



He was  
never  
part of  
the plan

*the*  
**DEVIATION**

EXPERIMENTAL LOVE BOOK THREE

REBECCA RAINE

# **THE DEVIATION**

*Experimental Love, Book 3*

Rebecca Raine

Title: The Deviation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*For Liam and Emily.*

*The big brother – little sister team  
who will always be the lights of my life.*

## ABOUT THE DEVIATION

*When my quiet life fell apart, he turned up the music in my soul. How do I pretend we never happened?*

### **Johnny**

I did everything my parents wanted: got a respectable job, married my childhood sweetheart, and pushed my rock star dreams into the background. It was enough for me... until my divorce cracked open the cage.

Now old cravings rush to the surface, and I ache to satisfy each one. Starting with the gorgeous man I lock eyes with at a music festival. Calum is all kinds of perfect. As a manager, he could accelerate my music career. As a man, he reignites the fire in my soul. I can't have him both ways.

When my band signs with Calum's company, we agree to keep our distance. No one can know we've met before. How far we've gone. How deeply we've tasted. Our futures depend on the secrets we must keep.

### **Calum**

If I'd known who Johnny was the night we met, this never would have happened. Getting involved with a client is forbidden, and I can't risk my job—or my sister's security—for some lust-fuelled romance.

Working together doesn't have to be complicated. That's what I tell myself every time we avoid touching. When his eyes tease, and his lyrics seduce. As our professional successes mount, the connection between us only grows stronger.

There are lines we can't cross. Boundaries we can't break. But when Johnny is all I want, all I think about... how do I stay away?

## ONE

---

### JOHNNY

*Byron Bay, Australia*

Very Important People aren't supposed to celebrate their triumphs alone. I'm sure it's a rule of some kind, written by rock legends of music festivals past. When you defy all the odds and achieve your wildest childhood dreams, the people who love you are meant to be there cheering you on. Even if your dreams are their disappointment. Even if they wanted you to give up long ago.

My grip tightens on the plastic cup in my hand as I take a long swallow. The beer is cheap, but it slides down my throat with ease. It's a shame I have to limit myself to one. Getting drunk might have distracted me from the ache in my chest.

Not that I'm actually here alone. My band, Fifth Circle, is with me. Ned Corbyn, our front man, is by my side. Gavin and Oz, our drummer and bass guitarist, are at the bar getting drinks. The four of us are crammed into the VIP tent of the Autumn Skies Music Festival. We've spent the evening rubbing elbows with Australia's musical elite, from fellow artists to record label executives, managers, roadies, and anyone else who managed to get past security.

Tomorrow afternoon, the boys and I will be on stage playing before an audience of thousands for the first time. It may be a side stage, rather than the amphitheatre, but it's still further than I ever expected to get. Especially considering music is the hobby I'm forced to fit in around my 'real' job. In all likelihood, this weekend is it for me—the pinnacle of my musical career. I hate that I'm not enjoying it more.

"Maybe you were right, Johnny." Ned casts a wry smile in my direction.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I lift an eyebrow at him. "Right about what?"

"Coming down here for the full weekend." Ned slides his arms around the waist of his brand-spanking new boyfriend, Toni, who responds by nestling back against Ned's chest.

"Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, after all."

I force a smile. “Told you. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. We have to wring as much fun out of it as possible.” Given my mood, I’m not wringing hard enough.

Ellie would say I chose this every time I left her alone to spend the night playing music in some tiny pub. Every time we argued over how many hours I spent with a guitar in my hands—practising, composing, rehearsing, performing. She used to joke that I was married to my music, and she was my bit on the side. I should have paid more attention when humour gave way to resentment, when she stopped caring what time I’d be home on a Saturday night. Maybe she wouldn’t have looked elsewhere for the attention she wasn’t getting from me.

Achieving my wildest dreams is great and all, but I did it by letting down the one woman I’d promised to love and cherish above all else. If my arms are empty and my heart heavy, it’s my own selfish fault.

“Maybe I should find a groupie or two to play with for the night.” The words fall awkwardly from my mouth, tripping all over each other in their rush to get out. “That’s supposed to be a perk of being a musician, isn’t it? Getting laid?” It wouldn’t be the same as having the woman who’d vowed to love me ‘till death do us part’ by my side, but it might help soothe the ache.

Ned’s laugh is doubtful. “So they say.”

I fight the urge to sigh in the face of his disbelief. Ned isn’t just Fifth Circle’s lead vocalist; he’s also my oldest friend. We grew up in the same neighbourhood, went to the same schools, though I was a couple years above him. We played together in our first bands. Which means he knows exactly how full of shit I am.

It’s been over a year since Ellie left me. Our divorce came through months ago. Still I have yet to muster anything more than a passing interest in another woman. If I don’t get some action soon, my right hand might up and suggest we start seeing other people.

“Just remember,” Ned adds. “Wrap it before you tap it.”

A groan erupts from my throat. “Condoms. Do you know how long it’s been since I had to think about condoms?” I know exactly how long. The last time I had sex was the night before Ellie left me. I made love to my wife that night. I don’t know what she was doing. Pity sex, perhaps? One last time sex? Whatever it meant, it was unprotected. “Actually, I thought about them a lot when I found out Ellie cheated on me.” Not once or twice, but for months. With some guy who drives a Porsche and doesn’t own a single guitar. I wonder if he knows she cheated on him too—with me. “I had to get tested and everything. That was fun.”

Toni gives me a playful whack. “No, Johnny. This is fun.” The sweep of one slender arm encompasses our surroundings and the multitude of people it contains. “You’re the lead

guitarist for an up-and-coming rock band. You're young, and single, and you look like that." His second sweep gestures to all of me, as if there's something to see here.

I glance down at my denim jeans, designer t-shirt, and black boots. All newly bought, because I didn't want to turn up looking like I shouldn't be let in. My shirt got wrinkled in my bag and I tug at the hem, trying to smooth it out.

"This weekend has the potential to be one of the greatest memories of your life," Toni continues. "Go have some fun with it."

I only met Toni a few hours ago, and I know next to nothing about him, but the man has a point. This weekend is supposed to be exciting. It's about time I stop wallowing in thoughts of my ex-wife and have some goddamned fun.

With a determined nod, I turn my eyes back to the crowd. There's a bevy of attractive and talented women here; many of them are fellow musicians who can sympathise with my constant need to pluck at the same six strings for hours on end. Surely, I can find a woman who'll be happy to help me pop my single-life cherry. Does the who even matter?

I allow my gaze to roam at will, searching the ample supply of generous curves and sultry smiles for someone, anyone, who'll inspire a genuine reaction in me. A hint of lust. A dash of desire. Something to bring me back to the land of the sexual living.

A hopeful minute passes. Then another. At the end of the third my shoulders sag. Fuck. Maybe I really am dead inside.

I'm turning away, resigned to another night alone, when my gaze finally snags—on ginger. Tousled ginger that's rebelling against the neat style it's been forced into.

I pause, widening my focus to take in the broad shoulders and trim waist. A crisp, button-up shirt and tailored pants fit the long form—the long, male form—to perfection. Inhaling softly, I work my way back up to the man's face. Over the rigid stance and crossed arms, the square jawline and furrowed brow. He's deep in conversation with a second man who's facing him, but somehow I can already imagine what he looks like when he laughs, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he lets loose what's sure to be a killer smile. Are his eyes blue? Or green maybe. The dim lighting makes it impossible to tell across the ten or so metres separating us. My feet shuffle beneath me, urging me to move closer, to find out for sure.

His gaze shifts to the right, as if drawn by the spark of attraction lighting me up from the inside. Our eyes meet. They linger. The flow of words from his lips stumbles to a stop. My spark catches fire in his expression and we both burn, just a little.

At his distraction, the man he's with starts to turn, and he snaps his focus back to their

conversation. The connection between us cuts off, but it's far from over.

My whole body is hot, restless, itchy with sensation. My clothes irritate. Even my nipples are tight. Without thought, I bite down on my bottom lip, allowing the pain to drag me back from the brink of temptation. The reflex is old, it's automatic. It's also unnecessary.

I'm not married anymore. I'm free to do whatever I want, with whomever I want. It won't be cheating. It won't be wrong. And for the first time since my marriage ended, I want something to happen.

Relief blossoms in my chest as I let go of a stale, belated sigh. There were times I wondered if I'd ever feel anything for anyone, ever again. But this man... he has me feeling all the things—all in the same horny, joyous, overwhelming moment.

The strength of my reaction to the gorgeous ginger-haired man is surprising, but hardly a shock. I was seventeen when I discovered my fervent and expected attraction to girls came with an equally fervent and unexpected attraction to boys. But Ellie and I were childhood sweethearts; we'd already been together for two years. Our relationship rendered my bisexuality redundant before I even realised it existed. She was my first kiss, my first girlfriend, my first everything. My only everything. I would have lived my whole life that way and had no regrets, except... now I don't have to.

I look up at my ginger. He's giving me a once over. A covert, but interested, once over. I smile as our eyes meet again. His dart away. His jaw tightens and he pretends to ignore me. Oh no, it's too late for that now.

The desire to satisfy every curiosity rushes over me. What would it be like to touch a man? To kiss and hold and be held by a man? I want the roughness of his stubble against my cheeks. I want the smell of his sweat, the taste of his skin. I want hard muscle and low, rumbling moans. But I don't want to experience these new and untested sensations with just any man. It has to be him.

That man.

Right there.

"You're right," I say to Toni, lightheaded with lust and hope. "I've dreamed of being here most of my life. No more moping on the sidelines. It's time to enjoy it."

Toni nods in my periphery. "That's more like it. The ladies won't know what hit 'em."

Grinning, I lean down to speak low in his ear. "What if it's not a woman I'm hitting on?"

He laughs out loud, eyes widening. "Aren't you full of surprises?"

Ned looks between us curiously, but I don't let him in on my secret. There would be shock and questions. Those things take time, and I'm not willing to wait.

I turn back to my ginger. Heart pounding. Stomach fluttering. I'm ready.

Aaand... he's gone.

With a quiet curse, I search the crowd until I spot him making his way to the exit. He glances back at me before continuing on his way. Am I supposed to follow? Will we meet up outside? Is he planning to pull me into the darkness beyond the festival lights and do wicked things to me? God, I hope so.

Draining the last of my beer, I toss the cup into a nearby bin before grinning at my friends. "Don't wait up." My heart pummels the inside of my ribcage as I rush off.

The freedom I've resented for months is a blessing now. My isolation, however miserable, is the greatest of gifts. After all these years, I have the opportunity to indulge a part of myself I've always known about but never explored.

There's no one here to disapprove of this new deviation from my expected life path. No one will censure me or be disappointed in me.

I can have this. No one will even know.

## TWO

---

### CALUM

I shouldn't have looked back. Not even to check if he'd caught me making my escape, which of course he had. I may as well have held up a sign: this way for blow jobs.

My sex-deprived brain leaps at the idea, eagerly supplying images of me sinking to my knees for the beguiling stranger. Right there in the middle of the crowd. A rush of saliva fills my mouth, and I clamp down on a needy moan in the instant before it reaches my vocal cords. That's it. I've officially crossed the line from desperate to utterly pathetic. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Bursting free of the VIP tent, and the tempting man within, I stride through the throng of festival goers in search of food. It's been a long day, and my chance of grabbing lunch was forfeited when Kerbside Desire's drummer failed to show up to prepare for their two o'clock set. I found him passed out in the band's trailer, snoring fit to shred the metal roof. Five more minutes and the whole thing may have popped open like a tin can.

I'd prodded the poor guy awake, poured a cup of hastily made coffee down his gullet, and deposited him on stage with drumsticks in hand and two whole minutes to spare. Arthur, the band's manager, patted me on the back—literally—before sending me off to solve the next crisis. As if it's not his incompetence that keeps landing us in these messes in the first place. Thankfully, I'm now off the clock until tomorrow morning. It's time for one of the other lackeys to take their turn doing Arthur's job for him.

My stomach growls as a row of food trucks comes into view. I scan the lines in front of them more closely than their offerings. I don't much care what I eat at this point, as long as it's food. Joining the end of the short burrito line, I pull out my phone to call Hannah.

"Hey, big brother." Her soft drawl is relaxed and sleepy... and a little slurred.

An amused smile curves my lips. "Hey, little sister."

She tuts. "I'm nineteen now, Cal. Don't you think it's time you stop calling me little?"

"Nope." I've replied the same way every year since the day she turned fourteen to my eighteen. "You'll always be littler than me." Reaching the front of the line, I quickly buy a

burrito and a bottle of iced tea before finding an empty seat at one of the long picnic tables. The nearby amphitheatre is alive with music and cheering, but it's quiet enough back here to talk. "How was your birthday?"

"I had a morning lecture at uni. Then, at work, I got to spend my whole shift stocking shelves. Barely talked to anyone. It was perfect."

I snort a laugh. "You know, sometimes talking to other people can be an enjoyable, life-affirming experience. You should give it a shot."

"No, thanks," she counters. "I'm willing to overlook your social quirks when I have to, but don't go trying to drag me into your weirdness."

Rolling my eyes, I move on. "What did you do for dinner?"

"Chinese food and a bottle of merlot." There's a teasing smile in her voice. "Are you jealous? Be jealous."

I stare at the sadness that is my hastily assembled burrito. "I am one hundred percent jealous."

"Good." A delighted giggle fills my ear. "Oh, and I bought cake. I even blew out some candles because... why not?"

The smile slides off my face. "I'm sorry I'm not there. You know I wanted—"

"Stop being stupid," she grumbles. "They were just candles. You know I like to watch the wax melt." Her words are quiet now, almost self-conscious. "Who knows, maybe one day one of us will even make a wish or something."

A sigh sneaks out of me. "I hope so." We gave up on wishes years ago; it hurt too much when they never came true. But the idea of Hannah sitting alone in our dingy two-bedroom apartment, lighting her own birthday candles just so she could blow them out again... it's too much.

"Besides," she says, interrupting my guilt-fest, "we can do it all again when you get home on Monday." She pauses to clear her throat. "You will be home on Monday, right?"

"Yes." I don't allow so much as a millisecond to separate her question from my response. "I'll be heading straight to the office, but I'll text you when I reach Brisbane." The fact she posed the question at all bothers me. "Did something happen?"

"No." There's a longer silence this time. Her breathing turns ragged. "I looked through some old photos today is all."

I close my eyes, my mouth twisting with the need to swear. Out loud. With excessive force and creativity.

"Do you think they remember today is my birthday?" She sniffs. "I mean, parents aren't

supposed to forget stuff like that, right?”

“That’s it, I’m coming home.” I’m halfway to my feet, my food forgotten. “I’ll be there in two hours.”

“Don’t you dare,” she jumps in. “I’m a big girl, Cal. I don’t need you to come rushing to my rescue over every little thing.” I freeze, unsure what to do. She takes a deep, shaky breath. “If you want to make me feel better, tell me about your day. Give me some juicy festival gossip or something.”

My shoulder’s sag, but I sit back down. “All right, fine.” Hannah’s right. She’s not a kid anymore, and she can handle more than I give her credit for. Not to mention, if I leave in the middle of the festival I’ll be kissing my job goodbye. Working at Rush Music Management may not be my dream job, but it’s gaining me rungs on the right ladder. I need to keep my head down and my mouth shut long enough to get where I want to go. Managing my own musicians—and doing it right.

“You won’t believe the shit I’ve seen in the past twelve hours,” I begin. Between bites of burrito, I regale Hannah with anonymised stories of snoring drummers and vocalists behaving badly. “I swear, some of these musicians are like really tall toddlers. I want to take away their liquor bottles and put them down for a nap.”

Hannah is laughing her head off now. “But then you’d wake them up again.”

“True,” I concede, wincing at the thought. “I feel bad about that one, though. That band has been touring non-stop for months. They’re all looking frayed around the edges, but the drummer is a step beyond the rest. Meanwhile, Arthur’s so busy signing *new* bands, he’s failed to notice his most valuable asset is on the verge of burnout.” Kerbside Desire are talented, and they work hard. They deserve better than to be flogged to death by a manager who’s already on the lookout for his next new and shiny. “The man is sloppy with people’s lives, and the boss lets it slide. It’s not just unethical, it’s bad business.”

Hannah gives a dutiful hum of understanding, as she does at the end of all my rants. “Remember, you won’t be stuck under Arthur’s thumb forever. Soon you’ll sign a band of your very own, and you’ll take good care of them. That’s what you do,” she adds, “you take care of people.”

The words are nice, and I appreciate them, but they’re mostly bullshit. Yes, I did my best to take care of Hannah. I made sure she always had a full belly, a roof over her head, and a near-perfect school attendance record. But I was never her parent. Hell, I was little more than a kid myself the day we realised our parents weren’t coming home. No amount of brotherly love could ever fill the hole their absence left behind or repair the damage they did to her

confidence.

“You know, if you wanted, you could perform here one day.” I shouldn’t go there, but some days I can’t help myself. “I can see it now. You up on stage, thousands of fans screaming your name.” I cup my free hand around the phone so I can do the whisper-roar. “Hannnnahhhh.”

She laughs, the usual traces of chagrin keeping to the edges of the sound. “All I can see is the heart attack I would have, being in front of all those people. I’m so out of practice.”

The fact that she hasn’t already shut the conversation down lures me in, makes me push a little further. “What about when I’m a big shot music manager? Will you sign with me then?”

This time the silence seems endless. “Maybe.” The word is pinched; it’s placating. It’s also a lie. “Tell me more about the festival,” she says, changing the subject with forced brightness. “Are there tons of hot guys for your workaholic self to ignore?”

I swallow my last bite of burrito before answering. “There was one.” With jet black hair, smooth olive skin, and the kind of intensely baffled stare I’ve only ever seen in romcoms. His gaze alone was like a live wire, zapping me from a distance and setting off sparks beneath my skin. Even the memory has every hair on my body standing on end.

“Don’t go speechless on me now,” Hannah cries in my ear. “Tell me about *the one*.” Christ, now *she’s* making it sound like we’re in a romcom.

“There was a guy. We locked eyes across the crowded VIP tent. He was hot. The end.”

She gasps, unreasonably excited. “That can’t be the end. What happened?”

“I did what any grown man who values his professional reputation would do. I turned tail and fled.”

“Noooo,” she moans. “Tell me you didn’t pull a Cinderella on the hot dude.”

“Both of my shoes are still securely on my feet, thank you very much. What did you expect me to do? I was with Arthur discussing tomorrow’s schedule. Could you imagine his reaction if some random musician hit on me right in front of him? He’d be dobbing me in to the boss before I could say, *Thanks, but no thanks*.”

“He can’t get you fired for someone else’s actions.”

“He’d sure as hell try,” I mutter. “Fraternising with potential clients would be the perfect excuse.” Arthur and I stopped getting along when I realised how poorly he treats the people whose work underpin his success, artists and interns alike. He’d show me the door if he could, but the CEO of Rush, Genevieve, happens to like me. She took a chance by hiring me as an intern despite my lack of training in entertainment management. My eagerness to speed-learn the business over the last year and a half has kept me in her good graces. Still, if

Arthur can find a way to make me look bad in front of her, he'll jump on it.

There's more tutting from my sister. "What if he wasn't a musician? Would you still have said, *Thanks, but no thanks?*"

I huff out a laugh. "Not convincingly." Or for long. "But he was in the VIP tent, so..."

"That doesn't mean anything. *You* were in the VIP tent and *you're* not a musician."

"I'm also wearing what are obviously work clothes. Mr Hottie had on jeans and a t-shirt." The denim clung. The shirt was snug. Oh yeah, his eyes weren't the only part of him that caught my attention. That man reached out to me on all the relevant levels.

"You do know all work and no play makes you a dull boy, right?"

"I believe you've told me a time or twenty."

"And it's always true," she teases. "Hey, I know what you should do. You should go back, find your man, and seduce the crap out of him. That would be fuuun." The final whispered word drags out into eternity.

Dropping my head into my free hand, I groan. "This conversation has taken an oddly disturbing turn."

"Come on, it could be like a bonus birthday present."

I choke on the shock first, and the laughter second. "How do you turn me screwing some random stranger into a gift to you?"

She gives a sigh of exasperation. "When you put it like that it sounds weird."

"You're weird."

"You're weirder."

We fall into a comfortable silence as I finish the last of my iced tea. The festival crowd wanders past my table. Groups of friends, lovers holding hands. Around and between them, I catch a glimpse of movement in the shadows beyond. A man, standing alone. His body is turned side-on so I can only see his profile, but his feet shift in a restless way that seems vaguely familiar. I peer closer. Is that...?

"I don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?" Hannah asks.

"He's here."

"Who? Arthur? Because you're supposed to be done—"

"Not Arthur," I hiss. "*The one.*" Damn it, we need to pick a different nickname. "I mean, the guy from earlier."

Hannah gives a loud gasp. "Where is he?"

"About five metres from where I'm sitting." I don't know why I'm whispering, it's not

like he can hear me over all the noise. I sit frozen to the spot, staring at him. His hands are jammed deep into his pockets, and his jaw is clenched tight. There's an edge of expectancy to every subtle shift of his body, as if he's waiting for something. Or someone?

He glances left—straight at me—before his gaze darts away again.

My heart rate spikes and I sit up straighter. “Holy shit, I think he’s stalking me.” The thought is way hotter than it should be.

Hannah shrieks her excitement. “Take a picture.”

Eyes widening, I growl into the phone, “I’m not taking a picture.”

“Why not? I want to see *the one*.”

I’m still staring when he turns to look at me again. His limbs tremble and his chest heaves, but he doesn’t look away this time. Neither do I.

After a brief hesitation, he starts wending his way towards me through the passing crowd.

“Hannah, I’m gonna go. He’s headed this way.”

A delighted squeal threatens to burst my ear drum, and I pull the phone further away before she deafens me. “Yes, you go and have fun. Don’t forget to take a picture for me. You know, before you get to the good stuff.” The rambling cuts off as she hangs up.

Apparently, my little sister thinks I can’t get laid fast enough. Ugh. So disturbing.

### THREE

---

### JOHNNY

Turns out staring at someone from across a crowded tent is way easier than actually walking up to them and starting a conversation. Who knew?

I have no idea how long I stood there looking like an idiot as I waited for him to finish his phone call. I should have left the moment I realised he had no idea I'd followed him. He wasn't waiting for me or leading me anywhere. He was just a guy chatting on the phone while scoffing a meal and ignoring the world around him.

I was on the verge of walking away—for real this time, as opposed to the other twenty times I tried to leave but couldn't get my feet to move. Then, he saw me.

Maybe if he'd looked away again, or appeared uncomfortable, or glared daggers in my direction, I could have brought myself to put a stop to my ridiculous behaviour. But he didn't. Instead, his gaze stayed locked on me, following my every move. He seems transfixed by the sight of me, mesmerised even. Of course, it's also possible he's refusing to take his eyes off me because he finds my stalker routine to be deeply creepy.

Damn it, this whole night is turning into a farce. I'm a twenty-six-year-old man, not some simpering teenager. So what if I haven't been single since I was fifteen? Who cares if I've never approached a stranger with amorous intentions even once in my life? I can do this.

Swallowing my nerves, I wipe sweaty palms on my jeans and force myself to put one foot in front of the other. Please, please, please, don't let him be creeped out by me.

He straightens at my approach, and a moment later he lowers the phone to the table, apparently having put an end to his conversation. That has to be a good sign.

I come to a stop on the far side of the picnic table from where he's sitting. "Hey."

He stares at me with wide eyes. They're green, his eyes. A perfect, clear, sea-green. "How did you find me?"

Not the most welcoming of questions, but the delivery is more curious than accusatory, so I opt for honesty. "I never lost you." His eyebrows lift in surprise and I rush to explain. "At first I thought you wanted me to follow you, but then you stopped here and I realised..." Stop

talking, you arse, before the hole you're digging buries you. "It was an honest mistake."

"A mistake you clued in to... what," he glances at the time on his phone's lock screen, "fifteen minutes ago?" A languid smile spreads over his face. "But here you are, lurking in the shadows."

My face burns at his teasing. Is this what flirting looks like nowadays? Embarrassing the shit out of the other person? "I, um, I didn't want to interrupt your conversation." It's better than admitting it took every one of those fifteen minutes to work up the nerve to walk over here.

He seems to ponder my response for a moment. "What if I'd been on the phone for an hour? Would you have given up on me?"

This has to be a trick question. If I lie and say yes, I look like a fickle bastard. If I tell the truth, I'm an even bigger creep than I was before. "Maybe I would have become impatient," I tell him. "I would have moved closer, grabbed a seat."

He peers down the full length of the table, which is empty apart from us. It could easily fit ten with room to spare. "Where would you have sat?"

I point to the far end. "Down there." He cants his head to one side and I nod solemnly. "But I would have butt-shuffled my way closer, slowly but surely. It would have been frightfully inconspicuous."

He laughs out loud. "You would have been right about the frightful part."

"Yeah, but then eventually I would have been in front of you." Taking a chance, I step over the bench and sit opposite him. "Right here. Once you noticed me, you would have done one of two things."

"Only two?" He pulls a face. "How uncreative of me. Please, inform me of my options."

Taking a deep breath, I play my hand. "You would have paused your conversation long enough to tell me to get lost or..." I clasp my hands together under the table to try to stop them from shaking. "You would have made your excuses so you could hang up and talk to me." I glance at his phone before meeting his eyes once more. "Kind of like you did then." My mouth is dry and I can feel the thumping beat of my own heart, but my gaze is steady as I wait for his response.

He gives a noncommittal shrug. "She hung up on me, actually."

My smile freezes. All my hopes nosedive into the well-trampled grass at my feet. "Oh." Maybe this was a mistake after all. "Girlfriend?" I ask, because apparently self-torture is my new favourite pastime.

The teasing glint is back in his eyes. "Sister."

A laugh falls out of me as my chin drops to my chest. “Right. Siblings. I’ve heard of those.”

“You don’t have any of your own?”

I shake my head. “Only child. It took my parents multiple rounds of fertility treatments to get me here. They opted out of further misery.” Why am I telling him this? He doesn’t care about my parents’ reproductive issues. “You’re sitting with a genuine miracle child,” I add, as if some false levity will make the information more interesting. *Shut the fuck up, you twat.*

His eyebrows lift, along with one corner of his mouth. “I’m impressed. I’ve never met a miracle before.”

I appreciate his attempt to save me from my own awkwardness, but it does nothing to dampen the inferno erupting on my cheeks. Clearing my throat, I try again. “How about you? Do you have brothers, more sisters?”

“It’s just me and Hannah versus the world.” Every word is warm with affection and I can’t stop staring. The love inside him, the loyalty he wears so openly—they attract parts of me his good looks and the charm of his smile could never reach.

“I get the feeling knowing your sister’s name before I know yours tells me a lot about you.”

He laughs out loud, his eyes crinkling at the corners exactly as I thought they would. “Very astute.” He holds his hand out over the scarred surface of the table. “Calum Ellis.”

We shake, our fingers wrapped tight and our palms pressed together. A jolt of awareness shocks me, all the way from my fingertips down to my dick, and my lips part on a soundless gasp. “Johnny,” I rasp, embarrassed by my overreaction to a simple handshake. “Johnny Durant.”

Releasing my hand, he gives me a wary look. “I need to ask you something, Johnny.”

Uh-oh. This could be bad, considering my recent actions, but there’s no avoiding it. “Shoot.”

Calum takes a deep breath, as if bracing himself for the answer. “Are you a musician?”

The yes jumps to the tip of my tongue, despite feeling like a misnomer. I am performing tomorrow. Not in some tiny beer garden in the back of a pub, but at a real, live music festival. After growing up in a household where *musician* was a dirty word, I’m finally in a place where music is celebrated. I want to shout my accomplishment from the rooftops while I have the chance. But now, seeing the look on Calum’s face, I get the impression he’s hoping for a *no*.

“Why? Do you have a problem with musicians? Because if you do,” I glance around us

before continuing in a whisper, “you’re in the wrong place.”

Smirking, Calum runs a hand over his face. “It’s quite the opposite. I’m a music manager, at least I’m training to be one. Mixing business and stalkers is a big no-no in my workplace.”

His phrasing hits, and my mouth falls open. “I was not stalking you, I was—”

“Lurking in the shadows and waiting for your chance to hit on me.”

Damn that sounds shady, but the gleam in Calum’s eye implies he doesn’t mind. “All right, yes,” I admit, throwing my arms wide. “That is exactly what I was doing.” I attempt a contrite expression. “Is it working?”

With a laugh, Calum rakes his gaze over me. “That depends on your answer to my question.”

If I say yes, it will be the end of... whatever this is. Calum is the first man—the first *person*—I’ve responded to in over a year. Even if nothing more happens between us than talking and flirting, I don’t want it to stop. Not yet.

“I know my way around a guitar.” Not a lie. “But I’m a pharmacist by trade.” Also not a lie. Come Tuesday morning, this fantasy I’m living will have run its course and I’ll be back behind a counter, dressed in my pristine white coat and dispensing cold and flu tablets to the snot-nosed masses.

Each conveniently chosen truth broadens the smile on Calum’s face until he releases a pent-up breath. “That’s good news.”

Guilt twinges in my gut, but I push it aside. We’re only talking. He can’t get into trouble for talking to me.

“I never would have pegged you as a pharmacist,” he says.

I snort a laugh. “Funny, that’s what my parents said. They could have sworn they ticked the Doctor box on the paperwork but,” I shrug, “no such luck.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he says with a nod. “I mean look at you, all gorgeous and intelligent. Working in some dodgy front line health profession where you care for the sick and the elderly.” He winces dramatically, shaking his head. “What a disappointment.”

I smile, as if his joke is funny. It should be funny. Except my parents don’t see me the way Calum does. When they look at me, they see a divorced, not-a-doctor who’s ruining his life with a worthless distraction. Some miracle I turned out to be.

“Personally,” Calum continues, “I’m delighted by your occupation.”

A genuine smile pulls at my cheeks this time. “I’m delighted by the fact you called me gorgeous.” I waggle my eyebrows at him.

“Like it’s a secret,” he mutters, a blush creeping up his cheeks.

Leaning closer, I rest my elbows on the table. “Does that mean I can go back to hitting on you now?”

He chuckles, all low and sexy, before giving me a nod. “Please do.”

I’m reaching out to brush trembling fingertips along the back of Calum’s hand, eager for a hit of warm skin, when his phone starts vibrating on the table between us. We both jump. I snatch my hand back; he grabs for his phone. He dismisses the alarm and the buzzing cuts off.

We stare at each other, our sexy as sin hand grope aborted before it could even begin, and dissolve into laughter.

Calum stands and begins collecting his rubbish. “I’m heading over to one of the smaller stages to check out a band I’ve had my eye on. They start in ten minutes. Join me?”

I’m on my feet before he finishes asking. “I’d love to.”

## FOUR

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### CALUM

The band gives a lacklustre performance. The drummer's high, the vocalist is overdosing on vibrato in an attempt to cover a severe case of vocal fatigue, and the loose-limbed gait of the lead guitarist has me wondering about the blood-to-alcohol ratio of his veins. Only the bass guitarist is in good shape, and she's glaring at the others as though she's ready to walk off stage if they do one more thing to piss her off. If the demo file they sent to Rush was their best, I'm now seeing them at their worst.

Disappointed, I allow my focus to drift to the man at my side. The crush of the crowd has ensured our closeness, his arm brushing against mine as the music evokes subtle movements from us both. Every now and then, Johnny sneaks a glance in my direction, but each time I try to meet his gaze, his skitters away. I'm not sure what that's about. He's far too good looking to be this shy.

Leaning closer, I speak into his ear. "What do you think of the band?"

He hesitates before shrugging. "Not bad." At my dubious look, he rolls his eyes. "You want the truth?" I nod. Johnny lifts his chin towards the stage, where the lead guitarist is fumbling his chord transitions. "I don't show up to my job drunk, why should he get to? It's disrespectful to the audience. They paid good money to listen to him play like shit."

I can't help but chuckle at his pursed lips and furrowed brow. "You're cute when you're all offended on other people's behalf."

He grins, turning his head in my direction. Then he realises how close his face is to mine, and his eyes widen. A moment passes. Johnny's teeth sink into his lower lip, abusing it in a way I'd love to emulate, before allowing it to pop free. His gaze darts between my eyes and my lips, not quite landing on either. "I didn't insult your favourite band, did I?"

Smiling, I shake my head. "Not even close." I move to stand partially behind him, so we can speak a little easier, so we can stand a little closer. My right hand comes to rest on his hip. He jerks in surprise but then relaxes beneath my touch. "I've been working under another manager until now," I tell him, "learning the ropes and all that. The big boss has finally

agreed I'm ready to work with a client of my own, but I have to be the one to land the client."

Johnny turns his head to speak to me over his shoulder. "It's a test, yeah? You can't get promoted until you prove you're good enough to lure the talent yourself?"

"Exactly," I say with a nod. To even have such an opportunity at twenty-three, especially without the benefit of a university degree, is a big deal. "That's the upside of working here this weekend. There's a bunch of bands playing for the first time, including some who don't have management." I gesture to the stage, where the total lack of professionalism continues to astound. "These guys sent their demo to us. It was decent, so I figured I'd give them a shot. Unfortunately, they're blowing it." If they can't keep their shit together for something as important as their music festival debut, it's unlikely they'll be able to handle the kind of career I'm looking to provide.

Johnny turns abruptly, all signs of shyness gone as we come face to face. My low-key arousal kicks into a higher gear. Getting my grind on with a stranger at the festival I'm working is a terrible idea. But if Johnny presses that hard body of his against me, even a little, I'm pretty sure my libido will happily tap dance me all the way to career ruin. Instead, he just stands there, his eyes staring directly into mine. "You're here looking for a debut band who doesn't have a manager, so you can offer them a contract?"

"That's the plan. Why? Do you have someone in mind?" My eyes narrow. "Perhaps whoever got you through the entrance of the VIP tent tonight?" Johnny must know someone in the business to have made it past security. "I'd be happy to check them out. Have they played yet?"

His mouth opens, but it takes a while for the words to emerge. "I do know one band. They're playing tomorrow and they're good. They're really good." His gaze drops away, and his hands get all fidgety. "The thing is..."

When he fails to finish the sentence, I do it for him. "Don't tell me, they're after someone with more experience." It's a guess, but it wouldn't be the first time someone assumed my newbie status meant I couldn't get the job done. It's unfair, and patently untrue, but I get it. Lifting my hands in a show of acceptance, I back up a step. "It's cool. No harm, no foul."

"That's not it." Johnny shakes his head, stepping forwards to recapture our closeness. "The band I know, they aren't looking to sign with anyone. No managers, no labels." His lips twist in an exasperated grimace. "Honestly, I'm not even sure why I brought them up."

It's not so uncommon these days for bands to not want to sign with a label, but not even wanting a manager? Granted I'm biased, but I don't get why any band would want to face the complexity of trying to grow their brand without help. "Maybe if I met them, I could change

their minds.”

“I doubt it.” Johnny huffs out a laugh. “See they made this pact when they got together. To stay small, be content as a pub band. They love to perform but,” he shrugs, “they’re not looking to make it big.”

“Then what are they doing here?” I throw my arms out to indicate the crowd surrounding us and the music saturating the night air. “Small pub bands don’t tend to end up on festival stages. Not unless they want something more.”

Johnny’s smile is resigned, bitter even. “We all want something more, don’t we? Doesn’t mean we should get it.” There’s a brief hesitation, a tightening of his jaw, and then he closes what’s left of the gap between us. His hands grab hold of my waist and he pulls me close. “Then again, sometimes we find exactly what we want, and we realise we *can* have it.” The way he looks at me then, fucking me with his eyes, the way he brushes his hips against mine in a perfect blend of uncertainty and longing, all of it sends my pulse kicking into overdrive.

Hell yes, he can have me.

Deep in the recesses of my brain, there’s a howl of frustration. The survivor in me needs the name of the band Johnny’s talking about so I can escape Arthur long enough to catch their set tomorrow. If they’re as good as Johnny says, winning them over could get me my promotion, ensuring mine and Hannah’s security for years to come.

But the man in me has other ideas. He reaches out with his hands but keeps his mouth firmly shut. Johnny’s desire to change the subject is as obvious as the pulsing in my cock. To backtrack now would be pushing too hard in the wrong direction, and I don’t want to ruin whatever is happening between us. Besides, the band he thinks so highly of could be shit. What the hell does a pharmacist know about good music? The whole thing is probably a dead end, anyway.

“Calum.” Johnny’s voice is a low rumble in my ear.

The battle I’m waging inside my head breaks up as every argument, both for and against getting that name, rolls over in slutty submission. “Yes?”

The current song finishes, to a half-hearted smattering of applause, and I expect Johnny to speak now he has the chance. Instead, he waits patiently for the next song to begin. That’s when he leans in, bringing his lips right up close to my ear so I can hear him over the fresh onslaught of noise. “I can’t think of anything interesting to say, but I like being this close to you. So, I’m willing to say anything that comes to mind.”

Laughing out loud, I drop my forehead to his shoulder. How he manages to be so artless and charming at the same time is beyond me. He has to be either a master flirt, or utterly

hopeless. I turn my head, angling my mouth closer to his, desperate for a taste. But I don't want to get it here, where we have an audience and any random homophobic asshole could ruin our delight with a single harsh word.

I straighten, looking into those endless, brown eyes as I hold out my hand. "Walk with me."

His face breaks into a grin as he threads his fingers through mine. "Lead the way."

## FIVE

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### JOHNNY

The thrashing melody of the stage fades into the background as we emerge from the back of the crowd. A gust of cool autumn air causes goosebumps to erupt on my bare arms. I lift my face to the star-studded sky and breathe the night deep into my lungs. It does nothing to calm my blood. The mess in my head keeps right on churning.

There's no way I can tell Calum I'm a musician now. It would look like I confessed in the hope of wrangling a management deal out of him. That couldn't be further from the truth. My whole spiel about Fifth Circle making a pact to stay small was no bullshit. The band is my hobby—a creative outlet for the musical quirks I never managed to shake loose. It will never pose a threat to Calum's job, though I doubt he'd see it that way.

I jam my hands in my pockets as Calum and I walk side by side. My heart pounds a bass line inside my chest with every step. Thump. Thump. Thump. Anticipation. Trepidation. Possibly the beginnings of panic. I don't know, it's kind of hard to tell. I focus on putting one foot in front of the other, although I have no idea where we're headed or what will happen when we get there.

All I know is, the thought of kissing this man makes my taste buds tingle, and I haven't felt that way in a really long time. If I need to keep my secret a little longer to make it happen, so be it.

"We could head back to my place," he suggests in a low voice. "Have a drink. See what the night brings."

I slow to a stop, my mouth hanging open as I wonder what happened to the kissing part. Do people seriously skip straight to offers of sex without so much as an evaluative lip lock? What if it turns out we have no chemistry? We could get all the way naked only to discover we're all spark and no fire.

Or worse, we could have sex and it could be bad. I've had exactly one sexual partner in my life, and Calum isn't even the same gender as Ellie. I could be total shit at pleasuring a dude!

“I um...” I search for a way to distract him while I attempt to get my shit together.  
“You’re a local?”

He grins. “No, but my hotel isn’t far.”

“Right, of course.” I stand there scuffing the crap out of my boots on the well-trod grass. Calum looks on with an expression of bemused curiosity.

Finally, he takes hold of my hand and tugs me back into motion. “I grew up on the outskirts of Sydney,” he says as he leads me in the direction of the amphitheatre—and away from the festival ground exit. “My sister and I moved up to Brisbane about eighteen months ago, after Hannah graduated high school.”

Calum’s hand feels solid in mine, and my pulse rate settles back into a reasonable rhythm. “Why the move?”

He takes his time choosing a response. “We needed a fresh start.”

It sounds so simple when he says it. As if packing up and moving interstate is no big deal. “Your parents weren’t upset about both their children moving away at the same time?”

His lips press into a hard line. “No,” he says before clearing his throat. “What about you? Where do you hail from?”

“I’m a Brisbane boy, too. One hundred percent born and bred.” The only time I’d ever considered leaving was when Ned announced he was moving to Sydney after graduating high school to pursue a career as a musician. I considered taking a year off uni to go with him. My parents had been horrified I would think of abandoning them. Ellie also made it clear she was staying put, with or without me. The thought of losing my girlfriend and upsetting my parents freaked me out enough I killed the barely expressed idea before it had a chance to take hold. Ned went to Sydney. I stayed home.

“So, we’re both in Brisbane,” Calum murmurs. “Which means seeing each other again just got simple.” An understated smile works its way onto his face. “If that’s something we decide we’re interested in.”

My answering smile is subdued. Despite my fascination with everything Calum, I’m not here looking for a relationship—least of all with a man. I can imagine the reaction *that* would get at home. Besides, the second I confess to being in a band, Calum is going to kick my lying arse to the kerb. Bloody hell, when did my spontaneous decision to find someone to get my rocks off with become so goddamned complicated?

Pushing the mess of thoughts away, I start walking again. “How do you like Brisbane?”

“It’s good,” he says, falling into step beside me. “Calmer than Sydney, more laid back, but the music scene is still rich, you know?”

I nod. “We like to think of ourselves as a major city, but that big country town vibe is hard to shake.”

He chuckles. “It’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

We walk, and we talk. Somewhere in the middle, we snack on warm donuts and hot chocolate from one of the food trucks. It turns out we only live a couple of suburbs apart, which seems nuts. “Still, we had to come all the way to Byron Bay for you to stalk me,” Calum teases.

I laugh, my face warming as I run my hands over it. “Music does have a way of bringing people together.”

We get to comparing our favourite live music venues and from there we’re off again, chasing each other down conversational tangents. When he mentions visiting the music store where I buy most of my gear, I gasp with delight. “God, I love that place. My wife hated it when I went there, I’d get lost for hours.” I glance up, only to realise I’ve lost my walking partner.

I turn around. Calum has stopped a couple of steps behind me. We’re at the perimeter of the festival grounds now and it’s too dark to make out his expression so I move closer, until I’m standing right in front of him. That mouth I want to get to know is pressed into a thin line. “You’re married?”

“Oh, um, not anymore.” Lifting my left hand, I show him my bare ring finger. “Guess I should have led with the word *divorced*.”

His shoulders lower and he releases a breath. “That would have been preferable, yes.” There’s a beat of silence and then he cocks his head to one side. “How dry is the ink on your divorce papers?”

“Dry enough the pen we used to sign them would have been tossed into landfill months ago. But this is the first time I’ve...” I wave a hand between the two of us, hoping that explains everything.

His eyes widen and then he gives a slow nod. “A lot of things about you are suddenly making all kinds of sense.”

I aim a dramatic grimace his way. “Ah, you’re talking about my colossal awkwardness. Thanks so much for pointing that out.”

Laughing out loud now, he steps forwards to nudge his shoulder against mine. “I think it’s sweet,” he says before we slip back into a slow stroll across the uneven ground. “You’re bisexual, then? Or maybe bi-curious?” He gasps, dramatically. “Am I an experiment? Because I could definitely be into that.”

“Yes, I am bisexual,” I assure him, “and no, you’re not an experiment. Although, until now I suppose you could say I’ve been a... non-practicing bisexual.”

He turns his head, eyebrows raised. “How does that work?”

“I met my future ex-wife, Ellie, when we were fifteen. We were together until the day she walked out on our marriage so, I never had the opportunity to...”

“Be a practicing bisexual?” he finishes for me.

“Yes.”

“Wow. That sounds...” He shudders faintly. “Not gonna lie, kind of horrifying.”

I laugh, shaking my head. It’s such a relief to talk about it out loud for once, instead of keeping that whole side of myself neatly under wraps. “It wasn’t so bad. I didn’t feel like I was missing out on anything. It’s just... I was taken.” Being with Ellie didn’t stop me from being bisexual, but it did ensure my fidelity.

“When did you realise?” he asks.

“I was seventeen when I fell for a guy I met in my university course. It was only a crush, and it didn’t last long, but it was enough.”

“Did Ellie know?”

“Mate, she’s the one who told me,” I admit, slapping a hand over my chest. “I had no fucking clue what was happening until she pointed out the apparently obvious hots I had for the guy. Then I sat there like a stunned mullet going over every interaction with him, before I finally found the balls to nod and say, *You know what? I think you might be right.*”

Calum throws his head back and laughs uproariously. “How did she react?”

“She pitched a fit, naturally.” It had all seemed so profoundly serious at the time, but talking about it in retrospect I can’t help but grin. “We argued about it at first. She was hurt. I was confused.” Not to mention we’d just started having actual sex a few months earlier. Together, we were a couple of hormone bombs in the depths of our first existential crisis. “It took months for the dust to settle, but we got past it in the end. The crush faded. My love for Ellie was the real deal.”

Calum reaches for my left hand again, lifting it to draw my attention to my bare finger. “What happened?”

So many things, all of them slipping beneath my notice until it was too late. “We grew apart. She wanted me to give up my...” I trail off, because mentioning my music would bring an abrupt end to our evening. How is it I’m sharing my most guarded secrets with this man, and lying to him in the same breath?

Clearing my throat, I look away. “We started to want different things. Then one day she

told me she'd fallen for someone else. Only it wasn't a crush, and it didn't fade. Then she left. For all our years together, our marriage lasted less than three."

