice is even and calm, but he can't hide the desperation rising in his eyes. He's blinking a mile a minute. He's a placid surface with anxiety churning beneath. We're so tuned in to one another that he can't hide it from me. Does he feel my hurt as acutely? My disappointment in him?

“How dare you play games with my life?”

There's the anger. The indignation. It's bubbling up, spilling over.

“You manipulated me. Made a fool of me. You ruined one of the most special performances of my life so I'd do what you wanted me to do.” My volume climbs until heads are turning in our direction, but I can't control it. I can't stop. “Do you have any idea how opposite that is of love?”

Rhyson flicks a glance over my shoulder, takes my elbow, and bends to my ear.

“Baby, someone has a phone recording us. We can talk about this, but we need to get out—”

“I don't care!” I snatch my elbow away from him, whirling around in

search of the camera phone. As soon as I see the stagehand wearing a black T-shirt with his phone trained on us, I flip him the bird.

Bristol stutter-steps over to us in her three-inch heels.

“What the hell is going on?” Her low-voiced demand sends me over the edge.

“The hell that’s going *on*, Bristol,” I say, hands on my hips, “Is that your wildest dreams are coming true. I’m breaking up with your brother.”

“The hell you are, Pep,” Rhyson snarls, pulling me so close I feel his heart slamming into mine. “Do you honestly think I’m letting you leave me over this shit? For some line of crap that scum, John Malcolm, fed you?”

I knew I shouldn’t have let him touch me. Just his hands on me dim the anger, turn down the intensity, because even rough, his touch feels right.

“Line of crap, was it?” I jerk myself away from him, ignoring the way my body misses him already. “Did you do it?”

“Pep—”

“So you didn’t tell the producers if they passed on me you would guest judge this season? You didn’t take away my shot to do things on my own terms so you could control me on yours?”

Bristol drops her head into her hands, plowing her fingers through her hair.

“This is a nightmare, Rhyson,” she says. “There are phones everywhere, most of them capturing all of this. Nothing we can do about that now, but you have press waiting.”

“No way,” Rhyson says. “Pep and I—”

“Are done,” I snap. “Stay away from me. You’re as bad as your parents.”

He winces, shaking his head, eyes pleading with me.

“You don’t mean that. We can work this out.”

I claw at my neck, seeking the symbol of the friendship we built, of the trust I thought we had. I pull until the clasp on the necklace gives, and I hurl it at his chest.

“Not if I’m gone we can’t.”

And with that, I charge blindly toward the exit. I have no idea how I’ll get back to my apartment, but there’s one thing I know: my bags are already packed, and I’m getting out of this town.

# Chapter

# FORTY-FIVE

## RHYSON

WHEN WE WERE FOURTEEN, BRISTOL SNUCK into the rehearsal room one afternoon while I was preparing for a concert. Her class had gone to the zoo, and she knew I loved hearing about the things she got to do with kids our age. She bounced into the room, slammed the piano lid shut, face lit with wicked anticipation.

“Guess what happened at the zoo today?”

“Uhhhh, you saw animals?”

“Of course, we saw animals, dummy, but two orangutans started fucking!”

So everyone stood around gawking at these two creatures sharing their most base, intimate moments in a manufactured wild.

That’s how I feel, pulling up to Kai’s apartment, where a pack of paps lie in wait. The video of our fight, our most base, intimate moments, has gone . . . if there is a level beyond viral . . . it’s gone that. And if this is our zoo, our manufactured wild, I’m the crazed orangutan, scouring the preserve for my mate, mad and exposed, dick dangling in the wind for all to see.

“You’re not seriously going out there, are you?” Gep asks from the driver’s seat.

We broke a dozen laws getting here at top speed. From the passenger seat, I’ve called and texted Kai so many times I’ve lost count. No response,

unless I count that *as* her response.

“I have to try, Gep.”

“Are you sure she’s even here?” He scans the twenty to thirty photographers between the parking lot and Kai’s apartment door.

“No, but I see San’s car, so I know he is.”

“Okay, on the count of three then.”

I nod, pulling the bill of my Dodgers cap as low as it will go, obscuring as much of my face as possible. Gep blocks as many shots and flashes as he can with his bulk, but he can’t block the questions hurled at me like grenades.

“What did you and Kai fight about?”

“Have you talked to her?”

“Is it over between you two?”

I tune the questions out, focusing instead on putting one foot in front of the other until I reach the door. I ring the doorbell and wait along with everyone else to see if I’ll get in. When there’s no response, I bang on the door twice, three times, four. Thankfully, before I move to the pathetic, “Rocky” stage of yelling Kai’s name hoarsely from the street, the door cracks open, tethered by the chain. San peeks out at me. This is some door *déjà vu*.

“Let me in, San. I need to talk to Kai.”

“Oh, because that has gone so well since the last time I let you in.” San shakes his head. “Don’t think so.”

I grit my teeth and check my natural asshole reflex. He sees me standing out here in a hurricane with not even an umbrella, but he’s gonna give me shit right now? Antagonizing San will not get me to Kai. He’s the gatekeeper.

“San, please.” I humble my voice, keeping it low so the vultures behind me don’t hear any more than necessary.

“You stole her shot, you son of a bitch,” San spits through the crack. “Do you have any idea how many years she worked for that moment? And you just took it away because, what? You couldn’t do without the pussy for six weeks?”

Gatekeeper or not, he's gonna get punched in the face when I get on the other side of this door. My hands have been insured since I was six years old, and today's as good as any to test the policy.

"San, I was protecting her." I keep my voice reasonable, even though blood pistons through my veins. "You gotta believe me. Just let me in so I can explain."

San looks me in the eye for a few seconds before nodding and taking the chain off. I slip in fast, leaving Gep with his back to the door until I'm done.

I don't even bother making good on my fantasy of punching San. I'm too anxious to get to Kai. I jet down the hall to her room, half expecting the door to be locked, but again it opens right up.

But unlike last time, she's not there.

I look around the room, studying the boxes she had packed to move in with me. We were so close. I could strangle John Malcolm. I *will* find a way to make him pay. I shouldn't have done what I did. I see that now. I was controlling and manipulative and all the things Kai accused me of. And, yes, I got it honest. I'm my parents' spawn, but I thought I was protecting her. Ironically, my last sight of her was Malcolm holding the exit door for her, probably driving her home or wherever she is right now. So, where are they?

"Where is she?"

"She's gone." San leans against the doorjamb, considering the stacks of Sharpie-marked boxes lining the walls.

"Gone where?" I scowl so hard my face hurts. "What do you mean she's gone?"

"You'll find out anyway." San straightens, walking farther into the room and sitting on Kai's bed. "She's gone on tour."

"What tour?" My heart is an eagle in a birdcage, panicked and trapped. "What are you . . . I don't . . . explain."

"Apparently, they filled the spot you made sure Kai didn't get on *Total Package*." San gives me a dirty look. "But Malcolm had other ideas for Kai."

I just bet he did. Serpent.

“Go on.” I stand with my back against the wall, but my composure is slipping and sliding down its surface, already on the floor.

“He wants Kai to open for Luke’s tour.”

*What the hell?*

“But she’s not ready for that.” At San’s evil look, I clarify. “I don’t mean talent-wise, I mean, she doesn’t have a set or anything ready. How would that work?”

“Oh, John had a plan. It’s a three-month tour. The opening act is only booked for the first few weeks. During that time, Kai will sing background vocals in the shows, but she will work on her own set too so by the time the opening act leaves, she’ll have her own set together and be ready to open.”

I push away from the wall, pacing the small bedroom, shoving my hands through my hair.

“This is exactly the kind of thing I was afraid of. Malcolm works his talent to death. Luke almost collapsed last year.”

“Luke seems fine to me. He’s got a top twenty album and a world tour starting.”

If you’ve never been the person pimped out for your gift, so exhausted you wished you didn’t even have it so you can rest, you don’t know what it’s like.

“It’s not that simple, San.” I start toward the door. “I’ve got to—”

He blocks me. The motherfucker blocks me.

“Get outta my way, San,” I say, voice low and hard.

“Do you love Kai?”

What does he think this is about? What kind of dumb question is that?

“You know I do.”

“We have the video on *Spotted*’s site. Sorry, but seventy-four-year-old grandmas can watch it on Facebook, so of course we have it.”

*His point?*



“You can’t make out everything Kai says, thank goodness,” San continues. “But I distinctly heard her say that what you did is the exact opposite of love. She told me about it when she came to grab her things, and I agree.”

“Kai knows I love her. She knows—”

“You need to let her go do this.”

“I can’t.”

I shake my head vigorously. The selfish part of me intrudes. I can’t risk her well-being with that snake Malcolm, but I also can’t be separated from her for three months.