Saying the words is like prodding at an old bruise. It still hurts, but not the way it used to.

"I'm sorry that happened to you." His brow is furrowed, his gaze warm with empathy. "You loved her very much."

Nodding, I give a resigned smile. "I did."

Calum takes a small step forward, and although not a single part of him is touching me, I can feel his warmth. I crave it. "What about now?"

"Now that part of my life is over. It took a long time for me to make peace with it, but I think I'm finally ready to move on, make a new life." I look up. The distant festival lights illuminate Calum's face, lighting up the red of his hair. A smattering of freckles is visible on the bridge of his nose and across his cheeks. He's perfect. Sexy. Magnetic. My feet shift as I give in to the pull and edge closer. "I'm ready to have new experiences."

A slow grin breaks out over his face. "You want to kiss a guy."

"I really do." I exhale on a breathy laugh, my gaze dropping to his mouth. "I want to kiss you."

The smile widens and he lifts a hand to trace my cheekbone with his fingertips. "I'll need to be gentle with you. After all, when it comes to men, you *are* a virgin."

My mouth falls open and a sound of indignation falls out of it, but the mischief dancing in his eyes seduces the crap out of me. "I suppose I am."

His other hand joins the first and he cups my face. "I'm flattered you chose me, Johnny." The way my name rolls over his tongue sets my body to quaking. "I mean look at you, so fucking hot with your nerves and your curiosity." He lifts my chin, tilting my head back. The heat of his breath rushes against my throat and I gasp. "You could have had anyone you wanted."

"No." I manage to shake my head slightly, my hands sneaking up onto his biceps as my knees turn to jelly. "Only you." He releases my chin so I can meet his gaze once more. "You were the only person in the room."

His eyes widen with surprise, and then he takes a deep, shuddering breath. "It was the same for me."

The heat between us sparks and sizzles. Our arms tangle around each other and why the hell are our lips not already touching? "Calum." My voice is strained, needy, one whispered word away from begging. "Please."

I've always imagined kissing another man would be instinctively aggressive somehow. A

clash of testosterone-fuelled lust. That's the direction my fantasies took on the occasions I indulged in them. The guttural sound of satisfaction Calum makes now seems to agree.

And yet, when his mouth meets mine, he is all tenderness and restraint. His lips brush across mine in firm, but unhurried, caresses. His tongue comes into play slowly, requesting permission before sweeping inside to tease and taste. It's as if he's easing me into this, testing my reactions.

At the same time, his arms imprison me in a strong grip. One hand slides up behind my neck to hold me in position for his coaxing. The other trails down my torso and wraps around my waist, pulling my body flush against his. On contact, my already panting breath escalates and an unexpected groan gushes from my throat.

I knew I'd love this, that I would get off on kissing a man. The taste of his mouth. The feel of his tongue. The musky scent and the shock of a hard dick. I can feel it now, pressing against mine through layers of denim and cotton. It's all I can do to keep from grinding against him like a mindless animal.

Calum tears his mouth away, touching our foreheads together as we breathe in each other's air. "Christ, Johnny. Your mouth should be illegal." I give a hoarse laugh, sagging against him. "I'm serious," he says with a grin. "A single taste could ruin a man for life."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I brush my lips against his yet again. "I could say I feel bad about ruining you, but I'd definitely be lying."

I flinch at my own words, swaying on my feet as I pull back. In the thrill of the moment, I forgot all about my earlier deception—and the potential consequences of my dishonesty.

The rapid descent from ecstasy to regret must play out upon my face, because Calum's smile dims. "What's wrong?" he asks. "If we're moving too fast we can slow down, it's just..." he sighs into a renewed smile, "I don't want to stop yet."

"I don't either but..." I stumble through a dozen hesitations. My white lie seemed harmless when we were talking. But this, what I'm doing now, is wrong. I glance around, making sure we're still alone in our darkened spot before reaching out. Curling desperate fingers into the front of Calum's shirt, I tug him closer.

My mouth covers his with hungry impatience. I'm a starving man in search of one last morsel before I'm cut off from the feast. "I'm sorry." The words are forced out between kisses because I don't know how to be the first to pull away.

"What are you sorry for?" he whispers.

My heart stampedes inside my chest. My breath is a panting, fluttering mess rushing between our barely parted lips. I wish we had more time.

“I’m the lead guitarist in a band. We’re performing here tomorrow.”

Calum withdraws, his brow furrowing as he stares at me in confusion. “What?”

I brace myself for the anger that’s sure to come. “I lied to you, Calum. I’m a musician.”

CALUM

I lurch backwards. This has to be some kind of twisted joke. He's saying he's a musician to get a rise out of me. "You have a truly awful sense of humour." I let out a rough laugh, ignoring the heavy weight already settling in my stomach. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

He shakes his head. "I wish I were joking, but it's true."

Adrenaline streaks through my veins and I spin in a circle, searching the darkness for anyone who could have seen us making out. Like Arthur, for instance. Or another Rush manager. One of the interns, or an artist we represent. The chances are so slim as to be ridiculous, but they're still greater than zero. I've never been one to take risks when it comes to my job.

The closest people are at least twenty metres away. They're paying no attention to us. My eyes close as I release a slow breath. Where else could we have been seen? At the picnic table where we first met? We only talked there. At the stage where we watched that shitty band play? The memory of Johnny's hands on my hips plays through my mind. We were so close to each other. I wanted to taste him so badly.

But I didn't. We did nothing overtly sexual there. Even if someone did see us getting all up close and personal, I would be able to explain it away. Concerts and personal space were never meant to co-exist.

*This isn't a problem, I remind myself. No one will know. Everything's going to be fine.*

"Calum, wait." Johnny calls out from behind me, and I look up to find I'm already halfway back to the exit, my legs pumping in determined strides. "Let me explain."

I glare at him over my shoulder as I continue walking. "Explain what? Lying to me? Telling me you're a fucking pharmacist?"

"I *am* a fucking pharmacist," he insists, catching up to fall into step beside me. "During the day. But at night, on weekends, I also happen to be in a band." He tosses his arms in the air, as if dismissing the word. "It's only ever been a side gig, a hobby."

I come to an abrupt stop, though my limbs continue to vibrate with a mix of anger and

thwarted lust. “You said you’re performing here tomorrow. That doesn’t sound like a side gig to me.” Bands don’t play in festivals of this size for kicks. They do it to increase their exposure, to make a name for themselves. They do it to get the attention of labels, or managers like me.

My already heated blood catches fire. “What else have you lied about?” I stalk back towards him, hands clenched at my sides. “Did you know who I was when you started eye fucking me back in the VIP tent? Is this some kind of set-up?”

His eyes spring wide and he lifts his hands between us. “No. Absolutely not. I had no idea who you were until you told me, I swear.” He pauses before adding, “Even if I’d known, I already told you... we’re not looking for a manager.”

My eyes narrow. “The band you were talking about earlier. The one that’s all talent and no ambition. That’s your band?”

“Yeah, but it’s not... I mean we’re not...” He nods his head at the festival stages in the distance and the longing on his face is clear. “We’re a pub band, Calum,” he says with a sigh. “We spend most of our time in back rooms and beer gardens. That’s all we’ll ever be. You don’t have to worry.”

“Oh, don’t I?” My eyebrows raise at the profoundness of his bullshit. “Do you think I give a crap about your insecurity or your imposter syndrome or whatever the hell you’ve got going on? Tomorrow you’re going to be on stage performing at Autumn Skies. Side gig or not, that makes you a musician. Of a debut band. From Brisbane. With no management.” The blood that so recently filled my cock pumps through my veins in a rush of professional frustration. “You had better not be as good as you say you are.”

The contrition he’s been so busy displaying melts away as pride shines through the serious. “We’re better than good.” His various brands of uncertainty were charming and sweet, but his confidence is a seduction I would have been better off not knowing about. “We’re fucking awesome.”

Of course they are, because that would be the rotten cherry on the top of this clusterfuck of a cake. “Give me a name, Johnny.”

“Fifth Circle,” he says, with zero hesitation now.

The corner of my mouth tugs upward in a sneer. “Never heard of you.” I’m not sure that’s true. The name rings some kind of bell, but I’m not about to admit it.

He shrugs. “We’re not big on promotion.”

A bark of laughter erupts from my chest. “A manager could help you there, you know.”

“Yeah.” His own laugh is quieter, more resigned. “I know.”

Shaking my head, I stare at him in confusion. “If you and your band are so happy hiding your supreme talent in the back of suburban pubs, why are you even here?”

His gaze drops and he shifts on his feet in that way he does when he’s uncomfortable, or horny. It’s too soon for me to be recognising his tells. I shouldn’t have spent the last three hours focusing on him quite so completely.

“They did it for me,” he says, looking everywhere but at me. “When the opportunity came up, I was in the middle of my divorce and my life had gone to shit. I needed... something to look forward to.” His gaze lifts to meet mine. “They’re here to support me.”

Bitterness wells inside my gut, under my skin, behind my teeth. “How nice that you have so many people who wish to love and support you.” There is nothing nice about my tone. It’s all glass shards and barbed wire. “But this job isn’t a hobby for me. There is no side gig, no back up. This is how I put a roof over my sister’s head and food on our table.” Anger ricochets around my body, tearing me up from the inside out. “I asked you flat out, the moment we met, if you were a musician and you said no. Why did you lie?”

“Because I was horny,” he snaps. “I wish I had a better reason, but there it is. I’m not after a relationship. I just wanted to get laid for the first time in freaking forever and for whatever reason everything from my brain to my dick to the soles of my feet chose you.” He gestures to me with sharp movements. “I didn’t know what would happen, or if anything would happen at all. When you asked the question, I figured I could at least talk to you, and that would be enough. Then my lie wouldn’t matter.”

“Except we didn’t just talk. Did we, Johnny?”

We both fall silent, staring at each other, and every ounce of the heat that erupted between us when we kissed is right there in his eyes—burning me alive.

“No one saw us.” The husky note in his voice tells me he’s as affected by the memory as I am. “You don’t have to worry.”

He’s probably right. It’s unlikely anything calamitous will come from this. But if he thinks I’m going to thank him for taking a half-arsed glance around before sticking his tongue down my throat he’s going to be waiting a long time.

The silence between us lengthens, until Johnny breaks it with a heavy sigh. “So, I guess this is it, then.”

“You think?” The panic is gone now, and the anger is fading, leaving irritation behind. Gripping tight to the itchy restlessness of it, I take my own quick glance around before stepping closer to him. His eyes widen at my approach, but he doesn’t back away.

Good. I want this last hit of him. It hurts, but it hurts so damned good.

I want him to hurt more.

“The one thing I’m glad about,” I tell him in a low, harsh voice, “is that I will always be the first man who tasted you.” The banked fire erupts inside his gaze and his lips part in an invitation he can’t help but give. “I’m ever so glad you will go home wondering what else I could have done to you, would have done. You’ll wonder until your balls are a deep, achy blue.” He sways towards me. I evade him, but only just. “You’ll lie in bed at night and think about how close I am, a few minutes’ drive away. And you’ll know that if you come to me, if you beg me to give you what you want...” This is the moment I edge closer, until he gasps in anticipation. “I will turn you away.”

It takes a bit for Johnny’s lust-addled brain to catch up with my words. Then he jerks in surprise, hurt flashing in his gaze before it falls away. Neither of us move, desire arcs in the meagre space between us with sharp, painful jolts.

I clench my teeth to stop myself from taking the words back. What good would it do? This song, short though it was, has already hit its climax; we’re mere notes away from the fade out.

“You’re right, I will think about you,” he says in a low voice. “But I’ll never be sorry we met. Even though I did the wrong thing, and you cursed me with blue balls, which I deserve.” His mouth betrays a hint of smile, a sign my meanness has been forgiven. “I’ll never be sorry you were my first kiss, Calum.” He licks his lips, as if he can still taste me. “Never that.”

He turns and walks away, leaving me to stand there in the darkness at the edge of the festival grounds, painfully hard and desperately alone.

After the lights and the people swallow him up, I check my watch. It’s close to midnight. The amphitheatre will soon fall silent. The last of the smaller stages will follow soon after. In seven hours, I’m due back here for another long workday.

As I finally force myself to move in the direction of the exit, I’m overcome by a stark sense of disappointment. I liked Johnny. He was a bright spark in my otherwise responsible and rigid life. Our meeting seemed like serendipity at its best, so full of promise. As it turns out, he only ever intended to use me for sex, anyway. *If he ever managed to psych himself up enough to go through with it*, I think with a wry smile.

I’m still annoyed at him for lying, but I’m more annoyed at myself... for falling for it. Johnny was just doing what people do, putting his own interests first, other people be damned. I could hardly expect him to go against his own desires for the sake of a stranger he already planned to ditch come sunrise. Trust is a fool’s game, and I should have known better than to hand it over so casually.

At the end of the day, the only person Hannah and I can count on to do right by us, is me. Our parents taught us that, as surely as they taught us to tie our shoelaces, count to ten, and leave them the hell alone whenever possible. It's not the kind of lesson either of us will ever forget.

## SEVEN

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### JOHNNY

Everything is good. The sound check is done. Gavin and Oz are primed and ready to rock. Ned looks horny enough to fuck the whole world and still have jizz to spare—which is his version of pre-performance jitters. All in all, we're as ready as we'll ever be for this afternoon's performance.

If my gaze searches every crowd for a glimpse of ginger, it's not a problem. Calum was just some guy I met. He was a few hours of my life. My first kiss. Well, my first dude kiss anyway. I could easily kiss dozens of men before I'm done.

Sooner or later, I'm going to be swayed by the lush curves of a woman, anyway. The plump, roundness of breasts. The breathy sound of a feminine moan. That's what I'm used to, and it's what my parents expect. They loved Ellie like a daughter and were devastated by our divorce. To turn around now, at the age of twenty-six, and announce I'm bisexual? That would be pushing it. No, ultimately my future lies in the embrace of a woman. Men are nothing more than a blip on my radar.

It doesn't matter if my fingers twitch at the thought of Calum's hard, unyielding muscles. Or if the memory of his groan, all low and rumbly in his chest, sets off sparks in my whole body. If I can't explore my attraction to men with him, I can do it with somebody else.

The fact it took me most of a year to find him means nothing. The dam is broken now. I'm sure to meet plenty of men I'm attracted to. Losing Calum as an option is not a problem.

The table I'm sitting at shifts as Ned takes a seat opposite me. "How did your mischief making go last night?"

Attempting a casual shrug, I keep my gaze on the scarred and dirty table. "Not as well as I hoped." I'm not keen on giving away the mess I've got going on inside me—I'm supposed to be having fun here—but who else can I talk to about this if not my oldest friend? The plastic water bottle I'm holding threatens to crumple as I turn it back and forth, repeatedly screwing and unscrewing the cap. Clearing my throat, I finally blurt out, "Honestly, I thought casual sex would be easier."

Ned returns my shrug with one of his own. “It can be, but it doesn’t suit everyone. Why push it if it doesn’t feel right to you?”

“Because this is my one chance to—” I stop talking. Ned has no idea I’m attracted to guys. No one in my life does. Ellie was the only person who ever knew, and she wasn’t about to tell anyone. We didn’t set out to keep it a secret. Neither of us had a problem with me being bisexual. We just didn’t tell anyone. It was nobody else’s business.

I never thought of myself as being ‘in the closet’. I sure as hell never thought I would need to ‘come out’ to anyone. But I suppose I am now... and I do.

Rubbing my hands over my face, I sigh. This is fucking up my brain way more than I expected. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. Let’s talk about what’s going on with you and Toni.”

Colour springs to Ned’s cheeks as he stares at me with raised eyebrows. “What do you mean?” he says, as if I can’t call bullshit on his new relationship.

“Last I heard, you were after a weekend fling. Then Toni shows up, introduces himself as your boyfriend, and the two of you spend the whole weekend acting like two peas in a little love pod. Are you guys serious or what?”

Ned’s lips press together as he considers my words. “We’re not serious at the moment,” he says, carefully. “Although, I think maybe we could be.”

Wow. That was fast. I can’t imagine what it would be like to be in another relationship. Even the idea of being in love with someone who isn’t Ellie is surreal to me. And trusting someone again, after the way she broke my heart? I have no clue what that would even look like.

I’m happy for Ned, though. He’s a good man. He deserves this. “I hope it works out for you,” I say, forcing some sort of smile.

The lump at the back of my throat aches. I swallow, and it hurts. I wonder if Calum’s ever been in love. If he’s ever had his heart broken into little pieces and fought his way whole. Damn, there he is, filling my head again. I knew from the get-go this would be a weekend I’d remember for the rest of my life, but I had no idea meeting a man would play such a big role.

Attempting to move on, I hold my arms out to gesture to the still sleepy festival grounds. “If nothing else, at least we get to play in front of a big arse crowd today. That’s worth celebrating all on its own.”

The grin spreading over Ned’s face is a relief. I know it was hard for him to come here, although the why behind his reluctance is still a mystery. Something about an ex-boyfriend he’s keen to avoid. I appreciate that he came anyway. I appreciate that he did it for me.

“Yeah, Johnny.” He nods, a glimmer of genuine excitement in his eyes. “It is worth celebrating.”

\* \* \*

My left hand tightens around the neck of my electric guitar as I walk across the stage. The autumn sun shines overhead. The crowd cheers our arrival with raucous enthusiasm. I want to focus on them, on my band mates, on the awesomeness of this experience. Instead, all I can think about is him. Calum.

There’s no way he’s here. He told me himself, he’s going to be run off his feet all day, working behind the scenes at the amphitheatre. He can’t just take time out to watch the performance of some pub band who he already knows has no interest in his services—especially when he’s probably still mad at me.

None of that seems to matter to the jittery, nervous, horny mess the last twenty or so hours have made of me. I want him to be out there somewhere. In the crowd. Watching.

His imagined gaze weighs heavy on my skin as I play the opening chords of our first song. It follows the furious movements of my fingers as we progress from one song to the next. My guitar sings and sobs for him. My hands fist and flex in the moments between, eager to continue the show.

I have no doubt the lion’s share of the audience has eyes only for Ned. The succubus that possesses him prior to every performance is a greedy thing who loves to suck all available attention in his direction. He feeds off the energy of the crowd, multiplies it, sensualises it, and then feeds it back to them. That larger-than-life stage presence is one of the reasons I was so desperate to have him join Fifth Circle when he returned from Sydney. It’s hot as hell and every audience laps it up.

But not Calum.

In my head, Calum is mine.

All too soon, the final notes ring out, and our set comes to an end. My guitar falls silent, and I take a moment to drink it all in. The cloudless blue sky. The crowd’s thunder of applause. My band mates at my side, sharing in the glory. My chest swells with a bone deep satisfaction. This is what I’ve been working towards my entire life. Every time my parents insisted I give up the guitar and I refused. Every time Ellie and I argued about how big a role my music played in our lives. This is the feeling I fought for. It was worth every second.

Again, I imagine Calum’s eyes on me, but I don’t picture him joining in on the applause.

Instead, he glares at me, with his arms crossed and silent curses spilling from his lips. The image shouldn't stretch my grin wider, but it does. Because even if I never get to see him again, I find delight in the idea of him knowing how good we are.

It's crazy and it's mean, but I want him to know we're the band he's been searching for all along. I want him to want me in every way want can be imagined.

Before long, another act has taken our place, and we're emerging from the backstage area into the main festival grounds. Toni appears from the crowd, heading our way at a full run.

"You were brilliant," he cries, throwing himself at Ned and planting kisses all over his face. Ned laughs as he wraps his arms around the smaller man.

Oz lets out a loud laugh. "Hold up. Do we all get sugar? This was a team effort, you know."

Ned tugs his boyfriend closer. "No way. This one is all mine."

Gavin's wife, Charmaine, reaches us then and tucks herself under Gavin's arm. "Don't worry, boys, you were all brilliant." She smiles up at her husband. "Of course, no one outshines the hot drummer." With a wide grin, Gavin lowers his head to press a soft kiss on his wife's lips. When they part, the love between them is as clear and bright as the day.

My jaw tightens, and I drop my gaze to the grass beneath my moving feet. There's no point in allowing myself to search the crowd. There's no one here for me.

Oz gives a long drawn-out groan. "Next year, Johnny and I are bringing dates of our own." He throws me a wink. "Right, mate?"

A rush of sparks ignite at the idea of coming back next year. Being on stage today, playing our asses off and loving every second of it, was unlike anything I've ever experienced before. The connection between the four of us was stronger than ever. Our performance was freedom and joy and intensity all rolled into one, and we nailed it. Why shouldn't we come back?

My chest expands as I allow the possibility room to breathe. Autumn Skies is held one weekend a year. It's two days out of hundreds. Surely, it's not too much to ask. Surely, we can have that. Excitement streaks through every cell as I lift my gaze back to the rest of the band. Oz and Gavin smile back at me, their expressions open and bright with enthusiasm.

Ned's eyes are also wide. His face is flushed, his body tense. He looks on the verge of panic.

It's the same expression he wore two years ago; the day I asked him to join Fifth Circle as our permanent front man. He agreed—on one condition. Ned told me flat out he couldn't reach higher than where we were right then. Small pubs, small audiences. A small band living a small life. That was all he could offer.

I didn't understand it. Such a pact went against every dream Ned ever had as a teenager. But, when Gavin and Oz shrugged and left the decision up to me, I agreed. Not only because I was so desperate to ditch the raging dickhead we had behind the mic at the time, but also because I knew it would be an easy promise to keep.

I had responsibilities. A wife at home. A career my parents could be reasonably proud of. There was no room in my schedule to play at being a rock star. Taking the musical world by storm simply wasn't part of the plan. Not for me. Of course, divorce hadn't been part of the plan, either.

My circumstances may have changed, but Ned's haven't. Whatever demons he brought with him when he came home from Sydney, they are alive and well. As of this moment right here, they're eating my friend alive.

"For now, let's enjoy this for the awesome experience it was," I say to the band as a whole. "Let the future take care of itself."

There's a brief silence before Gavin nods in agreement. "Yeah, you're right. It was awesome." He steers us towards his van, where we'll be storing the gear we brought with us. "How many people do you reckon were in the crowd?"

Oz and Gavin launch into a debate over the answer, with Charmaine adding her estimate somewhere in the middle. The woman is wicked smart and probably closer to the truth than either of the guys.

On their far side, a silent Ned gives me a nod of thanks. I respond in kind, despite the twisting in my gut and the tightness in my chest.

I've always had this need inside, for one more song, one more gig, one more perfectly strummed chord. It's like an itch, invigorating and incessant, but impossible to scratch without hurting someone I love. It prevented me from being the son my parent's hoped for. It ruined my marriage. I'm not about to let it destroy my band, too.

It doesn't matter if I'm chafing under the limitations Ned placed upon us. I made a promise to my friend, to be content with the status quo, to not reach for more than he can handle. It's a promise I intend to keep.

## EIGHT

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### CALUM

Turns out Johnny isn't the only one who can nail the stalker routine. Blending in with the crowd, I watch the men of Fifth Circle celebrate the success of their music festival debut.

I almost didn't make it to their performance. When I approached Arthur this morning about timing my break to check them out, he'd scoffed at the name.

"They're not worth it," he'd barked, impatiently. "I went to one of their shows when they first popped up on the scene about three years ago. The music was decent, but their lead singer looked like a junkie—and not the marketable kind. They had no website, no social media presence. They weren't even trying. Honestly, I'm surprised they've lasted this long."

I already knew about the not trying part, but the rest of the image he presented didn't fit with the band I'd spent the early hours of this morning researching. From what I saw, Johnny's confidence in Fifth Circle was justified. Their music was light years beyond decent and Ned Corbyn, the lead singer, had a stage presence like nothing I'd ever seen. Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I opened their website—which not only existed but was slick as hell—and zoomed in on Ned's face in one of the band's promotional photos.

"Is this the lead singer you saw?" I asked, holding the phone up for Arthur to see.

He took a quick glance before coming back for a closer look. "No. He must be new."

New to the point of having fronted the band for the last two years, but I wasn't about to mention that. Bands vied for Arthur's attention every day. It's little wonder he never looked back at those he'd already dismissed. I'd hoped to use the information to my advantage.

"Genevieve wants me to come back from this festival with a band to sign and I've heard good things about these guys." Granted, the person who bragged about them was their own lead guitarist, but still... I had to know if they were as good live as their online videos implied. There was also the part where I wanted to see Johnny's long fingers work a fret board like I wanted my next orgasm. Another point best kept to myself. "It can't hurt to take a fresh look."

"Fine." Heaving a sigh, Arthur rolled his eyes at me. "Go. Look. Maybe they won't reek."

Smothering my smile of triumph, I got back to work, ripping my way through task after task so there would be no chance for Arthur to change his mind.

When the time came, I sneaked away from the amphitheatre, arriving at the side stage as Fifth Circle took the stage. The drummer, Gavin, bounced into place like a freaking puppy, his grin reckless but his hands steady. Next came Oz, the bass guitarist. He was younger, and the calmest of the bunch, but the skip in his step gave away his excitement. Ned, like any good lead singer, was more dramatic. He burst into the space as if someone had wrenched open the door to his cage. The sensuality of his gait as he made his way to the front of the stage, his arms stretched wide in welcome, sent a ripple of anticipation through the crowd. Then he wrapped his hands around the microphone, licking his lips like he was about to fellate the damned thing, and they willingly threw themselves into his wildness.

Johnny was the last to step onto the stage. The electricity that seemed to zap me from a distance in the VIP tent last night jumped and zinged from every inch of him. It was in his smile, his eyes. It sparked in the way his fingers twitched, like live wires, and I couldn't help but wonder if the brush of his calloused fingertips against the strings would short out the system and destroy his electric guitar.

Then they began to play and... christ, they were good. The music was loud, the lyrics complex and clever. Each of the songs could easily have stood well on its own, but strung together they flowed in a seamless story of emotional turmoil that wandered among devastation and pain, through the struggles of letting go, only to end in a place of tentative hope. Ned continued to seduce his audience with increasing intensity. There was a guileless abandon to his performance that I could only imagine came at a cost. Creative types often walk closer to the edge of madness than the rest of us and this man looked set to topple. If I ever had the chance to be in charge of Fifth Circle's future, it would be Ned I'd keep the closest tabs on.

Each of these evaluations and considerations was made through the eyes of a manager watching potential clients. I appreciated the band as a whole, without getting caught up in the hype. I acknowledged Ned's star power, without being drawn into his web.

It was in the times my gaze strayed to the left that my professional lens cracked. And it did stray—to Johnny—over and over again.

The heat of last night's anger had faded, but the fire of lust still burned, and watching his body move to the rhythm as he played strengthened the blaze. Every hip tilt, every sway, brought to mind the way he'd pressed against me when we kissed. Those same calloused fingertips that plucked so deftly at the strings of his guitar had sneaked beneath the hem of

my shirt last night, stroking bare skin and making me shiver.

Every time he turned to face towards my section of the audience, my heart stumbled. If he knew I was here, would he care? Had I been used and dismissed as easily as he'd planned? Or did he want me here, watching him?

By the time Fifth Circle finished their set, I was left trembling under the weight of two unavoidable truths.

Firstly, Fifth Circle is the band I've been searching for. These are the men I can put all of my professional confidence and enthusiasm behind. It's their music I want to bring to the world.

Secondly, I will do anything I have to in order to sign them. That includes pretending last night never happened. If the hungry look Johnny had on his face when he gazed out at the festival lights is anything to go by, he'll be happy to do the same.

All I have to do now is convince them they need me... more than I need them.

\* \* \*

An hour passes before I manage to find an opportunity to approach Ned Corbyn. He's crossing the festival grounds with a second man who appears to be his boyfriend at his side.

I glance around to make sure the rest of the band is nowhere to be seen before I draw closer. The act itself feels sketchy in a way I've spent my short career avoiding. Normally, I would have approached the band as a whole, while they were still riding their performance high. I would have showered them with compliments and business cards, and hoped they were in the mood to change their minds about wanting more and bigger.

But if I'd followed the standard approach, Johnny might have said or done something to give us away. If the band found out something happened between us, there's every chance word could eventually leak back to my boss. Genevieve believes in two things: maximising profits and keeping steadfast boundaries between artists and managers. If she knew I had the hots for Fifth Circle's lead guitarist, there's no way in hell she would allow me to take the lead in their management.

Which would mean they'd have the potential to end up in Arthur's not so tender care. The thought of Arthur exploiting yet another talented band makes me sick to my stomach. Not to mention he'd be in a position to tell Johnny what to do, which may lead to me strangling him in his sleep.

My strides lengthen as I catch up to my target. "Excuse me, Ned Corbyn?"

Ned turns and I offer him my hand and a wide smile. Returning my friendliness, he shakes my hand. “That’s me. How’s it going?”

“It’s great to meet you,” I say with a nod. “The name’s Calum Ellis.” Bringing my other hand forwards, I offer my business card this time. “Rush Music Management.”

This is the part where most lesser-known musicians react in one of two ways. Their eyes go round with amazement, or they narrow in suspicion.

Ned does neither. Instead, his smile dies and he eyes my card as if it’s a snake, coiled and ready to bite. “Not interested.” Taking hold of his boyfriend’s hand, he walks away.

The expected rejection barely registers as I fall into step beside the two men. “I apologise for ambushing you, this isn’t the way I prefer to operate. But I caught Fifth Circle’s performance earlier and I wanted to introduce myself. Your set was impressive.”

Ned doesn’t bother to look at me as he gives a curt nod. “Glad you enjoyed it.”

“How is it possible I’m based in Brisbane, and yet I’ve barely heard of your band before this weekend?” It’s a question I’ve been asking myself all morning. Ideally, I should have had Fifth Circle on the list of bands I wanted to check out while I was here. Yet, somehow they slipped my notice. Which sucks because if I’d researched them earlier, I may have had a chance of recognising Johnny when we first met. Then last night never would have happened, and I wouldn’t be trying to forget the taste of him, his hesitation and his eagerness. I never would have been the first man he kissed.

Despite the complications our meeting has caused, I can’t bring myself to regret it. The idea of some other man kissing Johnny makes my skin crawl.

“We’re not big on promotion.” Johnny used exactly the same words. I wonder which of them decided it was true first?

“That’s one of the areas where I can help,” I reply. “Give me six months and I’ll put Fifth Circle’s name on the lips of every music lover in the country.” Considering their good looks and innate presence on stage, I’d put it closer to three.

Ned disagrees, if his curt laugh is anything to go by. “You’re full of shit all the way to the top, aren’t you?”

I let out a chuckle of my own. Do these guys really not know how exceptional they are? “No, actually, I’m not.”

“Ned.” The blond man trailing behind Ned speaks for the first time. His voice short and grumbly. “Not all of us are six feet tall.”

Glancing back over his shoulder, Ned immediately slows. “Sorry.”

Whoever this guy is, I’m about ready to kiss him for slowing the breakneck pace we’ve

been walking at. We're already halfway through the festival camping area. Who knows how long I have to convince Ned to give me the time of day.

Taking a deep breath, I pull on my most professional tone and try again. "I'll admit to a certain boldness when it comes to proclaiming my intentions, but I assure you I have the experience and contacts necessary to back them up." I start name-dropping like a B-grade celebrity. Bands I've 'helped manage'. Companies and people I've 'collaborated with' in Sydney. I may not be an integral member of the Rush management team yet, but when the drummer from Southern Kings was desperate for coffee and a blueberry muffin, I came through like a boss. It all counts.

"I'm currently looking to work with more indie bands." They're easier to get close to and if I can get just one to hit it big, we'll all win. "No labels and no nonsense."

The random trailer up ahead is seeming more and more like a destination and I'm almost out of time. I hold out my card one more time. "Perhaps we can talk more once we're all back in Brisbane." I consciously force air in and out of my lungs. Because held breath is a sign of desperation and I need to limit my tells. *Take the fucking card. Just take it.*

Ned glares down at me, pressed lips curved slightly. "Thanks, but no thanks."

My stomach drops all the way to my shoes. They're not just the perfect band for me; they're the only band I've seen who comes close.

I open my mouth, though I have no idea what else I can say. *Please? I need this? My sister needs this?* This is the real world. No one gives a shit what anyone else needs unless it pleases them.

Ned's boyfriend steps between us then, cutting off further attempts to make a fool of myself. "Ned is super glad you enjoyed the show, Mr Ellis." His voice is on the comic side of cheerful. It's also sharp as a scalpel. "As he already mentioned, Fifth Circle is not currently looking for a manager. You can leave the card with me if you must, but now is the time to bow out gracefully."

It's over. Any further overtures on my part would be little more than harassment. Even if there was a chance it would work, that's not the kind of manager I want to be.

Nodding, I hand the business card over before lifting my gaze to Ned's one more time. "Thank you for your time, Mr Corbyn. Enjoy the rest of the festival."

Gathering what little is left of my dignity, I turn around and walk away with my shoulders back and my head high.

This isn't a problem. There are plenty of bands waiting to be discovered. Bands who *want* to be supported and nurtured by a dedicated manager. In fact, my first clients could be

composing their future hit right now. All I need to do is find them.

Besides, with another band I'll never have to worry someone will find out about the random almost-hook-up I had with the lead guitarist. I'll never have to think about his lips, or his smile, or the way his body fit so perfectly against mine. I won't even wonder what he sounds like when he comes.

Maybe, in the end, this is for the best. Fifth Circle and I were never meant to be.

It's time to wash my hands of this whole mess and move on.

## NINE

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### JOHNNY

*Brisbane, Australia*

*Two months later*

A sudden downpour threatens to soak me as I rush from my car to the safety of my parents' covered porch, a bottle of wine in one hand. I pause to shake the rain from my jacket, shivering when a few icy droplets find their way beneath the collar of my dress shirt. The front door opens before I have a chance to knock.

“John, darling, I thought I heard you pull up.” My mother's smile is warm today, like sunlight in winter.

My shoulders relax at the evidence of her good mood. A good mood usually means a pleasant visit. “Hi, Mum.”

“Come in, before you catch your death.” She steps back, opening the door wider.

Toeing out of my wet shoes, I place them in the corner of the porch, where they'll be protected from the rain, and enter my childhood home. Mum wraps me up in a tight hug and I stand there for a long moment, enjoying the simple comfort of her embrace. “It's so good to see you again,” she says.

With a quiet chuckle, I drop a kiss on her forehead. “It's only been a fortnight.”

“That's quite long enough between visits with your mother.” She wags a manicured finger at me but then links her arm with mine to guide me down the hallway towards the back of the house. “Lunch is almost ready. I made your favourite.”

With every step, the scent of my mother's maple-glazed corned beef permeates the air and I inhale deeply. My mouth waters. My stomach growls. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle with unease. “What's the occasion?”

“Do I need a reason to spoil my only child?” she asks with a laugh.

I drink in the light, carefree sound, even as my throat constricts. “It smells delicious. Thank you.”

We enter the combined kitchen-dining area. My father looks up from his usual place at the table, where he's reading the Sunday newspaper. "There you are, John." Rising, he offers his hand. "We were about to send out a search party."

"Sorry I'm late," I say as we shake. It's only ten minutes past the hour, but every minute counts in this house. "There was an accident on the freeway."

"Well, you're here now. That's the important thing. Right, Margie?"

"Absolutely, dear." Mum pulls a crisp, golden potato bake from the oven—another of my favourites—and my stomach turns a somersault. This isn't just any lunch.

I busy myself with setting the table, and opening the bottle of merlot I brought, pouring generous servings for each of us.

By the time we sit down to lunch, apprehension weighs heavily in the pit of my stomach. The clink and clatter of cutlery is overly loud against the porcelain plates. Though the beef is tender, it takes two tries to get it down. A long sip from my wine glass does little to help, the red liquid flowing bitter across my tongue.

"Thank you for lunch, Mum. It's delicious, as always."

She smiles back at me. "You're welcome, darling."

"What have you two been up to this week?" I ask, hoping to keep the conversation focused in their direction.

"We went out to dinner with Jeff and his wife last weekend." My father's words kill what's left of my appetite. I should have asked a different question. "He says you're doing well at the pharmacy."

I nod in agreement. "Work is good."

Dad and my boss have been friends for years. When I finished university, Jeff was happy to take me on at the pharmacy he's owned for more than a decade. I've been working there ever since. Jeff is a good bloke, and the pay is decent. I've had no reason to leave.

"Oh, yes," Mum chimes in. "Whenever we see Jeff and Deidre, he always talks about what an asset you are. The best employee he's ever had."

Smiling stiffly, I shovel a bite of potato bake into my mouth. Dad may have known Jeff the longest, but I spend forty hours a week working for the man. He would never say those words. He's not that verbose, and I'm not that dedicated. I show up on time. I do my job. I try to be pleasant about it. But I'm in no danger of being named Employee of the Month, even if Jeff believed in such a thing.

"Although, working for Jeff was never supposed to be a permanent thing. I'm sure you'll be ready to think about buying your own pharmacy soon." Dad pauses, giving me time to

jump in. I don't. "You don't want to work for someone else forever."

"Of course, you don't," Mum agrees, "and what an amazing achievement it will be. Your own business." One hand lifts to her chest as she beams with delight. "We'll be so proud of you, John. Not surprised, though. You are our precious miracle, you know."

I do know. All my life I've known what a miracle I am. It was the last thing Mum said to me every night growing up, after she tucked me into bed and turned on my galaxy night light. She would kiss me on the forehead, walk to the door, and then look back over her shoulder. "Good night, my little miracle," she would say.

As a kid, it made me feel special, knowing how important I was. They often told me stories of their journey to parenthood. The years of fertility treatments. The prayers they offered up to God. The month in hospital when I threatened to come early. They poured everything they had into me, both emotionally and financially. After I was born, they kept right on pouring, providing every opportunity they could afford, and a few they couldn't. As I grew, I learned to appreciate the magnitude of what they went through to give me life. The sacrifices they made, and the grief that came with the struggle.

It wasn't until I was a teenager—with less than stellar report cards and a guitar clutched in my hands—that I learned the truth. After all they'd done, my parents expected a return on their investment.

Turns out, it's not enough to simply be a miracle. If I want to keep my parent's love and approval, I have to act like one.

"What do you say, son?" Dad looks at me expectantly. "Owning your own place is the next logical step in your career. Yes?"

I sit rigidly in my chair. My hands ache from the tight grip they have on the cutlery. My gaze darts back and forth between the two of them as they wait for me to give them what they want. That's what I'm here for, right? This is why they went through hell to have me, so I could make all their dreams come true.

I've done my best, truly I have. I got as close to being a doctor as I could manage. When they objected to me 'living in sin' with my girlfriend, I married her. Every place I've lived has been within a thirty-minute drive of their house. I crushed my passion for music until it fit the 'hobby' boundary they deemed acceptable.

On the whole, it's been a good life. I've been reasonably happy. They've been reasonably happy with me. Then Ellie left, and everything went to shit. Now, all the neglected parts of me are howling for attention and everything I've ever done is still not enough and now they want fucking more.

“I’m not ready for that kind of commitment, or the debt that would come with it.” My tone is firm and even, but every word is compromised by fissures of guilt. “Maybe in a few years.”

Dad sits back in his chair with an exasperated huff.

Mum frowns, seeming baffled by my response. “John, darling, you’re not married anymore. Surely you need something productive to occupy your spare time.”

“I’ve been plenty busy,” I tell them, though I have no idea why I’m bothering to bring this up. Music isn’t considered productive in their eyes. “I went down to Byron Bay with the band recently. We performed at the Autumn Skies Music Festival. That took a lot of preparation.” My parents knew about the festival. I told them before I left. They voiced their disapproval and never mentioned it again. I followed their lead. Until now. “It was a great success,” I press on, my voice tight. “We played for a huge audience.”

Mum gives me a look of commiseration, as if my pride in my accomplishment is misplaced. “But you didn’t play on the big main stage, did you. It was a smaller space, off to the side.”

My gaze narrows. “How do you know which stage we were on?”

“We looked it up,” Dad grumbles. “We wanted to know what kind of mischief you were getting up to down there.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little undignified, John?” Mum asks gently. “Bouncing around the place with your hair flying every which way. What would your customers think if they saw you? And using that name.”

“I like the name Johnny.”

“It makes you sound like a child,” she snaps. “You act like a child when you use it.”

The words hit me like a slap. I look down at my plate, taking a deep breath. “There are plenty of musicians who go by the name Johnny.”

“John Denver had a dignified name,” Dad points out. “He was one of the most respected musicians of his time.”

My jaw clenches. “So was Johnny Cash.”

Mum makes a tutting sound. “I do wish we’d gotten you piano lessons as a child like we intended.”

“I wanted to learn the guitar.”

“Which you did, and you’ve had a lot of fun with it.” Mum leans forwards again, her face the epitome of concern, though her tone suggests she’s dealing with a particularly petulant toddler. “You’re twenty-six now, John. Don’t you think it’s time to put childish interests aside and focus on the things that really matter?”

Exhaustion washes over me. I'm so tired of this question. My parents have been asking it from the time I turned eighteen. Ellie joined in before we even arrived home from our honeymoon. I know music will never be more than a side hustle for me. I know it will never make my parents proud. But playing Autumn Skies made me happier in one day than I'll ever be working behind a counter. Yes, pharmacy is a noble profession, but it's not why my heart beats. I need music. It's the only part of my life that feels like it belongs to me.

My lack of response has my parents glancing hopefully at each other. Dad picks up his cutlery and returns to eating. "Either way, you'll have to restrict the time you spend playing guitar when you start dating again," he says between bites. "You don't want to make the same mistakes you made with Ellie."

Mum's shoulders sag subtly, her eyes heavy with sadness. "It's such a shame you two couldn't work things out."

"She cheated on me and left me." I flinch at the sound of my raised voice. Picking up my wine glass, I take another gulp before continuing in a quieter tone. "There was no coming back from that."

"I know but..." Mum sighs, pushing food around on her plate. "Well, there are plenty more fish in the sea and all that." Straightening, she offers me another bright smile. "Have you met anyone nice?"

Calum.

The name slides into place in my mind, the same way it does a hundred times a day. His taste lingers on the back of my tongue. His rough cheeks prickle the tips of my fingers. The heaviness inside my chest dissolves as tiny bursts of light ricochet around my body. My breath catches and I close my eyes, holding on to the subtle burn as long as I can.

Over the past two months, I've learned to welcome the discomfort that comes with memories of that night. Frustrating though it may be, it's still better than the nothingness inspired by anyone else I try to consider. Despite my efforts to find a man who can take Calum's place, I have yet to react to anyone the way I did to him. And forget women. My libido seems to have discounted them altogether. It wants dick—one dick in particular—and it won't let up until it's satisfied.

Even late at night, when I stroke myself in the privacy of my own bed, all I can fantasise about is hard muscles and large, veined hands. Try as I might to keep the men of my fantasies faceless and nameless, it's no use. They all have ginger hair.

"No," I say out loud, my tone rough. "There's no one."

I could never tell my parents about Calum, even if things had worked out between us.

Their attitude towards my music is bad enough, I can imagine the horror they would betray if I admitted my attraction to men.

My parents aren't so crass as to be overtly homophobic. On the surface, they have nothing against queer people. They voted in support of same-sex marriage. If they happened across a gay or lesbian couple in their usual social circle, they may even go so far as to befriend them. To show how homophobic they aren't.

But on a personal level, I'm ninety-nine percent sure they view any sort of queerness in the same way they view unemployment or mental illness—as unseemly business that happens in other people's families.

Thankfully, this is one area where I know I can come through for them. I'm not gay; I'm bisexual. I already know I can be happy in a monogamous relationship with a woman. By the time I'm ready to put my heart on the line again, I'm certain to have had my fill of men. I'll find a woman I can love and my parent's will approve of, and we'll all be happy. After all they went through for me, and all the ways I've fallen short of their hopes and dreams, the least I can do is give them another daughter-in-law. And, one day, grandchildren.

Which means I need to hurry up and find a man to satisfy this growing obsession. No matter what the future holds, I have the right to explore the unknowns of my sexuality in the here and now. It's time I get out of my own way and do something about it.

TEN

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## CALUM

My stomach churns as I sit at the crowded Rush boardroom table. My arms are crossed, and one leg bounces silently beneath the table. At the front of the room, one of my colleagues, Jess, is finishing her progress report. Hired as an intern around the same time as me, Jess was recently promoted after signing her first client. She now has a second in her sights and is beginning negotiations. Her excitement over her latest find is clear, and I'm happy for her. Really happy. Oh, and by the way... fuck my life.

"Excellent work, dear," Genevieve says with a satisfied nod. "Let me know when the contracts are signed and we can proceed."

Jess preens under the boss's approval. With a word of thanks, she logs out of the presentation laptop and quickly gathers her notes. She shoots me a relieved smile as she strides back to her chair. I try to return it, but my face threatens to crack.

At Genevieve's side, Arthur glances at the agenda and then swings his bored gaze in my direction. "Calum, you're up."

My feet drag as I stand and take my position in front of the dozen or so people surrounding the table. I log myself in on the laptop and navigate to where my files are stored on the network. Straightening, I clear my throat in an effort to dislodge my reluctance. "Good morning, everyone. Today I'll be presenting two bands who are eager to work with us."