“I know Kai loves you, but I think if you don’t let her do what she wanted to do in the first place, make her own way, you’ll lose her for good.”

I hate the ring of truth his words carry. Every muscle and cell in my body strains to tear this city apart until I find her. Until I find Malcolm and can rip into his fleshy face, but somewhere in my heart, the part of me that knows Kai best and feels her deepest, I know San’s right. And it’s from that part that I draw my resolve.

“Could you give me a few minutes?” I ask quietly.

My eyes are trained on the cheap carpet, but I feel San’s eyes on me for long moments before he leaves, closing the door behind him. I sink to the bed I got to share with her only once. I rarely even came this far back in their tiny apartment. Most of our friendship developed in the front seat of my car, skulking around in disguise when I picked her up from The Note. In her living room, on her lumpy couch quoting movies and watching fifteen-year-old television shows, talking sometimes until the sun came up.

The spotlight has sought me most of my life, and I have often shied away. Kai’s been steadily making her way toward center stage, one step forward, two steps back, since she was a little girl. We’ve wanted exactly the same thing, and exactly different things our whole lives.

Our friendship, our love is so unlikely. How we even met, a fluke. I’ve

been a star so long, I'm like the Big Dipper, a fixture above, there every night for eons. Kai is this supernova, propelled and rising. Or a shooting star, fighting for hang time. And somehow, implausibly, we crashed into one another. Beautifully, passionately, soulfully crashed, burning bright and hot for everyone below, pointing and gawking at our stellar spectacle.

I look around the room, scrubbed free of her. The pictures of her mother and Aunt Ruthie have been stripped from the walls and surfaces. The closet is like a small, empty tomb, none of her jeans or dresses or vintage nightshirts to be seen. She's not anywhere to be found, and I need something of her to get through this next three months.

I use my key to open a box marked "DRESSER." Some of her clothes are neatly folded and packed, and I'm immediately assaulted with the scent of pear and cinnamon. Just that bit of her wafting up from a cardboard box is enough to have me blinking back damn tears.

Despite what San said about her loving me and letting her go being my only chance of getting her back, I have no assurances. Three months is a long time, and this industry has a way of changing people beyond recognition. A lot can happen on the road. Look at Jimmi and me. At home, fucking her wouldn't have even occurred to me, but the road makes strange bedfellows. I know for a fact that Dub is choreographing Luke's tour. He'll be there every step of Kai's journey that I'm missing out on. That ups the stakes. That bastard won't hesitate to take advantage of the next three months I'm separated from Kai. How do I know, in her hurt, in her anger, she won't turn to him?

*I don't.*

I'm risking the best damn thing I've ever had. Forget my musical ability, my career, and my ambition. What has that gotten me but trapped in here alone with more money than I'll ever spend and a pack of hungry wolves salivating at the door? The last months I had with Kai were more real than anything, so real I was desperate to never lose it and made the biggest

mistake of my life. I ruined it, and just like my parents lost me, I've lost her. She has emancipated from *me*, but I'm not free of her. I'm still chained to her, body and soul.

The last time I felt this broken, Grady found me vomiting and shaking on the floor of my tree house, trying to break myself free of Xanax. It was Christmas Eve. It was the beginning of the end, and it was the beginning of the beginning. It was hard, but it was worth it. I can only hope this will be the same.

I go to refold the box when I notice a small, sheer bag filled with hundreds of pale pink glass shards. The pieces are so fractured I wouldn't know what the figure had once been if a piece, a ballerina slipper, hadn't remained intact. I don't know the exact significance of this little bag, but it must be important to Kai, and that makes it important to me. As if I haven't already transgressed enough against her, I slip the bag into my front pocket. I'm walking out of here with at least a piece of her. It's only right since she's somewhere right now, and she has all of me.

THE END



Keep reading for a sneak peek into Soul Series Book 2,  
DOWN TO MY SOUL, coming March 2016!

# Sneak Peak

## DOWN TO MY SOUL

Add to [Goodreads!](#)

Kai

THAT WEARINESS DOING WHAT YOU LOVE kind of loses its novelty around the second week of eighteen-hour days. Dub and I expend so much energy working on my opening act for the second leg of the tour, I barely have energy for the tour each night. It's just singing easy BGV parts for Luke's show. When Luke performs his hit single, I join him onstage to simulate the lap dance from the video. It's a show-stopper.