I wish I were half as eager to work with them. I'm picky as hell, I know, but I never wanted to launch my career with just any band who can compose a tune and string a few rhyming words together. I wanted a band I could believe in. An act I could put my heart and soul into.

Unfortunately, only one band has fit every one of my lofty requirements. That way lies chaos and rejection. Which leaves me here. Settling.

I launch into a brief summary of the first band. Promotional photos flash up on the enormous monitor mounted on the wall behind me, followed by charts with statistics regarding their target market and the current size of their audience. I play samples of their

music through the room's surround sound speakers. Their eagerness and dedication are obvious, but the state-of-the-art equipment gives the lack of originality in their work nowhere to hide.

The presentation for the second band is more detailed. They're also eager and dedicated, but with the addition of a fresh sound. Unfortunately, their talent comes with an excess of ego that could prove problematic as they grow more popular. Working with them would be a step forwards, but the path ahead could be bumpy.

When the final sample finishes, I close down the files and await Genevieve's response. The impassive expression she's maintained throughout my presentation already has beads of perspiration forming on my forehead. Now, my stomach sinks. The bands I've brought her lack star power. I know that. But I've seen far less competent bands get the nod in this room.

Genevieve stares at me for a long moment, her arms draped casually along the sides of her plush chair as the fingers of one manicured hand drum a slow rhythm against the leather. Everyone is silent. Arthur's grin is smug, his gaze mocking.

Finally, Genevieve steepled her fingers in front of her and tilts her head to one side. "How do you expect me, or anyone else in this room, to engage meaningfully with either of these acts when you so clearly find them lacking?"

I freeze in place, my mouth hanging open.

"Truly, Calum, you could have been presenting on a barely adequate jingle for all the passion you've shown," she continues. "It's been three months. Have you truly not found a single act who excites you?"

"Yes." The word shoves out of me in a panicked rush. Managers who can't bring in marketable talent don't last long in this company, and I'm a long way from proving myself. Two months ago, attaching my career to a musician I'd already crossed lines with seemed like a fast track to the unemployment line. Now, I'm beginning to think he may be my only hope for staying out of it. "Give me one second."

My hands shake as I scramble to bring up the information I've gathered on Fifth Circle. There's plenty of it. I could claim to have collected the multitude of photos and recordings so I'm prepared if they change their minds, and it would only be a partial lie. My strange obsession encompasses the band as a whole—and I thrill at the thought of all I could do for them—but Johnny is always going to be the fixed point at the centre.

The first photo, taken from their website, appears on the monitor and Arthur shifts in his seat with a low groan. "Fifth Circle again?" He rolls his eyes. "You begged me to let you see them at Autumn Skies, despite the fact we were swamped with work, and then you said they

were no good. Which, I might add, I'd already told you."

I grit my teeth at the mixture of truth and bald-faced lies. "I said they're resistant to the idea of being managed. The band itself was incredibly impressive." I meet Genevieve's gaze. "If I may?"

She nods her assent.

I cover the basics of the band's background at top speed. How Johnny was the one who put the band together. It originally had five members, including current members Gavin and Oz. The keyboardist left after about six months and was never replaced. The band's development was hampered by a series of sub-par lead singers. "That would be when Arthur saw them," I add, gesturing in his glowering direction. "However, that changed with the arrival of Ned Corbyn two years ago. It's taken time for them to find their sound," I conclude, "but there's an incredible amount of untapped potential there. With the right management strategy, they could be huge."

I hit play on a video recording from the festival. Produced by the organisers, it does a decent job of showcasing the band. I keep my gaze averted as the clip plays. I already know every note, every movement of Ned's performance, every gesture Johnny makes as he works his magic on his guitar.

The song ends a few minutes later, and I pause the playback. Looking up, I force myself to meet Genevieve's gaze. She's frowning at me.

"Why am I only hearing about this band now?" she says tersely.

"They've been surprisingly good at keeping under the radar. Autumn Skies was their festival debut. Until then, they'd been keeping to small pubs with small audiences. They've opened for other bands at some larger gigs, but that's it."

"The festival was two months ago. Why didn't you sign them then?"

"I had a meeting with Ned Corbyn at the festival." More accurately, I chased him across the lawn like a deranged groupie while he did his best to escape me. "Fifth Circle see themselves as a simple pub band, and nothing more. Ned was adamant about their desire to remain completely independent in all regards."

Arthur barks out a laugh. "He told you to fuck off is what you're saying."

I smile tightly, waiting for the murmur of smothered laughter in the room to die down. "He was more polite about it."

Arthur turns to Genevieve with smug confidence. "Let me talk to them, Genny," he says in a low voice, as if I've already been dismissed from the conversation. "Perhaps they'd be open to someone with more experience and less..." he glances at me with a hint of disdain,

“desperation.”

Genevieve appears to consider the suggestion. “I suppose you could—”

“No!”

Every person in the room snaps their focus to me. Most with horror. Arthur with delight. Genevieve regards me with lifted eyebrows and a hint of amusement on her lips. “You have something to add, Calum?”

I stand there, jaw dropped, but nothing comes out. My mind is still busy reeling with the possible ramifications of talking over the CEO of the company. Loudly.

Clearing my throat, I manage to croak out a few words. “I apologise for the interruption. I didn’t mean to—”

“Spit it out,” she snaps.

“Fifth Circle is my find and if they sign with Rush, I want to be the one to bring them into the fold.”

“That’s an excellent idea, but apparently you’ve already taken no for an answer.” Her tone is mild but there is a wealth of judgement in the words. I had my chance. I failed. “All right, everyone,” she continues to the room at large. “Mr Ellis and I are going to need the room.”

A clamour of activity begins as everyone rushes to leave before they’re contaminated by my vocational stink. Arthur is in no such rush. He knows his worth here, even if he does misuse those beneath him to maintain his lofty reputation.

Finally, he pulls the door closed behind him and silence rushes to fill the space between me and the woman who signs off on my pay cheques.

She remains in her chair at the far end of the boardroom table, her hands loosely clasped in front of her as she regards me with inscrutable eyes. “Calum, dear, I have high hopes for you. You’re smart and you work hard. But I’m beginning to wonder if you have the determination required for this line of work.”

“I do,” I assure her.

“It’s been almost three months since I offered you the opportunity to sign a band of your own. You’ve found a suitable band. What’s the problem?”

“They insist they don’t want to grow beyond what they’re doing now.”

“Ridiculous. Everyone wants to grow.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“You only spoke to the lead singer, Ned Corbyn. Yes?” At my nod, she continues. “If Johnny Durant is the one who formed the band, why not go directly to him? I’m sure he didn’t spend years piecing this act together so they could hide their light under a bushel.”

“I got the impression Ned is the most reluctant.”

“Who better to change his mind than his band mates.” She stands from her chair, indicating this meeting is nearing its conclusion. “I agree, Fifth Circle will be perfect as your first client. I expect the signed papers on my desk by the end of next week.”

My heart is racing and I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

She pauses by the closed door, one hand on the knob. “Last chance, dear. If you want to be a Rush manager, find a way to turn that no into a yes.”

## ELEVEN

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### JOHNNY

The guy on the dance floor has been watching me from the second I stepped onto the small pub stage, and I wonder if maybe I could be into him. His face is too far on the classical side of handsome to float my boat, normally. But he's quick to smile. His body knows its way around a beat. And when the light shines on his pale hair from the right direction, I can almost pretend it's ginger.

He'll do.

By the time we finish our last set, my mind is racing. Can we load out our equipment fast enough for me to reach my target before he has a chance to disappear? If I do reach him, will I be able to go through with whatever happens next? I mean, it *could* happen. I chased Calum halfway across a music festival; surely I can ask this guy to join me for a drink. If I'm a little less enthusiastic about it this time, that's probably a good thing. I don't want to be so desperate for dick I fall for every man who manages to make my pulse kick.

Load out seems to take forever, but as soon as we're done, I rush into the tiny backstage bathroom to rinse the stage sweat from my face and torso. After drying off, I stuff everything into my duffel bag before heading out to the car park to throw it in the boot of my car. I'll say a quick goodnight to the boys, and then slip back inside and—

One look at the man standing alone in the dimly lit car park brings every hopeful thought to a screeching halt.

Shock holds me frozen for a long moment. When I do begin walking towards him, I'm sure the mirage will dissipate with every step. I don't stop until we're up close and personal. My heart pounds, and my deepening breaths draw the scent of him into my lungs. He's really here. And he really does look that good.

"Calum." I imagine he can hear all sixty-seven days' worth of longing in the roughness of my voice.

"Hello, Johnny." His voice is rough, too.

We stare at each other in silence. I shift awkwardly on my feet. He remains stock still, his

hands jammed into his pockets.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I um... I need to talk to you.”

Sparks of excitement tug at the corners of my mouth. “Couldn’t stay away from me, huh?”

He looks past me, clearing his throat as he backs up a step. “To the band, I mean.”

My smirk dies. “About what?”

He takes a deep breath, meeting my gaze once more. “I know you meant it when you said Fifth Circle isn’t looking for a manager. You told me. Ned told me. But if I could—”

“Ned told you?” I ask, frowning. “When did you meet Ned?”

“At Autumn Skies. I approached him after your set with the hope of tempting the band to reconsider.”

My eyes narrow. “Why didn’t you come to me?”

“It was a business proposal,” he says, as if that clears everything up. “I couldn’t bring it to you. Not after we...”

“Johnny.” Gavin’s call comes from the far side of the car park, where he and Oz have just left the pub. “Are you heading out?” he continues as they join us.

“Soon,” I say with a nod. Their gazes drift to the man at my side and I make the necessary introductions. “Calum is a manager at Rush Music Management,” I tell them. “He wanted to introduce himself. I did tell him we’re not in the market for a manager, but he’s determined to be the man who changes everything.” I attempt to keep the sarcasm to the very edges of my voice—sort of.

Two sets of eyes widen before Gavin and Oz both reach out to shake Calum’s hand. “It can’t hurt to hear what you have to say,” Gavin says, cheerfully. Oz, ever the quiet one, nods his agreement.

A flicker of movement catches my attention. I turn my head to see Ned making his way over to us, his brow furrowed as he glares at Calum.

Anger flares in my gut and I stalk over to meet him halfway. “Why didn’t you tell us Calum approached you at the festival?”

His gaze darts to Calum briefly, before flicking back to me. “Why would I?” he says, his mouth set into a grim line. “We’re not looking for a manager.”

“We’ve never been approached by one, either.” I have no idea what I would have done if he’d said something. But the idea I missed the opportunity to see Calum again, even if only to turn him down, has me mad as hell. “You should have told us.”

“Fine,” Ned grits out. “I should have told you. But what difference does it make? This guy

can't do anything for us we can't do for ourselves."

I open my mouth to argue when Calum beats me to it. "I beg to differ," he calls, one hand raised. "I can make your lives a lot less complicated. Take care of the business side of things so you can focus on what you do best. Making music."

Damn, that sounds good. To be able to focus on nothing more than creating and performing. Even if it would still be strictly limited to non-business hours, the thought of not constantly chasing the end of the organisational to-do list that keeps the band running? That alone sounds like heaven.

Ned's face contorts in disgust, and he stalks past me to join the others. "Oh, that's what we should do, is it? Make music and leave the rest up to you? While you take a nice fat percentage of our money and make promises you won't keep? No, thank you."

Calum's gaze narrows. "You've had a manager in the past I take it? Not a competent one."

Ned scoffs. "Actually, he's one of the best in the business. You should know, you've worked with him. If he's so incompetent, why is he still there while you're here trawling for clients in a pub car park?" He takes another step towards Calum, continuing in a low murmur.

Whatever he says makes Calum's eyes widen, and then I hear him muttering about motherfucking bastards under his breath. He sighs when he drags his gaze back to Ned. "You're one of Zac's boys, aren't you?"

Zac's boys? I only know of one Zac in the management business whose name could be dropped like that. Zacariah Powell.

Ned flinches, like he's been stuck with a branding iron. Stepping backwards, he lifts a hand to his chest. "Not anymore."

Holy shit. Is it true? Was Ned managed by Zac Powell when he was in Sydney? Why didn't he tell me? Yes, I would have been jealous as hell, but mostly I would have been stupidly happy for him. It would have been a dream come true.

"Look, I'm not here to cause trouble," Calum says. "I came to..." The flick of his gaze in my direction is a sharp jolt to the senses. "I wanted to see the show."

The show. Not me. Only the band. The potential client. My jaw clenches. To think I've been fantasising about him all this time, unable to get him out of my head, and he's just here for business. I run a hand through my hair, clearing my throat in an attempt to dislodge the lump in the back of it.

"Calum wandered back here to introduce himself," Gavin tells Ned. "In case we ever change our minds about working with him."

"We're not changing our minds." Ned says the words without hesitation, without checking

in with the rest of us, because he knows he doesn't have to. He trusts us to back him up. He trusts me. The leash around my neck tugs a little tighter.

Despite the fresh rejection, Calum pulls a handful of business cards from his pocket. "Feel free to throw them out if you want." He offers one to Ned, who doesn't take it. With a mild shrug, Calum moves on to Oz and Gavin. They each accept a card, though whether out of interest or politeness it's hard to tell.

My turn comes. Calum holds the card casually between his index and middle fingers. I glance at Ned, whose eyes are wild with anxiety. I shouldn't take the card. Ned will see the simple act of acceptance as a fuck you to every promise I ever made to him. But when I look down, I see Calum's phone number. It's right there under his name. The possibility of future contact gifted in ink.

I take the card.

Ned's eyes close as he turns away.

Calum returns his attention to Ned, speaking in low tones I can't make out, though I definitely hear the name Zac mentioned again. When he finally backs up, he addresses us as a group once more. "Think about it. It's all I ask."

I hold back a snort of laughter. Calum Ellis wants me to think about him and all he has to offer. As if I can stop. As if I've thought of anything else in months. His gaze meets mine one more time, and I'm surprised to see my own longing reflected back at me.

I wish we were alone. Just for a minute. I need to talk to him, hear his voice, be near him. I need to hear him say he's thought about me, too.

When he walks away, my heart claws at my chest in an attempt to follow. Everything about him is everything I want. As a manager, he could give freedom to my music. As a man, he seduces me with every word, every heated glance. I can't have it both ways, that's a given. But can't I at least have one?

Clamping down on the urge to act like a love-sick twat, I force my focus back to the men at my side. We come together, like the four distant corners of our own little world. For a long moment, no one speaks. I can't be the first. I'm too close to the edge. I don't want to lose my shit.

Ned begins. "I'm sorry for not telling you about Calum at the festival. I had no right to make decisions on behalf of the band." We nod and Ned releases a sigh, though his body still quivers with tension. "Now what?"

"Now we need to get our arses on the same page," I insist. Things are changing, new opportunities are appearing, and the way we're starting to pull in different directions is going

to tear us apart if we're not careful. It's time to clear the air, maybe even renegotiate the pact we made. Getting a clue as to why Ned needs it in the first place seems like a good place to start. "Zac Powell. As in *the* Zachariah Powell? He was your manager in Sydney?"

"Yes," Ned replies.

The rest of us mutter curses under our breaths. It isn't an over-reaction. "Is he also the ex-boyfriend you didn't want to see at Autumn Skies?" I ask, the thought suddenly occurring to me.

Ned nods, his expression grim. "We were together for eight months. He managed me the whole time. He tried to help me get off the ground but..." He shrugs, as if there's nothing more to say.

Gavin frowns. "I don't know, mate. I've played in a lot of bands with a lot of singers. The thought of someone as good as you not being able to gain traction, even with Zachariah Powell backing you up?" He shakes his head. "Sounds dodgy to me."

"Either way, it ended badly, and I walked away with nothing," Ned says in a rush. "I'm not about to sign up for more of the same."

The pieces are starting to come together, and yet it still doesn't make sense. This is Ned's big secret? He got the opportunity to work with one of Australia's most successful music managers, while dating the man, and it didn't work out. Seriously? That's it?

"It wouldn't have to be the same," I assure him. "Whatever happened between you two, it was clearly bad." Granted, I imagined something more dire than getting dumped by his boyfriend, but heartbreak is a bitch. That, I do understand.

The tension radiating from Ned's body cranks up a notch as he crosses his arms and gives a curt nod.

"Okay, so I get now why you're wary of getting involved with another manager. Zachariah Powell wouldn't be the only bad egg and all. But that doesn't mean we can't get good representation if we want it. Right?" Gavin and Oz nod their heads in agreement. "Working with Calum could be good for us." His name alone fizzes on my tongue and I try to rein in my eagerness. If Ned finds out what happened between me and Calum at the festival, he'll shut me down so fast I'll be in danger of losing body parts. "Or, you know, someone like him."

Gavin's nod grows more enthusiastic. "I agree. We could check him out first, and the company he's working for, make sure they're decent. Charmaine can read over any agreements they want us to sign so we don't get shafted. Being married to a solicitor has its advantages." His face lifts in a smug grin.

“Exactly.” My pulse riots inside my body, and I can’t help the hope filling me. If it’s fear of getting screwed over that’s holding Ned back, surely we can help allay that fear. “We’ll be there to watch each other’s backs. You might not have had that before, but you have it now.”

Instead of responding to me, Ned turns to Oz. “What about you?” he snaps. “Are you itching to be a rock star, too?”

There’s a moment of hesitation, but then Oz nods. “It would be nice to feel like we’re building something, moving forwards. We’ve been stuck in the same place an awful long time.”

Yes. That’s it exactly. I don’t need to be famous. I just want to know there’s more to my life than a 9-to-5 job and going home to an empty bed. Apparently, Gavin and Oz are keen for more, too. All we need is for Ned to agree.

Putting my hand on his shoulder, I pull his focus to me. “Ned, I know this wasn’t the plan when you joined us, but there’s one detail we weren’t counting on back then.”

He barely lifts an eyebrow at me. “What is that?”

I let loose a wicked grin, the kind that usually provokes the equally wicked side of him. When he’s not desperate to hide it. “The four of us together are so freaking good.” Gavin and Oz laugh behind me and I allow the sound to push me on. “Seriously, man, we were a decent band before. But you, my friend, turned out to be the secret sauce.”

Ned shakes his head. “You never needed me. All you needed was a singer who could show up on time and not be wasted.”

I bark out a laugh. “I’ll admit it was a start. It’s more than that, though, and you know it.” I grab hold of his other shoulder, desperate for him to see us the way I do. “We mesh on stage like a freaking dream and people respond to that. They know us. They love our music. The momentum is growing, and this is our chance to do something awesome, but we’re going to need help. I reckon the sooner we accept it, the better off we’ll be.”

Ned stares at me for a long moment, his eyes wide and wild. “You’re right.”

My heart threatens to burst through my ribs as hope spreads its wings and takes flight. I suck in a deep lungful of air. Hell yes, I’m right. We can do this. We can do it together and take care of each other. We’ll be okay.

“You should keep growing,” Ned continues, his voice breaking. “You always were a great band, and you’ll still be great after I’m gone.”

As quickly as it rose, my new-found hope goes into free fall, like a bird whose clipped wings are only discovered in the instant before it hits the ground.

The world contracts, snapping back into place against my skin. I try to breathe, but the air

is gone. I'm suffocating. Whatever panic has Ned in its grip reaches out to take me, too. As hard as he needs to disappear, I'm just as desperate to break free. "What in the ever-living fuck are you talking about?" My voice is hoarse, my throat closed tight. "Are you seriously threatening to quit on us? Now?"

"It's not a threat. I don't want to leave, but you've all worked so hard to get to this point and you shouldn't stop now. You deserve every success coming to you." Regret leaks out through his voice, and he stops to clear his throat before delivering the final blow. "But you'll have to do it without me."

All the frustration building inside me ruptures in a fury of adrenaline. "That's bull and you know it." I'm yelling. I don't want to be yelling, but the words are vomiting out of me and I have no idea how to stop. "You and I write the music together, Ned. Gavin and Oz finish what we start. That's the way it works. That's why it works. Because the four of us, together, work. None of us is expendable. You can't just be replaced."

Of all the bands I've put together over the years, Fifth Circle is the only one that's felt this solid. Me, Ned, Gavin, and Oz. We're a complete unit. The past two years have been a revelation for my music. Ned has told me he feels the same way. How can he throw it all away, after I've fought so hard to keep it together?

Tears burn the back of my eyes, and I force myself to walk away. The anguish inside me pushes at my skin. I can't breathe. I need to get rid of it before I choke. Gavin's van is in front of me and I lash out, punching the side panel as hard as I can. Pain reverberates through my fist and up my arm. That's a dumb arse thing for a guitarist to do.

"Whoa, Johnny." Gavin closes in, putting himself between me and his van. "Settle down. We'll sort this out."

"I can't lose the band, Gav," I say in a low voice, my body trembling. "This is all I have. I can't lose it. I'll go crazy."

"You won't lose it, and neither will I," Gavin insists, one hand on my back. "But you know shit like this isn't going to help."

Nodding, I squeeze my eyes shut and take a few deep breaths. I've never been the kind of man who loses control and throws punches when I don't get my way. I'm the level-headed type, doing right by the people I love and not making a fuss. It hasn't always been fun, but at least I knew who I was. Right now, I barely recognise myself.

Looking up, I see the dent I've put into the side panel of Gavin's van and groan aloud. "Sorry about your van. I'll get it fixed."

He snorts a laugh. "Yeah, you will, but first things first." He gestures back to where Ned

and Oz are talking.

I heave a sigh and nod. “Okay, let’s figure this out.”

We’ve barely taken a step when Ned backs away from us. “I’m sorry I can’t be the person you need me to be,” he says. “I won’t stand in your way, but I can’t go with you. I just can’t.” He heads for his car, slamming the door closed just as I call out.

I take off at a run, trying to reach him before he leaves, but there’s no chance. His tyres squeal as he pulls out onto the road and drives away.

Everything stops as I stand there in the middle of the driveway. I should have been calmer. I should have taken the time to listen to Ned’s concerns. Maybe I could have said something different, made him see reason. He used to want this—exactly this. Once upon a time, being a musician was all he ever talked about. When I see him on stage, I know how badly he wants to stay there. I don’t understand why he’s so afraid of this.

I don’t understand why we’re losing him.

The shuffled footsteps of Gavin and Oz sound behind me. “Let’s give him some time,” Gavin says. “Call him tomorrow when he’s calmed down a bit. Yeah?”

I nod, unable to call up the motivation to reply.

Oz speaks next. “It’ll work out in the end, one way or the other.”

We say subdued goodbyes before the two men hop into Gavin’s van and drive away. I watch them out of sight before heading for my own car.

When I get home, I slump in a kitchen chair and stare at Calum’s crisp white business card. My thumb strokes back and forth over his name, feeling the edges of the subtle embossing.

For months, I’ve managed to keep the emptiness inside me in check. I’ve been alone a long time now. I’ve gotten used to it. But seeing him tonight, being near him, brought it all surging back to life. The bite of loneliness. The yearning to touch and be touched. I was a fool to think just any man could soothe the ache he created. I don’t want any man. I want him.

Unlocking my phone, I carefully add Calum as a contact. I should stop there, but I don’t.

I send him a text. My home address, with a simple *J* at the end.

If he wants me anywhere near as much as I want him, he’ll come.

## TWELVE

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### CALUM

I shouldn't have come.

The street outside Johnny's townhouse complex is quiet. Not surprising, given it's past one in the morning. I pulled up to the curb at least five minutes ago, but I've been too busy arguing with myself over why I'm here to get out of the car.

Nothing about tonight has gone the way I'd planned. After Genevieve left me alone in the boardroom with the threat of unemployment buzzing in my head, I'd made a beeline for my laptop and gone to the Upcoming Events page on Fifth Circle's website. The notice about tonight's gig at one of their local haunts just about had me weeping with relief. It seemed like fate. All I needed to do was show up and convince them to give me a shot.

By the time I arrived at the pub, it was all planned out in my mind. I'd approach Gavin and Oz first. We'd never met, so I still had a chance to make a good impression with them. When Johnny joined us, I would greet him warmly but keep a professional distance and say absolutely nothing about our prior meeting. By the time Ned arrived, I would have the other three band members in my pocket, and I'd be able to concentrate on charming their lead singer. Away from the pressure of a festival debut, I'd imagined him open to all the opportunities working with me could provide. I'd have the papers signed by the end of the night.

The whole thing was a pipe dream, of course, but I'd decided contrived confidence would get me further than fear and begging. It didn't matter. The meeting came to naught, anyway. Or so I'd thought, until Johnny reached out.

This visit is strictly business. Johnny made that clear in his text. An address, a single *J*. Nothing more. It was hardly an invitation to hook up. Yes, I'd recognised the hunger in his eyes earlier tonight when he saw me waiting in the car park. I'd felt the sparks zinging between us. But his frustration when Ned refused to listen to my offer overshadowed everything else. He's keen to move the band forwards, I'm certain of it, and he knows I can help.

That's why he sent the text. That's why I'm here. Because we both want the same thing: Fifth Circle, signed on the dotted line.

Fortified by my own logic, I get out of the car and stride up to Johnny's front door. I haven't finished knocking when it swings open.

Johnny's wearing nothing but a pair of worn, low-slung jeans. His feet are bare, his dark hair wet and curling at the ends. Water droplets cling to the sparse covering of hair on his chest, looking for any excuse to trickle downwards over his abs.

Christ. I stride past him, careful not to touch. "You need to put a shirt on."

He closes the door. The lock engages with a quiet snick. "Why? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

His living room is small, but functional. A lone couch. Coffee table. Television. It's the home of a bachelor who'd rather be elsewhere.

Johnny ambles over to invade my personal space. The warm, freshly showered scent of him creeps into my nostrils, causing me to inhale, but I don't shy away from his closeness. He's in a dangerous mood. If I show weakness, he may pounce.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks, gesturing with the tumbler that dangles from the fingers of his right hand.

"Sure." It's a terrible idea, but at the moment I'll say yes to anything if it will put some distance between us. He withdraws to the kitchen, and I suck in a lungful of oxygen. It doesn't help. His presence lingers in every square inch of air. It strokes my insides, burrowing into my cells and setting them on fire.

This is not the meeting I expected. We're supposed to talk about Ned and how we can be allies in my bid to win him over. This isn't supposed to be a seduction, and I am definitely not supposed to be gagging for it.

Stalking after him, I plant myself in the entrance to the kitchen and glare at the lines of his muscular back. "Why am I here, Johnny?" The clipped words imply irritation, though the truth is probably closer to lustful vexation.

He turns, smirking as he delivers the generous glass of scotch to my hand. "Because you can't stop thinking about me."

My spine stiffens at his knowing drawl. I snatch the drink before escaping back to the living room. It has more room for pacing and I'm unsure what he'll do if I stay still. "I mean, why did you ask me to come here tonight?"

He drains his glass as he returns. Dumping it on the coffee table, he steps into the path I'm wearing through his carpet. I come to an abrupt halt to prevent a head-on collision. His hands

lift to cup my face, the calloused fingertips dragging over my cheekbones. The deep brown eyes drink me in, and his mouth is a breath away from mine. “Because I can’t stop thinking about you,” he says in a rough whisper.

There’s no smirk this time. Only need and heat and passion. “I wonder where you are, constantly. What you’re doing. How you taste.” His body crowds mine. Our hips brush together and, holy hell, we’re both hard as nails. This man is lightning in my veins. The way I want him hurts, and I glory in the sharpness of the need. “I imagine you masturbating to the thought of me,” he whispers, “every time I masturbate to the thought of you.”

“Johnny.” The name is a groan, dragged all the way from my throbbing cock and up through my vocal cords. “We can’t do this.”

“Sure we can.” His head dips, and I shiver as his lips brush my throat. “I’ll show you.” His hands are on my hips now, tugging me more firmly against him. His mouth chases mine but I turn my head, my eyes drifting closed.

“I need...” My words falter as he rocks his hips, rubbing his erection against mine.

One hand threads through my hair. Taking it in a firm grip, he angles my face back towards his. His panting breath fills my open mouth. “I need you, too.” Then he’s kissing me. His tongue in my mouth. His body flush against mine.

God help me, I kiss him back. Even as I force myself to stay still, my arms to remain at my sides, I can’t resist losing myself for precious moments in his kiss, in the scotch and temptation of him.

When a needful moan reverberates from my throat to his lips, he withdraws far enough to smile at me. It’s the smile that shocks me back to my senses. Lifting one hand to his chest, I force myself to push him away.

“No, Johnny.” We stand there staring at each other, our chests heaving. “I need Fifth Circle. I need to sign a band, and my boss has decided it has to be your band.” His smile dies and he straightens away from my touch. “If I don’t sign you to Rush, I lose my job. If my boss finds out what’s going on between us, I lose my job.” The ramifications of my actions slam into me, and I drain the glass of scotch I’m still holding before putting it beside his. “I can’t risk my job. Not for anything.”

*Not for you.* The unspoken words hang between us.

His gaze hardens and a bitter grimace curls his lips. “In that case, we’re both shit out of luck.” Picking up the empty glasses, he storms back towards the kitchen. “There may not even be a band anymore.”

My eyes widen as I follow him. “What are you talking about?”

“Ned quit tonight, right after you left.” Johnny uncaps the scotch and refills both glasses. “Just like that. As if the last two years mean nothing. All the work we put in, the sacrifices we made.” He chokes out a broken laugh. “I ruined my marriage to hold on to that band and he just... left.” He lifts the glass, tossing the contents back in one swallow. “I suppose you can leave now, too,” he says in an acerbic tone, not bothering to look at me. “Since there’s nothing else here you need.”

He’s gone again and I’m forced to chase after him back to the living room. “There’s got to be something we can do.” I will not give up without a fight. Not when I’m so close to securing mine and Hannah’s future. “If we work together, I’m sure we can convince Ned—”

“There is no convincing Ned,” he cries. “The more I push the more he pulls away and now...” he shakes his head, “he’s gone.”

Anger courses through me as my mind rebels against his words. “No, there has to be a way.” I could do so much to help them fulfill their potential, to take them wherever they want to go. I would do right by them. Take care of them and never, ever abandon them. “All I need is a chance to prove myself.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t have one.” He turns to face me, holding his arms out to the sides. “Guess you’ll have to settle for the consolation prize.”

My eyes narrow. “What’s that?”

“Me.”

One word—two little letters—is all it takes to trigger every one of my starving senses. I want him. I want to take him apart piece by piece until he doesn’t even know his own name. But we can’t.

I take a step forwards.

We shouldn’t.

Another step.

Johnny waits for me, his gaze locked with mine, his body frozen in a turbulent stillness.

“You are not a consolation—”

“Yes, I am, but I don’t care.” The harshness of his whisper, the trembling of his limbs, makes me want to wrap myself around him. Comfort him. “Do you think I haven’t tried to find another man who makes me feel the way you do? Do you think I wouldn’t *un*choose you in a heartbeat if I could? I can’t. There hasn’t been...” He falls silent, lowering his gaze.

Satisfaction roars through me at the thought no man has touched him the way I have. Reaching out with fast hands, I cup his face in my palms. “Not for me, either.” I pause, knowing exactly how dangerous this is to my future. To Hannah’s future. “No one since

you.”

“Fuck.” His hands lift to my wrists, gripping tight as he presses his forehead to mine.

“Please, Calum, put us both out of our misery. Even if it’s just for one night.” He licks his lips, his eyes wild. “Have me.”

## THIRTEEN

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## JOHNNY

Calum gives in. He gives in so hard. If I break under the force of his surrender, it will have been worth it.

With a final muttered curse, he yanks me against him. One hand takes the back of my neck in a tight grip. The other arm snakes around my waist, trapping me in place.

His mouth crashes down upon mine, demanding instant access to all I have offered. I greet the intrusion of his tongue with a violent welcome. My hands clutch at his hair, his shoulders, at the lines of his back and the curves of his arse. It's not enough. I need skin. Now.

Thrusting my hands between us, I try to undo the buttons on his shirt, but my fingers fumble the attempt and I resort to tearing at the material. Buttons pop. Calum releases me with an impatient growl to shrug out of the ruined shirt and toss it aside.

Our bare chests collide as we rush each other once more. Urgent hands grapple for purchase, blunt nails rake over skin. I track wet kisses along his jaw, biting down on the skin of his throat until he hisses in a breath and drops his head back in invitation. The subtle roughness of his stubble abrades my lips, and I relish in the sparks of delight that trip and flare inside me.

My exploration continues downward over his heaving chest where I pause to play teeth, fingers and tongue over his nipples before sinking gratefully to my knees. Taking hold of his hips, I press my face against the flatness of his belly, breathing deep of the musky, masculine scent of him. I rub my lips back and forth above the waistband of his trousers, teasing myself with the faint line of hair that leads me to my intended destination.

Being with Calum is wholly different to anything I've known before. Where sex, for me, has always been about taking pleasure in softness and curves, Calum's body is all straight lines and height and the firmness of muscle. My pulse races as strongly as it ever has. I'm desperate for him the same way I was once desperate for her. But while there's a familiarity in the fire ignited by his nearness, this experience is a unique kind of revelation. There has never been anyone like Calum for me. There never will be again.

My breath catches as I reach for his belt buckle. His eyes widen on a gasp before he breathes my name. “Are you sure?”

I allow my grin to be answer enough. My hands continue to move. Unbuckle. Unbutton. Unzip. My mouth waters in anticipation until, finally, I push his trousers and boxers down over his hips to release his dick.

It seems to preen beneath my hungry gaze, bobbing and weeping pre-come. I wrap one hand around the length of it and give a single tentative stroke. Calum jerks within my grasp. “Christ, Johnny,” he mutters, his voice strained. “Feels so good.”

Emboldened by his words, I stroke him a few more times, before moving on to the real reason I’m so eager to be down here. Licking my lips, I lean in and take the head into my mouth. Our simultaneous groans mingle in the otherwise silent room. I continue to stroke the base of his erection with a firm hand while my mouth plays. Lapping, sucking, teasing his slit with the tip of a pointed tongue.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I never thought I’d be here. I never thought I’d have the chance to do this.

With an ecstatic moan, I sink deeper. Calum’s length fills my mouth, it prods at the back of my throat, and my eyes roll back in my head as I tongue him all over. The sounds he makes are shockingly erotic. The slow roll of his hips, the tangle of his fingers in my hair. Every move, every moan, propels me on. Drawing him as deep into my mouth as I can manage, I seal my lips around him and suck hard on the withdraw.

Calum cries out, his body shuddering before he pulls free of my mouth and wraps a hand tight around his base. When he urges me upward, I grunt in disapproval but get to my feet anyway.

His arms wrap around me, and he buries his face in the curve of my neck. “Your mouth is insane.” His breath is hot and fast. “I don’t want to come to soon.”

“Can’t stop touching you.” The restless grinding of my hips and wandering of my hands make my words superfluous but I give them to him, anyway. I’ll give him anything, as long as he doesn’t stop. “Need you so badly.”

“I want to touch you, too.” His mouth slants across mine and the whispered words spill across my lips. “I want to taste you.” A drawn-out whimper is the only response I can muster, but it brings a lusty grin to his face. “Where’s the bedroom?”

Taking him by the hand, I drag him around the couch, down a short hallway, and through an open door. Clothes are strewn haphazardly across the floor. I was too hyped up on fury and anticipation to give a shit where my clothes landed earlier tonight. But at least the bed is

made.

We strip naked in a rushed silence, grinning at each other like a couple of lust-addled fools.

Calum is still toeing out of his boots when he pushes me backwards onto the bed. I scoot into the centre while he snatches off his socks. “Lube?” he asks.

“Top drawer.” I gesture to the bedside table.

Calum snaps on the small lamp, casting the room in the dim warmth of light and shadow. He finds the small bottle in the drawer and tosses it onto the bed before joining me.

Leaning down, he licks a short, wet line along the inside of my knee. Tiny jolts of lightning zing beneath the skin, arcing upward towards my straining dick. The next lick teases my inner thigh and my legs part further in encouragement.

When he takes my left nut into his mouth, I damned near howl in pleasure. My calloused fingers sink into the thickness of his hair as he lavishes my right nut with the same level of care before engulfing my length in his hot mouth like he’s planning to swallow it whole.

My entire body draws tight, back arching, head thrown back. The sound erupting from my throat is embarrassingly wanton and unnecessarily loud.

With a satisfied hum, Calum eases off my aching dick and rises to hover over me on straight arms. “The sounds you make blow my mind. So hot.”

“More,” I mutter, wrapping my arms around his neck and urging him closer. “Down.”

He lowers his body on top of me, his weight pushing me into the mattress. “Too heavy?” he asks with lifted eyebrows.

My eyes slide closed as I shake my head. “Perfect.” Taking his firm arse cheeks in my hand, I roll my hips, thrusting our dicks together. With a low groan, Calum follows my lead.

Every inch of me is on fire for him. My mind is full of him. I can’t get enough.

“I’ve dreamed of you like this, Johnny.” Calum’s words are a balm on my lips between kisses.

I smile and he licks at the corners of my grin before diving back between my lips. “How often?” I ask, desperate to know I haven’t spent these last two months alone in my suffering.

“Every night.” He reaches for the lube. “Every day.” One slick hand reaches between our bodies to curl around both of us. The sounds we make merge and mingle as our foreheads press together. “Every minute in between.”

“I’ve dreamed of you, too,” I whisper as we move together in an ever-quickening pace. “I wanted to know... I wanted...”

My hips buck harder and Calum gasps. “Tell me, Johnny. What do you want?”

I open my eyes to look at him. “I want to know what it feels like to fuck you.” The words are barely audible. A wish thrown atop an exhale.

Calum stills, his body trembling, his fingers gripping us tight but no longer moving. His head drops into the curve of my neck with a strangled groan.

“Calum?” Did I say the wrong thing? Is he strictly a top? Have I ruined our night together?

His head turns until hot breath rushes against the shell of my ear. “Say it again.”

Sighing out a relieved laugh, I grip his ginger hair in one hand, tugging until he lifts to look into my eyes. “I want to fuck you in the arse until you’re humping my bed and coming all over the sheets.” I take a shuddering breath as I wait for him to respond. “Can I?”

“Yeah.” His smile is sunshine bright. “You can have me anyway you want.”

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest, until a thought occurs to me. “Oh shit, I don’t have any condoms.” I’d meant to buy some, for all the gay sex I’d planned to have—eventually. The idea of it actually happening has seemed too surreal, until Calum knocked on my door.

“It’s okay.” Calum scrambles off the bed to search through his clothes and pulls a foil packet from his wallet. “I’ve got you covered. Literally,” he finishes with a wink.

Snorting in amusement, I take the condom with one hand and guide him back onto the bed with the other. He turns over onto his hands and knees, his legs spread, and I clamber into a kneeling position behind him. My breath catches. This is how I’ve pictured him. Naked. Needy. Arse up and waiting to be filled. I take a moment to run my hands over his back and legs, before allowing my focus to lower to the puckered opening between his arse cheeks.

One hand drifts in that direction, until my middle finger brushes lightly over his hole. He gasps and the muscles there clench and release. I do it again, and again, watching him quiver in tiny spasms of longing. Fascinated by his responses, I try to insert a finger.

His arse tilts towards me but his muttered, “Lube,” makes me freeze.

“Shit, sorry.” I grab the bottle and apply a liberal amount to one hand before trying again. My index finger slides into him all the way to the second knuckle, and he clamps down around it with a sharp cry. Holy hell, he’s tight. Even the thought of him wrapped around my dick has me on the edge of coming.

I try my thumb this time, sliding it in and out of him, my gaze riveted to that one spot connecting us. Calum lowers his head and chest to the mattress, fucking back onto my finger with slow, rocking movements. “Calum,” I breathe hoarsely. “So hot.”

Snapping up the bottle with my free hand, I manage to awkwardly spill lube out onto my palm before reaching around to grasp his hard length. Drunk on his reactions, I work him

over with both hands. Jerking his dick, fingering his arse. He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen. It's like he said the night we met. This one hit will ruin me for life.

"Johnny." His voice is strained, his body quaking. "You promised to fuck me."

A wicked grin spreads over my face. "One second. I want to try something." I curl the fingers I have buried inside him until his body goes rigid and he keens loudly. "That's it," I mutter under my breath. "Found it."

Satisfied, I withdraw my fingers and rush to put on the condom. It takes longer than I would like. It's been a really freaking long time since I've had reason to use one.

The moment I'm sheathed, I add final lashes of lubricant to myself and Calum before moving into position. Unable to resist any longer, I push against the tight ring of muscles until the head of my dick sinks inside of him. His grunt of satisfaction sends me deeper on the second thrust. Ripples of pleasure shudder through me on the third and this is the way I could lose my fucking mind.

"Yes," Calum shouts, jerking backwards to meet every thrust. "Take me."

I slam into him, the cradle of my hips crashing into his spread cheeks as I sink to the hilt. The hunger of his body strangles me in its embrace and already my orgasm is barreling towards me.

"Calum, I'm not gonna last." The words are forced through gritted teeth. "You're so... ugh." I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to hold back.

"Do it," he breathes. "Come with me."

I reach for him, but his hand is already there, stroking furiously. Further back, I take hold of his nuts, rolling them in my palm.

"Johnny!" Calum begins to shudder violently, and I jerk my hand up to the head of his dick. The evidence of his orgasm flows over my hand and my heart is set aglow. But ultimately, it's my name—ejected from his lips like a prayer—that sends me over the edge. Come pulses out of me, filling the condom, until I've given him all I have.

It's a long time before I manage to move. I deal with the condom before collapsing beside Calum. My chest is pressed along his side, one arm thrown over his back, a calf between his knees. He turns his head so he's facing me. We're silent while we catch our breaths, allowing our eyes, and the occasional brush of lips, to say everything we're not allowed to voice.

Finally, he lifts onto his elbows, glancing down towards where his belly still touches the duvet. "I messed up your bed," he says with a sardonic grin.

"As requested." I laugh and my whole body gets into it. I haven't felt this relaxed since... hell, I don't even remember. "I suppose I should reward you."

He lifts curious eyebrows at me. “What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could spend the rest of the night taking turns acting out the fantasies we’ve had about each other.”

Calum smiles. “That could take a while.”

“We have all night.”

His smile dims. I try to swallow past the painful lump in my throat.

“It’s not long enough.”

“I know.”

We stare at each other, acknowledging the uncertainty dawn will bring. For both of us. Then he takes my hand, he kisses my lips, and we lose ourselves in each other all over again.

## FOURTEEN

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### JOHNNY

Morning comes—as it must. The first rays of sunlight creep stealthily into the room, dispelling the protective darkness. Calum is asleep beside me, curled on his side with both hands tucked under the pillow and his lips parted in a relaxed pout. I've been awake for over an hour, the disparate events of last night crashing and swirling in my exhausted brain.

Not a single part of me regrets what happened between me and Calum. The memory of his touch, the feel of his body against and around my own, burns me still. He's assuaged the multitude of questions that have thrashed inside me from the night we met. My limbs are warm and languorous, relaxed in a way I'd almost forgotten. I look at him now, and my soul is satisfied.

In the same breath, my heart is breaking.

Ned quit the band. That singular truth screams through my mind over and over, searching for a way to gouge itself into reality. I'd like to believe it was a knee-jerk reaction on Ned's part. That he didn't mean it, and he'll be back. But I saw the hurt in his eyes, the panic. I saw the anguish of betrayal when I accepted Calum's business card. This may be the end of Fifth Circle. The one part of my life where I can be truly, authentically me.

Calum stirs, but thankfully his eyes remain closed. When he wakes, he too will be forced to confront all he's on the verge of losing. He only gave in to the desperation of my need last night because I took away his hope for a better future. I dragged him down to my level of despair, where failure freed us both from taking responsibility for our actions, and we found solace in each other.

Calum's presence in my bed is my most hidden fantasy made real, and its implications could devastate us both. I'm lost in the contradiction.

The sunlight reaches the bed, inching ever closer to Calum's sleeping form. I force myself out from beneath the warm blankets and into the winter chill. Crossing to the window, I draw the curtains closed to envelope him in the comfort of darkness a little longer.

I grab some warm clothes and head for the kitchen to get dressed before putting on the

kettle. Thank god it's Saturday, and I'm not scheduled to work. Coffee in hand, I hunt for my phone and find it discarded on the coffee table in the living room. No messages.

Heaving a sigh, I drop onto the edge of the couch and open a new text message to Ned. It's probably too soon to be reaching out, but I can't sit around waiting for Ned to realise he's being an overly dramatic dick. I have to do something.

My thumbs twitch as they hover over the letters. A frustrated tirade wants to break free, but I hold it back. I tried letting my emotions get the better of me last night. It made things worse.

Ned was my friend long before he was my band mate. I need to remember that. Taking a deep breath, I tap out a simple message. *Can we talk?*

I toss the phone back on the table, staring at it while I sip my coffee and wait for a response. This is probably a bad time to hold my breath.

"Any news?"

I turn to see Calum standing beside the couch, dressed only in his trousers. His expression is sombre, but his gaze is soft as it wanders over me, and my heart kicks into overdrive.

"Not yet," I say, rising to stand. "I've sent him a message but..." The words trail off into a simple shrug.

With a nod, he nabs his shirt from where it landed last night and shrugs it on. He tries to do up the buttons, but most of them are scattered across my living room floor. Our eyes meet and we both snort a laugh.

"Sorry, not sorry?" I edge closer, unsure where we stand now morning has arrived. I lean in slowly to place a firm but chaste kiss on his lips. "Good morning."

When I start to back away, he comes after me. His kiss is more insistent than mine, more thorough. It soothes the hesitation in my touch, and I slide my arms around his waist to pull him close. We linger there in the quiet of the morning, sharing warmth and kisses. "You taste like coffee," he murmurs.

Smiling, I gesture to the couch. "Have a seat. I'll make you some."

I return a few minutes later to find Calum curled up with the throw rug I keep on the back of the couch spread out over his lap. His ginger hair is defiantly dishevelled, and he still has pillow lines on his left cheek. All the times I imagined what Calum would look like first thing in the morning—sexy, tousled, horny—I never imagined him looking quite this cuddlesome. It makes me wish we could laze the morning away right here, free from fear of the future, like a normal... two people who had sex last night.

He has his phone in hand as he sends an early morning text of his own. I place a steaming

mug on the coffee table in front of him. “Are you hungry? I could make us some breakfast.”

“No, thanks,” he says, rubbing his hands over his face as he drops the phone into his lap. “I should go soon.”

I fold myself onto the other end of the small couch. Our knees crowd each other in the middle. It’s not close enough. “Everything okay?”

He nods with a wry smile. “Hannah’s pissed at me, is all. I usually let her know when I’m going to be out overnight.”

“She worries about you.”

“No, she just...” he pauses, clears his throat. “She likes to know where I am.”

It seems like overkill for a sibling, even if they do share an apartment, but there’s weight to the careful way he says the words. It’s more than the typical *are you dead in a ditch?* check-in with family.

I hold my silence, hoping he’ll share more. He holds his harder.

Finally, he picks up his mug and takes a long sip before returning his focus to me. “About last night...” The change in topic is as obvious as it is necessary.

“Which part?” I ask, forcing some measure of levity into my voice. “The shitty part or the X-rated part?”

“Both, I suppose.” He swallows, his jaw clenching as he meets my gaze. “Johnny, being with you was—”

“A good time,” I rush to interrupt. “A great time, even, but also over.” I appreciate his attempt to let me down easy, but I’d prefer a hard and fast crash so we can move on.

Calum’s eyebrows lift. Catching my furtive gaze, he holds tight. “I was going to say, it was fucking incredible.”

My heart thuds heavily, pushing a flush of blood into my cheeks. “Yeah, it was.” I shift in my seat, sitting up straighter in an attempt to put some distance between our limbs. It’s either that or risk climbing onto his lap to have another go. “But we both know you didn’t come here for me, Calum. You’re here for the band.”

He allows a few moments of silence to elapse, not bothering to fill them with false denials. “It’s my job to sign Fifth Circle as a client for Rush.” His words are quiet, but firm. “This is the kind of opportunity I’ve been working towards since I got there. It will solidify my position at the company and launch my career as a manager in my own right. I can’t let this pass me by.”

“I don’t want you to,” I assure him. “I actually think it would be a good thing for us to have help dealing with all the behind-the-scenes bullshit. Gavin and Oz are on board, which

leaves...”

“Ned.”

I nod, eying off my phone where it continues to brood in silence on the table. “You know, when we were kids there was nothing Ned wanted more than to be a rock star. His bedroom walls were covered in band posters. He could barely hold a conversation without setting part of it to a melody. I remember him almost flunking maths one semester because he got distracted writing song lyrics in the middle of the exam.” I shake my head with a laugh. “The day he left for Sydney, he told me he’d come back famous or die trying. I believed he’d do it, too. I was so jealous.” It had been my choice to stay behind. It seemed like the right thing to do, but... “I wanted so badly to go with him.”

Calum watches me closely. “Why didn’t you?”

“I was already halfway through my pharmacy course at uni. I had my parents to consider. Ellie. I couldn’t drop everything, hurt them like that, to go chasing after a fantasy. But Ned? No power on earth could have held him back.”

A deep frown mars Calum’s brow as he mulls something over in his head. “How much do you know about his relationship with Zac?”

I shake my head. “Only what he told us last night. They were together for eight months, and it ended badly.” Which explains some things but not others, and only knowing part of the story is doing my head in. Leaning forwards, I rest elbows on knees as I try to explain my frustration. “I get Ned being disappointed he didn’t have more success when he worked with Zac. I get their break-up was hard on him. Heartache sucks arse, it really does. But it’s been three years since all that happened. I don’t understand why he’s not over it.” I rake my hands through my hair. “I’m right there beside Ned every time he’s on stage. I know he still wants more. He aches for it. Why not reach out and take it?”

“Wanting something and reaching for it are vastly different things, you of all people know that.” The harshness in Calum’s voice snaps my head in his direction. He’s glaring at me. “Did you miss the way Ned flinched when I said Zac’s name last night? I didn’t. Why do you think I backed off? And fuck you for dismissing his pain like it’s some inconvenience. Which, granted, it is, for both of us. But fuck you, anyway.” He pushes up from the couch, tossing the blanket aside. “Being betrayed by the people who are supposed to love you can wreck you in ways that don’t heal just because the clock keeps ticking.” He grabs his mug and turns to head for the kitchen.

“Cal, wait.” Scrambling upright, I leap over the back of the couch to grab his forearm. He stops, but he doesn’t look at me. The muscles of his jaw tick as he holds himself rigid. “I’m

sorry. I didn't mean to..." What? I'm not even sure what I did wrong, but I know we're not talking about Ned anymore. "You—"

His gaze snaps to mine, narrowed in warning. I'm not quite there yet.

A second name slips into place behind the first. "And Hannah."

"Back the fuck off." He jerks out of my grip, backing away. "My sister and I are none of your concern."

He's off again. I follow close behind. "Maybe not, but Ned is my concern." I stop behind him as he rinses his mug in the sink. "Do you know what happened to him?"

"No. But my point is, neither do you." He turns to lean back against the sink, his arms crossed. "Here's what I do know. When it comes to launching artists on a global scale Zac is the best there is. He has connections I would kill for. He's also a soulless monster." His face twists with anger and disgust. "Musicians who put themselves at Zac's mercy—and they all beg for the chance—end up in one of two ways. They're household names, or they're broken."

Ned is far from being a household name. "Shit."

"There are rumours," Calum continues, more quietly, "about what happens sometimes, to the men he takes to his bed. I won't go into them, if Ned was part of that scene that's his story to tell, but..." He pauses briefly, waiting for me to drag my attention back to him. "What's a few years to someone who has to relive their trauma every other nightmare?"

My heart stalls inside my chest. My gut clenches and regret burns through every vein. Everything inside me hurts. For my friend who came home so scared and small it took a year for him to sing a single note. For this man before me who stood up for him when I was being a whiny brat. Because apparently he can see the level of pain in Ned I've been blind to all this time. "I had no idea it was so bad," I whisper, as if that's some kind of excuse. "He refused to talk about it."

"Talking about the things that hurt us is hard." He straightens with a heavy sigh and comes to stand in front of me. "Look, Johnny, here's the deal. I'm going to fight for Fifth Circle, you can trust me on that. It's not just about my job, not anymore. I refuse to allow anyone else to get their hands on the four of you. When I have you, I will fight twice as hard *for* you. That's my job.

"Your job," he continues, prodding my chest with a finger, "is to be there for Ned. I believe you when you say he still wants a career in music. I see it, too. But the fear is the biggest thing in him right now and he needs to know you have his back, no matter what. Whatever demons he's facing, he doesn't want to do it alone. I know I didn't."

The hurt in him is a palpable thing. His green eyes are bright with it. It presses his lips into a thin line and furrows his brow. My mouth opens to ask questions I know I shouldn't. It's none of my business and getting closer to this man is not allowed, but I have to know. "Cal—"

A ping sounds from the next room. My phone.

Our eyes widen as we stare at each other. Then I'm running. Stumbling around the couch. Banging my shin on the table. I'm still swearing a blue streak when I grab the phone and unlock it. My heart lurches. "It's Ned," I call, but Calum is already at my side.

"What does it say?"

I open the text and read aloud. "Sorry about last night. I need a few days to sort out my shit. Talk soon." My heart races as I lift my gaze back to his.

Calum licks his lips, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. "Do you think he might..."

"I don't know." Even as I voice my doubts, hope is there stamping them underfoot. "Maybe."

I stand up, leaving the phone behind. There's more staring. His body is tense, like mine. His hands are restless at his sides, like mine. Every instinct urges me to wrap this man up in my arms and celebrate the renewed possibility of a future we both want. But getting one thing requires the absence of the other, and we both remain where we are.

"I should leave," he says suddenly, before disappearing into the bedroom. He returns in under a minute, shoes on and belongings tucked away inside pockets. "Let me know if anything changes?"

With a mute nod, I follow him to the door.

We almost make it.

My back slams against the wall. His mouth crushes mine. I rake my hands through his hair, down his chest, over his arse. Our tongues fight for access to each other's mouths, and when he growls low in his throat I can't help but grind against him in response.

Finally, haltingly, we manage to drag our lips apart. Our bodies are still plastered together, each breath combining between us. The green of Calum's eyes is barely visible around his dilated pupils. "We can't," he rasps.

"I know."

"We have to—"

"Keep our distance." I touch my forehead to his as I say the words, stealing myself for a reality that has to be. "Thank you," I whisper.

He cants his head to one side. "For what?"

"For coming here. For giving me what I needed."

A smile quirks the corners of his mouth. "Johnny." Releasing my name on a whisper of a sigh, he runs the tip of his tongue between my parted lips. "I needed you, too."

His head lowers to my shoulder, and our arms come around each other in a fierce hug. "One way or another, I'll see you soon."

"Yeah." Nodding, I force myself to let him go.

In a rush of movement, he's out the door and striding down the footpath towards his car. I close the door, so I don't have to watch him leave.

## FIFTEEN

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## CALUM

I'm running out of time. Every tick of the clock on the kitchen wall is a stark reminder. It's Tuesday morning and I'm no closer to my goal than I was when Genevieve put the deadline in place. If I don't have a contract with Fifth Circle—including all four signatures at the bottom—by Friday afternoon, I'll be looking at a long weekend. The kind that never ends.

“What's wrong?”

My head snaps up. Hannah stands at the kitchen entrance. She's only half-awake and her ginger hair is a tangled mess, but she's conscious enough to glare at me in suspicion.

“Nothing's wrong.” Straightening from my lean against the counter, I pour what's left of my lukewarm coffee into the sink. “Just trying to figure out how to get Ned Corbyn to talk to me.”

Hannah knows I'm trying to sign Fifth Circle; she's as excited by their music as I am. But she doesn't know the stakes involved. I don't want her to worry.

“Maybe I should talk to him.” She grabs a bowl and pours an obscene amount of Corn Flakes into it. “I could convince him for you.”

“You're offering to talk to someone? Who are you and what have you done with my sister?”

“Ha, ha,” she deadpans. “He's messing with my brother. That's not okay with me.”

I can't help but grin at her protectiveness. “That's sweet, but I don't think it would be very professional to have my little sister fight my battles for me.”

Spinning around, she holds her spoon against my throat. “I'm not so little anymore.”

“Forgive me,” I say, raising my hands in mock defence. “You are indeed an elderly lady.”

“That's better.” Pushing her bowl over to the far side of the counter, she plops onto a stool and begins eating while I throw my own breakfast together.

“Where are you today? Uni or work?” I wish there were more potential options, but the university campus and the grocery store where she works part-time are the only two places she tends to frequent.

“Ugh, uni.” She cringes. “I have a Managerial Economics lecture and then, like, three different assignments to work on. They’re all boring as bat shit.”

“You could always switch to a degree in something you’re actually interested in,” I suggest carefully, ignoring the roll of her eyes. “Or you could take a break from uni and focus on something else for a while... like, say, your music.”

“A business degree will get me a corporate job. A corporate job will get me money,” she snaps before shovelling more food into her mouth.

I shrug, as if we haven’t already had this conversation a dozen times. “There’s more than one way to make money.”

Her spoon drops into the bowl with a clatter, splashing milk over the sides. “What kind of brother encourages their little sis—” she stops to correct herself, “their *younger sibling* to quit studying and chase a career in music?”

She has a point, but so do I. “The kind who recognises your potential and would be at your side every step of the way. The kind who hates seeing how miserable you are in this degree and knows how happy you are with a guitar and a microphone.”

A flash of longing clouds her features. It’s gone just as fast. “Happiness is fleeting,” she mutters, curling a fist around the end of her spoon.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Her gaze drags its way up to mine, all dewy with sadness. “How would you know?”

I don’t. Of course, I don’t. But in that moment, it doesn’t matter how many birthdays she’s had, all I can see is the terrified thirteen-year-old girl I promised to take care of when we found ourselves all alone in the world. So, I lie, because I can’t bear not to.

“I hope, Hannah. I hope for a happy ending to all this. You should, too.”

Whatever argument springs to her lips is cut off by the sound of my phone ringing.

My first thought is of Johnny. We haven’t spoken since I left his place three days ago. Maybe he has news. My heart pounds as I pull the device from my back pocket, but it’s an unknown number. Pushing away inappropriate levels of disappointment, I force myself to answer with a professional flourish. “Calum Ellis speaking.”

A heavy silence ends with a deep inhale before, “Hey. It’s, um, it’s Ned Corbyn.” There’s a short pause before he adds, “From Fifth Circle?”

I rush to pick my jaw up off the floor and reattach it to my face. “Good morning, Mr Corbyn.” I look meaningfully at Hannah as I speak. Her eyes spring wide and she smacks a hand over her mouth. “I know exactly who you are. I’m just surprised to hear from you.”

He chuckles softly. “You and me both.”

“What can I do for you, Mr Corbyn?” *Anything. I’ll do anything to keep my job.* I clamp my lips shut to stop the desperation leaking out.

“You can start by calling me Ned.”

I smile on a rushed exhale. “Done. What next?”

There’s another pause and my thoughts are a jumbled mess. Did Johnny do this? Did he convince Ned to give me a chance? Am I going to get my promotion after all?

“I was wondering if we could meet up for a chat.”

My fist punches the air, and Hannah bounces around with a silent clap. “Name the time and place. I’ll be there.”

\* \* \*

The pub is quiet when I arrive. After the brightness of the winter sun, the interior seems almost gloomy, but at least it’s warm. I pause near the entrance, giving my eyes time to adjust. The tables crowding the main room are mostly vacant. Unsurprising, given it’s almost four on a Tuesday afternoon. The lunch crowd has long since filed back to their desks, the relief of post-work drinks is yet to come.

An old Crowded House song permeates the air as I make my way across the polished wooden floor. Restless fingers tug at my suit jacket, half doing up the button before falling away again. My gaze darts from table to table, searching for the man who will decide my future.

“Over here.”

I follow the voice to the right, where Ned lifts a hand in greeting from behind the bar. He’s wearing a crisp white dress shirt, the sleeves folded to reveal strong forearms. The thick brown hair I’ve seen in various forms of disarray is neatly combed and tucked back behind his ears. He’s no less handsome for being so precisely groomed, but it’s more than his outward appearance that takes me by surprise. He appears... diminished somehow, like the rock god I witnessed taking the crowd apart at Autumn Skies has zipped himself into a normie suit to blend in with the rest of us.

I approach him with a proffered hand. “Good afternoon, Ned. It’s good to see you again.” His shake is stiff and abrupt. His lips pressed into a thin line. He may have called this meeting, but he looks one careless word away from bolting. I cast about for a topic of conversation that isn’t a pitch. “You work here?”

He casts his gaze about the pub, giving a sharp nod. “It pays the bills. For now.” Those

last two words, the way he glances back to me as he says them, make my breath catch. “I’m about to finish my shift. Join me for a beer?”

Anticipation sparks in my veins as I try to look casual in my response. “That would be great.”

“Grab a seat.” He gestures to the booths lining the far side of the room. “I’ll be with you in a sec.”

I choose the booth in the corner. It’s furthest from the other customers and the overhead television where a sports channel plays highlights of the week. I’d like to avoid interruptions at all costs.

Ned speaks briefly to a woman who’s also working behind the bar before grabbing a couple of glasses and filling them with one of the lagers they have on tap.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I check for new messages. If Johnny knew Ned was going to contact me, I’m sure he would have given me a heads up, but I still haven’t heard from him. Part of me wanted to reach out, share the news. The rest of me refuses to do anything that has the potential to mess this up.

Two beers land on the table, and I look up as Ned slides into the booth opposite me. Putting my phone on silent, I shove it back in my pocket before raising my glass. “Cheers.” Ned responds in kind and we drink.

Our glasses are still touching down when we both start to speak.

“Ned, I want to—”

“First, let me—”

We stop short. There’s an awkward silence, a shared smirk, and then I gesture to him. “Please, you first.”

Ned digs absent hands into his hair, bringing back some of the mussed mess I’m used to. “I’d like to apologise for my behaviour last Friday. It was uncalled for.”

“No need.” I shake my head. “I understand you being wary of some stranger coming at you out of nowhere to promise the world.” I pause before venturing, “You’ve been promised the world before.”

His nod is slow and cautious. He doesn’t speak.

“Instead, you got fucked over.”

Ned swallows, his throat moving visibly. “You could say that.”

“Can I ask why you decided to take a chance on me?”

“I’m not taking a chance on anything yet.” The sharpness in his response is quick, reflexive. There’s no malice in it, but it reminds me to tread carefully. “We’re just talking.”

I nod in acknowledgment of his words. “My question still stands. What changed?”

He leans forwards, one hand lifting to the chain around his neck as he rests his elbows on the table. “Someone reminded me the past doesn’t have to repeat itself. I have the control here. It’s about time I used it.”

“Words from the wise?”

Ned chuckles. “He wouldn’t think so, but yeah. Not to mention the delivery was... convincing.”

His cheeks flush and I’m reminded of the blond spitfire who was with him at the festival. “Your boyfriend?”

He nods. “Toni.”

I grin, making a mental note never to get on the wrong side of the man, especially when it comes to Ned. I might get my eyes clawed out.

“Well, I for one am glad to have this chance to discuss what my company can do for Fifth Circle.” It seems as good as any time to start my spiel. “Rush has been in operation for nearly two decades. We have connections all over the world—”

“I already know everything I need to about Rush,” Ned interrupts. “I have my own connections, from the client side of the table. I know your CEO is legit and she runs a decent company, though her managers aren’t always as client friendly as she claims.” Ned’s heard tales about the heavy hand of Arthur, no doubt. “I also know you aren’t quite the manager you’ve made yourself out to be. At least not yet.”

The bottom drops out of my stomach and the single sip of beer I’ve had threatens to make a reappearance. “I’ve been working for Rush since I moved to Brisbane over a year and a half ago, but I really have collaborated with teams in Sydney and Melbourne. Plus, I have references to attest to the quality of my work.”

An eyebrow quirks upwards. “But?”

I try to keep the heaviness from my exhale. “Technically, Fifth Circle would be the first client I would manage on my own.” I hold his gaze as I continue. “Ned, your band has the potential to be legendary. I want to be a part of that. I’m ready for this.” All I need is a chance.

“How old are you?” he asks.

I refrain from sighing. “Twenty-three.” Younger than Ned himself, probably, though not by much.

Instead of being upset about my relative youth, Ned gives an easy shrug. “Your lack of age and experience doesn’t bother me. If anything, it works in your favour.”

I frown. “How so?”

“Let’s just say, it puts us on equal footing.”

That’s what this is about. It’s why he chose me. He wants a balance of power, a sense of control. All the things his partnership with the much older Zac would have lacked.

Ned needs to know I won’t hurt him.

“Perhaps it would help if I told you how I ended up in this business to begin with.”

His second shrug is less relaxed. “Let’s give it a shot.”

I take a long swallow of my beer, plonk it back down on the table and announce with a generous eye roll, “It’s all my sister’s fault.”

Ned snorts a laugh. “That’s not what I expected.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I reply with a grin. “I learned guitar as a teenager. Nothing serious. I messed about with the classics. Pretended to be Kurt Cobain. You know the deal.”

Nodding, he lifts his glass. “Hell, yeah, I know it.”

“So, Hannah was fourteen the day I came home and found her curled up on my bed with my guitar in her lap. The look on her face...” I’d literally watched the blood drain from her cheeks as she gaped at me. “She thought I was going to skin her alive.” I can’t help but laugh, and Ned grins in response. “I showed her a few chords. She picked it up so fast, way faster than me. I gave her the guitar. By then it was collecting dust anyway.”

“You’d quit playing?” he asks.

My stomach tightens. I keep the smile attached to my face. “I worked a lot. Didn’t have much in the way of spare time.” Ned watches me closely, and I clear my throat again before skipping ahead in the story. “It didn’t take me long to realise Hannah was going to be a better musician than I’d ever be. Within months she started to write her own music, and it was so unbelievably good.”

It wasn’t only the way her fingers danced over the strings. She had the voice of an angel and the soul of a poet – complete with an ingrained sadness bordering on melancholy.

“She decided she wanted a career in music. I decided it would be a crime not to ensure her dream came true. But I was terrified of what could happen to her. She was still only fifteen.”

Shadows cloud Ned’s face. “You wanted to protect her.”

“Yeah,” I reply with a nod. “That’s how it started. I learned everything I could about music management. University wasn’t an option, but I studied books, read online interviews, anything I could get my hands on. The thought of being a part of the music industry, someone who helps artists like Hannah get their music out into the world, fired me up in a way playing the music itself never had.” It felt like fate, for me and Hannah to be able to work together to

give her a bright future.

Ned wears a baffled expression. “What happened?”

“The better she got, the more she closed up. I encouraged her to put some of her music on social media, start building an audience. I saved money to get her time in a recording studio, bought her a better guitar. But the more I prepared to move forwards, the further she pulled back.

“I think the idea of being criticised and rejected by strangers is too much for her. Which she will be, if she steps into that spotlight.” It’s inevitable. She’ll be loved, but she’ll also be hated. She’ll be praised, and she’ll be told her music is shit. That’s the way it works. “I can’t protect her from that.”

“It’s tough,” Ned agrees. “Putting your heart out there for people to stomp on. It can hurt.” Then his smile slips its leash, and I glimpse the other half of him. “When people do connect, though,” he says in a low, sultry voice, “it’s addictive as all hell.”

A laugh bubbles up my throat. “I can tell.”

“Do you think your sister will ever be ready to take that step?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” I shake my head. “But that’s why I fought for a job at Rush when we moved up here. So, if she does decide to take the chance, I’ll be ready.”

Ned nods his head, slow and easy. His body is relaxed. His beer half gone. If I’m ever going to make this deal, now is the time.

“Too many managers forget the artists in their care are more than products to be packaged and sold,” I tell him. “Musicians are people first. If you don’t take care of the people, they start to fall, and before long the band is lost. The product ceases to exist. The way I see it, the best business decision I can make is to take care of you, Gavin, Oz, and J-Johnny.” I trip over the last name in my effort to make it sound like the rest. “I will work every day to further your career in the ways you want it to progress, and I will never betray your trust. That is my promise to you.”

Ned considers my words for a long moment. “If we do this,” he says in a low voice, “Fifth Circle signs with you. Only you. Rush will not have the option of slotting someone else into your spot if you leave or they decide to ditch you. Not unless the four of us agree on it unanimously. It will be in the contract, or we don’t sign. Understand?”

Genevieve won’t like it, but she’ll accept it. I’ve seen it happen before, but always with experienced managers. Never with a newbie like me. “We can make that work.”

“I also want those references you mentioned,” he adds, as an afterthought.

I grin, while also trying not to faint with relief. “Done. Anything else?”

Ned's mouth twists, as if he's trying to choose his words wisely. "I don't know if you've been in contact with any of the others."

"You're the only one who called me about my offer." The half-lie is sour on my tongue. We haven't even started working together, and I'm already jumping through loopholes in the promise I've made. But life isn't black and white, and in this case honesty would do too much damage. It's not just about keeping my job, although that would be enough. I refuse to out Johnny to one of his best friends. This is a hit my ethics can take. I'll still sleep easy tonight.

"Okay," Ned says, releasing a breath. "Let's do it." He tells me about the weekly rehearsal the band has scheduled for tomorrow night. I agree to meet him there with copies of the contract. "If anyone does reach out before then, I'd appreciate it if you could keep our conversation to yourself. I'd like to be the one to tell them."

"Of course," I assure him as we get up to leave. "This is your news to share. I won't say a word." At least this is one promise I can keep. Ned will tell the band before I meet with them tomorrow night, which will give Johnny time to cover any reaction he might have to seeing me again.

After that, all we have to do is keep our distance and remain professional. Johnny will get to be a rock star. I'll get my promotion.

It might not be everything we want, but the most important parts are covered. That will have to be enough.

## SIXTEEN

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### JOHNNY

Wednesday night. Six o'clock. The Jam Shed. It's been a standing rehearsal for Fifth Circle since the beginning. In fact, Oz and I helped Gavin build this place in the back of his and Charmaine's small property soon after the band's formation. Gavin chose the apt, if unoriginal, name during a laughter and alcohol-fuelled celebration the day we hammered the last nail into place. Each member of the band has a key and an open invitation to use the space at any time.

The building is small and simple. It's little more than four walls, really. But it also has enough insulation to muffle a stampede of rhinos, so we can play at all hours of the day and night without getting noise complaints from the semi-distant neighbours.

My parents would be horrified to hear me say this, but this place is as close as I will ever come to having a church. I can come here and allow all the expectations of the world to fall away. I can surrender to the movement of my fingers and the rhythms of my heart.

I slept here more than once after Ellie and I argued—about how much time I spent here. The irony may have amused me if I hadn't felt torn in two. This place was my solace when I went through my divorce. It was my happy place once the pain gave way to healing.

After the events of the past week, I'm left with the realisation it's never been about the building. The power of this place lies with the men who come here every week to fill it with music.

Gavin, Oz and I have shown up by default. None of us mention what happened after the gig last Friday night. Those conversations have already been had. There's no point in rehashing.

My guitar waits beside me on the couch as I sit, stiff and restless, on the edge of the cushions. On the far side of the room, Gavin is hunched behind his drum kit, glaring at a random spot on the floor. Oz plucks absently at the strings of his bass, murmuring the odd reassurance that Ned could be running late. He could still show up.

Ned is never late for rehearsal.

I can't stop thinking about what Calum said, about how wounds don't always heal just because the clock keeps ticking. I keep remembering the way Ned behaved when he first came back from Sydney. Small and sad... and quiet. Even when he'd sit in on sessions here at the shed, or when we were in the car with the volume cranked... the quiet in him seemed like it would go on forever.

I did ask him what happened, but when he refused to talk about it, I didn't push. I told myself it was his business, and I shouldn't pry. The truth is, I was so busy trying to keep Ellie happy, make my parents proud, and still have time for the band, I hadn't really taken the time to be there for him when he needed me. Ned was never going to share that kind of pain with someone who was only half listening.

Then my life fell apart, and Ned showed up like a boss. He came over with beer and pizza on a Friday night. He called and texted to check-in. He listened to me rant about Ellie for months on end. He said yes to performing at Autumn Skies, knowing Zac would be there.

The true enormity of what it must have cost him has finally sunk in. Ned has been the best friend I've ever had. I've repaid him with frustration and whining.

Man, I fucked this up. The same way I fucked up my marriage. Obviously, I haven't learned the lesson losing Ellie should have taught me. I'm the same selfish arsehole I've always been. Never content. Always reaching for more than was meant for me and letting down the people I love.

Now, I may have lost the one thing I really need. Not fame. Not money. Not the elusive *more*. I just need my band. To create and play and perform with the three men who are the only brothers I'll ever have.

I have to be content with that. Like I was before.

My life was never meant to be lived so loud.

The thunk of the door closing resounds through the room. "Hey, guys."

My head snaps up. Ned's hand is still on the knob as he stands there, his gaze darting between the three of us as he waits for our reaction to his arrival.

With a sigh of relief, Oz crosses the room to shake Ned's hand. "Good to see you. We weren't sure you'd be here."

A small grin twists Ned's features. "Neither was I for a while."

Gavin greets him next and why the hell aren't I moving? I should already be there begging for forgiveness or offering condolences on his trauma or some shit. Forcing myself to rise, I make my way over to him, hoping he'll forgive me for being the shittiest friend in the whole fucking universe.

Before I have a chance to open my mouth, Ned lifts a hand to stop me. “Look, I’m sorry for being an asshole the other night. I shouldn’t have taken off like that.”

I shouldn’t have ambushed him with my excitement for a level of exposure Ned has always made it abundantly clear he doesn’t want. “I don’t care about—”

“Hang on. Let me finish, okay?”

Apparently, he’s not going to let me apologise until he’s said his piece, so I nod. “Go ahead.”

Ned takes a deep breath before he speaks. “I’ll admit it’s taken me a long time to face up to what happened in Sydney with Zac. I’m not going into the details, obviously, but it was bad for me. He was bad for me.”

Guilt bites into me, but I refuse to allow my gaze to fall. I need to face up to what I’ve been putting Ned through with my demands.

“Since I came back, I’ve been hiding from everything I wanted, from life and from music. It’s time I stopped hiding. I’ve dreamed of being a musician from the time I picked up my first guitar, and now I am. We are. I want to own that title again, I want to run with it, without being scared of falling down. And I want Fifth Circle to go as far and as high as we can. Together.”

My heart stalls inside my chest, before sparking back to life with a painful jolt. The energy of the room, so gloomy and regretful moments ago, now vibrates with possibility. Ned’s words have changed everything.

Go as high and as far as we can? I want it, too. I want it so bad I can feel my soul expanding, willingly cutting itself on the constraints imposed by my real life.

“What do you say, Johnny?” Ned turns to me, away from the enthusiastic smiles of Gavin and Oz. “Forgive me?”

I look at him, really look, and for the first time in years I can see the fire in his eyes. The one that burned in him when we were young, before adulthood tried to destroy the dreams we were told we could never fulfill.

“You goddamned asshole. What the fuck do you need to be forgiven for?” The words burst out of me as I gesture at him wildly. His shocked ‘huh?’ only makes me feel worse.

“I’m the one who should be sorry.” I smack a hand against my chest. “You were there for me when Ellie left and I was a freaking wreck. You were all there for me. I don’t know what I would have done without you lot.” Emotions clog up my throat and threaten to escape through my eyes. Damn it, I need to stop being such a melodramatic prick. I turn back to Ned. “You were a true friend to me, and I should have been the same to you. I never should

have pushed aside whatever you went through. It was selfish, and I'm sorry."

Ned shakes his head, smiling as if I haven't been yelling at him like a madman. "Don't be. If you hadn't pushed me, I never would have gotten past all the bullshit, and we'd never have the chance to move forwards."

I'm not sure what that will look like yet... moving forwards... going far and high. But I know I'll be there beside him for all of it. Fuck fame and fortune and festivals. As long as I have these men, and the music we create together, I don't need anything else. Closing the last of the distance between us, I put a hand on Ned's shoulder. "We're in this together, right? We take care of each other. We have each other's backs from now on. No matter what."

Ned's grin widens. "Yeah, we do."

I launch myself at him and he grabs me in a fierce hug. "Welcome back, mate." I smack a kiss on his cheek. The kind we usually exchange before a performance, when we're hyped to the max.

He laughs out loud, giving me an enthusiastic back thumping. "It's good to be here."

When we part, my heart is lighter than it's been in months, and my phone is halfway out of my back pocket before I realise my fingers are fixing to call Calum. It's an urge I've managed to resist since he left my place on Saturday morning. My conscience wouldn't allow me to discuss the band's business with him anymore than I already had, and what other excuse would I have offered for calling? That I miss talking to him? That I crave his touch? That the need inside me has grown stronger after the taste he gave me? I'm in over my head, drowning, and for all I know he's only waist deep in this. So, yeah, I've preferred to hang on to what's left of my dignity, thank you very much.

But this... this is the perfect excuse to reach out. Ned is back. There's a chance everything could work out, and he could get his promotion. Except, I don't know exactly what Ned's vision for the future includes and I don't want to risk turning this tide by asking. Despite the threat to Calum's job, those questions will have to wait. Ned is my priority here.

I slide my phone back into my pocket as Ned opens the bag he came in with. "I've got a ton of new material to show you." He pulls out a spiral book and a thick pile of papers covered in his messy scrawl.

Joy streaks through me at the sight. "Someone's been busy."

We all settle in to start sifting through what has to be some of the most creatively carefree writing Ned has produced in years. Seriously, the man has always been an outstanding lyricist, and together we've written songs that brought me to the edge of a freaking brainasm, but suddenly he's reaching for a whole new level. I can't wait to join him there.

I'm lost in re-reading one of Ned's longer pieces, rearranging some of the lines in my head while the fingers of one hand toy with non-existent strings, when there's another knock on the studio door. We all look up, but it's Ned who rises from his chair to answer it. The rest of us stare in confusion as he greets whoever is on the other side with a total lack of surprise.

He backs up, and Calum enters the room. I flinch, taking in the neat ginger hair, the suit, the wide smile. Bright green eyes wander over Gavin and Oz before crash landing on me. "Good evening, gentlemen."

I shoot upright from the couch, my heart pounding. How did he find us? Is Ned going to be pissed? "What are you doing here?"

Ned waves a hand in the air. "I asked him to come."

Calum nods in agreement. "Ned tells me you may be in the market for a manager, after all."

What the fuck? I stand there blinking as Gavin and Oz cross the room to greet our guest. Here I'd been trying to figure out how and when to sneak Calum's name into the conversation, and Ned's already invited him to rehearsal? He wasn't kidding about moving forwards. Now all I have to do is not screw it up.

Schooling my expression, I follow the others and reach out in welcome. "It's good to see you again."

Calum's hand closes around mine and we shake. The spark ignites. His pale cheeks burn with the rush. "You, too."

We're supposed to let go now.

*Let go, Johnny.*

I release his hand. Our gazes remain stubbornly locked.

"So," Gavin says, filling the silence as he rubs his hands together, "are you gonna make us famous or what?"

Calum turns towards him, and I suck in a lungful of air. Glancing at Ned, I see him watching me with a quizzical frown. My eyebrows lift in question. When he looks away without a word, I sag with relief.

"It all depends on what your goals are as a band," Calum is saying when I manage to tune back in. "I believe happy bands make the best music and have the best longevity in the industry. Those are two of my most important measures of success. Are you headed in the direction you want to go? And are you having a good time along the way?" He gestures to the circle of chairs we vacated when he arrived. "Shall we sit?"

I rush to grab a single chair. The last thing I need is to find myself squished in beside

Calum on the less-than-spacious couch.

“All right, gentlemen,” Calum begins once everyone is settled, “let’s have a frank discussion about your future as rock stars.”

A grin erupts onto my face as the others laugh out loud. I take the opportunity to lean closer to Ned, who’s sitting beside me. “Are you sure this is what you want?” I murmur. “Because I get it now and I’m ready to follow your lead on this. Anywhere you want to go.”

“I know,” he says with a nod. “I’m sure. This is exactly what I want.” He glances at me. “It’s still what you want too, right?”

“Hell, yeah.” Even as the words slide off my tongue, my gaze is drawn back to Calum. He’s talking animatedly with Gavin, his body relaxed and eager. It seems job security really is his happy place. It looks good on him. “This is the dream come true,” I tell Ned. “For all of us.”

And yet, I can’t help but want more of the fantasy, too.

That’s what this thing between me and Calum is: a fantasy come to life. What we feel in each other’s arms is explosive and breathtaking—but it’s also temporary. The carnal pull of our attraction will release its grip, eventually. There’s no reason why we can’t end it on good terms. There’s certainly no reason why we can’t continue to work together after the physical aspect of our relationship has run its course.

Surely, it’s possible for the dream and the fantasy to co-exist a little longer.

## SEVENTEEN

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### CALUM

“My place?”

Johnny mutters the words as he passes me in the gravelled parking area outside the rehearsal space. He pauses to look back over his shoulder, the intensity in those dark eyes striking me deep in the gut.

I open my car door and throw my bag onto the passenger seat. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“We need to talk.” He takes a step back towards me, and I glance around. Ned and Oz are still packing their gear into their cars. Gavin is locking up. None of them seem to have noticed us—yet.

“All right,” I tell him. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Releasing a breath, he gives me a short nod before walking away.

I get into my car and slam the door closed. “Fuck.” Starting the engine, I follow Johnny’s taillights down the driveway. “Goddamn, fuckity fuck.” It is a monumentally bad idea for Johnny and me to be alone together. But he’s right. We need to talk, if only to get our stories straight.

My meeting with the band went better than I ever could have imagined. I left a copy of the contract with each of them, though I know it’s Gavin’s wife, Charmaine, who will be doing the closer examination. It’s a good contract. I have no doubt it will be signed and on Genevieve’s desk well before the Friday afternoon deadline.

Now, all I need to do is put this situation with Johnny to bed—figuratively, not literally—and no one will be the wiser.

The drive to Johnny’s townhouse is over too soon. I reach him as he’s opening the front door. We don’t speak as we go inside. Putting down his guitar case, he locks the door behind us and turns to face me.

We stand there for a long moment. Still. Silent. Neither of us wants to be the one to end it.

“I don’t want to stop yet,” Johnny says in a quiet voice.

A hint of smile tugs at my mouth. “Neither do I. But we have to.”

“Do we, though?” Pushing away from the door, he closes in on me. “I know how to keep a secret, Cal. As long as we’re careful, no one will ever know.”

“I would know.” I raise a hand between us to stop his advance. “Ned is taking a big chance on me. He’s trusting me to do right by all four of you. I refuse to betray his trust.” He quirks an eyebrow, and I groan. “Any more than I already have, obviously.”

“Even if Ned did figure it out, this is nothing like what he went through with Zac. He would understand.” Johnny rushes through the words, restless feet shifting beneath him. “I’m not some wide-eyed teenager falling into your clutches. I’m a grown man. I know exactly what I want.” His gaze stumbles down the length of me, a smile hovering on his parted lips. “I want you.”

I close my eyes as my body goes haywire, responding to his desire with jagged bolts of lust. My heart thunders. I can barely breathe. Still, I force myself to voice the only question that matters in the end. “For how long?”

“What?”

“For *how long* will you want me?” I open my eyes in time to see confusion falter to resignation. “You said it yourself the night we met. You’re horny and you want to get laid.” I gesture between us. “That’s all this is. Right?”

“Bullshit,” he growls. “You know it’s more.”

“Is it?” I demand. “Are you saying you want to have a relationship with me? Something real?”

His mouth twists in a grimace as he rakes clawed fingers through messy hair. “No,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

The words are expected. Johnny’s thinking of himself, and fuck whatever I need. It’s what people do. I know this. It should make the whole situation easier. Instead, hurt erupts inside my chest until the only place it has to go is out my mouth. “Do you want to take this chance away from Ned just as he’s found the courage to try again?”

Johnny’s gaze narrows. “Of course, not.”

“Do you want to tell Oz and Gavin they won’t be getting their big break because your cock needs time to work me out of its system before you ditch me?”

He sucks in a deep breath, jaw locked and eyes flashing. “No.”

“Then we need to end it.” I get in his face, jerking my hand up between us, the thumb and index finger held a few centimetres apart. “We are, all of us, this close to getting everything we want, and I *need* this.” Our gazes clash as I continue in dark tones. “I will not risk my job

for you, Johnny. It's too important."

The unspoken implication hits hard, and he flinches.

I look away, resisting the urge to take it back. Johnny is *not* unimportant. The way he occupies my thoughts, the current of excitement humming beneath my skin every time I get to see him, is evidence of that. But my security, Hannah's security, has to come first. Always.

He takes a moment to collect himself before he responds. "I would never do anything to risk your job. Especially not over some stupid rule."

"It's not just about the rule or getting caught," I say, my voice softening. "It's also about why the rule exists. From the second the contract is signed, I will have a direct influence in the growth of your career."

"This isn't a career. It's a hobby."

I snort a laugh, my eyes rolling. "Now who's spouting bullshit? Your heart is all tangled up in the strings of your guitar. You'd have to slice it into pieces to get free."

His body stiffens, lips pressing into a hard line. "It's only music. It can't amount to anything." The words sound foreign coming from his mouth, and I wonder who forced them in there. Was it the ex-wife who hated it when he got lost in music stores? Or the parents who tried to dictate who he should be from the cradle?

"If either of us believed that, we wouldn't be having this conversation." I take a step closer, knowing I shouldn't, knowing the risk. "Music is fundamental to who you are, Johnny. I saw it the first time I watched you play. You were like..." Emotion clogs my throat, and I pause to swallow. "You shone like the sun."

He lifts his hands to my face, dismissing the last of the crucial centimetres I'd kept between us. His lips find mine in a hard, desperate kiss. Though it only lasts a moment, we both shudder at the contact.

"Why did you have to be both?" he murmurs, his forehead pressed to mine, fingertips clutching at my cheeks. "When I saw you that first night, you struck a spark that brought me back to life. Then you turned out to be the dream manager, too. One would have been enough, you know. Both is overkill."

"I know, right?" I say with a laugh. My hands find the sides of his waist, gripping handfuls of his t-shirt. "I'm still glad I get to be both, though."

Lifting his head, he looks into my eyes. "Why?"

"Because every time we kiss, that spark in you burns me alive; and because I know how hard I'll work to give you everything you've ever wanted."

"Everything except you."

“That’s the way it has to be.” Even as I say the words, my grip on him tightens. We’re both breathing hard, the air between us hot and wild.

“I guess this is it, then.” His voice is barely a murmur. “Time to say goodbye.”

“Not goodbye,” I say with a small shake of my head. “Don’t forget, soon you’ll be seeing more of me than you can stand.”

“You’ll be ordering me around, no doubt.” His arms slide over my shoulders to loop around my neck.

Grinning, I tilt my head until his mouth is almost close enough to taste. “I’ll make polite requests, with much forethought and planning.”

He winks at me. “Sounds hot.”

“You’re hot.” The words are out before I even think to stop them.

We both freeze. Our arms are wrapped around each other. One of my hands is tangled in his hair, and I’m all but licking his lips.

“Or…” He leans his body in to mine, fitting our hips together, and holy hell he’s hard and hot and it’s all I can do not to groan. “We could take the time to say a proper goodbye.” He watches me as my brain attempts to remember the risks and the obstacles instead of the endlessly seductive possibilities. My fingers flex, dragging across his scalp, so I can feel him shiver.

“Nothing is signed yet,” he manages to get out between pants. “We still have time.”

We shouldn’t. I know it. I also know there is nothing I want more in this moment than to spend the night burying myself beneath this man’s skin. Imprinting myself on him so he’ll never forget how good we were together for the short time we had.

I lower my voice to a whisper, so the world won’t hear. “We have tonight.”

Johnny’s exhale is harsh with relief. A smile hovers on his lips. “Tonight,” he says with a nod. “Okay.”

“Tomorrow…” I begin.

“We’re over.” There’s more nodding. “I get it.” Any further attempts at clarification are quashed by his kiss. Fierce and thorough, he plunders my mouth until our tongues tangle and moans of acquiescence are forced from my throat.

When he finally pulls away, I stumble after him. “Get out your phone,” he says with a grin, taking my hand as he leads me down the hallway towards his bedroom.

“Why?”

“Text your sister to let her know you won’t be home tonight.” We cross the threshold of the bedroom and he slips behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Because you’ll be

with me, and I'm not letting you go until dawn."

I dig my phone from my pocket, charmed by the knowledge that, even as my brain is short-circuiting, he remembers how seriously I take my responsibility to Hannah. My hands shake as I type out a quick message, both from the adrenaline in my veins, and because Johnny is still touching me. His lips brush the back of my neck. His hands yank my business shirt from the waistband of my pants to slide underneath. The instant I hit send, I toss my phone onto the nearby dresser and turn to face him. For these few hours, under the cover of darkness, he is mine. Just as I am completely, undeniably his.

Our hips fit together as we sink into another kiss. His erection presses against mine through layers of cotton and denim, and a deep groan seems to reverberate through his chest and into mine.

"Fucking hell," he breathes, his head falling back to expose his neck to my searching lips. "This is all I've thought about since the last time."

"You too?" My low chuckle has him shivering as my mouth and tongue drag down his throat and over the collarbone revealed by the wide neck of his faded Wolfmother t-shirt. "Off," I growl, yanking the hem upwards. With a raspy laugh, he helps me.

We shed our identities along with our clothing. The straight musician and the respectable manager are left behind as my business shirt and tie land atop his crumpled t-shirt.

I lower myself to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling him in to stand between my thighs. My tongue and teeth lavish attention on one nipple, then the other, as my hands go to work on his jeans. My mouth waters for him. My hands revel in every inch of revealed skin, even as they crave another crevice, a new plane.

His cock springs free, the head flushed a dark red. I bend to press a kiss to the tip, before my tongue sneaks out to lick a bead of pre-come from the slit. He hisses in a breath, his fingertips digging into my shoulders.

"Cal, babe," he pants, "so you know, I'm kind of on a hair trigger right now."

"Is that so?" Wicked delight fills me as I look up at his face. The heavy eyelids and parted lips. Leaning in, I blow a gentle breath of air over his shaft, smiling when he whimpers. Next, I lick the broad flat of my tongue along him, from root to tip, before closing my lips around the weeping head to suck gently. The taste of him fills my mouth and my eyes roll back in my head as I groan with blissful abandon.