The whole plan is getting me lots of face time, lots of exposure. It's a brilliant strategy, but it's wearing me down. I can't let on though. I don't want Mr. Malcolm to think I can't pull this off. I can. I've waited too long for this. Nothing will get in my way. Certainly not my own body.

I keep hearing Rhyson's warning about John Malcolm. It's galling that I kind of already see what he means. Mr. Malcolm's not tyrannical, but he definitely focuses on the bottom line, and requires the talent to do whatever it takes to meet it.

It's been a week since Rhyson called or texted me. We have a fifteen-minute break from rehearsal, so I sit on the stage step and pull out my phone to look at his last text. It was a long one, but I almost have it memorized, I've read it so many times. It starts, of course, with a movie quote.

***Rhyson: So I'm single now, and everything's changed. I hate it."*—  
Say Anything**

***I know you're mad at me. It was a dick move. I know that, but don't give up on us, Pep. San told me you're on tour for three months. I've started my tour too. We can take this time to clear our heads and do what we need to do, but you know I can't let you go. Please don't see me not coming after you as giving up. When you get back, you have to give me another chance. You have to. I thought I was doing what was best for you. I wanted to protect you. I'm sorry I went about it the wrong way. Please forgive me, and PLEASE TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF! You know I don't trust John Malcolm, but this is a great opportunity, so kill it. Your whole life is about to change, because when the world sees what I see, they won't be able to get enough of you. I can't. Don't forget I'm yours and you're mine. I LIVE you.***

I'm reading the last line when a new text comes in.

My heart patters in case it's him. Stupid heart. After all he did—the manipulation, the deception, the out and out betrayal—a chain still hooks my heart and Rhyson's, stretching from wherever I am to wherever he is in the world. I have no idea how to break it. When it comes down to it, in spite of everything, I'm not sure I want to.

The text is not from him. It's an unknown number. Odd.

There's a link, and I open it, which is probably stupid, but I'm curious. It's to a *Spotted* post detailing our very public fight. And breakup. Okay. Old news. Even my tourmates have stopped looking at me funny by now. Their curiosity has waned, and thank God, so has the public's.

Another text comes in.

***Unknown: You and Rhyson Gray don't belong together. I advise you to keep things this way.***

*What the hell?*

***Me: Who is this?***

***Unknown: Don't worry about who I am. Worry about what I have.***

A video file comes over. This can't be good. Finger hovering over the screen, I tap the file. Sounds of loud panting and grunting come from my phone. Two naked bodies in profile, a man and a woman, fucking hard, doggy-style. The man at the back turns his head to grin right into the camera like he's giving the performance of his life. My heart skids to a halt, burning rubber and slamming on the brakes in my chest. Horror and disgust war in my belly, churning dark emotion until it leaks out through my sweaty palms and under my arms. I can't process what I'm seeing. How did he . . . how could it . . . It can't be. The handsome face smeared with a devil grin is Drex. Even though I know it's not possible, I feel like those malevolent eyes are looking right at me—taunting and toying with me.

My brain is still catching up to what my eyes are seeing, when I focus on the woman. She's on all fours, her face forward and turned away, but I know her. I see the words hugging her ribs. Lost in the iniquitous sight, buried in the lusty sounds, the prayer looks out of place.

*My soul to keep.*

As if I needed further confirmation, the woman turns her head just enough for me to see her face clearly. I'm ashamed of my face, looking so much like my mother in a situation she would never have allowed to compromise her.

I tap the screen to stop the video, doing a frantic sweep of the stage to see if anyone heard or saw. Sweat covers my body, slicking my palms and dampening my forehead. My heart rages and rattles inside of me. My hands tremble so badly I drop the phone.

*Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.*

On the brink of my big break, the girl who wanted no distractions, could

be ruined by the biggest distraction of all.

A sex tape.

But it's not the buying public I consider, who'd probably be titillated and maybe even more intrigued than ever. It's not the good people of Glory Falls Baptist, who'd be scandalized to see Mai's little girl getting herself plowed from behind. It isn't Aunt Ruthie, who might not judge, but would probably never see me quite the same way. It's none of those people, none of those responses that strike fear right down the center of my heart.

It's Rhyson.

He wouldn't even *hear* the details of what went on with Drex. How would he handle seeing it in dirty, living color? Could he ever scrub his mind completely free of it? Would it change how he saw me? How he loved me? Even if he said it wouldn't?

All these weeks I thought his transgression was the thing that might irreparably break us.

Turns out it may be mine.