"Fuuuck." Johnny snatches away from me. I open my eyes to see him staring at me with stark hunger. "I need you to be naked," he says, yanking off the last of his clothing, "like, right now."

As I scramble to follow his instructions, he opens the drawer of his bedside table and pulls out a bottle of lube and a condom. An eager smile leaps onto my face. “Looking to fuck me again, are you?”

He stills for a moment, licks his lips, before his brown gaze finds mine once more, a little shy this time. “Actually, I was hoping you’d fuck me.”

I damned near swallow my tongue and my cock throbs in anticipation, but I force myself to tamp down on the happy. Reaching out, I tug him onto my lap until his long legs straddle mine. “Johnny, are you sure? It’s fast for you.”

“Yeah, it is... kind of fast.” His whole body quivers, a nervous energy coursing through his limbs. “But if tonight is all we have...” He pauses, takes a deep breath before continuing. “You were my first kiss, Cal.” His lips brush mine in recollection. “I moved inside you first.” His hips begin to roll, sliding his partially softened erection along my still aching hard length. His thumb under my chin tilts my head back so our gazes lock. Any hesitation I may have seen there earlier is gone. “I want all my firsts to belong to you.”

The satisfaction blossoming deep in my chest wars with the idea of Johnny choosing another lover after me—male or female. And he will. If not soon, then eventually. I don’t expect him to become a monk because we can’t be together. When it happens, I’ll have to find a way to be okay with it, even when I’m forced to see them together. No matter what, I want him to be happy.

But tonight, this moment, is ours. I want every first he’s willing to give me. I’ll make this good for him; good enough a small part of him will be mine forever.

I push myself up to stand with his legs still around my waist. Turning, I put a knee on the mattress and lay him out across the bed. I trail slow, wet kisses down his torso, paying extra attention to his nipples, his abdominal muscles, the insides of his thighs, before I refocus my attention on his now rock-hard cock. It’s only when he’s languid with desire and moaning his need that I sit up between his parted thighs to grab the bottle of lube. “I’m gonna be so gentle with your pretty virgin arse.” The words come out drenched in sin with a playful hint of tease.

Johnny releases a laugh, slightly manic but all joy. “My arse isn’t a total virgin, you know. Straight couples can indulge in arse play, too. Especially when one partner has certain... curiosities.” He winks at me. “I have the dildos to prove it.”

Chuckling, I climb back up his body to lower my full weight on top of him. His arms come around me, fingertips caressing my back from my nape all the way down to the curve of my arse.

“Johnny, my sweet baby bi,” I murmur in his ear, “have you ever had the pleasure of a man’s fully erect cock stroking in and out of you, nailing your prostate on every thrust?”

His fingers clutch tighter, and he rolls his hips to increase the friction between us. “Not yet.”

“That makes you virgin enough for me.” I bite down on his neck to reinforce my claim before returning to my previous position between his thighs.

He watches me spread the slick lube over my palms and fingers with glazed eyes. “Give it to me, Cal,” he says, roughly. “Make me feel it.”

The urge to bury myself inside him right then and there has me gritting my teeth in restraint. I will make Johnny come first if my balls turn a bright and lurid blue in the process.

Bending over, I suckle the tip of his cock, teasing and coaxing until his hips lift off the bed in search of more. I groan as I draw him deeper, allowing the vibrations to envelop him while I fondle his balls. He whimpers quietly, clawed fingers sinking into my hair. Oh yeah, my gorgeous Johnny is going to come apart for me, piece by delicious piece.

Reaching down with my free hand, I trace his crease before settling my middle finger over his hole. He tightens reflexively, breath stuttering inside his chest. Adding a little pressure, I massage his opening with slow strokes until he begins to relax. After a final cheek-hollowing suck on his rigid length, I rise to capture his mouth in a deep, wet kiss. My tongue strokes his in time to the movement of my fingers between his arse cheeks. A string of sexy little noises escapes his lips while he rides my fingers, all but begging me to come inside.

When he reaches for his cock, I shake my head before he manages a single stroke. “Oh no, you don’t. There are too many things I want to do to you before you come.”

“Do it,” he says with a gasp, reaching for me instead. “Anything, please. I need—”

I cut him off by sliding a finger past the ring of muscles that have been tempting me half-way to oblivion. His back arches and his mouth falls open in a silent scream.

Slowly, carefully, I work him over. One finger becomes two, then three. Everything I am is focused on his pleasure. Reading his responses, following where he leads. His writhing body is a paradise for my greedy mouth and thrusting fingers, every hot and aching inch of me.

When I finally force myself to withdraw, Johnny cries out in dismay. “Please, no, don’t stop.” He starts to sit up, his mouth chasing mine as his arms reach for me.

“Not stopping,” I assure him as I tear open the condom wrapper. “Need to be inside you.” The moment I’m ready, I push him back down flat on the bed, spreading his legs wide to apply a large dollop of fresh lube. “Pull your legs up against your chest.”

His compliance is immediate and the sight of him, offering himself to me with such openness, has my cock throbbing in excitement. Wrapping a slick hand around my eager flesh, I pause to take a deep, steadying breath. I lower myself over him, brushing my lips back and forth across his, breathing his air as I rub my weeping tip against his newly stretched hole. "You're perfect," I whisper, unable to hold anything back. "My Johnny."

"Yes." The quiet word urges me on. Restless hips lift in invitation. "Need you."

I press against his opening, increasing the pressure, little by little. His breathing speeds up, even as his body strains to accept mine.

"That's it, baby," I croon in his ear. "Bear down for me. Let me in." His back arches and he opens suddenly, allowing the head to slide past the ring of tight muscle.

His eyes snap open and every part of him goes still. "Oh," he gasps, his breaths short and sharp. "Oh, wow." Wonder flickers over his face, his gaze holding tight to mine. "You're so... holy fuck... I can't..." His hips move in slight, jerky motions, as if his body can't decide if it wants more or less of me. "Cal, I want... I want..."

Tiny beads of sweat gather on my skin as I struggle to stay still while he adjusts to the overload of sensations. "Tell me, Johnny," I urge, spreading kisses over his cheek. "Tell me what you want."

He takes a deep breath. Licks his lips. "More." His fingernails dig into my butt cheeks as he says the words. "I want more."

Relief forces a laugh from my throat. "Thank fuck." Taking his mouth in another kiss, I begin to rock my way into him, inch by aching inch. He's there to meet every thrust, welcoming me with delicate shudders and wanton gasps. I sink deeper. Deeper. All the way inside. When my hips meet his arse, I grind against him. With a deep, satisfied groan, he wraps his legs around my waist, locking me in place.

I withdraw almost to the tip before sliding back in. His head tilts back, eyes closed, mouth open. The play of expressions on his face holds me captive as I fall into an easy rhythm, adjusting the angle of my thrusts until he cries out.

"So good." Fucking him harder, I fondle his naked body with one hand while holding myself up on the other elbow so I can still drink in the sight of him. "Give me everything."

Moans of pleasure overlap in the darkness. Whispers of affection flow from our lips. *You feel so good. Love the way you taste. I've dreamed of this. I've dreamed of us. Don't let go.*

All too soon, the fire and the need pull us onwards to oblivion. I don't want it to end. Sex has never been like this. I've never been this in sync, this far beyond need, this deep in the moment. Not with anyone. "Johnny."

His eyes open and he looks up at me. I can see my fire blazing in him. “Cal.”

My orgasm rushes towards me, vast and unstoppable. Lifting myself up, I reach between us to wrap my hand around him with long, firm strokes. A keening sound leaves his throat. He’s close.

“Come with me, baby.” I’m pounding into him now, my hand working him roughly while he claws at my back. “Come with me.”

And he does. Thick streams erupt to coat my hand and his stomach, even as my own climax pulses through me in a seemingly endless rush.

When I finally collapse on top of him, our breathing harsh in the sudden quiet, his arms come around me. He holds on tight, like he’s afraid I’ll vanish this instant. Struggling against the inertia of my blissed-out body, I lift my head to press a simple kiss to his lips. Then another. And another.

His hold relaxes, and I roll us over so he’s half lying on my chest, our legs still entwined. I take a second to deal with the condom, before wrapping him back up in my arms and dropping more kisses on the top of his head. I’m not going anywhere. At least... not yet.

After a while he looks up at me. “Take a shower with me,” he says. “I want to run soapy hands all over your skin. Rinse you off. Blow you until you come in my mouth, and then,” he pauses, gives me a shit-eating grin, “I’ll drag you back to bed to start all over again.”

Despite the force of the orgasm I enjoyed mere moments ago, my whole body perks up at his words. “You have the best ideas.”

## EIGHTEEN

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### JOHNNY

An incessant beeping forces my eyes open, and I cringe at the dawn light creeping its way across the room. Did I fall asleep? Gasping, I turn over. The other side of the bed is empty. My palm slides over the cold sheet. Calum is long gone. We're over.

I drag myself out of bed. Put in my usual hour of guitar practice. Shower and get dressed for work. Drink my coffee. Pack lunch. All the while, a hollowness yawns wide inside my chest. Days and nights of loneliness stretch before me. There's no help for it. My only cure is two suburbs away, preparing for his own workday. Ten minutes and a thousand reasons separate us.

Calum is right. We can't continue like this. Risking his job. Risking this chance for Fifth Circle to grow the way I've always dreamed. Neither of us wants to put our future on the line for a fling that can't possibly go anywhere. I've done enough to disappoint my parents without suddenly announcing, by the way, I'm bisexual and never bothered to tell you.

They've already lost their daughter-in-law, and the grandchildren they hoped we would soon provide. To tell them I've fallen for a man... it would be too much. They would never reject me outright, I believe that. But I'm not sure they'd ever forgive me.

Given enough time, my attraction to Calum will fade. We'll get used to being around each other, we'll reach an equilibrium, and the rest of what we had will fall away. Life will move on. Then, one day, I'll be going about my business, and BOOM. A woman I have no idea exists will knock me on my arse and that will be that. I'll fall in love again, because I won't be able to stop myself from loving her. I'll trust her, because she will earn my trust. I'll share my life with her, because being apart would hurt too damned much. My parents will love her as much as I do. They'll be proud. And I'll be happy.

I have to believe it will happen. Not now, not soon, but someday. When I'm ready.

The next time I lay eyes on Calum, he is officially Fifth Circle's manager and we're having our first official meeting. He's back in his suit and tie, freshly promoted and bursting with enthusiasm.

When he sees me, he stills for a moment before an overly bright smile appears. “Good evening, Johnny.”

I approach slowly, my heart sinking at the wariness in his green gaze. He’s not sure he can trust me. He’s worried I’ll give us away with a careless look or a tell-tale remark. That I’ll take everything he’s worked so hard for and turn it to shit.

I can hardly blame him. I’ve pushed for more at every turn. I’ve lied and seduced and argued with him to get what I want.

No more.

“Calum,” I say with a nod. “Looking forward to working with you.” I hold out my hand. When he accepts, I keep the shake brief—perfunctory, even.

His sigh of relief, silent though it may be, doesn’t escape me. Holding his gaze, I give him another nod. I want this to work. I want him to succeed. Most of all, I want to be the man Cal needs me to be.

But as he begins the meeting, my hand tingles with awareness. I can’t help but wonder if that handshake was the last time we’ll ever touch.

\* \* \*

## **CALUM**

The next two months are filled with an ecstatic kind of chaos. I waste no time solidifying Fifth Circle’s brand and taking over their web presence. They’d recently launched a new website, designed by Ned’s boyfriend, Toni. Slick and modern, it needed only minor tweaks to bring it in line with my vision for the band’s future. Their social media accounts, on the other hand, were woefully under-utilised. Between a fresh photo shoot and a multitude of candid shots taken with my phone camera, I’m now adding fresh content to their socials daily.

I’ve also streamlined every one of their administrative processes—from booking gigs, to ordering merchandise. It took some time for Johnny to loosen the death grip he had on everything. He’d been running the band almost single-handedly from the moment of its inception, so I understood how bizarre it must have felt to hand the reins over to an outsider. Eventually, I’d pointed out two important facts. One, that’s precisely why they hired me and,

two, he could use the extra time to write more of the music that makes my job possible. With vague mutterings about stupid forethought and bothersome planning, he made a conscious effort to let go.

Ned is slowly learning to trust me. The nervous energy he exuded at our initial meetings has morphed into something more relaxed and playful. I'm learning his moods and what he needs to feel safe. He's shown little interest in the numbers I live for—streams, likes, follows, engagement. The man has his focus firmly set on three things: writing music, performing music, and Toni. The combination works for him, and I intend to protect that balance.

Gavin is similarly dedicated. He loves his wife and his drum kit, in that order.

Oz, the youngest at twenty-two, is quieter. He doesn't share much, so I haven't gotten to know him as well. But he's always on time, and when he manages to put down his bass guitar, he has mad skills on a soundboard.

Which brings me back to Johnny. Hell, every thought I have circles back to him, eventually.

Johnny has remained true to his word in every way. Not a single utterance has passed between us about our previous relationship. He doesn't tease. He never flirts. There have been no 'accidental' touches, heated glances, or late-night texts. While I've spent the last two months becoming friendly with the other three men in the band, Johnny has kept his distance.

It's not a cold shoulder. There's no animosity. He's just... restrained.

It means a lot, that he respects the boundaries I put in place. Everything is working out exactly as we hoped.

With every step Fifth Circle takes down the path I've laid out for them, their fan base continues to grow, and their streaming numbers climb steadily higher. Every milestone fills me with satisfaction. After years of working under other managers, I'm finally responsible for my own band. I'm sharing their talent with the world in a way that benefits us all. This is my dream come to life, and I am basking in every second of it. Truly, I am.

Except...

I miss him.

I miss the way he looked at me before I told him not to. I miss the way he pushed, the way he craved, the way every encounter teemed with discovery and joy.

Even when we're in the same room together, especially when he's close enough to touch... I miss him.

\* \* \*

## JOHNNY

The applause of the crowd still rings in my ears as I finish dressing. Ned owned that stage tonight, like the rock god he was born to be. With the opening chords of every song, fresh sparks flared on my skin and tripped their way down to the tips of my fingers. Oz and Gavin fed the fire and, together, we blazed like a goddamned beacon.

My entire body vibrates as I chuck shit into my duffel bag and finger-comb hair still wet from the shower. We're loaded out and ready to go, so I pop my head into the next room to say goodnight to Gavin and Oz. I have no idea where Ned is. Given Toni showed up backstage after our encore, it's a safe bet they're fucking in a corner somewhere. Lucky bastards.

Glancing at my watch, I make my way through the darkened backstage area towards the exit. It's well past one in the morning. I need to be bright-eyed and ready to dispense drugs responsibly by seven. With how keyed up I am, I'll be lucky to manage even a couple of hours sleep.

"Johnny, wait up."

My feet grind to a halt. Several parts of my anatomy clench and my eyes slide closed. Damn it. I should have moved faster. Ignoring my heart's attempt to kick its way free of my chest, I turn to face Calum as he catches up to me. He's dressed in black pants and a Fifth Circle t-shirt, his ginger hair all messy and gorgeous. "Hey."

"Just checking in before you head off," he says. "I know you had concerns about booking a venue of this size, so I wanted you to know, you came so close to selling this place out it's insane."

A short laugh falls out of me. "Really?"

"Really, truly." The brightness of his green eyes matches the megawatt smile. "You put on a phenomenal show tonight."

My chest swells at his praise and I look away, swallowing past the sudden lump in my throat. "Thanks. I appreciate it." God, I'm pathetic. If this man patted me on the head and called me a good boy, I'm not sure I wouldn't come right there on the spot. The joy he takes in our every success has become the most potent fuel my ambition has ever known. Never in my life have I worked this hard on my music, or this consistently. All so I can bask in the

warmth of that goddamned smile.

“You’re heading home?” he asks, breaking the sudden silence.

“Yep.” Better to be curt than ramble my way to an invitation he doesn’t want and won’t accept.

He nods. Licks his lips. Fuck, I wish he wouldn’t do that. It’s been three months now since I tasted him. Since he touched me. Since that stupid handshake.

I cast my gaze about, hoping to see one of my band mates, staff from the venue, anyone. Every shadow is dangerously empty.

“Well, I won’t keep you.” He nods again. Waits for me to turn and leave.

I don’t.

There’s no other viable choice. I *have* to go. But I can’t seem to move.

I’m kind of pissed about it, actually. After the absurd lengths I’ve gone to, ensuring Calum and I are never alone together, he has to catch me here. In this darkened sliver of space between the two halves of my life—the stage and the world outside.

He should know better.

My feet move, finally, but instead of heading for the exit, they take me deeper into the shadows.

Cal’s brows lower into a frown. “Johnny?”

“Come with me.” The words are low, secretive.

He takes a step. “We can’t—”

“We won’t.” Lowering my bag to the floor, I lean back against a wall. He follows, stopping with a professional distance still between us. “I’m not asking you to... do anything.” *Like kiss me, hold me, let me sink to my knees and suck the come out of you. Oh god, please.* I shake my head, rejecting the fantasy. “Stand here with me,” I whisper, the break in my voice revealing my desperation. “Just for a minute.”

There’s a moment’s hesitation, and then he turns to join me against the wall. We stand there, shoulders almost touching, listening to each other breathe.

“Thank you for talking us into booking this place,” I murmur. “You were right. It was totally worth it.”

“Of course, I was right. You boys have a tendency to underestimate yourselves. I don’t have that problem.” He’s all smug now. It looks good on him. “The crowd was awesome tonight. They went feral for you guys.”

I smile, turning my head towards him. “Ned really nailed his whole succubus thing.”

“Nailed it so hard,” he agrees. “But he wasn’t the only one.” He looks straight at me, and I

can make out the teasing glint in his eyes. “Don’t tell me you didn’t love how nuts they went during your solo for ‘Anywhere but Here’.”

My chuckle is quiet in the darkness. “Yeah. It was pretty wild.”

“You were so sexy up there.” The words are barely out before he gasps.

We both freeze.

My gaze flits between his parted lips and wide eyes.

“Johnny, I’m so sorry.” His quickened breaths rush towards me, dissipating as they reach my mouth. I fight back a moan at how desperately I want to lean closer, chase the disturbance in the air. “I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s okay,” I whisper, drinking in the sight of him. It’s something I haven’t allowed myself to do in the last few months. He looks good. Relaxed and confident, though his face is now flushed from his slip. His ginger hair has grown since the last time I raked my fingers through it. He also smiles more often. I’ve seen those green eyes gleam with excitement, determination, and patience. He really is everything we could have asked for in a manager. He’s come through for us in so many ways. Now, I need to come through for him.

“Our minute is up.” I bend down to grab my bag before gesturing to the small space.

“Thank you, for this. And for saying you think I’m sexy.” My laugh has him grinning, rolling his eyes. It’s the single most honest moment we’ve shared since the last time I fell asleep in his arms, and my chest aches with everything I can’t change. “Goodnight, Cal.”

Without waiting for a reply, I force myself to turn and walk away. His gaze is heavy on my back as I yank the door open and return to the world outside.

\* \* \*

## CALUM

“Ned’s working at the pub on the night of the fourteenth,” Toni says, scrolling through their shared calendar on his phone, “but he’s free on the fifteenth.”

Charmaine scans the wall calendar she laid out on the table after the dinner dishes were cleared away. “That works for Gavin.”

I nod, shifting my focus from the dates Johnny and Oz gave me, to my own calendar. “The fifteenth is a winner. I’ll email the venue tomorrow and finalise the change.” I scribble the

date in my notebook and then flip back to my agenda. “Next up, I’ve got studio time booked on the twenty-second of next month for recording the new single. I want to double check everyone has it locked in, so there aren’t any last-minute conflicts.”

Pages are flipped and phone screens swiped before murmurs of confirmation are given. Crossing the item off on my list, I take a sip from the glass of iced tea Charmaine served after the guys headed outside to The Jam Shed to begin their rehearsal.

What originally started as a fortnightly pre-rehearsal meeting to go over the band’s upcoming schedule has grown into something entirely less formal. We all gather around Gavin and Charmaine’s dining table—the four men, Toni, Charmaine, and me—for a noisy dinner full of takeaway containers and shared stories as everyone catches up with everyone else. Once stomachs are full, I force the guys to drag out their various calendars and set about co-ordinating their schedules. With all four of them working full-time jobs, it can take a while to find room for everything. The second we’re done, they disappear out the door to do what they love, play music together.

Tonight though, they were so restless Toni, Charmaine and I jointly decided to send them on their way while we organised their lives for them. They seemed unperturbed by the idea. Once they were gone, Toni and I helped Charmaine clean up from dinner before we sat back down and got started.

Being included in what they refer to as ‘band fam dinner’ was overwhelming for me at first. That’s what they are to each other. Family. The easiness between them, the shared history, is a painful reminder of something I once thought I had. Which reminds me of the dangers of getting too comfortable. I don’t belong here; I’m not one of them. The band pays Rush a percentage of everything they earn to employ me to manage them. I am, quite literally, the hired help. As long as I do my job to their satisfaction, I’ll be welcomed with warm smiles. But if they ever decide another manager would suit their needs better, my seat at this table will be offered to someone else. That’s the reality I can’t allow myself to forget.

“Have you heard the new song yet?” Charmaine’s voice catches my attention, but her wide smile is directed at Toni.

He sucks in a deep breath, eyebrows reaching for his white-blond hair. “Ned sang it for me a few days ago. It gave me chills. I don’t want to hear my boyfriend pining that hard for anyone but me, thank you very much.”

Charmaine gives him a conspiratorial grin. “Except, we all know *Ned* isn’t the one doing the pining.”

“Oh hell, yes. That boy has it bad.”

“Has he said anything to Ned?”

“Not a peep.” Toni shakes his head. “Whoever she is, she must be putting him through the wringer.”

Wincing, Charmaine sits back in her chair. “After everything he’s already been through, with the divorce, I’d hate to see him hurt again.”

I frown, my gaze bouncing between the two of them. “Who are you talking about?”

Two sets of eager eyes turn my way. “Johnny,” they say at the same time.

My heart sinks... all the way down, souring the honey chicken in my stomach. “Johnny’s seeing someone?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Charmaine says with a shrug. “But with the music he’s been writing these last few months, and the new single...” A look of blissful agony crosses her face, and she puts a hand over her heart. “Tell me it’s not the most heart-wrenching thing you’ve ever heard.”

My mouth drops open. I shake my head. “I haven’t heard it.” Apparently, I’m the only one. “Johnny said it wasn’t ready.”

“Oh, it’s ready,” Toni says with a nod. “It makes me want to cry it’s so freaking ready.”

Charmaine sighs. “Hopefully, this woman will soon pull her head out and realise what an incredible man she’s got there. Then, maybe we’ll get to meet her.”

Toni holds up his own glass of iced tea. “Here’s hoping.”

Charmaine turns her curious gaze on me, as if I’m not on the verge of hyperventilating. “What about you, Calum? Do you have someone waiting for you at home?”

Clearing my throat, I force a smile. “Just a sister, I’m afraid. All my focus is on the band right now and building my career. Boyfriends will have to come later.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone when the time is right,” she says. “A handsome ginger like you? What man worth his salt could resist.”

I huff a laugh. “More than you’d imagine,” I admit ruefully, picking up my glass. “I’m afraid ginger isn’t everyone’s cup of tea.”

“Pish posh,” Toni says, scoffing. “Trust me, there is a man out there who’ll take one look at your hot self and decide to scull the whole damned pot.”

“Too right,” Charmaine says with a definite nod.

The back screen door slams and Johnny strides into the room. “Charmaine, do you know where Gavin left his black music folder?” He’s breathing heavily and there’s a light sheen of perspiration on his skin, even with the cool spring night. “I need some notes I gave him last week.”

“It’s in the bedroom. I’ll grab it. Help yourself to some iced tea,” she says as she rises to leave the room.

He turns, his eyes widening as he takes in the jug and collection of cups on the table. “Perfect.” Stepping closer, he grabs my almost full glass. I try to tell him that one’s mine but he’s already gulping down the icy liquid. My gaze catches on the way his throat moves as he swallows, a single drop of condensation sliding down over his olive skin. It catches on the neck of the t-shirt stretching over his chest, which leads to a hint of taut stomach and then the tight denim moulded to his groin... which is right, the fuck, in front of me.

Up until this moment I could honestly say I’d never had a single tea-related erection in my entire life. The bastard ruined my record.

Lowering the glass with a hum of pleasure, he meets my gaze. His tongue sneaks out to lick the tea from his lips, his teeth bite down on his bottom lip before it springs free. He’s still staring at me when he takes a deep breath and another, quieter, hum slips out of him.

“Huh.” The soft noise from the other side of the table snaps me back to the present, where Toni is still in the room with us.

I sit up straighter, sneaking a glance at Toni, whose gaze darts back and forth between me and the man at my side. “I didn’t realise how much you like tea, Johnny,” he says in a deceptively innocent tone. “I thought you more of a coffee man.”

With a shrug, Johnny steps away from me. “Coffee is my go-to, but tea is good.” He tips the glass back and finishes the last swallow. “Damn, I was thirsty.”

“Apparently so,” Toni says, before turning those blue eyes on me. “You should have some too, Calum. You’re looking rather thirsty yourself.”

My mouth opens, but I have no idea what to say.

“I should get back,” Johnny mutters, placing the glass on the table before rushing out the same way he came in.

Barely breathing, I turn back to Toni, whose wide gaze is still locked on me.

I stare back. Struck dumb by the raging hard-on I’m sporting beneath the table.

Toni bats his long lashes. “I saw nothing. I know nothing. I will say nothing.”

My eyes narrow. “There is nothing to know.”

“Exactly.” He gives me a slow nod, even as his lips roll inward, as if the secret he’s stumbled upon is already trying to squirm its way out.

Charmaine chooses that moment to return, holding a thick black folder in her hand. “Where’s Johnny?” she asks, looking around.

“I think he’s going to grab the folder later,” Toni tells her, before lifting his glass. “I’ll

have more tea if you don't mind." The corners of his mouth tick up in a secretive smile. "I'm suddenly feeling a little parched."

\* \* \*

## JOHNNY

This is not the way things were supposed to go. It's been five months, and I'm *supposed* to be over this bullshit. Calum and I weren't even together that long, or that much. I counted once. In the middle of a restless night, desperate to convince myself this obsession with him is crazy, I counted up every hour we spent in each other's company, including the time we spent asleep in my bed. It was less than 24 hours. Not nearly long enough to justify this gnawing ache I have to *get closer*.

Life has become a never-ending tug of war. My body pulls towards him... endlessly. My brain recites the reasons why I have to hold back. I don't want to hurt him. I don't want him to regret the night we met. When he kissed me under the midnight sky.

All this longing inside me... it has to go somewhere. I tried to tamp it down, ignore it, deny it. Nothing worked. Until I allowed it to bleed into my music. The relief was raw, but immediate. It's a way for me to reach out to him without hurting anyone. Give of myself without indulging my selfish ways. It's led me to depths of creativity I didn't know I possessed.

My normie hours are still spent at the pharmacy, of course. I still have lunch with my parents every second Sunday. But the remainder of my time is devoted to the music.

Ned meets me in that creative space, every time. Whatever he and Toni have going, it's given my friend his confidence back. The rock star in the making I knew in high school is finally off his leash, and he's blossoming into a man who is so fundamentally... *himself*. I'd be envious if I weren't so damned happy for him.

The joy in his wildness clashes with my frustrated hunger every time we write together. It's demanding work, somehow exhausting and effortless at the same time. Some of our sessions are disjointed and messy, dismissed as worthy of a dumpster fire. Other times, a turn of phrase clicks with some twist in a melody, and suddenly we're erupting in goosebumps, or fighting tears, or just grinning at each other like a couple of lunatics. This is what I've always

dreamed of. The freedom to spend hour after hour chasing that madness, finding its echo in my strings, and playing it back to the world.

Calum has given this to me. He's made the dream real in a way I struggled to do for years. We're playing more shows than ever, gaining traction, and our new single launched like a rocket, both on the streaming services and off. After all these years of slog, we're finally being played on goddamned national radio.

Which is why I can't screw this up. I have to keep us safe from all the ways I would ruin it for the both of us. The occasional stolen moments we now take—in backstage shadows, and car parks—have to be enough. A minute here, a minute there. Never touching. Sometimes barely talking. They're all I can have.

I know I should look for someone else, another body to pour my frustrations into. Plenty of offers have come my way, from women and the occasional man. I've turned down every one. The thought of touching anyone who isn't Cal, allowing them to put their hands on me in return... it leaves me cold.

What does it say about me, that I'd rather go to bed alone every night and ache for the one man I can't have, then experience something real with anyone else?

\* \* \*

## CALUM

I shouldn't be watching him like this.

I mean, I have to *be here*. As Fifth Circle's manager, showing up at the studio on the first day of recording for their full-length album is part of the job. But the staring—let's call it what it is, I'm ogling him—is unfair.

It's not like I don't have plenty of work to keep me occupied. On top of managing Fifth Circle, I'm still assisting Arthur with a number of his artists. Plus, I recently signed another act to Rush. Jonas and Angela Starling are a brother and sister duo who made me want to weep with joy the first time I heard them sing. Adding to my portfolio has, of course, doubled my workload. So, yes, I'm a very busy man. Which is why I shouldn't spend the entire day sitting beside the sound engineer and staring through the control room window while my *clients* spend hours perfecting a song that makes my toes curl and my heart strings tie

themselves into messy little knots.

Johnny wrote it, I know he did. The lyrics are a love letter to the night we met. Getting lost together in a crowd, and midnight kisses beneath the stars. The melody wraps around me as tightly as Johnny's arms ever did. This man doesn't need to touch me, or flirt, or mess with my boundaries to keep me on my knees for wanting him. He just needs to be Johnny.

By the time they're done for the day, I'm a horny wreck of memories and longing. The four men look drained, but satisfied, as they pack up their gear. Ned and Gavin float the idea of heading to a local pub for dinner. Johnny nods in silent agreement. Oz elects to stay behind with the sound engineer, eager to put in another hour or two going over the day's recordings.

"Are you joining us, Calum?" Ned asks, as I follow the other three men out into the building's small foyer.

"Thanks, but I already have plans tonight."

Johnny turns at my words, his gaze locking with mine as he falls into step beside me. A sudden tension rolls off his body, and I have to bite down on the urge to explain. It's not supposed to matter what plans I have, or what plans he has. We can never be together. Seeing other people is inevitable. Neither of us deserves to be alone. The thought sends a jolt through me. Is he alone? Has he been with someone else? Even as he still writes songs about me?

I come to a standstill in the middle of the foyer. Watch as they continue on without me. Gavin pushes the front door open, and they begin to file outside. "Johnny."

He looks back over his shoulder, his jaw flexing as he grits his teeth. "What do you want?"

"I almost forgot..." My voice sounds strained, awkward. I clear my throat and try again. "I wanted to go over something with you." I open my bag, pretending to rifle through it.

"Before you go can I, um..." I look up at him, my heart pounding. "Can I have a minute?"

His eyes flash. With heat or anger, I'm not sure. Half turning to Gavin and Ned, who have stopped outside the open doorway, he says, "You guys go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

The moment they're gone, he comes at me. I rush to back up, but the empty foyer is tiny and within a few steps I'm flat against a wall with him in front of me. Placing his guitar case down, he lifts his arms to plant a hand on either side of my head. "Tell me," he growls.

"Hannah's finished her exams for the year. We're celebrating with pizza and a movie." I shake my head. "I'm not... seeing anyone."

He releases a breath, his shoulders sagging as his head falls forwards between us. "Fuck."

I swallow hard. "What about you?"

Lifting his head back up, he looks at me with tired eyes. "No."

My lungs start working again, and I take a deep breath as relief floods my body. Which is

ridiculous. One of us has to break eventually. “I’m sorry about,” I gesture between us, “asking for this. I feel like I’m leading you on.”

“You’re not. I know the deal, and I agreed to it. Shitty though it might be.” His lips twitch. “Besides, I was already trying to figure out how to make it happen. You beat me to it, is all.”

My eyebrows lift. “Yeah?”

He nods, his eyes flitting between mine as he smiles. “Today was exciting and demanding and so much fun and I—” His elbows bend as he leans closer. “I need a hit of you before I lose my fucking mind.”

He’s so close. Closer than he’s been in almost six months. His skin radiates warmth, and he smells like an orgasm waiting to happen. Christ, I want it to happen. I fantasise about him every night and deny it to myself every morning. He thinks he’s going crazy? I left crazy behind months ago. “Johnny.” When he looks at me, I let him see the constant need inside me. Ebbing, flowing, crashing one day, rippling the next.

His eyes close as he draws a breath deep into his lungs. “I’m so hard I think I could come from the smell of you alone.”

My cock pulses at his words and I release a soft groan. My body straightens, easing off the wall. No, my brain screams at me. No, no, no. I can’t give in. I can’t. But my lips are parting and I’m burning all over and this is the only man who can soothe the ache.

“Time’s up.” He pushes away from me, turning abruptly to put several paces between us. I stare at his back as he takes shuddering breaths, rakes his fingers through his hair, adjusts his pants.

“Do they help?” I ask in a quiet voice. “These minutes.” He turns to give me a look, and I roll my eyes. “Maybe not today, but usually. Do they make it easier?”

“No.” The word comes out on the back of a twisted laugh. “Do they help you?”

I huff out a laugh of my own. “They’re torture.”

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh.

“Maybe we should stop.” His brows slam down as he comes back towards me, and I rush to explain. “What’s the point of doing this to ourselves? If we can never—”

“Because I need it,” he bites out, his hands reach for my face before curling into fists on either side of my head. “I need to get close to you, even if it’s only for a minute, even if I can’t touch. And wanting you *hurts*, like on a cellular level, but it hurts *so fucking good*.” We’re both panting now. Our chests rising and falling between us. Almost brushing, but not. “It’s this sharp, elemental pain,” he whispers, “and god help me, I’m a little bit in love with it.”

“I’m a little bit in love with you.” The admission leaves me on the barest breath of sound.

“Yes.” His lips tremble, caught between smiling and frowning. “We’ll stop, just... not yet. Yeah?”

We stare at each other for a long moment before I nod. His answering smile, though it’s slow to come, is so pure it makes my gut swoop with a flurry of excited butterflies.

“I’ll see you soon, Cal.”

He leaves me standing there, as he always does, hard and aching with my back up against a wall.

## NINETEEN

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### JOHNNY

I take the stairs two at a time on the way up to Calum's apartment. My heart is freaking out inside my chest, even though I know he won't be home. He mentioned in the band's group chat this morning he'll be in meetings at Rush all afternoon. That's the only reason I've taken the risk of coming here.

We've done our best to stay away from each other in the last couple of weeks. The moment we shared in the foyer of the recording studio proved how close we are to breaking. One temptation too many will have us both giving in.

Even now, my imagination is going wild at the idea of him opening the door to find me standing here. We'd both be surprised, unprepared, vulnerable. Maybe he would yank me over the threshold, his mouth on mine as the door slammed closed, hiding us from the world. A quiet groan from my own throat snaps me out of my delusion, and I swear under my breath. "Get a grip, Johnny." Paper crinkles and I look down at the carefully wrapped gift I'm clutching. Cartoon Santa Claus heads smirk up at me, as if amused by how separated from reality I've become.

The swapping of gifts for Christmases and birthdays isn't something we normally do within the band. We decided early on to skip the stress of it all and celebrate the milestones of life by sharing a meal or going to a concert. The time we spend together has always been more important than anything we could find in a store. Which is why I snooped for Cal's address and came here, rather than handing him the gift when I saw him earlier in the week. If one of the guys had caught me, they would have thought it was weird. They might have asked questions. I don't want to lie to them anymore than I already have.

I should dump the gift on the welcome mat and make a run for it. Just in case. Except, now I see how exposed his front door is to the other apartments, I'm not sure this is the safest place to leave it. It could get stolen. It's just a stupid novelty mug with World's Best Manager printed on it. When I saw it in the gift store it reminded me of Calum, and I couldn't help but smile. I wanted him to have it, as a token of my appreciation for all he's done for the band.

That's what I told myself. Really, I like the idea of him using something I gave him every day. He'll be reminded of me each morning when he takes his first sip of coffee, and I want him thinking of me... relentlessly.

Given our circumstances, I'm pretty sure that means I'm still a selfish prat.

The flick of a lock sounds behind the plain white door and I jump to attention, panic streaking through me.

The door opens a few centimetres, the security chain still attached. "Can I help you?" A young woman stares at me with narrowed green eyes. A riot of ginger curls frames her pale face. She looks so much like her brother, I could have picked her out of a line-up.

"Hi, um..." I glance into the room behind her, but don't see anyone else. "Calum isn't home, is he?"

"No." There's more staring while she inspects me from head to toe. "Can I take a message?"

"No." If her response was clipped, mine is closer to a flinch.

Her gaze flits down to the package in my hands.

I thrust it in her direction. "Could you give him this?" The damned thing has caused more angst than it's worth. "It's for Christmas."

"I can see that." She extends one arm to accept the gift. It's barely narrow enough to fit through the gap.

"It's nothing, really. I just wanted..." I have no idea how to finish the sentence. I don't even know why I'm here.

"Okaaay," she drawls the word, looking at me like I'm some creeper. She wouldn't be half wrong. "I'll make sure he gets it."

"Right, thanks." Twisting my lips into an awkward smile, I lift a hand in farewell. "Have a good one, Hannah."

I'm turning away when she speaks again. "You know my name?"

"Of course." I gesture to her curls. "The ginger gives you away." Her eyes roll, but her lips quirk upward at one corner. "Calum talks about you all the time," I tell her. Okay, he doesn't really. Not with the rest of the band. But he used to... with me. I smile at a favourite memory. "I knew your name before I knew his." It was one of the things that attracted me to Cal as a person, his obvious love for his younger sister.

"Oh," she whispers, her eyes widening, "you're *the one*."

I shake my head, frowning. "The one what?"

"I mean, you're—" She grunts in exasperation before slamming the door in my face. My

eyebrows lift, but then I hear the clinking of the security chain before the door opens wide.

“You’re Johnny, right?”

Smiling, I offer my hand. “Guilty as charged. It’s great to meet you.”

“You, too,” she says as we shake.

“So... Calum’s mentioned me, huh?”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Once or twice.”

A spark of delight lights up inside me, and some of the glow must escape through my pores or something, because Hannah gives a smug snort. “I do believe I’ve made your day.”

“What?” My eyes widen in panic. “No, I mean...” Shifting on my feet, I try to think of a way to cover my mistake. “We work together. Well, he works for my band.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “By telling you all what to do?”

Huffing out a laugh, I nod. “Pretty much, yeah.”

Those shrewd green eyes study me before she says, “I was about to put on the kettle. Join me for a cuppa?”

“I probably shouldn’t.” I glance behind me, as if Calum could appear on the stairs at any moment. Which is actually true, so...

“He won’t be home for at least a couple of hours,” she says, before opening the door wider in invitation.

I absolutely, positively should say no. I mean, technically I’m not breaking any rules by being here, but I know Calum wouldn’t want me in his home, spending time with his sister. Still, standing here with the one person who knows Cal best, the person he loves above all others, I find myself helpless to say no. “I can stay for a few minutes,” I say, walking through the doorway.

“Great.” Hannah grins and, in that moment, she reminds me so much of her brother, my heart actually skips a beat.

“How did you know I was out there?” I ask as she closes the door.

“I heard weird noises and looked through the peephole. Watched you dance about looking for the perfect place to put your offering.” She gestures to the gift before bending to put it under a small, but brightly decorated, Christmas tree. “It was pretty funny.”

I hang my head. “I’ll bet. I hope I didn’t scare you.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t have a serial killer vibe.”

“That’s good to know.”

“You seem more like the stalker type.”

My eyes close on a groan. Hannah definitely knows the full extent of my weirdness. “I

was not stalking your brother,” I say, lifting my arms into a defensive position. “I followed him for a short distance, to see where he ended up.” She stares at me. I stare back. “Like a total stalker.”

We both burst out laughing.

“Don’t worry,” she says, heading into the kitchen. “Your secret is safe with me.”

While Hannah’s busy in the kitchen, I wander around the living room of their tiny apartment, hoarding every detail. An old cork board on the wall is covered with takeaway menus, concert flyers, and photos of Calum and Hannah—together and apart. No photos of them with their parents, though. A small television is flanked by two bookcases. One is filled with books. The other houses a wide collection of CDs, some vinyls, even a handful of beat-up cassette tapes. In the corner, beside the music collection, sit two acoustic guitars, dust free and gleaming.

I turn to look at Hannah, gesturing to the instruments. “You play?”

A multitude of expressions cross her face as her mouth works in a prelude to actual words. “The one on the right belongs to Cal,” she says, finally.

My hand reaches out, a single finger stroking the top of the neck. “Do you think he’d mind, if I...”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Pluck his strings?”

Warmth rushes into my face, and Hannah snickers with wicked delight. “Go ahead. He won’t mind a bit.”

Lifting the guitar from its stand, I sit on the couch with it propped on my knee. I run loving fingers over the body before my hands fall into position. I pick out a simple melody, testing the strings. Of course, they’re perfectly in tune. I switch to something more intricate, eyes closing as my fingers move of their own accord. The knowledge Cal plays these same strings, makes music with them, has my fingertips tingling. It’s pathetic, the lengths I’ll go to, just to feel close to him. I’ve long since given up caring. My feelings for him are real, even if our involvement is a thing of past.

“What are you playing?” My eyes open to see Hannah sitting in the armchair to my right. Two steaming mugs sit on the large, wooden coffee table before us. “I haven’t heard it before,” she says, her gaze focused on my hands.

I hadn’t even noticed I’d switched gears again. “This is new,” I tell her. “The melody is set, but the lyrics...” I grimace. “They’re a work in progress.”

She listens for a little longer before asking, “Can I hear them?”

My nose wrinkles. “I don’t sing.”

“Please?” She’s perched on the edge of the cushion now. “It’s just me. I promise not to judge.”

I take a deep breath, my hands stilling as I look at her. Leaning over the guitar, I lift the mug to take a sip of tea and then clear my throat. “You asked for it,” I say, getting back into position.

“I did.” Her nod is solemn. “Do your worst.”

With a chuckle, I restart the song, lingering over the introduction before sliding into the first verse. My voice is rough, more talking than singing. It’s not that a *can*’t hold a tune, but I’ll never be anybody’s idea of good. My music has always come from my fingers, rather than my vocal cords. But for her, I give it a try.

I sing about my struggles with the destiny assigned to me. About trying to fit my fire inside a box, only to watch it burn. The man I am and the man I was born to be have never felt more disparate, torn asunder by desire and loyalty. It scares me, to wonder if my failures will leave me an outcast. With no destiny to restrain me. No heart to guide me. I would be all alone. Lost, somewhere, in the desolation of the middle ground.

When the final notes fade, I look over at Hannah. Her lips are pressed together in a hard line. Hands clutched in her lap. And her eyes, there’s a bleakness to them. “You didn’t like it?”

She blinks, her gaze snapping to mine. “No. I mean, I did,” she pauses to swallow, “like it.”

I tilt my head, waiting.

“It’s about not being... you know, good enough or whatever.”

Nodding, I allow my fingers to move. The chorus filters quietly into the room. “Expectations can be heavy, sometimes. Especially when you try. You try so hard to be everything you’re supposed to be.” I watch my fingers as they move over the strings. “It can be hard to fail.”

Her nod is visible in my periphery. “I get that. Knowing people want something you don’t know how to give?”

“And they keep jamming you into that mould, hoping one day you’ll change enough to fit but you can’t—” I break off, my hands stilling. This is inappropriate. Calum’s sister or not, I just met this woman. Clearly, I’ve spent too long buried under the weight of this song.

“Or they give up on you.” The tremulous words reach out, and I lift my head to meet her gaze, but her focus is fixed elsewhere. “I mean, that’s what people do sometimes, when you cause too much trouble, or you’re too much of a bitch and they can’t be bothered dealing with

your bullshit. They give up on you. They leave.”

*We needed a fresh start. It's just me and Hannah versus the world. She likes to know where I am.*

Snippets of conversation with Calum piece together and my stomach pitches. Did their parents leave them? When? Why? And how did I not know this?

Cal never talks about his parents, or his childhood. Not even in passing. I'd noticed. Of course, I had. But I'd never had the opportunity to ask him about it. There hadn't been enough time in those first chaotic meetings to have those conversations, and then... after. So much of my energy has been spent fighting my attraction to him. I've been scared to get too close, for fear of what else I might reach for.

“Could I maybe...” Hannah's quiet words break into my brooding, “try something?”

Surprise lifts my eyebrows, but I give her a hint of smile. “Have at it.”

“Okay.” She darts out of her chair, returning with the second guitar. “Maybe...” She plays the opening chords, stumbles, stops to take a deep breath. “I'm rusty,” she admits, her cheeks flushing.

I nod my encouragement. “Take your time.”

Her playing smooths out, quickly. Within minutes she's playing the melody without a hitch. Then she begins to sing.

Her voice is soft at first, a little husky, as she offers my lyrics back to me—but not exactly. There's a change in the middle of the first verse, then another at the end. The new words tie together perfectly, and my mouth drops open. Anxious eyes glance my way, and I nod again. “Nice.”

She gains momentum as she heads into the chorus, and I lift a hand to cover my slackened jaw as she belts out the last few lines, coming to a stop there. Her eyes are bright and she's a little breathless from the sudden burst of music. “Sorry,” she mutters, sneaking a peek in my direction. “I got a bit carried away.”

“I'm so glad you promised not to judge my singing,” I tease, grinning at her. “She with the voice of a freaking angel.”

Her eyes roll, but those pale cheeks flood with colour. “You're just being nice.”

“I'm really not. You've got a banger set of pipes on you, girl.”

“Ugh, stop.” Her hands cover her face as it turns redder, but she's laughing with me. I can see the adrenaline pumping through her, a side effect of the music. That shit is addictive. It's one of the things that keeps every musician coming back for more.

“I'll stop, I promise, but you are freaking amazing.” She peaks out from behind her hands,

and I ask, “Contralto?”

She shakes her head. “Mezzo-soprano. But I can go low if I need to.” The hint of pride in her voice makes me smile.

“Hell yeah, you can,” I say with a laugh. “Do you have some paper and a pen? I want to get those new words down before we lose them.”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

I give her a look. “And don’t even pretend there isn’t more where that came from.”

“Maybe.” A reluctant grin sneaks onto her face. “Okay, but we have to stop before Cal comes home.”

“Agreed.” I can’t be here when he gets back. I shouldn’t even be here now. “An hour?”

She looks at her watch, deliberating, before turning back to me with eager eyes. “Let’s do it.”

## TWENTY

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## CALUM

My feet are like lead as I mount the stairs leading to my apartment door. This afternoon's meeting with my boss, and the other Rush managers, has been replaying on a loop in my head all the way home, and I'm ready for a long, hot shower to wash away the cloying sense of disillusionment.

While Genevieve is thrilled with the swift progress I'm making with the Starling siblings, her approval is more reserved when it comes to Fifth Circle. Their star is on the rise, certainly, and she has every faith in the band's future success. She would simply prefer the future be brought into the now. Unfortunately, her accelerated timeline doesn't gel with the band's preference for a more relaxed approach.

Fifth Circle's first full-length album will be released in two months. Then, they'll play the Autumn Skies Music Festival again. The month after that, they'll embark on a four-week national tour before regrouping and planning their next move. Is it the boldest of plans? No. But it does take all their needs into consideration—including Ned's lingering anxiety, Johnny's available leave from the pharmacy, and Gavin's reluctance to be separated from his wife for long periods of time. Oz, single and self-employed, is the only one with the ability to pick up and go whenever.

I pitched the plan to Genevieve as a 'considered path to a sustainable high'. Arthur scoffed from his place at her side, wondering aloud if this crap was down to a lack of commitment on their part or a lack of persuasiveness on mine. Everyone else in the room remained deathly silent.

"How are you getting along with the members of Fifth Circle?" Genevieve asked.

A twinge of anxiety shot through me before I reminded myself she couldn't possibly know about me and Johnny when there's nothing to know. "We've developed a strong working relationship and have excellent rapport."

"You've become friendly with them, have you?" she asked with a tight smile.

Swallowing, I nodded. "I would say so, yes."

“Except clients are not friends, Calum.” Any warmth her expression may have held winked out. “Clients are resources, and the majority of them spoil rapidly. If you can’t get the best out of them while they’re still fresh in the public’s eye, then how will you make the time you’ve spent with them worth *my* while?”

Even now, hours later, I can still taste the sour edge of her disappointment in the back of my mouth. I’ve never wanted to be the kind of manager who wrings the talent from my artists as hard and as fast as possible. The Starling siblings are young and eager. They want a meteoric rise to fame and I’m working my arse off to make that happen for them.

Fifth Circle is different. When I first approached Ned at the festival last April, I tried pitching the hard and fast approach. It didn’t take long to realise my mistake.

These men I’ve come to care about have massive potential. And yes, if I pushed them harder, the embers they’ve been fanning would almost certainly ignite into a blazing wildfire. But that kind of heat would consume them whole. Ned would be the first to succumb to the flames.

My passion for this job came from my dream of supporting Hannah as she stepped into the limelight. For me, treating my artists with less care than I would show for my sister would be tantamount to failure—no matter how much money I, or anyone else, made in the process.

However, this is a business. Genevieve’s business. I do appreciate the need for my work to contribute to the company’s profits. I always believed when I became a manager, I would find a way to strike a balance between protecting my client’s interests and meeting Rush’s demanding business objectives. Without being careless like Arthur. Without being manipulative like Zac. I’ve worked so hard these past seven months to make it happen. After today, I’m beginning to wonder if such a compromise is even possible.

Genevieve’s patience with me is wearing thin. While she has decided to allow me to continue as I am for now, the implication is clear: If I fail to meet my targets within a reasonable time frame, I’ll be expected to sacrifice my ideals in favour of Rush’s bottom line.

I’m halfway up the final staircase when I hear her. My body stills, ears straining for more. Hannah.

She’s singing.

My eyes close, a smile creeping its way onto my tired face. Damn, she’s good. I’d almost forgotten.

I’m about to open the door when something about what I’m hearing makes me stop. The guitar. Hannah is good with a guitar. She’s better than I’ll ever be, but she’s not *this* good. Whoever’s accompanying her sounds like... Johnny. I gasp. It can’t be.

Carefully sliding my key into the lock, I ease the door open and pause in the entryway.

Hannah is perched sideways on the armchair, her eyes closed as she sings. The lyrics are unfamiliar to me, but she performs them with an easy confidence.

Johnny sits on the couch, my guitar resting on one bent leg. His other foot is tapping along to the tune he's playing so effortlessly. The two of them seem totally in sync with each other. Hannah's voice melding perfectly with Johnny's notes.

The sight of them here, together, doing what each of them does best, makes an absolute mess out of my already battered heart. Moisture pricks at the back of my eyes. I would give anything to come home to this—exactly this—every day.

Johnny's head lifts, and he catches sight of me. His fingers jerk on the strings. The colour drains from his face. Hannah's voice falters as she glances around. "Oh, shit," she says, shooting up off the armchair.

"Language, little sister."

She crosses her arms, scowling at me. "You're early."

"Nope." I shake my head. "Right on time."

She looks down at her watch. "Oh."

"Guess we lost track of the time." Johnny stands and carefully places my guitar back on its stand.

How long has he been here? But more importantly... "What were you singing?" I ask Hannah.

"I wasn't singing," she snaps.

I lift an eyebrow at her.

"No, I mean..." She gives a false laugh and waves a hand in Johnny's direction. "We were just messing around."

"I should go." Johnny keeps his gaze averted as he heads for the door behind me.

"No," Hannah jumps in. "You stay. I'm gonna go," she backs down the hallway, "to my room." She lifts a hand. "Catch you later, Johnny." The cheery farewell has me doing a double-take. Since when does Hannah enjoy meeting someone?

My head turns in time to catch the affection in Johnny's expression. "You too, Hannah. Thanks for your help."

She makes a dismissive sound. "It was nothing." Her door closes with a bang. Within seconds, loud music begins to emanate from behind it.

Johnny snorts a laugh.

Grimacing, I turn to face him. "She's subtle."

“She’s a sweetheart,” he says, all soft eyes and gentle smile. “And a hell of a singer.”

“Yeah. No kidding.” I put my work bag on the kitchen counter before turning back to him.

“How did you manage that?”

“Manage what?”

“Getting her to sing for you.”

He looks confused. “We got to talking and it just... kind of... happened.”

As if it’s that easy. As if getting my sister to sing is no big deal. What kind of bonding moment did these two have while I was off squirming under my boss’s narrowed gaze?

“Why aren’t you managing her?” Johnny asks.

Exasperation makes me sigh. “You’ll have to ask her. Heads up, she won’t give a satisfactory answer.”

His head tilts as he considers that, before a smile quirks onto his mouth. “She knew who I was when I showed up here. She called me *the one*?”

His question begs an answer he won’t be getting from me. “You’re forgetting, I was on the phone with her when you came up to me the night we met. Of course, I mentioned you.”

“Because you couldn’t keep your eyes off me.”

“Because you could have been a serial killer.”

He gives a short laugh. “For real, are you two obsessed with serial killers or something?”

I shrug. “We like horror movies.”

“Huh. Something else I didn’t know.” His brown eyes study me closely before he shakes his head. “It didn’t stop you from wandering off into the dark with me. Where’s your sense of self-preservation?”

He’s joking, but his words trigger the memory of our first kiss. The one that ruined me for every man since. The one that still threatens my job because of my inability to let it, or him, go. I need to get him out of my apartment.

“Why are you here?” I ask, my voice betraying an annoyance that has more to do with me than him.

“Oh, um...” He goes over to our sorry excuse for a Christmas tree and nabs a wrapped box from underneath. “Merry Christmas,” he mutters, all but dumping it in my hands.

My mouth drops open. “You didn’t need to—”

“Don’t get too excited.” He’s doing that restless feet thing again and his hands are shoved into his back pockets. “It’s nothing. I saw it in the store and thought of you.” His gaze darts from the present to my face and back again. Plucking it from my hands, he puts it back under the tree. “You can’t open it until Christmas.”

My heart warms at his fumbling, which only feeds my irritation. “Thank you for the gift.”

He nods, his eyes averted. “I should go.”

He really should, before I... do something. Wrap his awkward self up in a giant hug? Slap him senseless for putting us in such a dangerous position? I don't even know.

He walks to the door, and I steel myself for his departure. The knowledge he was here, in my home, may keep me up—raging and cursing and fucking my own hand—half the night.

“Oh,” he says, turning back to me, “one more thing—”

“No,” I snap, falling back a step.

He frowns. “No what?”

“No, you can't have a fucking minute,” I growl at him. “Not here.”

His mouth opens, as if he's going to argue the point, and I hold up a hand to stop him.

“You have to know one minute would turn into ten. Ten would turn into an hour. That hour would turn into me tying you to the goddamned bed.”

Wide eyes stare at me as he shakes his head. “Cal, I didn't mean to—”

“But you always do.” There's an accusation in my voice I don't really mean, but I kind of do. How dare he show up like this? In my home. Mere metres from my bed. He knows what's at stake. “That girl in there?” I jab a finger in the direction of Hannah's room. “She's relying on me to make everything better. I cannot fuck her life up because you like the way it hurts.”

Johnny inhales sharply, his back pressed against the door.

The ensuing silence echoes with the sting of my thoughtlessness. It's been a long day. I'm tired and anxious. But that's no excuse to take my frustration out on him. “Johnny—”

“I was going to say...” He tries for a casual tone, but the hurt is unmistakable. “Gavin and Charmaine are having a New Year's Eve party. They'd like you and Hannah to be there.”

Regret slams into me. I close my eyes, my body sagging.

“You'll get an official invite, but I hoped to lock you in, before you get a better offer.” He swallows hard, still not looking at me.

“I'll try,” I tell him. “Hannah and I usually spend new year's together, and she's not much for parties.”

He nods. “That's fair.”

My throat aches as I swallow. “I'm sorry.”

“I never should have come here.” His voice is raspy as he reaches behind him to open the door. “I swear, seeing you wasn't part of the plan, but even so...” His gaze sneaks up to mine and the regret there threatens to bring me to my knees. “It won't happen again.”

And then he's gone.



## TWENTY-ONE

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### JOHNNY

If there is one thing Gavin and Charmaine love to do, it's throw a kick-arse party. The gravelled parking area outside The Jam Shed is full when I arrive, with extra cars lined up beside the driveway.

The path from the shed to the back of the house is illuminated by hundreds of fairy lights strung up in the trees on either side. Guests crowd the covered entertainment area, with more spilling out onto the surrounding grass. Low key rock music pumps from the sound system, almost drowned out by laughter and conversation.

I head straight for the kitchen, where I know Gavin will be busy refilling platters with cheese, crackers, and freshly baked sausage rolls, while also prepping a barbecue feast. "Mate," he drawls, wrapping one arm around my shoulders for a quick squeeze. "Glad you could make it." His lazy smile and the faint aroma of beer tell me he's well into enjoying the evening.

I clap him on the back. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." We chat for a few minutes before I hold up the large cooler bag I'm carrying, the assorted six packs of beer inside clink together. "Where should I stash these?"

He cackles with delight. "Mate, you're a bloody legend." Waving a hand, he directs me back outside. "Take these too, will you?" he adds, shoving two bowls of potato chips in my direction.

Making my way outside, I find an empty table to put the bowls onto before running into Charmaine. She looks stunning in a slinky red dress with matching kitten heels. "Johnny," she squeals, throwing her arms around me. Lifting up on her toes, she whispers in my ear, "A bunch of my single girlfriends are here. Sexy and successful." Pulling back, she waggles her eyebrows at me. "I could introduce you. New year, new you, and all that."

I give an awkward laugh, appreciating her attempt at match making, despite my total lack of interest. "I'll let you know if I need any help there. In the meantime," I hold my bag up again, "help with these?"

Her eyes light up, and she rubs her hands together. “Oh, I knew there was a reason I like you.” She leads me to the side of the paved area where a drinks table has been set up. The surface is covered in assorted wine and liquor bottles, along with soft drinks and juice. Underneath are a couple of ice-filled esky coolers. With some effort, we manage to wedge a half dozen bottles at least partway into the already crowded ice. It will have to do.

Charmaine is called away as I’m standing to twist the top off a bottle of beer. I have yet to take a sip when a flash of ginger closes in on me from the side.

“You’re late,” hisses a feminine voice.

I turn my head. Hannah glares up at me, her arms crossed and shoulders hunched.

“Hello to you, too,” I reply, smirking at her.

She makes a grumpy sound. “Hello.”

My gaze searches the crowd, but I don’t see any sign of Calum.

“He’s over there somewhere talking to people,” she says with a wave of her hand.

“Mingling or whatever.”

I clear my throat, kicking myself for being so freaking obvious. “Why aren’t you mingling or whatever?”

Indignant eyes lift to mine. “Do I look like a people person?”

My gaze sweeps over her. She’s wearing black skinny jeans and combat boots, despite the heat of the summer night. At least her shirt is cooler. A dark plum, the clingy material drapes artfully off one shoulder, leaving her arms bare. The riot of ginger curls hangs loose around her shoulders. She’s as beautiful as her brother is gorgeous. Not to mention, brimming with talent and sharp like a dagger. But here, surrounded by strangers, she’s skittish in a way she wasn’t when it was just the two of us. “You can stick with me if you’d like,” I suggest. “Then neither of us are alone.”

Her lips twist as she appears to contemplate my offer before giving a curt nod. “Okay.”

“Great.” I tilt my head in invitation. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to the rest of our little band family.”

“I met some of them already,” she says in a rush. “Cal introduced me.” I wait for more and she rolls her eyes before snapping, “I don’t like it when people try to hug me.”

My mouth rounds into an “oh” of understanding. That would be Charmaine. And Toni. Possibly Ned. “Let’s try again,” I say, crooking a finger at her. “If you give them a chance, I promise they’ll adore you from a distance.”

Huffing an exasperated sigh, she falls into step behind me.

I spend the next few hours hanging out with my favourite people in the world and sliding

Hannah into each conversation. Anyone who ventures too close to her finds me in their way. A subtle shake of my head has them backing up again. They quickly find other ways to welcome her. Charmaine brings her prime morsels of Gavin's cooking. Toni regales her with over-the-top tales about his life with Ned, while randomly throwing in questions about her, which she answers with short sentences.

Eventually, Oz sneaks in to stand on her other side. Her gaze darts to and away from him repeatedly. His glances are slower, with some crooked smiles thrown in. This dance goes on for a while, until he leans down to introduce himself in a quiet voice and offers his hand. To my surprise, Hannah accepts, her cheeks turning pink as they shake. Her other hand lifts to tuck her hair behind her ear and what the hell is happening here?

I'm still wondering if I should be doing something when Hannah touches my arm. "We're going to get some food," she says, gesturing to Oz.

"Sure." I nod, attempting to look casual, before meeting her gaze more directly. "You good?"

"Yeah." A tiny grin hovers on her lips. "Thanks."

I wink at her. "Anytime."

They're disappearing into the crowd when I realise Calum has come to stand at my side. Doing a double-take, I narrow my eyes at him. "Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you all night."

"I didn't want to interrupt. She looked so comfortable with you." His brows twitch, as if he's still wrapping his brain around those words. "I don't know what kind of magic you wield with her, but I'm grateful for it."

"Glad to be of service." I pair the words with a small bow and am rewarded with a low chuckle. "How did you convince her to come?"

He grimaces, taking a swig of whatever drink he's holding. "She wanted me to come. I may have threatened to stay home and keep her company if she didn't join me."

I snort a laugh. "Brotherly blackmail at its finest."

"It was a dirty trick, but it worked. And, who knows, in the end she may be glad she came."

My gaze follows his to where Hannah and Oz sit in a corner of the patio, their heads bent together in conversation. "He's a good man," I tell Calum, although by now he already knows. "He'll treat her right."

Calum gives me some side-eye. "He'd better," he says with mock ferocity.

Silence falls between us, and I shift on my feet as I lean closer to murmur, "I thought

maybe you were avoiding me.” Our last meeting, at his apartment, ended so badly. We haven’t spoken since, save for the obligatory Christmas wishes in the band’s group chat.

“No, I…” He pauses, before sighing heavily. “Maybe a little.” Someone bumps into him from behind and he turns, as if reminded of the mass of people surrounding us. He looks back. “Walk with me?”

Our gazes lock. The rest of the world glitches into a distant blur. Swallowing around the sudden lump in my throat, I nod.

We wander away from the paved area, towards a small fire pit in the middle of the backyard. A dozen or so chairs are set up around it, only half of them occupied. We grab a couple of chairs and settle in a quiet spot on the far side. The advancing night has brought a coolness to the summer air. It allows us to sit within the circle of light provided by the fire without sweltering.

The flickering flames are reflected in Calum’s green eyes; they pick up the highlights in his hair and illuminate his pale skin with an ethereal glow. I try not to stare, but it’s pointless. I’m so lost in him, in this madness between us. It’s a merry-go-round of want and denial I refuse to leave behind, even when the whirling leaves me sick to my stomach.

I’ve been going over and over it in my head for days now. Eight months have passed since the night we met, and yet I’m only now realising how little I actually know about Calum Ellis. I know he’s twenty-four, and managing musicians is his dream job. He likes horror movies and drinks enough coffee to energise a small town. But I don’t know his favourite book, if he prefers the mountains or the beach, which songs he would put on the soundtrack of his life. I don’t know anything about his friends, or his childhood. I know he would burn the world to the ground to protect his sister, but I don’t know why he holds so tight to the matches, as if an attack is imminent. I don’t know where his parents are, or how long they’ve been gone. I have no idea what his and Hannah’s life was like when they were still around.

After all these months of fighting my physical attraction to him, I’d almost forgotten the fascination that drew me to him that first night. It was more than his touch, his kiss. It was everything about him.

“I want to apologise for the way I acted the other day.” Calum’s quiet words drag me back from my ruminations. “I was harsh, and I’m sorry.”

The label on my mostly empty beer bottle tears as I scratch at it with my thumbnail. “I’m sorry, too,” I say, my voice rough with emotion. “I never should have shown up at your home uninvited. Even if I didn’t mean to see you. It was an intrusion, and it was wrong.”

He sits back in his chair. “Even if that’s true, I didn’t have to overreact.”

“You lash out when you feel threatened,” I say, turning to look at him. “It’s one of the few things I *do* know about you.”

Frowning, he crosses his arms. “What are you talking about?”

Swearing under my breath, I scull the last of my beer and drop the bottle to the grass. “I’ve spent the last eight months treating you like some drug I’m addicted to. Taking hits of you, one minute at a time, and praying it’s enough to keep me from losing control.” I sit forwards, resting my elbows on my knees as I stare into the flames. “It will never be enough, Cal, and if we keep going through these motions, we’ll keep ending up right back here, tearing strips off each other to get at something we’re not allowed to have.” Running a hand over my face, I force myself to look at him. “I don’t want you to regret me.”

He doesn’t bother to deny it could happen. Hell, he’s probably halfway there, already. “What do you suggest we do?”

“I thought we could try something different. New year, fresh start?” I say, remembering Charmaine’s words from earlier. “I would like for us to be a part of each other’s lives.” The words are quiet, cautious. Hope is a wary flutter in my chest. “I don’t want to use the word friends. I don’t think I could take pretending we’ve never... been more. But I want to know you. I want you to know me.”

He rolls his lips inwards and his eyes gleam with moisture. “I would like that.”

My eyebrows lift. “Yeah?”

Laughing, he swipes a finger under one eye and nods. “Yes.”

He holds his hand out to me for the first time in six months. I press my warm palm to his as we shake. I imagined this a million times, coming skin to skin with Calum once more. My imagination always pictured a moment steeped in desperation and broken promises. The reality is surprising in its calmness. The thrum of awareness is still there. I still want him. At the same time, there’s a depth to the ache that wasn’t present the last time we touched. A rightness.

We’re still staring into each other’s eyes, the renewed connection between us tentative and fragile, when the music cuts off and Gavin’s voice lifts over the din of the nearby crowd. “Listen up, you lot. There’s five minutes left until midnight, so top up your glasses and get ready to ring in the new year.” The music returns with a crash of drums, and Calum and I grin at each other.

Grabbing our empties, we set them beside the overflowing green and yellow recycle bin before finding our way back into the throng. Charmaine is dancing around with two open bottles of champagne, refilling outstretched glasses. Ned pulls me into a side hug, smacking a

kiss on my cheek before wrapping his arms around Toni. The shorter man smirks up at him, tugging on the T pendant that hangs on a chain around Ned's neck until he bends down for a more thorough kiss. Hannah moves into place on Calum's other side, looking appalled by the crush of people, even as she holds tight to Oz's hand.

"One minute," Gavin calls.

Calum's arm brushes against mine, and I thrill at the thought of not having to avoid such incidental touches anymore. Keeping him at arm's length has been exhausting. We glance at each other, and I see my own relief reflected in his eyes.

"Ten," Gavin yells, starting the countdown. The rest of us quickly join in, getting louder as we go.

"...seven, six, five..."

Ned and Toni are already making out. Hannah and Oz only have eyes for each other. Which leaves me and Calum.

"...three, two..."

I want to hug him. It seems more appropriate for midnight than another handshake, but I don't want to push.

"...one!"

Calum throws his arms around me. I freeze for all of a second before hugging him back. It feels so good to hold him again. I'm so grateful we've found our way back from what felt increasingly like the brink of disaster.

"Christ, I've missed you." His lips brush against the shell of my ear as the hoarse words make their way inside me.

"I've missed you, too." My heart threatens to explode, and I tighten my hold on him. "Happy new year, Cal."

He presses his cheek to mine for a brief moment before pulling away, an easy smile lighting up his face. "Same to you, Johnny. Only good times ahead, yeah?"

I'm nodding when Hannah appears, tugging on Calum's shirt. He turns to engulf her in a hug.

Watching them, I can't stop smiling. *This is good*, I think to myself. *We can make this work*.

## TWENTY-TWO

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### CALUM

Sometimes, I wonder what would have happened if, by chance, I'd strolled into the pharmacy where Johnny works before we met. The location is a couple of suburbs in the wrong direction from where I live, so the chances were low, but it could have happened.

Would I have been smitten with him the moment he advised me on cold and flu tablets or the benefits of some random vitamin supplement? Or would I simply have noted his good looks with a lingering once-over before walking away? I'll never know how such a meeting would have played out, but now I do know him, I can say one thing for sure: Johnny Durant looks hot as fuck wearing his crisp, white pharmacist's coat.

When he called me an hour ago to see if I could give him a lift from work to rehearsal, I jumped at the chance. I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to get a sneak peek into the other half of his life. I made sure to get here a few minutes early, so I'd be able to scope out the inside of his workplace.

The automatic doors slide closed behind me, cutting off the sweltering heat of late February and enveloping me in blessed air conditioning. Johnny is behind the rear counter; his gaze focused on whatever script he's filling back there. I wander into the maze of shelves, trying not to be obvious as I sneak glances over the top of them.

"Good afternoon." A young woman stands beside me, with a crisp blue uniform and bright smile. "Can I help you find something?"

"No, thank you," I say, returning her smile. "I'm here to pick up Johnny."

Confusion clouds her features. "Johnny?"

Now we're both confused. Lifting a hand, I gesture to the counter, where the man in question is now talking to an elderly woman. "Durant," I add.

"Oh, you mean John." Her face brightens in understanding.

Mine doesn't. "Yes." I nod, belatedly. "I mean John."

"No problem. I'm sure he won't be long." She walks back to the counter, leaning in to say a few words to Johnny. He looks my way and the smile lighting up his face sets my heart to

thumping. Lifting a hand, his fingers splayed, he mouths the words, “Five minutes.”

At my nod, he returns his attention to his customer, and I go back to wandering between the shelves.

These last couple of months have been good for me and Johnny. They’ve given us the chance to learn how to relax around each other. We’ve spent time together without the band a couple of times a week. On the days we don’t see each other, we’re constantly on our phones, talking or texting. The need to keep things platonic forces us to get out and about when we’re together, and damn we’ve had fun. We’ve seen live bands play all over Brisbane, gone to the movies, had dinner at all of each other’s favourite places. I’d call it dating, if it weren’t for the total absence of sexual contact. Brushing up against each other too often at a concert doesn’t count. Neither do the goodnight hugs that sometimes last a longer-than-friendly amount of time. If our conversations have deepened, interspersed with long minutes of simply being there, listening to each other breathe, it’s nothing to be concerned about.

Yeah, denial has become an active third in this new relationship we’ve forged. What other choice do I have? I can’t stop seeing him professionally. I don’t want to stop seeing him personally. And I definitely can’t tell him the truth I’m no longer able to hide from myself.

I’m in love with him.

Not just a little bit in love, like I confessed in that lust-fuelled moment we shared at the studio a few months ago. This is a bone deep, soul defining, this-lifetime-and-the-next kind of love I didn’t think I was capable of. Every time I’m with him, it only grows stronger. I have no idea what to do with that. All I know is, this ‘more than friends but not quite lovers’ relationship we’ve managed to build out of the ashes of our doomed romance is better than whatever toxic bullshit we were doing before. I don’t want to lose it. I don’t want to lose him.

Movement on my left alerts me to his arrival. “If you’re having an issue with foot fungus, I can recommend some excellent products.”

I blink at him in confusion. He gestures to the shelf before me. Apparently, I’ve spent the entire five minutes ruminating in the foot care aisle.

Turning, I give him a bright smile. “Thanks so much for your help, John.”

He grimaces at the emphasis I put on his name. “It’s what my parents call me. My boss is an old family friend so…” He shrugs off the explanation, his gaze falling away. “Shall we head out?”

I nod, and before long we’re on the road.

“Thanks for picking me up,” he says, running his hands through his hair as if freeing himself from the restraints of his day job. “I wasn’t expecting the mechanic to keep my car

overnight.”

“No problem,” I tell him. “You’ll get it back tomorrow?” He nods.

We’re quiet for a few minutes, an old Radiohead song playing low on the stereo.

“Can I say it was weird seeing you in there?” His voice is quiet, contemplative.

I glance in his direction. “Should I have not come in?”

“No, it’s not that,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s more like... my real life and my dream life have bumped into each other and now they’re giving side-eye, not quite sure how to act.”

We stop at a red light, and I turn to look at him. He appears, not upset exactly, more like uncomfortable.

“Just be you.” He turns to look at me, and I can see how torn he is over who that is. “This part of your life—the band, me—it’s no dream, Johnny. This is as real as anything else you do. You are never more real to me than when you’re on stage with a guitar in your hands.”

Gratitude fills his eyes, and his hand reaches across the console to touch my thigh for a moment. “Thank you.”

The light turns green and he removes his hand as we get moving again. “I’ll say this though,” I tell him in a playful tone, “I kind of liked getting a gander at John the pharmacist.”

He groans, messing up his hair some more. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Why not? John the pharmacist is hella sexy.”

“Ugh. John is the most generic name in existence. I’ll take Johnny any day over that boring arse name.”

“I’d take Johnny any day too, if I could.” The muttered words pop out before I can stop them.

His mouth drops open and he laughs suggestively. “Careful, Cal. Your libido is showing.”

Adjusting my position in my seat, I clear my throat. “My apologies.”

He continues watching me, a finger toying with his bottom lip. “Slip up all you like,” he draws. “I store every one of them in my spank bank for later use.”

“Fuuuck,” I groan, my hands tightening on the wheel. “Don’t tell me that.”

“Then stop slipping up.”

“I’m trying,” I cry.

“Try harder.” He drags the last word out until the innuendo is unmistakable.

Barking out a rough laugh, I glare at him. “You’re an asshole.”

“You started it.”

I heave a sigh as I pull into Gavin’s driveway. “And neither of us can finish it.”

“More’s the pity,” Johnny says quietly.

I park and kill the engine, but neither of us moves to get out of the car. “I can give you a ride home after...”

He shakes his head. “I’ve already asked Ned to drive me.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“I didn’t think it was a good idea for us to...” He doesn’t need to finish the thought. We both know what could happen if we’re not careful. “But there’s a new band I heard about playing at a pub on the north side on Friday night. I thought we could go check them out.”

“Sounds like a plan.” A safe, public plan. My hands curl into fists as we finally move to get out of the car.

## TWENTY-THREE

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### JOHNNY

I've had one too many glasses of champagne and, if Calum's giggling is any indication, he's even worse. The number of little red SOLD stickers showing up on the graphic artwork lining the walls tells me Toni can afford the extra bottle.

In the six months since his last art gallery showing, Toni has been focusing increasing amounts of time on what was supposed to be a side business to complement his day job as a graphic designer. The number of people attending his second show proves how popular his work is becoming. Ned is in ecstasy boasting about his talented partner, his enthusiasm only topped by Toni's best friend, Rodney. Watching the two of them compete for Toni's attention is enough to keep me and Cal in stitches.

"I like this one," Calum says, pointing to a small print hanging in the hallway of the converted house. With three cozy, brightly lit rooms, and a larger foyer, there are plenty of available walls. Toni has filled them all. "It's Fifth Circle, isn't it?"

I look closer at the image. There are four male figures, standing in varying positions. They're against the wall of a building that looks suspiciously like The Jam Shed. The subtle lines of a drum kit can be seen through the open door on their right. Hints of bushland fill in the background. "I didn't know about this," I murmur, feeling myself blush even as I'm smiling. "That's so cool."

"I'll be back in a minute." Calum says before disappearing into the crowd.

Assuming he's using the bathroom, I examine the print of me and my three band mates for a few more minutes. Ned is definitely the one furthest to the right. He's staring straight ahead, as if beckoning the viewer to come a little closer. Plus, there's no mistaking the tilt of those limber hips. Oz is next, arms wrapped around himself as he looks towards the ground. Gavin is loose-limbed and grinning. I'm on the end. My body angles towards the other men, but my head is turned away, looking off to the left. Something about the position evokes a sadness in me. Even here, in digital art form, I seem torn between the band and the somewhere else I'm supposed to be. Can everyone see that in me? Am I so obvious?

I'm leaning in close to the picture, staring at myself like a befuddled narcissist, when a hand places a red SOLD dot on the picture's frame. I jerk upright, to see Calum standing beside me. "You bought it?" I ask, my eyebrows lifting. He nods, but there's an odd expression on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Toni gave me a 'family discount'." He puts air quotes around the words.

"Is that bad?"

"No." His baffled smile wars with his frown. "I'm just... surprised, I guess."

"Why? You're our manager. That makes you family."

He starts to speak, but nothing comes out. Then he shakes himself free of whatever he's thinking. "Anyway, yes, I bought it. Fifth Circle is my first band."

"That makes us a forever kind of special, right?"

His smile is pure indulgence. "Yes, Johnny. You are forever special."

I laugh low in my throat. "That's what I like to hear."

"I've been meaning to ask," he says as we wander back across the room. "I know when you first started the band it had five members. Yes?" At my nod, he continues, "I assume that's where the fifth in Fifth Circle came from?"

"Yeah. In hindsight, we probably should have chosen a name without a specific number in it."

"Who was the fifth person?" Calum asks.

"Michael. He was our keyboardist. Things didn't work out and he left." Draining my glass, I place it on a nearby table. "Let's look in the next room." I escape through a doorway. With a quick glance around the new room, I pause in front of a large print of a nude male. He's reclined on a bed, back arched, arms tied to the rail above his dark head. One leg is bent at the knee, the conveniently raised thigh concealing his family jewels from view.

Calum joins me, his mouth dropping open as he takes in the enormous print. "Damn, Toni's good." I nod my agreement. "You think it's Ned?"

I snort a laugh. "I hope not."

"You'd rather Toni drew *someone else* this way?"

"Modelling for fine art is a timeless and honourable profession." I turn my back on the erotic painting. "If it prevents me knowing a little too much about my best friend's sex life, all the better."

Calum gives a low chuckle as we continue around the room. A few minutes later he grabs us fresh glasses of champagne from a passing waiter. I reach for one, but he keeps it just out of reach, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "Will you tell me what happened to the

keyboardist?"

"Fine," I say, holding my hand out. Once I have the glass in hand, I shrug. "There's not much to tell. I'd known Michael for a couple of years in passing, but we didn't really get to know each other until I put the band together. He was a good guy. We became friends."

After a lengthy pause, Calum gestures with one hand, his eyes eager. "Until?"

I clear my throat, take a sip of the bubbling sweetness in my glass. "I can't say exactly when things changed, but we started hanging out together more often. Sometimes, after rehearsals, we'd head to a local pub for a beer. Shit like that." We come to a halt in a quiet corner of the room, our backs to the wall. "One day, we were hanging out, having a laugh, when I realised he was flirting with me." It's so stupidly clear to me now, although at the time the realisation floored me. "It was low-key flirting, but it was definitely there and I... I was enjoying it." It didn't matter that I hadn't done anything wrong. I was ashamed to have let things get so far. What if I'd led him on without realising it?

"The whole thing freaked me out," I tell Calum. "I liked him—and, yeah, I suppose part of me was attracted to him—but I was a married man."

"What did you do?" Calum asks, his brow furrowed.

"I pulled back. Stopped spending time with him outside the band. The long conversations and shared jokes. I put a stop to all of it." I swallow hard. "When he asked why we weren't friends anymore, I didn't know what to say. I told him I needed to spend more time with Ellie. Which was true, and that's what I did."

I fall silent, unable to meet his gaze.

Calum watches me in that way he does. "There's more." The words are quiet. They're not a demand. They're a statement, an invitation.

"One night after rehearsal, he followed me back to my car. We argued. He tried to kiss me."

Calum's body turns rigid, and his jaw clenches. As if he wants to reach backwards through time, to the night Michael came on to me and put himself between us. "You stopped him."

My nod is short, but definite. "I'll admit to being clueless, sometimes. I screw up in all sorts of ways. But I am loyal." I meet his gaze then. "My place was with my wife; I always believed that. I never would have cheated. Not the way she—" I stop there, not wanting to get into the breakdown of my relationship with Ellie. That's not what this conversation is about. "Anyway, Michael quit the band. Said he wanted to go in a different direction. Gavin and Oz never questioned it. We did talk about getting a new keyboardist for a while, but it never went anywhere."

“Did you talk to Ellie about what happened?” he asks.

“And tell her what, exactly? A friend tried to kiss me and I turned him down?” I shake my head. “There was no point in upsetting her. All she knew was, I poured myself into loving her and she responded by loving me back. We were happy, for a while.” I suck down a gulp of champagne, but the sweetness has lost its appeal. My skin prickles under the weight of Calum’s gaze and I glance his way. “What?”

“I don’t know, I just...” His eyes are warm with concern. “I hate the thought of you going through all that alone.”

“That’s on me, though,” I argue. “My friends would have had my back if they knew the truth.” But they don’t, which makes me feel like the worst friend in existence. They think they know me. *I* thought they knew me. Right up until I realised how long I’ve been lying to them.

There’s no question they would support the shit out of me if I told them I’m bisexual. Hell, they’d probably want to throw me a coming out party, complete with rainbow streamers and cake. I would love them all the more for it, but at the same time it would make hiding the truth from the rest of the world that much harder.

If the world knew, then eventually my parents would find out. I don’t have to imagine how they would react. I saw the way they looked at me the day they realised I wasn’t smart enough to be a doctor. I saw it again when I defied their demands to give up the guitar. When Ellie left me. When our divorce came through. Every time I put off buying my own pharmacy.

They have no interest in knowing the flawed and conflicted man they brought into this world. They only want the parts of me that align with their vision of the perfect son. The further I deviate from their ideal, the harder it is for them to love me. And this final truth I hide—the deep, all-consuming love I’ve come to feel for the man at my side—may be one deviation too far.

I don’t want them to look at me and see a mistake where they once saw a miracle.

“Do you miss her?” Calum asks. “Ellie, I mean.”

Taking a moment to draw my thoughts back from the dark turn they’ve taken, I think about his question. “No, I don’t,” I tell him, truthfully. “We stayed together too long for the sake of making other people happy. But I do miss having someone to come home to, someone who’s there for me and I’m there for them. The intimacy that comes from knowing someone that deeply, being that connected, it’s unlike anything else.” I smile sadly, wondering if I’ll ever get another chance at that feeling. “I miss being somebody’s someone.”

“I’m sure it will happen again. When you meet the right woman,” he adds before draining his glass.

I used to think so. I really did. Now, there’s only one person I want to experience that with. He’s the one person I can’t have. “What about you?” I ask, more than ready to shift the focus away from me. “Have you ever felt that way about someone?”

He scoffs. It’s a bitter sound. “I haven’t had the time for serious relationships.” He looks up at me once more, the clouds clearing from his face. “I’m a master at the hook up, though.”

I let out a short laugh. “How do you do it? Going from meeting someone to being inside their body in the space of an hour?” I make a face of displeasure. “I don’t get the appeal.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Calum says. “And scratch the hour. Try ten minutes. You’d be surprised how much heat can be generated with someone who catches your eye in a dark club.”

“It seems so... impersonal.”

He looks at me, his eyes all soft and a gentle smile curving his lips. “You really are a hopeless romantic, aren’t you?”

My mouth drops open. “I am not.”

“Oh, yes you are.”

I turn away, my cheeks warming. “Yeah, well, don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

Calum smirks. “When it comes to you, Johnny, I’m tempted to try everything.”

## TWENTY-FOUR

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### CALUM

I pour hot water from the kettle into my World's Best Manager mug, watching the mini torrent mix with the instant coffee granules at the bottom. Adding a dash of milk, I give it a good stir before dropping the teaspoon in the kitchen sink. A tiny burst of pleasure radiates inside me as I raise the steaming mug, inhaling the cheap but satisfying aroma before taking my first sip.

I suspect this is exactly the scenario Johnny had in mind when he bought me this mug. When he wrapped it so neatly and came to my home to personally place it beneath my Christmas tree. It's weird to think a novelty mug now counts as one of my prized possessions, but it's the only physical evidence I have of the feelings we share. It matters.

My toast pops and I finish making breakfast before settling on a stool at the counter to eat while I plan the week ahead. Flipping open the cover of my planner, I go through my upcoming schedule. The Autumn Skies Music Festival is fast approaching. Fifth Circle will be performing in the amphitheatre this year. Mid-afternoon on the second day. It's a modest spot—the evening slots being saved for headliners like Dante Sinclair—but it's a decent step up from last year. Even Genevieve seemed pleased with the placement.

Arthur, on the other hand, looked furious when he found out. I know he hates the attention Fifth Circle is getting after he previously declared them unworthy of his time. It doesn't matter that they had a new singer by the time I found them, or that they'd had another two years to develop their sound. All he sees is a band he'd dismissed is now breaking out, and under my guidance instead of his. If we didn't get along before, I'm pretty sure he hates me now.

The door to Hannah's bedroom creaks open and I look up to wish her a good morning. Stopping at the end of the hallway, all messy hair and ruffled pyjamas, she glares in my direction. My eyebrows lift in question. It's too early for me to have done anything to piss her off, and she was fine when I left for work yesterday morning. By the time I got home last night, she'd already left for a date with Oz.

I open my mouth to ask what's wrong when Oz steps into view behind her. His hair and clothes are also rumpled. But where Hannah is still glaring daggers at me, Oz is sunshine incarnate.

Without a word, Hannah leads him through the living space towards the front door.

"Good morning," I say, my gaze darting between his smile and her glower.

Oz nods in greeting. "Morning, Calum."

I keep my back to them as they say goodbye, pretending not to hear their low murmurings or the quiet sounds of a final kiss.

The front door closes and Hannah enters the kitchen, head high and shoulders stiff, despite the fiery red colour of her cheeks. I fight a grin as she goes about her normal routine of pouring cereal and making tea. Eventually, she sneaks a peek in my direction. Holding her gaze, I take a leisurely sip of coffee.

"Will you please say it and get it over with?" she snaps, gesturing with her spoon as if threatening to gut me.

I clear my throat. "Were you safe?"

She rolls her eyes. "Of course."

"Do you want to talk about anything?"

The "No" comes through gritted teeth.

"Was he good to you?"

Her gaze drops and her lips roll in but, when she nods, I can tell she's fighting a smile.

"Okay."

She continues to stare at me as I pick up my pen and go back to my schedule. "That's it?"

"What else is there?" I ask. "You're both consenting adults. You're dating. What's the problem?"

Her mouth opens, and then closes. "Exactly."

A smirk makes its way onto my face. "Exactly."

The awkwardness lingers as we both eat, but we'll get over it with time. This was always going to happen sooner or later. Honestly, I'm only glad it didn't happen sooner. There are upsides to my sister's disdain for social interaction.

I'm halfway through washing my dishes when she comes to stand beside me with her empty bowl and spoon. "What about you and Johnny?" she asks in a deceptively innocent tone.

I take her dishes and run the soapy sponge over them. "What about us?"

"You're consenting adults. You're dating." She grabs a tea towel and starts drying.

“What’s the problem?”

“We’re not dating. We’re hanging out, enjoying each other’s company. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, right, except every time I’m in a room with the two of you I can barely breathe for the pheromones.”

Sighing, I turn away from the now empty sink, snagging the end of her tea towel to dry my hands. “He’s my client. We can’t be... involved.”

She yanks the damp towel from my grasp. “That’s stupid.”

“Keeping my job is stupid, is it?” I ask, lifting my eyebrows at her.

With a tutting sound, she dumps the last spoon in the cutlery drawer and hangs the tea towel on the oven door rail. “There must be exceptions to the rule. It’s not like you’re banging every client you come across.”

“There are no exceptions. Trust me, that was made exceedingly clear when I was hired.” I let out an exasperated laugh. “It’s a good thing. They have rules where rules should be.” Even if I’ve realised the reasoning behind the rules is less about ethics and more about preventing litigation.

“But you and Johnny are in love. Surely that’s more important than any job.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Rounding the counter, I gather my work things and shove them into my bag. “One, Johnny is not in love with me. And two, taking care of you and me will always be the most important thing I do. My job is a roof over our heads, food on our table, and money in the bank.” She never knew how close we once were to the edge, because I did my best to hide it from her, but I will never forget. “It’s you and me against the world. Remember?”

Her eyes cloud over, and she bites down on her bottom lip. “What if I don’t want it to be you and me against the world anymore?”

The words slam into my chest and I drop onto the stool behind me. “What?”

“It’s been brought to my attention recently,” she says in a small voice, hands fisted at her sides, “having other people around us can be... kind of nice. I think maybe I would like that to continue.”

A breathy laugh rushes out of me as my body sags. “I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she grumbles. “It’s not like you’ve spent the last six years surrounded by friends, either.”

She’s not wrong. The friendships I’d thought were so strong in high school fell away pretty quickly after I turned eighteen. While all my old friends were hitting the pubs and

starting university, I was working three jobs to support me and my kid sister. It wasn't until I landed my internship at Rush that I finally started to catch my breath. Even now, the few friendships I do have are through work.

"You know how grateful I am for everything you've done for me," Hannah says, coming to perch on the stool beside me. "But things will be changing soon. I'll finish my degree at the end of the year. I'll finally be able to get a full-time job and contribute more."

I'm already shaking my head. "There's no rush, Hannah. I can cover the bills, and I'd prefer you save for your future."

Storm clouds roll back over her face. "I'd prefer to start taking care of myself, so you don't have to do it for me. I am done holding you back."

I frown at her. "You've never done anything to hold me back." She gives me an incredulous look, and I roll my eyes. "Okay, yes, life turned out differently to what I thought it would, but that was never on you." What happened to us was a selfish act that shredded everything we believed about love and family. It left us with nothing to cling to but each other. Is it any wonder we're still clinging? "The truth is, I don't know what I would have done without you."

"To take care of," she insists in a hard voice. "You don't know what you would have done without me to take care of."

She was just a kid when we found ourselves all alone in the world. I was the closest thing we had to an 'adult'. Of course, I took care of her. "That's the thing you've never understood, Han. You gave me a reason to focus and get shit done. I probably would have gone off the rails, otherwise. Everything I did for you, I was doing for me, too." She might only see how much she needed me, but I needed her just as much. "You were all I had."

"That's my point," she cries. "I don't want to be all you have. You deserve more, and so do I."