# About THE Author

I'm a wife, a mom, a writer, an advocate for families living with autism. That's me in a nutshell. Crack the nut, and you'll find a Southern girl gone Southern California who loves pizza and Diet Coke, and wishes she got to watch a lot more television. You can usually catch me up too late, on social media too much, or FINALLY putting a dent in my ever-growing To Be Read list!

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# Other BOOKS BY Kennedy Ryan

[When You Are Mine](#)

[Loving You Always](#)

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**And coming February 2, 2016 . . .**

[Until I'm Yours](#)

**The world knows her face . . .**

Mean girl. Goddess. Bitch. Supermodel Sofie Baston has earned those labels . . . yet they don't scratch the surface of who she really is. Before she can follow her own dreams, Sophie must do her daughterly duty and reel in a "fish" for her father's business—a tall, brown-eyed entrepreneur who immediately hooks *her*. He's a big guy with an even bigger heart . . . but will that heart be open to Sofie once her darkest secret is revealed?

**. . . but only one man knows her heart**

To Trevor Bishop, Sofie is a beautiful mystery he would gladly spend his life solving. He figures her tough demeanor is armor against a world that's

hurt her too many times. Then Sofie's deepest wounds are reopened by the powerful, ruthless man who made them. When she musters the courage to take him down, her world shatters. Now Trevor is determined to help Sofie pick up the pieces so they can build a future together. The challenge will be convincing his ice princess that it's safe to melt in his arms . . .

*Here's a "first look" from Bennett #4, UNTIL I'M YOURS*

***FIRST SIGHT—Trevor***

The Big Apple. The city that never sleeps. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

Blah, blah, blah, blah.

"How long are we here again?" I glance out the cab window and up at the flock of billboards flying overhead in the Times Square airspace, a confetti skyline swirled with Technicolor and kinetic lights.

"Three months, give or take," my assistant Henrietta says, not looking up from her phone.

I already miss my house in Atlanta. Despite all the miles I log flying all over the world, I'm a Southern boy at heart. A city like Atlanta makes an excellent home base for me. A world-class city with the charm and sensibility of a much smaller town. When I'm in New York, I feel on edge, like the Big Apple is taking a bite out of *me*. It's not an easy place to negotiate. It's a city bursting with possibility and creativity, but it requires a certain amount of armor. Feeling that way for three months . . .

"We're lucky to have your sister's place while we're here." Harold, my business partner and best friend of fifteen years, looks at our schedule on his iPad. "We have so many meetings at the UN this month. All the companies interested in buying us out are here in New York. We have several galas in the city over the next few weeks. Just makes sense not to keep going back and forth; just make this our base for a little bit."

“Yeah, at least we’ll be staying in Brooklyn.” I lean an elbow on the cab window, considering the changing digital billboards while we’re stopped at a traffic light. “Downtown gives me a seizure—”

The word freezes on my tongue when one advertisement in particular catches my attention. Or should I say the model does. Her name is nowhere on the ad, but it doesn’t need to be. Sofie Baston’s been one of the most recognizable faces in the world for more than a decade.

She’s naked. Even though she’s stretched out flat on her stomach with her chin propped on her hands, breasts pressed to the floor, she’s obviously naked. Her hair, famously silver and gold, is ruthlessly scraped back, exposing the flawless bone structure. It’s rare to see someone like her wearing no make-up at all, but her face is completely bare. Matter of fact, the product she’s promoting is called BARE.

***BARE: Skin care so good you’ll have nothing to hide.***

She’s naked, no cosmetics at all, and yet her eyes make a lie of that tag line. She’s utterly exposed, and though her green eyes are the clearest I’ve ever seen, they yield nothing.

“You were saying?” Harold wears a knowing grin, glancing from my face to the billboard before it swipes to the next product being advertised. “I hope you’ll be less obvious when we meet her in person tonight, Bishop.”

“Tonight?” I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s Ernest Baston’s daughter,” Henritta pipes in, eyes still fastened to her phone. Sometimes I think she has eyes in the back of her head under that ponytail. “She’ll be at the Bennett charity dinner tonight. They’re at your table, if I’m not mistaken.”

I look back to the billboard even though a different image has taken its place. I still see her as vividly as when she stared back at me with those guarded green eyes.

Even when we’re several blocks away and have started discussing our upcoming trip to Cambodia, I’m still wondering how a girl naked on the side

of a building managed to hide in show nothing at all.