Dread gathers into a tight ball and lodges itself in my gut. "What are you saying? Do you want to move out?"

"No," she says with a groan, "don't be melodramatic."

"Then what?" I snap.

Her mouth presses into a hard line as she takes a deep breath. "You're my big brother, Cal, and I'll always need you." There's a pause before she spits the rest out. "But I want you to stop using me as an excuse to push people away."

Frowning, I sit up straighter. "I do not."

"Do, too."

My next denial is cut off when she raises her hand between us. “Does Johnny even know why this shit is so hard for us?” she demands. “Did you tell him about Mum and Dad?”

I flinch at the titles. I’d stopped thinking about them that way years ago.

“Why would I? Johnny’s not interested in having a real relationship with me,” I tell her, though it hurts to admit it. “He made that clear from the start.”

“Maybe it was true then, but it’s been almost a year and he’s still trailing after you like a lovesick puppy. You’re the one for him, Cal. Like he is for you.” I shake my head, and she growls in frustration. “Have you told him you want to give it a shot?”

“What I want doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” she snaps, her eyes bright. “You’ve been putting yourself last for years, working your arse off to make sure we’re okay. But we are now... we’re okay.” She throws her arms wide, as if gesturing to our small apartment. “It’s time to stop living in survival mode.”

I glance around. This place might not be spacious, or new, but it is a home. We have everything we need to live a comfortable life. My bank account has a reasonable amount of padding in case of emergencies. Hannah is right, we are okay—right now. But is it enough?

“We could lose it all, Han.” My voice is barely above a whisper. Rough to the point of breaking. “In an instant, we could have to start all over again.”

“That’s never going to stop being true,” she says with a slow nod. “It’s true for everyone. At least we’d be sharing the load this time. Besides, we’re tough. Emotionally stunted at times,” she adds with dramatic flair. “But you and me? We can come back from anything.”

I snort a laugh. “Bloody oath, we can.”

“Which means...” she drawls, “maybe it’s time we both put our childhood trauma aside and take some risks.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I give her a half-smile. “Does this mean you’ll start writing music again?”

She scoffs. “Let’s not get too crazy.” At the same time, her cheeks flush and there’s a secret sparkle in her eyes.

That in itself is worth the churning in my stomach when I leave a few minutes later. I never would have said she was wrong to want more. The kinds of risks she’s been taking lately are good for her. Meeting new people, singing with Johnny, dating Oz. Those risks are making her world bigger and richer. But I’m not sure her suggestion applies to me so easily.

I don’t even know what living outside of survival mode looks like. Taking risks and hoping for the best? It feels closer to self-sabotage than enrichment. Even if I did find the

courage to try, would Johnny ever want the same thing?

## TWENTY-FIVE

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### CALUM

The contradictory thoughts prompted by Hannah's words are still waging war in my head on Friday night. Johnny and I are sprawled on either end of his couch. There's an old thriller on the TV and an empty pizza box on the coffee table. We usually try to keep our 'alone behind closed doors' time to a minimum, but it's been a long couple of weeks, with the release of the album and preparing for the trip down to Byron Bay for the festival. Neither of us had the energy to go out tonight.

I turn my head far enough to sneak a look in Johnny's direction. He's slumped against the cushions in a t-shirt and black cotton shorts. His long, bare legs are stretched out, one foot propped on the edge of the coffee table, hands resting in his lap. My gaze lifts to his face—the warm brown eyes, sharp nose and full lips—and I watch the subtle play of expressions as he watches the movie. It's a rare thing for me to see him this relaxed, and my chest swells with a deep, limitless affection that threatens to burst through my skin.

I never expected this to happen. Never expected to fall so intensely for anyone. I've sure as hell never been in love before.

Between working and taking care of Hannah, there was never enough time for anything more than the odd hook up, and a few casual relationships. Some lasted a few weeks, maybe a month. I was never with anyone long enough to forge a true connection, and those who tried got nowhere with me. I told myself love was a fleeting indulgence I could suffer through later, when we were more secure. Hannah is right, though. My excuses have worn thinner with each passing year, and yet I've continued to be alone.

I'm alone still. The man beside me might have managed to wrest my heart from safety, perhaps I've even gained a piece of his in compensation, but that's as far as I've allowed us to go.

The concerns I have about my job are real. They aren't an exaggeration. Solving that conflict isn't as simple as looking for a job with a new company. Without a university degree in entertainment management, I don't exactly shine on a resume. My experience at Rush is all

I have to recommend me. I need time to establish myself as a manager, and develop a track record, before I can think about applying elsewhere. Even then, Fifth Circle's contract is with Rush. I wouldn't be able to take them with me. The idea of anyone else managing them triggers every protective instinct I possess and a soft, growly sound rumbles out of me.

Johnny looks my way. "Everything okay?"

Clearing my throat, I tuck my legs closer to my side and further away from him. "Yeah. I'm good."

He seems unconvinced, but turns his attention back to the screen, nonetheless.

I try to do the same, but I've already lost the thread of the plot. My concentration is shot, and my head is all tangled up with the questions Hannah has forced me to face.

If Johnny had been exactly the person he claimed to be the night we met, a pharmacist who happened to be at a music festival, would I be here right now? With no obstacles to keep us apart, but no ties forcing us together, would I have allowed myself to fall for him? Would I have been willing to get close to him in all the ways I've refused to do with others? Or would I have found another excuse to keep him at a distance?

Am I using my job, a very real but ultimately temporary obstacle, to avoid having to take the scarier, more fundamental risk of loving him—out loud, in the world, where he could change his mind and leave me behind?

A ping sounds faintly beneath the sound of the movie and Johnny leans forwards to grab his phone from the table. Reading the incoming text, he collapses back with a sigh.

"Problem?" I ask.

"No." A second sigh contradicts the singular word. He types out a quick reply before tossing the phone back onto the table. "Just my mum, confirming I'll be over there for lunch on Sunday. As if I'm ever not there every other Sunday, as expected." He goes back to watching the movie, but his arms are now crossed. His jaw clenched.

"I take it you don't want to go?"

"I do want to go," he says, even as he shakes his head. "They're my parents. I love them." He turns his body towards me, folding his legs up onto the couch. "I'm just tired of answering the same questions the same way. Yes, work is fine. No, I haven't met any nice women. Yes, I am saving, but no, I don't want to go into massive amounts of debt buying my own pharmacy, even if it would make me more successful in their eyes."

He falls silent and I have no idea what to say. This is usually the part where I pull away, not wanting to get involved in anyone else's drama when I have enough of my own to contend with. But I don't want to pull away from Johnny. Not when he's hurting. I sit up

straighter, move a touch closer. “That sounds like a lot.”

“Yeah,” he says with a hollow laugh. “You know, they asked about the new album last time I went over.” His face twists with bitterness. “They didn’t want to know how many streams or if it was well-received. They only wanted to know if the release was interfering with my hours at the pharmacy.” There’s another laugh, and it’s so filled with sadness the sound makes my chest ache. “It’s probably for the best they’ll never listen to it,” he says, softly. “I don’t want them to hear...”

The song he wrote about them. The same one Hannah sang the day I interrupted them. It did make it onto the album, and she fell all over herself in excitement when she saw her own name listed beside his in the credit for the lyrics. What would Johnny’s parents think if they heard it? Would they recognise themselves in the words? Would they finally see how deep his guilt over letting them down runs?

“Anyway,” Johnny says, shifting in his seat, “it is, what it is. Still better to have parents than not, right?”

My gaze snaps to his. His eyes widen in horror. “Oh fuck, Cal,” he breathes. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” I say, shaking my head. “I know what you meant.”

We stare at each other. His throat moves as he swallows. “Do you think you might ever want to talk about what happened?” The question is hesitant, as if he’s scared I’ll be upset with him for asking me to share something so personal. Even after all the times he’s shared himself with me. His past with Ellie. The issues he had being a bisexual man in a heterosexual relationship. Now, with his parents. He has given of himself, time and again, especially in these last few months. While I’ve continued to hold back, as always.

I’m so tired of holding back. I’m tired of putting obstacles between us. I’m tired of being alone. If I’m ever going to move forwards with my life, the way Hannah has started to do with hers, I’ll have to be brave enough to risk getting hurt again.

There’s still no guarantee this will amount to anything. Johnny has never once changed his tune about there being no future for us. In this moment, though, it’s my reluctance to commit that’s in the spotlight.

How can I ever expect him to risk his future, if I’m not willing to risk mine?

Leaning over, I push mute on the TV remote before pressing myself back into the corner of the couch. I draw my legs up in front of me and wrap my arms around them. The coloured lights from the screen flicker across Johnny’s face in the otherwise darkened room. He’s still, patient, as he waits for me to crack open the parts of myself I’ve always kept hidden. My

breath comes fast in my chest and my stomach is a riot of butterflies. “I’m not sure how to do this.”

Johnny moves slowly, sitting closer to me, placing a warm hand over one of mine as his brown eyes travel over me. “When was the last time you saw them?”

“The day after I graduated high school,” I say with a nod. It’s as good a place to start as any. “They told us they were going on a holiday, just for a week. A quick getaway before the rush of Christmas.” I shrug a shoulder. “It was something they would do sometimes. Take off. Hannah and I didn’t even blink. We were excited to have a week without them nagging us to do chores or turn the music down or stay in our rooms so we didn’t bother them.” Even that last part seemed normal to us growing up. “We smiled and waved as they drove away.

“When they were late getting home, we called them, but they didn’t answer. We sent a bunch of texts and finally they responded saying they’d decided to extend their trip for another week. Then another. We ran out of food and the bit of money they’d left us, so I called demanding to know when they were coming home.

“Dad answered that time. He told me to use some of the money I’d earned from part-time jobs to tide us over, and they’d pay me back when they came home.” Anger coils in my gut as I remember the exasperation in his tone, as if my complaints were an annoyance.

“Christmas came and went. They’d never been gone so long. Hannah called them every day, begging them to come home. They rarely picked up, and when they did the calls never lasted long. They acted like we were a couple of toddlers throwing tantrums and why would they want to come back to that. So, we stopped calling for a while. We thought it might help. Then the letter arrived.”

I pause to swallow. The movement hurts my throat. “It was handwritten, both his writing and hers. They said they needed a longer break. That we were old enough to take care of ourselves for a while. The letter came with a pre-paid Visa card with a couple of thousand dollars on it. A month later, the landlord called to find out why the rent was late. They’d stopped paying it.” My voice breaks on the words, and I stop to clear my throat. “The next time we called them, their numbers had been disconnected.”

Johnny’s hands are clamped around mine. “What did you do?”

“I held on to the house as long as I could. Because they couldn’t be serious. They were our parents. Hannah was only thirteen. They couldn’t stay gone forever, right?”

He nods in understanding.

“Between rent and food, the money on the Visa dried up fast. My savings account was next. Every cent I’d ever earned stacking shelves and serving coffee. When those dollars ran

out, I started selling stuff. Smaller items at first. Kitchen appliances. Framed prints. Anything that would score me a few bucks. Before long I'd moved on to the furniture.

"Hannah lost it when she saw me listing an armchair online. 'That's where Mum sits,' she cried. 'She's gonna be so mad.' I told her Mum could scream at me all she liked when she got back and then I hit submit. Two days later the chair was gone, and I had the extra couple of hundred I needed to pay the rent.

"Every day after was a race against time. When I wasn't working my shit job, or looking for a new one, I was deciding what to sell next. We had no other family, and I was too scared to ask anyone else for help. I thought if anyone found out we were alone they would take Hannah away from me. We both broke the day she came home to find the couch gone."

Words continue to spill out of me, revealing the story I've never once given voice to. But I'm no longer in the room with Johnny. I'm back there, in that empty house, terrified out of my mind...

"You're destroying our home," Hannah screamed at me, tears streaming down her face. "There won't be anything left for them to come back to."

I'd looked up at her from where I'd crumpled to the floor after the couch was taken away hours earlier.

We were running out of food again. Rent was due. The utility bills were starting to arrive. "They aren't coming back, Han." The thickness in my throat made the words difficult to say. I hadn't even allowed myself to think them until that moment. "They left us, and they're not coming back."

Hannah's backpack thudded to the ground and then she knelt in front of me, her green eyes wide and her body shaking. "But who will take care of us?"

Panic gripped me by the throat. I looked around the bare room, truly seeing it for the first time in weeks. Not much was left. I'd already sold almost everything that wasn't nailed down. We still had the bedroom furniture. I could get some money for that. Mum left some jewellery behind, and I was about to get paid again.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, I tried to slow the rush of blood through my veins. I was going to be eighteen in six days. A legal adult. Old enough to sign a lease for a smaller place. We could walk away from this house. Leave behind what little was left, along with the unpaid bills and the memories of the family we'd thought we belonged to.

Starting fresh would take every cent we had, and some we didn't, but choices were a luxury we couldn't afford.

"I will," I told Hannah, trying to keep my voice even so she wouldn't be scared. "I'm the

big brother here, and I'm going to take care of both of us."

Her bottom lip quivered, and fresh tears pooled in her eyes. "You won't leave me too, will you?"

A sob escaped as I pulled her into my arms. "Never." We clutched tight to each other, because there was no one else left to hold on to. "We need to stick together, okay? No matter what." I whispered the words in her ear, and she nodded against my shoulder. "It's you and me against the world, little sister. I promise. I'm gonna take care of you."

Warmth envelopes me, bringing me back to the present, and I realise Johnny's body is wrapped around mine. He's all but sitting on my feet. His chest is pressed against my legs where they're folded up in front of me. His arms are as far around me as he can reach, and his lips are pressed against my knees so only his eyes are visible. Those warm, brown eyes, are full of pain... for me.

"It sucks, I know," I say, forcing a shaky smile.

His brow furrows. "It does more than suck," he says in a rough voice. "The thought of you scared like that, of Hannah scared, it breaks my fucking heart."

My heart is broken, too. I don't know if I'll ever make it work the way it used to.

"Did you ever hear from them again?" he asks.

"They called one more time," I tell him. "On Hannah's fourteenth birthday. I think they expected her to be happy to hear from them. Instead, she started crying and screaming obscenities. By the time I got the phone off her they'd already hung up." I give a slow nod. "That was the last time."

In the silence that follows I take a deep breath, glad to have reached the end of my woeful tale. "For the first year or two we talked about them constantly. We would hunt through our memories for clues as to why they left. Try to figure out what we'd done wrong, but... the truth is, they never wanted us in the first place." It was a hard realisation to come to, but it's the only one that has ever made sense. "We knew neither of us were planned. They told us often enough. They were never particularly affectionate. I don't really remember them ever playing with us or spending time with us. But I never realised... how much of a burden we were to them." I shake my head in a sense of disbelief I know will never fade.

"Did you ever find out what happened to them?" Johnny asks.

"Hannah searched for them, obsessively, on social media. She managed to find a few photos through the profiles of friends they visited interstate." I swipe at a stray trail of moisture on my cheek. "They looked... fine. The same as they always did. She stopped looking, after that."

“Arseholes,” Johnny mutters. I don’t disagree. “She didn’t try to contact them?”

I shake my head. “I think she just wanted to know they weren’t dead.” Sitting forwards, I drop my legs into a cross between us. “She had nightmares for years, about me leaving her. I’d have nightmares about not being able to find her. We were a mess.”

Johnny strokes his hands up and down my arms, grounding me in the room with him. “You’ve done such an amazing job, Cal. You took great care of her and yourself.” He lifts the leg that was down beside the couch and presses it against my side, as if his arms alone can’t provide enough comfort. “You are the most incredible person I’ve ever known.”

I huff a bitter laugh. “Not incredible enough to stick around for, apparently.”

“No, don’t you believe that. Not for one second,” he insists, lifting his hands to cup my face. “Those people who gave birth to you, who abandoned you, they aren’t worth shit. I see you, Cal,” he growls, a tumult of emotion in his eyes. “I see everything good in you. The way you take care of Hannah. The way you take care of me, Ned, the whole band.” He scoots in under my legs until I’m all but in his lap. “You are so strong and so talented. You drive me crazy with how determined you are to do what’s right. Being near you makes every cell in my body light up and my heart go into overdrive.” His face is so close, his breath warm. “You don’t have a clue how much...” His whisper crashes through the otherwise silent room. “There are so many reasons why...”

I wait, but he doesn’t go on. Instead, his lips press together and he drops his gaze. “Thank you for telling me. It means a lot, you letting me in like that.”

I nod, but I’m burning up inside. Being this close to him, not being with him, it’s intolerable. “I want you to know me, Johnny.” Leaning back, I uncross my legs and thread them over his hips. His eyes widen in surprise as I move closer. “And I want you to finish your sentence.”

He searches my gaze, mouth open in confusion.

“There are so many reasons why... what?” I demand, though my voice is quaking.

He blinks slowly. Licks his lips. Then he leans in, gathering me in his arms. He presses his cheek to mine, his breath hot in my ear. “There are so many reasons why I love you.”

My arms curl around his shoulders, my legs wind around his hips, locking us together.

“I know I’m not supposed to say that,” he whispers harshly, as if the words themselves might lead us to ruin. “But I can’t hold it back anymore. You’re all I think about. Every day. Every night.” His arms are crushing me to him, his body shaking. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried to stop, but I can’t. You’re inside me all the time. I can’t breathe for how stupid in love with you I am.”

A sob wrenches out of me as I turn my head, covering his lips with mine. It's a hard kiss, desperate and wet with tears. It's like a dam inside me has broken and all the pain, all the hurt, the longing and the need is gushing out. We stay like that for the longest time. Bodies pressed together. Mouths relearning each other by touch and taste. Finally, reluctantly, Johnny begins to pull back. I chase after him, but he turns his head away.

"This is the part where we stop, yeah?" His voice is hoarse and his fingers dig into my hips, even as he says the words. "We're supposed to stop."

"No, Johnny," I whisper, my hands framing his precious face. "This is the part where I surrender. Because I love you and I don't want to stop anymore."

His gaze returns to mine and he releases a long, shuddering breath. "Are you sure?"

My nod is slow, but so very certain. Whatever comes next, whatever becomes of us, I want this to happen. "Make love to me, Johnny. Please."

## TWENTY-SIX

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### JOHNNY

I've had this dream so many times already. Calum—in my arms. Loving and wanting me. I'm scared to move, in case I wake myself up. Yet, I can't possibly keep still.

I remove his shirt first, easing the soft cotton over his head with care. When my fingertips touch down on his pale skin, his shiver sends a surge of satisfaction through me. I take my time exploring his smooth chest. The pebbled nipples and flat stomach. Goddamn, he's perfect.

My leisurely progress is interrupted when Calum yanks my own t-shirt up and off. "More," he breathes as he lifts himself up and onto my lap.

I can't help but grin, even as the weight of him against my rapidly hardening dick has me hissing in a breath.

My arms come around him, and I tilt my head back to take his mouth in a deep, thorough kiss. His tongue spears into my mouth, demanding a rush my heart can't bear to indulge. We've waited so long, denied ourselves so much. Holding him this way is a privilege I refuse to squander.

Pulling free of his mouth, I press our foreheads together. "I want to cherish you." My hands roam his body at will. Tracing the slender lines of his torso, learning the increased length of his hair, stroking his thighs and sliding beneath his loose cotton shorts to find the rounded curves of his arse.

Pausing there, I pull him closer, urging him to grind on me. He complies and a strangled cry fills my mouth. "Fuck, yes." His head falls to my shoulder, and his panting breaths are hot on my neck as he rides my lap. "Feels so good."

Too good. After all these lonely months, the slow, steady roll of his hips has my dick riding the edge of release within seconds and I refuse to blow before we even manage to get naked.

With a hand on his chest, I urge him to lie back on the couch. My hands hook behind his knees, and I drag him down the cushions until he's stretched flat out in front of me.

I take a moment to appreciate the view. His mussed hair and dilated pupils. Lips puffy from our frantic kisses and chest flushed and heaving. When my hungry gaze reaches the bulge straining beneath his shorts, I lick my lips.

“I must confess,” I tell him, reaching out to stroke my fingertips along the bare skin above his waistband, “I can’t decide what I want to do first.” The button and zipper come undone with a few deft movements, and then I’m yanking his shorts and boxers down over his feet. His erection is rigid against his stomach, pulsing lightly as it begs for attention. “I would dearly love to suck on you.” Standing long enough to shed the rest of my clothes, I kneel back on the couch. His knees fall open to make room for me as he watches me with heavy-lidded eyes. “I also want to ride you.” Leaning forwards, I place my hands on either side of his head, supporting my upper body on straight arms while my lower half settles between his parted thighs. His hands lift to stroke my chest, my sides, any part he can reach.

Looking down between our heated bodies, I align our hips so we’re sliding against one another. I keep the pressure light, providing enough friction to drive us to the brink, but not past it. We both moan at the torturous ecstasy of the contact. “Or,” I gasp, my voice husky with restrained desire, “I could sink into that tight hole of yours.” His whimper almost does me in and I buck against him. “I could fuck you until you cover me in your come.”

“Do it,” he cries. His fingernails rake across my back as he tries desperately to pull me closer. “Do anything. I don’t care. I want it all.”

My arms buckle and I lower my weight on top of him. Our mouths meet in a bruising kiss as I reach between us, taking hold of our dicks in a mess of pre-come and sweat. “This first.” For so long all I’ve wanted is to lose myself in his touch again, just like this.

“So hot. Love you so much.” I breathe the words into his mouth, my gaze locked on his as we both rut into the heat of my hand. “Come with me.”

His breath hitches and a whine escapes his throat as his entire body goes rigid. And then he’s coming with rough, jerky motions. His release spills between us, easing the way for my own impending release.

When my orgasm hits, I give myself over to it. To him. Completely.

From this moment on, I am his.

\* \* \*

I have no idea when the movie ended, but by the time my brain comes back online, the TV screen has returned to the promo photo. Reaching out, I grab the remote from the coffee table

and switch it off. Darkness covers us, relieved only by the faint moonlight coming through the windows. It's enough for me to see Cal open his eyes.

My lips twitch upward as I look down at him, but the knot in my stomach has yet to ease. His change of heart happened so fast. It feels too good to be true. "Cal," I whisper, brushing my lips over his. I want to ask the question, put voice to my fears, but it sticks in my throat.

"Johnny." He lifts his head to press kisses against my jaw. His hands stroke the length of my body and I'm already getting hard once more at the feel of him stirring beneath me.

He captures my mouth in a deeper kiss, but my head is noisy and my heart unsure. With a reluctant sound, I force myself to pull away.

"What's wrong?" Calum asks, running his fingertips over my furrowed brow.

"I need to know this is real, that we're together now." The words are harsh, urgent, in the darkness. "Tell me I don't have to let you go."

He relaxes with a sigh and cups my face in his hands, forcing me to meet his gaze. "If either one of us was capable of letting go, we would have done it already." His lips curve, but the slight smile doesn't reach his eyes. "We always end up right back here."

"Here is where I want to be," I insist, my hands tightening around him.

"I want to be with you, too." His nod is solemn, but sure. "For as long as you'll have me."

We stare into each other's eyes as the decision settles into place between us. This step we're taking... it is real. It's momentous. And it feels more right to me than anything I've done since that morning I woke up alone in my bed.

The reasons we had for staying apart are still valid. We'll have to face them, eventually. But not tonight.

With a final, hard kiss, I start to sit up between his legs. Our stomachs peel apart in a sticky mess and we both laugh softly. Grabbing my discarded t-shirt, I make quick work of cleaning us up before urging Calum back into my lap. "Hold on to me."

He wraps his arms and legs tight. "I promise, no letting go this time."

A wide smile covers my face as I lever myself up off the couch. Damn, he's heavy, weighing about the same as me. But I'm so high on having him in my arms, I barely notice.

When we reach the bedroom, I kneel up onto the mattress and lower him to the bed, following him down until we're tangled together once more.

We explore each other at a leisurely pace. I spend time working him to the back of my throat, moaning at the heavy weight of him on my tongue and the combined taste of our earlier release. When he starts to keen, I pull off. He sits up, pushing me onto my back so he can return the favour. It becomes a game of sorts, the way we take turns bringing each other

to the threshold, only to back off at the last moment.

Finally, when I can't take anymore, I wrench the drawer of my bedside table open. A bottle of lube lands on the bed before I go back for a condom. Holding the foil packet between two fingers, I look at Calum. "I was tested three months after Ellie and I split. You're the only other person I've been with. Hell, you're the only other person I've kissed," I add with a quiet laugh." Swallowing, I force the rest out. "I understand if you've been with someone... or someones. We were apart a long time. You owed me nothing."

I mean every word. Until tonight, he was a single man with the right to fuck whomever he pleased. That doesn't stop jealousy from searing my veins at the thought of another man touching him, and when he reaches out to take the condom my heart sinks.

"There was no one for some time before my last test," he tells me. "Then... after..." He tosses the packet back into the drawer and my breath hitches. "You still don't get it, do you? When I laid eyes on you that night, it was like other men ceased to exist. I haven't even looked at anyone else."

A laugh falls out of me as I return to his arms, rolling us until he's lying on top of me. "It was the same for me. You're the only man—the only person—I want."

He lowers his head to take my lips in a lingering kiss. "Only you."

Smiling, I arch up into him. "Only you."

When I push into his body a few minutes later, when I feel his heat enveloping and welcoming me, everything else falls away. There is only Calum. Me. Us.

\* \* \*

"I don't know how long we'll need to keep this a secret."

We're side by side beneath the top sheet, legs tangled, faces inches apart on our respective pillows. I lift the hands we have clasped between us and place a firm kiss on Calum's knuckles. "As long as it takes. We can't do anything that will put your job at risk."

He nods.

"Besides, Ned will kill me if I get you fired."

Laughter bursts out of him. "It's entirely possible. Also, I kind of like bossing you around."

"I like it, too."

There's a comfortable pause as we lay in the darkness, wrapped in each other's presence.

"I'll have to tell Hannah."

I snort a laugh. “Hannah already knows.”

“That we’re official,” he clarifies.

“She’ll be happy for us?”

He grimaces. “Disturbingly happy.” Turning my hand over, he traces his fingertips along the lines of my palm. The light tickle sends tiny sparks of pleasure skittering up my forearm.

“Your parents?” he asks.

My stomach swoops and I bite down on my bottom lip. I hadn’t even thought of them yet. This is all happening so fast. A couple of hours ago I planned never to tell them anything and now... “I think maybe I should hold off telling them.” My throat constricts as I say the words. Tendrils of shame weave their way into every limb. I want to tell everyone else. I want to scream my love for this man to all who will listen. But when it comes to my parents... “I don’t know how they’ll react, what will change.”

How will they look at me when they find out the truth of who I really am? When they realise how poorly the son they’re stuck with stacks up against the miracle child they imagined me to be.

“It’s okay if you’re not ready,” Calum says quietly, clutching my hand tighter. “I don’t want to come between you and your parents. Not ever.”

“I will tell them,” I assure him. “When we go public?”

He nods. “Wait until then.”

“Okay.” The relief of having a reprieve only makes the shame burn hotter and I latch on to a change of topic. “That leaves the band. I don’t know if any of them suspect. No one has said anything.”

“Toni suspects.” He reminds me about the iced tea incident.

“Holy crap.” Groaning, I cover my face with my free hand. “I was so convinced we were flying under the radar.”

“Not so much,” he says with a chuckle. “I didn’t confirm, of course. He swore he wouldn’t say anything.”

I sigh. This is more complicated than I thought it would be.

“Let’s wait with them, too,” he says after a while.

“Why?”

Rolling onto his back, he stares up at the darkened ceiling. “Because, despite everything, this is still new. What if it doesn’t work out? Now we’ve given in, you might realise you’re not as into me as you thought.”

I frown. “That’s not going to happen.”

“It could.”

“It won’t.” Lifting up on one elbow, I move closer, until I’m flush against his side. “Cal, babe, I know myself. I know the way my heart works and it belongs to you now. If this is to end, it won’t be me who walks away.”

He smiles at me, nods at my words, but there’s no hiding the doubt in his eyes. I’m not surprised. Why would he trust anyone to stay after what his parents did? I don’t bother belabouring the point. It would make no difference. The proof of my words will have to come with time. And time is what I plan to give.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

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### CALUM

It's almost ten at night on the first day of the Autumn Skies Music Festival and my workday is officially done. The last three bands on the schedule tonight are with other management companies. Which means after twelve hours being run off our feet, the staff of Rush are now free to enjoy what remains of the evening. Exhaustion has me ready to drop, but I'm still looking forward to catching up with Johnny and the rest of the band for a couple of hours before heading back to the house I rented us for the weekend.

The four bedrooms of the holiday home are a comfortable fit for the band, including Ned and Toni, Gavin and Charmaine, and Oz and Hannah. As the only two 'single' people, Johnny and I graciously offered to share the last bedroom, with its twin singles. No one questioned the arrangement, although I can easily imagine Toni chortling quietly to himself when he found out.

On my way out of the backstage area, I pass Arthur who is chatting amiably with Ned's ex-manager and ex-boyfriend, Zac Powell. The hairs on the back of my neck bristle with distaste. Being in the same vicinity as Zac at an event of this size is inevitable, given the number of artists he represents. Socialising with the man backstage, on the other hand, is a choice. One Arthur seems happy to make.

I'll agree networking is important, but there's something to be said for the quality of the company one keeps. Zac may have the power to shave years off my career trajectory with a single recommendation, but I'd rather put the time and effort in twice over than have my name associated with his. As long as he stays away from Ned, I intend to stay away from him.

Still, as I make my way to the VIP tent, a vague sense of unease creeps around the edges of my conscience. How can I judge Zac for sleeping with his clients when I'm doing exactly the same thing? I can claim my case is different until all the breath is gone from my body. The fact is the business relationship between me and Johnny will always have the potential for abuse. I'm confident my personal ethics will keep me focused on the band's best interests

instead of my own. But if the truth gets out, no one else will see it that way. Arthur will be the first to rake me over the proverbial coals, no matter his own professional shortcomings.

I lift my lanyard so security can inspect my ID before stepping inside the barriers of the VIP section, my brain crowded with all the work still needing to be done. The Starling siblings will play their set on a side stage early tomorrow afternoon. Fifth Circle will perform in the amphitheatre a couple of hours later. Those two acts are my main focus. I've arranged to have Hannah watching from the wings with me when Oz is onstage, as part of her twentieth birthday present. Otherwise, there are also about a dozen other Rush artists I need to be on hand for. Then, in the next few weeks, I'll be finalising the preparations for Fifth Circle's national tour. The release of their debut album won them glowing reviews, an abundance of airtime, and an exploding fan base. Ticket sales have been high enough I've added a couple of extra shows to the tour. We could have kept going, but there's a limit to how long the band wants to be on the road.

Things are slowly moving forwards, though. Ned and Gavin both resigned from their day jobs recently, to focus full-time on the band. Oz is reluctant to take that last leap of faith, but is able to work remotely, which helps. Johnny is the only one who's still working full-time, tied to a specific schedule and location. I don't know when, or even if, that will change. He may never be ready to step so far out of line with his parents.

Despite the limitations it puts on my vision for the band's future, and the friction it's causing at Rush, I never want to push him to do something he's not ready for. I work for the band, not the other way around.

I spot Ned first and weave through the crowd to get closer. He's deep in conversation with a man with long, dark hair. The man turns his head enough for me to see his profile and my eyes go wide. Ned is talking to Dante Sinclair.

Famous from the time he was in his mid-teens for both his songwriting and his soulful voice, Dante made huge waves in the rock scene a few years ago when he released a truly stunning album, which outed the 'straight' rock star as a bisexual man. The backlash from sections of his fan base was fierce. But it was the outpourings of love and support from the majority that truly astounded. If there was one person in this entire country I would kill to have Ned be seen with, it's Dante.

I attempt to keep some kind of restraint on my enthusiasm as I make my way over to them. When Ned catches sight of me, he waves me closer. "Speak of the devil," Ned says, when I reach his side. "Dante, I'd like you to meet Calum Ellis, the man who dragged us out of pub back rooms and into the spotlight."

Dante offers me his hand with a warm smile. “Good to meet you, Calum.”

“Likewise, Mr Sinclair,” I say as we shake.

Not letting go of my hand, he focuses his dark eyes on me. “Please, call me Dante.”

My heart gives an almighty kick inside my chest, and I clear my throat as I nod. “Dante it is.”

His smile widens as he releases my hand and holy shit, I think Ned has met his match when it comes to seducing anyone with a heartbeat.

Dante spends the next few minutes talking about how impressed he is with Fifth Circle’s album while Ned blushes profusely. My brain latches on to all the varied possibilities that exist for the two talented men. I have to remind myself a first meeting is not an offer of collaboration any more than a first date is a marriage proposal. Still, a manager can dream.

A laughing Toni soon appears with Dante’s husband, Sean, at his side. They’re returning from the bar if the overflowing plastic cups they’re holding are any indication. While Sean and I share a quick introduction, Ned hugs Toni against his side. The shorter man looks up to meet his gaze. “All good?” he murmurs.

Ned gives him a nod. “Better now you’re back.”

The two couples return to their easy conversation, but my own gaze can’t help but linger on Ned and Toni. The arm Ned has clamped around Toni’s waist, the subtle way Toni scans the crowd, as if standing guard. They have each other’s back, no matter what. Even as their professional lives have grown and evolved this past year, they’ve always seemed so fundamentally necessary to each other.

I’ve never been truly necessary to anyone, except Hannah. She didn’t get a choice. We’re the only family we have. I couldn’t imagine anyone *choosing* me like that. Even now Johnny and I are together, I can’t help but feel what we have will ultimately prove temporary. Not because I don’t believe him when he says he loves me, but because today’s love could just as easily be tomorrow’s burden. Lifelong love requires a level of commitment I would never assume to inspire. Even if someone did choose me as their life partner, I wouldn’t trust it. I’m not sure I have that kind of trust in me anymore.

“How did you end up managing Fifth Circle?” Dante’s question snaps me back to the present.

*The lead guitarist locked eyes with me, and I fell into the awkwardness of his charm.*

“I saw them perform here last year and hounded them until they gave in.”

Ned barks out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s pretty much how it happened.”

Now I have their attention, I ask if I can take a picture of the four of them for Fifth

Circle's social media. Dante and Sean readily agree, and the four men line up together. Ned and Dante are in the middle, with Toni and Sean on the outside. They all wrap arms around each other, looking happy and relaxed.

I quickly snap a half dozen shots and thank them before stepping to the side to pick the best photo to upload. Going to the caption, I add *Loud and Proud. The queer men of Australian Rock!* I tag Dante's account and then include every relevant hashtag I can think of before posting the photo. Within seconds, there's a like from Dante's account. I glance up to see Sean holding a phone and grinning at me. He comes over to show me he's reposted the photo to Dante's account. With millions of followers, that one post has the potential to bring hordes of Dante Sinclair fans to Fifth Circle's account—and their album.

"You are a legend," I tell Sean. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"I'm a photographer. Trust me, I know the power of a good shot," he says, turning to hand the phone back to his husband. "Besides, Dante wouldn't shut up about that album. Fifth Circle is a great band. They deserve every success."

"I couldn't agree more." I'm still smiling when something causes my gaze to slide to the right and I see him. Johnny. Watching me.

A keen sense of *déjà vu* washes over me. This is where it happened, one year ago, almost to the day. I'd been talking to Arthur that night, discussing the next day's schedule, when the prickling sensation at the base of my neck told me I was being watched. My gaze had shifted, finding Johnny's for the first time. It wasn't every day the dark and brooding eyes of a gorgeous man locked on me with such intensity. Surprise had stolen the words out of my mouth mid-sentence. A flush of warmth crept up my neck and butterflies took flight in my belly. The memory of all I felt in that singular moment filters into the deeper, more complex, and occasionally breathtaking love I feel now.

With a few quiet words, I excuse myself from the ongoing conversation and walk towards him. He stays where he is, his gaze unwavering as I approach. I stop as close to his personal space as I should get in an environment teeming with industry eyes. I hate not being able to touch him.

"If I walk out of here," I say quietly, "will you follow me?"

A slow, sensual smile curves his mouth. "I am your stalker," he replies, taking a step too close. Even though I know I shouldn't, even though it's dangerous, I let him. "To the ends of the earth, Calum. I will hunt you down if I have to."

Shivers race along my spine at his possessive tone. "Promise?"

He nods, before tilting his head. "If I fall too far behind, will you wait for me?"

Waiting assumes I trust him to show up. I don't know how to do that, but I can try. "I will wait for you."

His smile grows as he drops his gaze to my mouth. I lick my lips and he growls, one hand lifting to my chin. "Take me back to the house. I need to be kissing you."

Yeah, we need to get out of here before we're spotted by the wrong person. If my paranoia was bad last year, it's worse now that I'm guilty.

I move to his side, my shoulder brushing against his. "I'll meet you at the bus stop outside the entrance." Thankfully, the house is only a few minutes' walk from where we get off at the other end. I turn my head so I can speak directly into his ear. "The second we hit the bedroom your arse is mine."

"Yes," Johnny growls, his hand finding mine at his side.

"Give me a head start," I tell him before walking away. My heart pounds with anticipation as I stride through the crowd. If this is wrong, so be it. I no longer care.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

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### JOHNNY

The next morning, I wake earlier than expected. I'm toasty warm beneath a thick blanket and, when I stretch, the subtle soreness from last night's lovemaking brings a smile to my face. Calum is sound asleep in his single bed on the other side of the room, a pillow tucked against his chest. We tried sleeping in the one bed, but it proved less than comfortable and there was no way we could move the furniture to push the two beds together without announcing our relationship to everyone in the house.

If he were beside me, I'd be content to snuggle in and enjoy his presence and warmth. As it is, I don't want to wake him any earlier than necessary. Yesterday was a huge day for him and today will be no different.

Moving carefully, I dress in a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt before grabbing my guitar, small practice amp and earbuds. The spacious living area is blessedly empty at this early hour. Not surprising considering we heard the others coming back from the festival at around one in the morning and it's not yet six.

I make a quick cup of tea and set myself up on the couch, perching on the edge of the cushion with the tiny amp on the floor at my feet and my earbuds in place. I start with some basic warm-up exercises, keeping my fingers light on the strings.

I'm still running through my scales when Calum appears around the end of the large L-shaped couch. A cloud of sleepiness clings to his messy hair and rumpled clothes, and my fingers pause long enough to tug out my right earbud. "Good morning," I say, smiling up at him.

Leaning over, he presses a kiss to the side of my neck. "Morning." He gestures to the now cold cup of half-drunk tea on the coffee table. "You want a fresh cuppa?"

"That would be great. Thanks." I finish the last of my scales and am ready to move on to chord progressions, but my fingers hesitate over the strings. Calum glances up as he moves around the kitchen. "Don't stop on my account."

"Chord progressions aren't exactly fun to listen to." I move to put the guitar down. "I can

do them later.”

He frowns as he pours freshly boiled water into mugs. “Everyone will be up later. Besides, you have earbuds plugged in.”

“Yeah, but, even with them in you can still hear me.” The subtle vibrations of the strings themselves are soft enough not to wake the six other adults still sleeping in the surrounding bedrooms, but they’re not silent.

Calum pauses in the act of jiggling teabags to look at me. “What’s this about?”

I clear my throat, focusing on my still fingers. “Nothing. It’s just... I know hearing the same drills over and over again can be... tiresome.” Ellie had enjoyed listening to me practise when we were younger, but as the years progressed it started to get on her nerves. Eventually, I took to shutting myself up in our spare bedroom so she wouldn’t be forced to listen. It meant yet another hour we spent apart every day, but I’m a guitarist. Daily practice is part of the deal. After we split and I lived alone for the first time in my life, I discovered how freeing it is to play whenever I want. I still keep the amp volume low at home, so I don’t disturb the neighbours, but I’ve grown used to that freedom. The thought of going back to isolating myself for an hour every day is unpleasant. But I’ll do it if I have to. These are the compromises we make for the people we love.

“It’s not tiresome to me.” I look up at the roughness in Calum’s tone. His mouth is pressed into a hard line. Dropping the tea bags into the bin he brings the mugs over to the coffee table. “I find it soothing, actually.” He sits beside me on the couch, tucking his legs up under him. “I remember when Hannah was first learning to play. She would practise for hours on end, well into the night. I would leave my door open so I could fall asleep to the sound of her murdering her transitions.” The tender smile he wears is pure affection and the sight makes my heart clench. “It reminded me she was still with me. She was okay.” His gaze shifts to mine. “I get how hearing the same old scales and exercises could annoy *some people*,” the gentle emphasis tells me he knows who we’re talking about here, “but the sound of them makes me feel... safe, I guess. Does that make sense?”

I nod, my throat thick with emotion as I reach out to squeeze his hand.

“Besides,” he adds, squeezing back. “I know you’re happiest when you’re playing, and I enjoy hearing your happiness.” Whatever look of bafflement he sees on my face makes him chuckle. “Don’t be so surprised. I became a manager for a reason.”

My mouth is on his in the instant he finishes his sentence. I can’t help it. “You,” I whisper against his lips between kisses, “are amazing.” My free hand wraps around the back of his neck. “I don’t deserve you.”

He scoffs, pulling back to stare into my eyes, his hands cupping my face. “Forget that bullshit. It’s not about deserving or being good enough. On the night we met, there was more than one reason I hoped you weren’t all this,” his gesture encompasses the length of me, “and a musician, too.” A smile appears at the corners of his mouth. “Who you are is my kryptonite, Johnny. I’m helpless against you. You get that, right?”

“I’m starting to,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to his as I struggle to contain the fullness in my heart. “I didn’t know it could be like this. The way you see me.” As not lacking, not a disappointment, not some man-child who refuses to grow up. I’m just Johnny. “I don’t want to be your kryptonite, though,” I say, curling up closer to him. “I want to make you stronger, the way you do for me.”

His smile grows. “You do. Having you in my life, in all the ways, has been a game-changer. We’re growing together. Yeah?”

I take a deep breath, feeling contentment settle deep into my bones. “Together.”

Our lips meet and I make a silent wish for us to always be like this. Moving forwards together.

“Oh, bugger,” says a voice from the other side of the room.

\* \* \*

We jerk apart to see Gavin standing in the doorway of his bedroom, Charmaine peeking out from behind him, her eyes wide with surprise.

“We didn’t mean to interrupt.” His eyebrows are so high on his forehead, they’re about ready to disappear.

Calum springs up from the couch like he’s been electrocuted. “We were... umm.”

“Checking each other’s tonsils?” Gavin suggests.

My eyes roll as I scoff. We’d barely even managed to get as far as opening our mouths.

Charmaine pushes past him. “Are you two a thing?”

I look at Calum. He looks at me. His mouth works as if searching for the right words before he sighs and gives me a shrug. “I guess this is as good a time as any?”

“It’s the perfect time.” Turning back to Gavin and Charmaine, I grin. “Yes, we’re very much together.”

“Oh my god, this is perfect,” Charmaine squeals before rushing over to us for hugs. “I’m so happy for you both.”

“When did this happen?” Gavin asks, moving into the kitchen. “And why the hell didn’t

we know about it?”

Calum looks to me, allowing me to decide how much we tell everyone.

I open my mouth to reply, but more doors start to open. “Everything all right?” Ned asks as he joins us. “We heard a scream.”

“Sorry.” Charmaine winces, waving a hand in the air. “That was me.”

Toni wanders out, still pulling on his shirt. “Someone better be dying out here.”

Gavin snorts a laugh as he fills the kettle at the sink. “Only if you include the little death.”

Toni’s dimples leap onto his face. “Who’s been fucking on the couch?”

“No one,” I insist, only to be overridden by Charmaine’s declaration of, “It was more of a coitus interruptus.”

“There was no interruptus of anything,” Calum cries, his face turning as red as his hair. “We were kissing. That’s all.”

“Who’s kissing who?” Hannah appears behind the couch, hair sticking up every which way. Oz is a step behind her. His arms are crossed, hands tucked into his armpits.

Gavin points a teaspoon in Hannah’s direction. “You knew about this, didn’t you?”

Hannah narrows her eyes at him. “Knew about what?”

“Your brother and Johnny.”

A tiny smile appears as she drops onto an arm of the couch. “He’s my brother. Of course, I knew.”

My gaze turns to Oz, and the widening of his eyes as he looks around tells me he’s become the centre of everyone’s attention. “She’s my girlfriend. I couldn’t say anything.”

“Do we get to hear how all this played out now?” Ned asks.

I sneak a glance at my oldest friend. He’s the one I’ve been most concerned about telling, given his history. But Ned doesn’t look upset as he sits on the floor with Toni cross-legged on the couch behind him, arms looped loosely around his neck.

“Okay, here we go,” I begin, hoping to keep this short and, mostly, wholesome. “Calum and I met the first night of last year’s festival. We... took a liking to each other.”

Hannah giggles. “That’s one way of putting it.”

Calum continues, “We didn’t see each other again until the night I approached you all in the car park.”

“Ambushed.” Ned half-covers the word with a cough.

“Approached,” Cal insists.

“Whatever,” I say, hoping to speed the story along. “Everything stopped the moment we signed the contract with Rush.”

“Fraternising with clients is not allowed or appropriate,” Calum says, his gaze drifting to Ned. “I never intended to break that rule. I swear, but...” He turns to me and the look in his eyes makes my heart melt.

“But he’s helpless against me,” I say, grinning wide.

The room erupts with a chorus of cheers, clapping and laughter.

“You were together before the album was released, though,” Toni yells over the noise. He points a finger at Calum. “You were ready to bust a nut watching Johnny drink that iced tea.”

I shake my head. “Nope. We were still holding out.”

“Oh, New Year’s Eve,” Charmaine cries. “I saw you getting cosy out by the fire.”

We both shake our heads.

“Then when?” Gavin asks, coming over with steaming cups of coffee for him and Charmaine.

“We’ve officially been together for...” I drag the moment out, because the shit show I was expecting has turned out to be kind of fun, “about a month.”

Everyone stares at us with varying degrees of disbelief. Ned is the first to break the silence. “You are shitting me. A month?” He shakes his head. “All this time I thought you were just really good at keeping it on the down low.”

“Wait, what?” Toni grips onto Ned’s hair, tugging his head back. “How long have you known?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I had an inkling before we signed the contract. There was definitely something going on, but it took me a while to cotton on to what.”

Toni gasps in shock. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ned lifts an eyebrow at him. “Why didn’t you tell me about this iced tea incident?”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” he grumps, releasing Ned’s hair.

“Exactly.” Ned smiles, reaching up to wrap a hand around the back of Toni’s neck and draw him down for a kiss.

“How is it I’m the only one who didn’t notice anything?” Gavin asks with a frown.

Charmaine runs a comforting hand up and down his back. “You were busy being attentive to my needs,” she assures him. “It’s a good thing.”

Grinning, he plants a firm kiss on her lips. “Too bloody right.”

“Look, guys,” I say, drawing everyone’s attention back my way. “I’m sorry we’ve been hiding this from you all. We really did believe it was over between us. We tried so hard but,” I can’t help the smile taking over my face, “I love this man too much to be apart.”

Cal returns my smile. “I love you, too.”

I nod, taking a deep breath before I go on. “But the reality is, if Rush finds out about us, Calum could lose his job. So, at least for now, we’d appreciate it if you all keep this between us.”

Everyone murmurs their agreement.

“Now that’s settled,” Hannah says, dragging herself upright. “I’m going to steal the first shower.” She heads for her bedroom, Oz trailing behind her.

Toni calls after them, “Save water, shower with a friend.”

Calum groans his dismay. “That’s my little sister.”

“I’m twenty, Cal,” Hannah calls out. “Not so little anymore.”

The group breaks up soon after as people head either back to their bedrooms or into the kitchen to get breakfast. Ned and I both remain seated. Me on the couch, him on the floor. Calum takes note before murmuring, “I’m going to get ready. I have to head off soon.” I nod and he leans over to give me a quick kiss before leaving the room.

I turn my attention to Ned, who’s watching me in silence. My stomach flutters once more, despite how chill he’s been so far.

Clearing my throat, I get to spitting it out. “I know I’ve been a shit friend—”

“Don’t.” He shakes his head. “I understand why you didn’t tell me. Last year, I can’t say I wouldn’t have freaked out if I’d known how deep this thing between you and Calum went. I was still dealing with my own shit back then.” He lifts his gaze, and I see the faint echo of a pain he’s finally broken free of... with Toni’s support. “But I’ve gotten to know Calum pretty well since then. He works hard and he takes care with us. Do I wish you’d told me? Yes, of course. But I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is paying attention. I’ve seen you fucking drooling over him,” he adds, giving me a half grin. “I’m glad it’s working out for the two of you. You look good together.”

A giant smile pulls at my cheeks. “Thanks, man,” I say in a rough voice. “It means a lot.”

He rises onto his knees to come at me for a bone-crushing hug, complete with the usual kiss to my cheek. “You know I love the shit out of you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I love you, too.” It’s not something we’ve ever said out loud before, but it’s always been there. This man is the closest thing to a brother I will ever have. His approval is everything to me.

Letting go of me, he climbs onto the couch to curl up at my side. “Dude, you’re bi-fucking-sexual.”

Huffing out a laugh, I nod. “Yeah, I am.”

“How long have you known?”

I run a hand over my face, my cheeks warming. “Do you remember the guy I was friends with back in my first year at uni? I brought him to your sixteenth and you asked if he could be your birthday present.”

“Oh, hell yes,” he drawls. “That boy was so hot.”

“Yeah,” I say with a laugh. “He was.”

The amusement on Ned’s face fades and his brow creases. “That’s a long time to be alone with that information.”

“Ellie knew,” I assure him. “I wasn’t completely alone. We made the decision together to...”

“Hide it,” he says, quietly.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal. I was in a het relationship. What would have been the point?” Life is easier when people believe you’re straight, there’s no denying it. “Mum and Dad would have flipped.” The flutter in my stomach becomes churning. “They’re *going to...* when I tell them.”

Ned has known me since we put together our first tragically woeful band back in high school. He spent enough time at my house to understand my reluctance. “That’ll be tough.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“We have your back. Yours and Calum’s.” His hand lands on my shoulder and I lift my gaze to his. “We’re family, mate. For life.”

I return his smile, but my eyes burn. For all I know, after I tell my parents the truth, the band may be the only family I have left.

## TWENTY-NINE

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### CALUM

I walk into the Rush offices on Wednesday morning, stopping when Genevieve's assistant calls my name. "The boss wants to see you in her office first thing."

Frowning, I pivot in her direction. "Any idea what it's about?"

"No clue," she replies, shaking her head. "But Arthur's in there and neither of them are smiling."

A wisp of trepidation curls its way through my belly as I follow the young woman to Genevieve's office door. The Rush team drove back from Byron Bay late Monday morning and then took Tuesday off to recover before returning to work this morning. To my knowledge, nothing dramatic has occurred in the meantime.

The assistant knocks lightly before opening the door to announce my presence. She gives me an encouraging smile as I pass her, before pulling the door closed behind me.

Genevieve is at her desk, her usual relaxed but alert demeanour intact. I glance at Arthur, who is standing near the large bank of windows to her left, his arms crossed and chest puffed out. The subtle curve of his mouth has dread seeping into my veins.

Dragging my gaze back to Genevieve, I step further into the room. "Good morning. You wanted to see me?"

"Good morning, Calum." Genevieve's plush swivel chair turns idly as she gestures to the two chairs in front of her desk. "Please, take a seat."

My heart is in my throat as I lower myself into one of the chairs, placing my bag on the floor at my side.

"How was the festival?" she asks.

"Fantastic," I assure her. "There were record crowds and all the performances went off without a hitch." Every artist in attendance this year brought their A-game, delighting the enthusiastic audience.

"Including Fifth Circle?"

"Yes," I say, smiling as I remember the thunderous applause following their final song.

“They were incredibly well received.”

“That’s good news,” she says. “I hear you also had success with a photo of Ned Corbyn with Dante Sinclair.”

I nod, my smile widening. “That was a fortuitous opportunity.” The photo I took of Ned and Dante with Toni and Sean went viral overnight. While I was busy getting caught with Johnny by the rest of the band, that post was receiving hundreds of thousands of likes and comments. A significant bump in Fifth Circle’s streaming numbers quickly followed. “With their national tour starting next month, the timing couldn’t have been better. What venues haven’t already sold out are now well on their way to doing so.”

“That’s excellent news.” The words would indicate pleasure, if it weren’t for the chill in her expression.

A long moment of silence draws out. I glance briefly at Arthur, who still has yet to say anything. “Is there something else I can help with?”

“One more thing,” she says lightly, as if her next words will be of little consequence. “Tell me about your relationship with Johnny Durant.”

My heart stutters, trips, before pounding in double time. Is that why I’m here? Have we been found out somehow? Did someone in the band say something? They swore they wouldn’t, but I know how little promises are worth in the face of changing priorities.

“What is this about?” My guilt leaks through in the roughness of my voice, I’m sure of it.

Genevieve turns to Arthur. “Please repeat to Calum what you told me.”

Arthur clears his throat, regarding me with hard eyes. “I happened to see you and Durant talking in the VIP tent on Saturday night. The two of you looked a mite too cosy, given your professional ties. You left; he followed directly behind. I became... concerned.”

I manage to suck in a controlled breath, clasping my hands in my lap to reduce their shaking. “That’s it? We stood too close to each other?” I ask, forcing an incredulity I don’t feel. “You do realise it was a crowded space.”

“I followed the two of you out to the bus stop, Calum.” His raised voice cuts me off mid-sentence. “You were all over him, in full public view.”

“That is a blatant lie.” I rake through my memories of standing at the brightly lit stop with Johnny, waiting for the next bus to arrive. We’d been so hot with anticipation of the night ahead. I’d kept my hands off him for the most part, but there had been contact. More than once. His shoulder brushing against my chest. The brief slide of my hand over his arse. We were restrained. No one else would have noticed us. Only the one man who watched us from afar, hoping to see something incriminating. I handed Arthur all the ammunition he needed

with my reckless behaviour. Now I'll have to pay the price.

I force my gaze to return to Genevieve. Her focus drills into me. "Are you, or are you not, in a sexual relationship with Johnny Durant?"

Everything inside me goes still, as if the parts of my body are shutting down, one at a time. There's no point in denying the truth, even if I could stomach the thought of lying to the woman who offered me a chance when I needed one. The truth was always going to catch up to me, and I've crossed enough lines without adding another to the list. All I can do now is face the consequences and hope like hell I don't lose everything.

Taking a deep breath, I meet Genevieve's gaze. "Yes. Johnny and I are in a relationship."

Her face twists with distaste. "Truly Calum, your first client?" With a deep sigh, she shakes her head. "I expected far better from you."

"I know how it looks." My voice is small as I sit there, back straight and hands clenched. "This certainly isn't how I envisaged the start of my career. I take my responsibility to my clients, and to Rush, seriously." I swallow past the lump in my throat, struggling to continue. "Johnny and I... in working so closely, came to feel strongly for each other. We fell in love." The words sound ridiculous. Hollow. An easily delivered excuse, impossible to disprove but fickle as the tides.

And yet, I feel the truth of those words resonate so deeply, in some unshakable part of me. It doesn't matter that Johnny is the worst possible person I could have chosen to fall in love with. My heart chose to love him anyway. "I promise you, my personal relationship with Johnny will not interfere with my management of the band as a whole."

"I know it won't," she says, gesturing to the man beside me. "I'll be handing management of Fifth Circle over to Arthur for the time being."

My heart screeches to a halt. I look at Arthur, who is no longer bothering to hide his pleasure. "That's not possible," I insist. "They asked to work with me—specifically. It's in their contract." Ned made sure of it and the rest of the band supported him.

"That was when they were new to the game and wary of having management at all," she says, unperturbed by the reminder. "I remember how hard you had to work to bring them on board. But thanks to the excellent job you've done getting them off the ground, they are experiencing their first true taste of success. I'm sure they'll be open to a switch by now. As long as they all agree, there won't be a problem." She lifts a perfectly arched eyebrow. "That's also in their contract."

I know she's right, but the band and I work so well together. I worked hard to earn their trust, and I have it now. They know I'm on their side. Surely I can't be so easily discarded.

“What if they don’t agree?”

She tilts her head, as if baffled by the very suggestion. “Do you honestly think adding that stipulation to their contract had anything to do with you—specifically?” she asks, throwing my own word back at me. “They simply wanted to keep a sense of control, Calum. Don’t go mistaking their nerves for loyalty to you. You’ll only embarrass yourself, not to mention be disappointed in the end.” She waves a hand, dismissing my point. “People are loyal to themselves. The sooner you learn that the better.”

I sit there, frozen, trying to force my lungs to breathe. That’s a lesson I have already learned. I’ve learned it in the harshest way possible. I just hoped it wouldn’t be true this time.

“You said Fifth Circle’s national tour begins next month?” Genevieve asks.

A stiff nod is the only answer I can manage.

She turns her attention to Arthur. “What are the chances of you making space in your schedule? It’s their first tour. I want someone keeping an eye on them.”

“I can go with them,” I jump in before he has a chance to speak. “They’re expecting me to be there.” It’s not just about logistics or administration. I need to make sure Ned stays grounded, that Oz gets time to himself, and Johnny... Johnny needs me.

Leaning forwards, I look directly into Genevieve’s eyes, allowing my shame to shine through. “I know I’ve let you down, and I’m sorry. If you give me a second chance, I promise it won’t happen again.”

Arthur makes a scoffing sound. “Until you work closely with another client and decide you’re in love with them, too?” He turns back to Genevieve. “Honestly, Genny, this man can’t be trusted to manage anyone, even if he was able to get the job done.”

My gaze narrows on him. “I was getting the job done in a way that would endure, perhaps for decades.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’ve allowed these men to lead you around by your dick, pardon the crudeness, Genny,” he adds, lowering himself into the chair beside me. “It’s time for a professional to take charge and put them through their paces. They should be hitting much higher targets by now.”

I open my mouth to argue the point, but Genevieve silences me with a raised hand. “What do you have in mind?”

Arthur settles in, manspreading so hard I have to shift in my seat to avoid contact. “Step one will be to capitalise on the attention Dante Sinclair has brought to Fifth Circle. They already have a strong fan base in the queer community, given their front man is openly gay. Having Durant come out as well will strengthen those ties.”

“No.” The forcefulness of the single word has them both turning to look at me. “Johnny isn’t ready to come out.” The fans aren’t a problem, but his parents are. He’s talked about telling them, several times now, but there’s no missing the anxiety that crowds him at the thought. He needs time to prepare for the possible fall out. I won’t allow him to be rushed through the process for the sake of higher profits.

“Is that so,” Arthur drawls. “Like he’s *not ready* to quit whatever day job he’s still playing at?”

“Correct,” I insist. “At this stage, he has no plans to stop being a pharmacist. There is no reason why he can’t do both.”

“Except this isn’t amateur hour,” Arthur says with a laugh. “This is a business. If Durant isn’t willing to give blood, sweat and a steady supply of tears to his music, he doesn’t deserve to be here.”

This is exactly the kind of messed up thinking I’m trying to avoid. “If we’re taking care of our artists properly, they shouldn’t have to bleed to thrive.”

He looks at me like I’m delusional. “That, right there, is why you’ll never manage the same level of success I have,” he gloats. “My artists bleed on command. Anything less is a waste of my time.”

“You forget we work for the artists in our care, not the other way around.”

“Actually, my dears, you both work for me.” The deceptively quiet tone has my gaze snapping back in Genevieve’s direction. She’s still relaxed in her plush chair, but the subtle smile curving her lips is now razor sharp. “If you wish to continue working for me, you’ll tuck your dicks away and do as you’re told. Do I make myself clear?”

Arthur clears his throat, straightening in his chair as he lets out a quiet chuckle. “I beg your pardon, Genny. Please, continue.” The asshole somehow manages to pull off a blend of ingratiation and condescension that makes me want to vomit.

When she speaks again, Genevieve directs her gaze at Arthur. “Don’t apply any additional pressure regarding the job situation until after they complete their second album. It won’t be an issue until preparations for their next tour begin. There’s no need to risk harming the goose before it delivers another golden egg,” she says, as if she’s not discussing a man’s life. “However, I do agree breaking the news of Durant being gay could have a positive impact.”

“Johnny isn’t gay,” I say through gritted teeth, trying not to let my anger get the better of me. “He’s bisexual.”

She ponders the information for a moment. “Close enough for our purposes.”

I shake my head. “He’s not some weak-willed puppet. He won’t give permission to release

such personal information before he's ready."

"Who needs permission?" Arthur asks, snorting a laugh. "These things have a way of coming out."

My jaw drops and I swing my gaze back to the woman in charge. "You can't be serious."

Sitting up straighter, Genevieve steepled her hands on the desk in front of her. "Calum, dear, you say Johnny Durant is in love with you. Correct?"

Suspicious of the change in topic, I nod. "Yes."

"Well then, surely he intends to share his love with the world eventually." Her smile is all warmth and sunshine this time. "All I'm suggesting is you nudge him in the right direction."

"Me?" My eyebrows lift. "You want me to convince him?"

"As you say, it's better than having the news come out through any of the underhanded tactics Arthur might choose to employ. This way you and Johnny will be able to control the narrative." When I don't answer immediately, she adds, "Rush would be there to support your budding romance. You should be pleased."

My stomach pitches as her plan tightens, like a noose, around my neck. "That's not support, it's manipulation."

"A rose by any other name." She tilts her head to one side. "You do want to keep working here, don't you? You want to keep managing Fifth Circle?" Arthur starts to object but another lift of her hand renders him silent.

"Let me put it to you this way, Calum," she says in a pleasant tone. "I want Fifth Circle to be the next big thing in Australian Rock. You can help make that happen. Now, I'm willing to overlook your indiscretion, and allow you to be a part of your boyfriend's rise to fame. But I need to know, when everything else is stripped away, your loyalty lies with me."

My loyalty lies with Hannah. It always has.

Which means doing whatever I have to in order to keep this job.

Except...

Hannah's not a little girl anymore, as she keeps reminding me. She's an adult now. We're a team.

In those first years after our parents left, all I could think about was making sure Hannah's physical needs were met. I kept her housed, fed, and educated. I took any job I could to make that happen. But when I chose this job, when I worked so hard to learn all I could and get the promotion and start building my career, it wasn't about meeting those basic needs anymore. I wanted to make sure Hannah would have a safe place to grow as an artist, if she ever found it in herself to take that step.

That's the kind of manager I've spent the last few years aspiring to be. I want the artists in my care to know I will protect them, that I'll support their choices, and I'll never, ever abandon them.

To do what Genevieve is asking of me wouldn't just be a betrayal of Johnny's trust. It would betray every promise I ever made to myself about the kind of manager—the kind of man—I want to be.

If I was to commit such a sin in Hannah's name... she would never forgive me.

Taking a deep breath, I pick up my bag from beside the chair and rise to stand.

Genevieve also rises, with a triumphant smile. "We have a deal?"

I look down at the hand she's offering across the desk, then back up to her face. "No. There's no deal," I say, shaking my head. "I won't work against my client's best interests. Not even for you."

Her mouth tightens in displeasure as she narrows her gaze at me. "It's a pity," she says, stepping out from behind her desk. "You were so desperately keen when you arrived here, I'd hoped to make a great manager out of you. Alas, not everyone has the stomach for this business." She opens the door and addresses her assistant. "Please have security escort Mr Ellis out. He no longer works here." She turns her head to look back at me, her disappointment clear. "If you'll excuse us, Calum. Arthur and I have work to do."

## THIRTY

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### JOHNNY

“A little more to the left,” Mum says, eyeballing the centre of the bookcase she and Dad had delivered earlier today. “That’s it. Right there.” Smiling happily, she takes a step back to admire the new piece of furniture. “Perfect.”

Dad and I release our hold on either end of the bookcase. He lowers himself into a nearby armchair with a dramatic groan. “It better be perfect, because I’m not moving it again,” he grumbles, rubbing his lower back.

Laughing softly, I begin cleaning up the cardboard and foam packaging that protected the wood during transport. When my parents called earlier in the day to see if I could pop over after work and help them unpack and move their new purchase, I’d been happy to oblige. Lately, I haven’t spoken to them as often as I usually do. Between keeping up my hours at the pharmacy, rehearsing, going to the festival, and spending time with Cal, I’ve barely had a minute to breathe. Somehow, I’ve still managed to find time to feel guilty about neglecting them.

“I’m making a pork roast for dinner,” Mum tells me. “Stay and eat with us.”

“Sounds great,” I reply. “Let me finish up here and then I’ll come lend a hand.”

Beaming, she nods before disappearing into the kitchen. Dad pushes himself up from his chair and we finish cleaning up in what he would probably deem a companionable silence. For me, the room is deafeningly loud. Clamouring with all the secrets I’ve yet to reveal.

By the time we sit down to eat I’m vaguely queasy and my skin feels tight. Despite our proximity at the dining table, the distance between myself and my parents has never felt greater. How do I talk to them when I’m being dishonest about so much of my life? It’s always been hard for them to understand me, I know that. But somewhere along the way, it seems I stopped giving them the chance to try.

“I was down in Byron Bay for the Autumn Skies Festival on the weekend,” I begin. “We played the amphitheatre this year.”

They look at each other before Dad asks, “How was it?”

I smile. “It was fantastic. Perfect weather. A huge crowd. We had a great time.” Scooping up a forkful of peas, I force myself to chew and swallow. “Ned met Dante Sinclair while we were there. Turns out he’s a fan.”

Mum’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “A fan of *your* band?” At my nod, she gives a quiet gasp. “Goodness. That’s something.” My parents aren’t fans of Dante’s music, of course, but even they can’t deny the legitimacy of his career. The man is a household name around the world. I’m not above namedropping if it will help them understand how far Fifth Circle has come.

“Our tour is coming up soon. We’ll be playing shows all around the country. Most of those shows are already sold out.” They both stare at me, hands frozen on their cutlery. I can’t blame them for being shocked. In the past, I’ve always glossed over my work with the band. But it’s time I stop minimising my accomplishments for the sake of keeping the peace. I can’t hide forever. “It will be a lot of hard work, but I’m looking forward to it.”

Dad’s frown deepens the lines on his forehead. “Jeff doesn’t have a problem with you taking so much time off work?”

“It’s my annual leave,” I say before taking a sip of water. “How I use it is up to me.” In truth, my boss was excited to hear all about the tour. It seems he’s become a fan of the band as well.

“Then you’ll be back for good, right?” Mum asks with a hopeful smile. “You’ll have had your fun, and you’ll be ready to concentrate on your real career.”

*This is my real career.* The words appear in my head unbidden. They lock into place. Like a switch in my brain has finally been flipped to the correct setting and all at once, everything inside me feels... aligned. Because Cal has been right all along. Music isn’t a hobby for me. It’s where I belong. It’s my place in the world. Pharmacology is the distraction.

“You have such a bright future ahead of you, John,” my mother continues, unaware of the realisation that’s rendered me speechless. “You could make a real difference to the world, if only you’d let go of all the nonsense holding you back.” She reaches out, placing her hand over mine with a gentle squeeze. “It’s time for you to stop leading this double life and get serious about what you want for your future.”

A bittersweet smile tugs at my mouth as I lift my gaze to hers. That’s excellent advice. Except, the future I want doesn’t look like the future she and Dad chose for me. I’m going to disappoint them again. If I ever want to move forwards with my life, I’ll have to find a way to be okay with that.

“You’re right, Mum,” I tell her. “It is time.” My words bring such joy to her face that my chest aches, because I know I’m about to break her heart. “That’s why I’ve decided to take a

break from the pharmacy to concentrate on Fifth Circle.”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, for the blood to drain from her cheeks. “You can’t be serious,” she whispers.

“I am.” It’s me squeezing her hand now, hoping to provide some comfort. “I’m going to hand in my resignation before leaving for the tour.”

“When did you decide this?” Dad demands.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while, but I only made the decision recently.” Like five seconds ago.

For most of my life, the idea of being a full-time musician seemed like some unattainable fantasy, to be enjoyed only in the depths of my imagination. But this last year has brought the fantasy closer and closer to reality every day. I’ve never felt more grounded, more real, more myself, than when I’m on stage, or working in a recording studio with the guys, or thrashing out ideas with Ned. It was inevitable my mind would start to play with the idea of taking it all further.

I didn’t tell anyone when those thoughts sparked inside me. When they grew wilder and more insistent, I refused to say a word. Because talking about those thoughts out loud would have made them real, a possibility, a conscious choice: To stay where I am, or step fully into the life I truly desire.

I’ve been too scared to admit there is something I want more than I want to please my parents.

“What do you think is going to come of this?” Mum’s eyes are wide, and glassy with unshed tears. “You need to think long-term, John.”

“I am thinking long-term. I’m thinking about being behind that counter for the next forty years, wishing every day I was somewhere else.” I shake my head. “That’s not how I want to live.”

“You’re doing good work there,” Dad argues. “You’re helping people.”

I nod in agreement. “It is good work. It’s just not for me.”

“You spent years studying pharmacy,” Mum cries. “It cost tens of thousands of dollars.”

“I’m the one repaying my HECS debt to the government. It’s my responsibility. As is my life.”

Dad scoffs. “Is this band of yours even making enough for you to live off? Everything you make is split four ways, isn’t it? That’s after expenses. How will you afford it?”

These are questions I’ve been asking myself for months. I have workable answers for all of them. “I have plenty of savings to tide me over, and if I need to, I can get part-time work.

Something that works around the band's schedule." I pause to look each of them in the eyes. "This isn't a spontaneous decision, I promise, but it is the right decision for me."

Mum cries out in frustration. "I can't believe you would throw away everything we've given you so you can be fawned over by girls and gallivant around on stage." My body tenses at her words, at the tears spilling down her cheeks, at her crossed arms and hunched posture.

My jaw is tight when I respond. "If you took the time to listen to my music, you would know that's not true."

"It's cruel, John," she goes on, as if I never spoke. "It's selfish."

A year ago, I would have agreed with her. I would have backed down in the face of her distress. For so long, the very idea of going against my parents' wishes felt like turning my back on them. An insult to the sacrifices they made in order to have me, raise me, educate me. Being with Cal has taught me a new way of looking at myself. I've come to realise I owe something to myself as well. If I don't do this, I'll always wonder how far I could have gone. What I could have achieved if I gave myself this chance? This is not selfishness. I deserve to know the best of who I really am, not the worst of who someone else, anybody else, wants me to be.

"I'm so grateful to both of you for everything you've done for me," I tell them, keeping my gaze fixed on a breadcrumb that's fallen on the table between them. "There are a lot of other things I'm grateful for as well. I'm moving forwards in a career I love and I'm so good at it." They don't see it, they never did, but I believe it's true. "I'm doing it with my best friends in the world. We make music that moves people to sing, and dance, and feel. Every second of that makes me so much happier than I've ever been at the pharmacy. I'm so much more *me*." I blink back the moisture forming behind my own eyes. My hands are shaking, and I'm terrified they'll never accept this, but I push on anyway. "I know now, this is what I'm meant to do. I'm at peace with myself for the first time in my life, and I... I've met—" Fuck, I'm not ready for this. I should stop now. Tell them the rest later, when they've had time to get over the shock I've already given them.

Or I tell them now. I tell them and I trust them to love me anyway. They're my parents. They loved me first and they've loved me longest. I have to believe that will win out over everything else.

I clear my throat. Shift in my seat. Clasp my hands together in my lap. "I've met someone. I've fallen in love."

My parents stare at me in shock. Mum gives a short laugh that falls somewhere between exasperation and relief. "Why didn't you tell us?"

“I wasn’t sure you’d approve.”

She collapses back in her chair. “Oh, dear god. She’s not a musician too, is she?”

Lowering my gaze, I shake my head. “No. *He*’s not a musician, but he does work in the industry.”

In the silence that follows I risk looking up at them. Their matching expressions of baffled confusion would be humorous if my place in this family wasn’t on the line.

“He?” Dad says in a curt tone. “What do you mean he?”

Tension rolls through me and I fight to keep any defensiveness out of my tone. “I’m in love with a man. His name is Calum. I’m bisexual.”

“Since when?” Mum cries.

“Since always.” I pause, swallow. I hope I don’t throw up. “I’ve known since I was seventeen.” Both their mouths open, but I know what’s coming and I beat them to the punch. “Yes, Ellie knew. No, it had nothing to do with our divorce,” I say in a firm tone. “That’s all I have to say on the topic.”

They glance at each other in total bewilderment. I hate putting so much on them all at once, but at least the air between us will finally be clear. What happens next is up to them.

“Ten years, John,” Dad says in a hoarse voice. “You’ve known for ten years. Why did you hide this from us for so long?”

In an instant my throat feels thick and I’m struggling to breathe. “Because I didn’t want to see the look in your eyes. The one you have right now.” I gesture to both of them. “I didn’t want to be a disappointment. I didn’t want you to regret having me.” I swipe at my eyes, cursing my lack of control. “I still don’t want that.”

“Why would you ever think that.” Mum’s voice is softer than expected, and it brings me closer to the edge. “After all we went through to have you. You’re our little miracle, you know that.”

A bitter laugh escapes as I shake my head. “Any kid would have been a miracle. It’s not like there weren’t any other viable embryos created when you did IVF. Each one a unique combination of your DNA. There had to have been at least a couple of future doctors. Children who would have been what you hoped for and made you proud. They wouldn’t have gotten divorced within three years of the wedding. Or insisted on a profession that makes you cringe.” My whole body trembles as I finally release my greatest fear. “For whatever reason, I’m the one who was born. I don’t want you to regret ending up with *me*.” My hands claw at my chest as my vision blurs. “I’m not a miracle. I’m your greatest mistake.”

“No.” Mum stands from her chair, rushing to put her arms around me. “That’s not true.”

I turn into her warmth, clinging tight to her small frame.

“John, look at me.” Dad’s voice is gruff, and I have to force myself to face him. “You are our son. Our only son. Our beloved son.” He nods, as if satisfied he’s pressed the point enough. “That’s why we argue with you, because we want what’s best for you.”

I pull free of Mum’s arms. She sits back down, still holding my hand. “I want what’s best for me, too. But it’s time for me to decide what that looks like. I want you to be a part of the new life I’m building for myself, I really do, but I need you to accept me for who I am. Even if I’m not who you want me to be.”

Mum tuts before heaving a sigh. “You haven’t given us much choice.”

“No.” My tone is firm, but my heart is hopeful. “The choices are mine now.”

They exchange another long glance.

Finally, Dad turns back to me. His arms are crossed, and his frown is thunderous. I dread the words he’ll use when he opens his mouth to speak. “When do we meet this man you say you’re in love with?”

Relief floods my limbs, even as I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I can already imagine the conversation they’ll have after I leave. They’ll decide this is a phase and I’ll get over it. I won’t hold it against them. In their shoes, I might be guilty of the same doubts. They’ll get used to the idea in time. Because if I get my way, Calum is here to stay.

“Soon,” I tell them with a shaky smile. “You’ll meet him soon.”

\* \* \*

I’m halfway home when my phone rings and Ned’s name flashes up on the screen. I hit a button on my steering wheel to send it through to voicemail, intending to call him back as soon as I get home. I’m eager to tell him about my conversation with my parents, but don’t want to have to focus on driving while we talk.

Within seconds a text comes through. Two more quickly follow. A robotic voice reads them out to me one by one.

*Call me asap.*

*Have you spoke to Calum? Did he get fired?*

*What the hell is going on?*

Fresh spikes of adrenaline shoot through me with each message. What the—?

Pulling into a side street, I quickly park the car and grab my phone from its holder.

I call Calum first, cursing under my breath as I wait for him to pick up. He doesn’t. When

it goes to voicemail, I try to rein in my anxiety. “Hey, Cal. Ned’s sending me some weird messages. Is everything okay? Call me as soon as you get this.”

When I move on to calling Ned, he picks up on the first ring. “Thank god. What’s happening?”

“I have no idea. What do you know?”

“That Rush guy we met at the festival, Arthur I think it was, called to say the whole band needs to come in for a meeting regarding an upgrade to our managerial arrangements. He said Calum is no longer available.”

My eyes close and I drop my forehead to the steering wheel. “Shit. Did he say why?”

“He refused to say more. Just that we’d be filled in at the meeting.”

They must have found out about us. It’s the only thing I can think of. But how?

“When is this meeting?” I ask.

“Friday morning. I tried to get a hold of Calum but he’s not picking up. Have you spoken to him?”

“Not since last night.” We’d spent almost an hour on the phone, both of us in our respective beds. After sleeping in late yesterday morning, he’d spent the day catching up on household chores. He’d talked about all the work he wanted to get done this week at Rush. “Everything was fine then.” If something bad happened today, surely he would have called me.

Wouldn’t he?

“Hang on a sec.” I slam my phone back into its holder before restarting the car. When the Bluetooth connects, I speak again. “I’m heading over to Cal’s place now. Hopefully he’s there and I can find out what’s going on.”

“Okay,” Ned says. There’s a quiver in his voice and I can picture him pacing his living room, his own fears charging to life.

“Is Toni with you?”

“I called him. He’ll be home soon.”

Taking a deep breath, I pull back out onto the main road. “Good.”

“Tell me when you find out what’s going on. Yeah?”

“You bet your arse I will,” I say, nodding to myself. “Don’t worry. We’ll sort this out. Everything will be okay.”

Except that may not be true. Cal’s job means everything to him. If he’s lost it, because of me, we may never be okay again.

## THIRTY-ONE

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### CALUM

My fingers hover over the keys of my crappy old laptop as I reread my newly updated resume for the tenth time. The machine is so old it won't even turn on unless it's plugged into the charger. But the laptop I've been using the last couple of years belonged to Rush. I had to turn it in before I left. Then I was escorted from the building, to ensure I didn't try to steal any privileged client information on my way out the door. That wasn't humiliating at all.

Lifting my glass, I take a deep swallow of rum and Coke. Heavy on the rum. Light on the Coke. It's my third. I barely managed to wait for the sun to set before indulging. After mainlining coffee all afternoon while working at my cramped dining table, I needed the alcohol to settle my jitters.

Thankfully, Hannah was working today and then she's at university for a lecture tonight. I don't want her to see me like this. I don't want anyone to see me like this. When my phone started to ring and ping with messages a half an hour ago, I turned it off. If hiding away to lick my wounds is cowardly of me, I'll cop to it tomorrow. Tonight, I want to be alone.

I pick up my empty coffee mug and run my thumb back and forth over the words printed on the side. World's Best Manager. I'm pretty sure my chance of earning such a lofty title evaporated the moment I had sex with my client. Genevieve was right to fire me, even if she did try to use my job as a means to manipulate me. The knowledge my professional misconduct would have been overlooked if I'd agreed to further misconduct makes anger burn low in my gut. What I did was bad, but at least the feelings behind my actions were genuine. What she offered to do today? That was pure self-interest.

The chances of me landing another management job after being fired within a year of my promotion are slim. That's if Genevieve and Arthur don't decide to leak news of my indiscretion to their business contacts. If they do, getting a new job will require someone to look the other way on what I've done, which would make them no better than Rush. Either way, the death knell on my career is clanging and I have no idea how to make it stop.

There's a sudden pounding on the front door and I jump. Rising from the table, I look

through the peep hole. My eyes slide closed on a sigh, and I rest my forehead against the door for a moment, before stepping back to open it.

“Thank god, you’re here.” Johnny barrels through the doorway to wrap his arms around me. “What’s happened?”

My own arms remain at my side, even as I turn my face into the curve of his neck, breathing the scent of him deep into my lungs. I hate that everything is going to change. That we won’t get to work together anymore.

Slowly, I pull away to look at him. “I assume you’ve heard from Rush?”

Nodding, he tells me about the conversation he had with Ned on his way here. I’m not surprised Arthur has already been in touch. He’ll want to make his control of Fifth Circle official as soon as possible. “Did you really get fired?” he asks.

When I nod, he swears under his breath. “It’s my fault, isn’t it? They found out about us.”

Another nod and then I’m turning away. I drop back into my seat at the table and pick up my glass. “Arthur saw us at the festival. He followed us to the bus stop.” I toast him before draining what’s left of my drink.

With a groan, he sits in the chair opposite me. “Damn it, you warned me this would happen. I should have been more careful. I *should* have stayed the hell away from you. Except I don’t know how anymore.” He looks at me, his brown eyes stricken. “I’m so sorry, Cal.”

I manage a shrug. “We were kidding ourselves, thinking we could hide it.” A snort escapes me. “I guess now we don’t have to.”

A hint of a smile curves Johnny’s mouth. “I suppose that’s true.” With a sigh, he leans forwards, resting his elbows on the table. “What do we do now? There must be some way to fix this.”

I close my laptop and push it aside before grabbing a pen and opening my notebook to a fresh page. Writing down a short list of names, I tear the page out and hand it to Johnny. “When you go to the meeting on Friday, insist on working with one of these people. They’ll try to push Arthur on you. Don’t let them. Yes, he’s the most experienced and he has the best connections, but he’s not a good fit for Fifth Circle.” I lift my gaze to meet his. “Do not let Arthur get his hands on Ned.”

Johnny scowls at the list in his hands. “What are you even talking about? The only person who’s going to have their hands on Ned is you.”

A laugh bubbles up my throat, part hysterical, but mostly tipsy. “Toni might object.”

“I’m serious, Cal. It’s in our contract. You’re our manager. It’s you or no one.”

“Unless you all agree to a switch,” I say, wagging a finger at him. “Which you will.”

“Like hell we will.” He jolts upright out of the chair. Crushing the piece of paper into a ball, he tosses it on the table. “I’m not going to sit back and watch you get fired because of me.”

“It’s already done, Johnny. Besides,” I continue when he tries to argue, “you’ve got bigger problems to deal with.”

That gets his attention. “What problems?”

“They’re going to try to convince you to out yourself to the world. As bisexual. Because it will solidify your brand as *the* queer rock band of Australia. If they can’t convince you, there was talk of leaking it to the media.”

His eyebrows launch upwards at he moves away from the table. “They would do that?”

“Arthur would,” I say with a nod. “I didn’t think my boss would ever agree to it, but she didn’t shut him down. Not entirely.”

“What a bunch of devious wankers.”

A snort of laughter falls out of me. I couldn’t agree more.

“Not that it matters now,” he adds.

I lift my gaze to where Johnny’s begun pacing the length of the kitchen counter. “What do you mean?”

He stops to look at me. “I told my parents tonight. About you. About us.”

My mouth drops open before slamming shut. “How did they take it?”

“They didn’t freak out as much as I thought they would. But then, they were still reeling from the rest of the conversation so…”

I give him a look. “The rest?”

He presses his lips together, but there’s no hiding the smile that wants to break free. “I’m quitting the pharmacy. I’m done trying to live two lives to make other people happy. For the first time in my life, I’m going to put what I want first.” He takes a deep breath, as if resettling within the truth of his decision. “That means making music my first priority.”

My heart cracks. It cracks wide open in an avalanche of love and pride… and a bone-deep despair. “That’s great news,” I whisper, trying to breathe through the pain. “I’m so happy for you.” He’s going to fly so high, before long he’ll be out of reach. I wanted so badly to go with him, to continue working with him and supporting him through it all. “This is everything you’ve always wanted. You have to keep going.”

“I will,” he says with a wicked grin. “But not without you.”

Frustration tears at my gut. “You can’t have me. That’s the reality.”

“I don’t accept that reality,” he growls, dropping onto his knees in front of my chair. “Cal, you must see how perfect the timing is. Call your boss. Tell her I’ll come out, I’ll do a longer tour, whatever they want. As long as they give your job back.”

My head is already shaking before he finishes. “No. I’m not doing that.”

“Why not?” he asks, reaching out to cup my face.

“Because I’m not bloody well doing it.” Evading his hands, I stand up to put some distance between us.

“It will work,” he cries, coming to his feet. “It has to.”

“Yeah, it would work,” I snap, “because Genevieve already made me that offer, and I turned it down.”

Confusion clouds his face as he stares at me. “What are you talking about?”

“She said I could keep my job if I convinced you to do what they want. To prove my loyalty,” I add with a bitter laugh. “If I went back now, it would look like that’s exactly what I did. Manipulated you to save myself.”

“But you didn’t,” he insists in a quiet voice. “You said no and you lost everything, to protect me.”

“It wasn’t just about you. I did it so I can sleep at night and look at myself in the mirror every morning. Because I do not want to succeed by hurting the people who trust me.” Despite the cost to myself. The cost Hannah may have to help me bear. “My loyalty is not for sale.”

His jaw clenches as he stands straighter. “But you think mine is.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Bullshit.”

My eyes close as I shake my head. “You’ve earned this chance, Johnny. You deserve it.”

“And I’m supposed to, what, leave you behind?”

“Of course, you will!” I yell, throwing my arms wide. “Your tour is weeks away. Thousands of Fifth Circle fans have bought tickets and they’re expecting you to show up. Ned, Gavin, and Oz are expecting you to show up. Without Rush’s backing, all of it, the whole thing, will be cancelled.”

I see it in the widening of his eyes, the sudden intake of breath. The realisation. This has all happened so fast, he hasn’t had time yet to consider the consequences standing up for me would have on his life. On all their lives.

“Are you really going to turn your back on all the progress the four of you have made?” I ask in a deprecating tone. “For what... me?” A wild laugh spills from my throat. The idea my

lover will ride to my rescue, charge the fortress and do battle with the villainous executives to get me reemployed is sweet. Truly, it is. It's also the kind of immature fantasy that was obliterated for me years ago.

Crossing to the table, I pick up the ball of paper he discarded too soon. "You'll do what's right for you and the band, Johnny." I walk over to him, take his hand, and press the paper to his palm, closing his fingers around it. "Because you're a good man and a loyal friend."

His gaze drops to our joined hands. "No," he growls. "This isn't the way it's supposed to happen."

Maybe not, but here we are. Maybe it was inevitable from that first night. From the second his stare prickled across my skin and our gazes met. Our need for each other was always going to lead us here. "I can't say I wish we'd done things differently. Because I wouldn't give up a moment of what we've had, not for anything."

His hand tightens on mine and when he looks up, I glimpse the panic in his eyes. "You say that like you're breaking up with me."

"I'm not," I tell him. "I'm not letting you go entirely." I mean it. I want to be with him, more than anything. But... "I'm going to need some time. To sort my shit out and find a new job. Besides, you've got business to take care of with the band."

As if on cue, a buzz sounds from his pocket. Swearing quietly, he pulls out his phone and reads the notification. "It's Ned. He's called everyone. They're meeting up at Gavin's house."

This is it. Fifth Circle's first meeting without me in almost a year. Will Charmaine and Toni be there? I wonder if they'll gather around the dining table, drinking iced tea while they hash out their next steps. The steps they'll take without me.

"You need to go." I try to push away, but Johnny's arms circle around me, dragging me closer.

"This isn't over," he whispers, his breath hot on my face. "I will fight for you."

"Fight for yourself." I press my lips against his, giving him what little I have left. "We'll figure the rest out later."

He stares into my eyes for a long moment. "I love you."

A tremulous smile fights to overthrow my frown. "I love you, too. Everything is gonna be okay."

The words are for me as much as him. Because it doesn't matter how much I understand his need to move on without me. It doesn't matter that I'm pushing him to do exactly that.

It still fucking hurts.

I want to scream and rage at him for doing this. For leaving me behind. Even as I push him to go, I want him to stay. I want him to choose me.

But I refuse to hurt him like that. I won't lash out the way I've done in the past. This anger I feel will live and die with me. He deserves none of it.

"I'll be back as soon as I've talked to the guys," he says as we move towards the door.

"No, please." I shake my head. "Give me a few days to wrap my head around everything. Just let me know how the meeting goes on Friday morning."

I open the door, and he crosses the threshold before looking back at me. "They're trying to take you away from us, Cal," he says in a low voice. "They'll have a goddamned war on their hands."

"Don't do anything rash. I'm sure you and Rush can work something out."

"Yeah," he mutters, distractedly. "Something like that." He presses one more harsh kiss against my lips before he's gone. The list still held tight in his hand.

Closing the door, I manage a couple of steps towards the couch before my knees give out. I sink to the floor, my vision blurring and my mouth open in silent agony. The room around me flickers in and out, switching between this and another room—empty of furniture, but crammed full of fear.

This can't be happening. I can't be here again.

I want to scream, but nothing comes out. My body strains, writhes, grappling with the knowledge of all that I had and have lost.

Heaving a half dozen breaths, I sit up and then stagger back to my feet. Wallowing will get me nowhere and there's work to be done.

I need to take care of myself and my sister. The same way I always do.

## THIRTY-TWO

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### JOHNNY

It's after ten by the time I arrive at Gavin's house and this may be the most surreal night of my life. Coming out to my parents, deciding to leave my 'real' career behind, being the cause of Calum's worst fear coming true... it's all a blur inside my head. By rights I should be drowning in guilt or confusion. Instead, my mind is clear, and a steely determination burns through my veins.

I have to make this right.

Walking out of Cal's apartment, when I could see the hurt and doubt eating at him, was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I would have stayed if I thought it would do any good. I would have held him, raged for him, proclaimed my devotion in any way he wished to hear it. But words of reassurance mean nothing to Calum. How can they? His most basic trust in those who claim to love him is shattered.

There's only one way to prove my loyalty and my love. With my actions.

Knocking on the open back door, I make my way through the house. Gavin and Charmaine are in the dining room with Ned and Toni.

"This is such bullshit," Ned mutters as I approach the doorway.

"Maybe so," Charmaine replies from her place at the head of the table. She has a highlighter in hand as she studies what I assume is a copy of our contract with Rush. "But we need to know more about the brand of bullshit before we decide how to deal with it."

Gavin is seated to her left, his back to me. Ned is opposite him, pale-faced and jaw locked tight. Toni is by his side, one arm around Ned's shoulders and his chair pulled so close the two of them might as well be glued together.

Ned is the first to see me. "Johnny," he says, straightening in his chair. "What's going on? Was Calum fired?"

There's movement as all eyes turn in my direction and I swallow hard. "Yeah. One of his colleagues saw us together at the festival. It didn't take a genius to figure it out."

"I don't know," Gavin grumbles. "I thought you were very circumspect." His ability to

remain clueless about my relationship with Calum when the others either knew or suspected has continued to irk him. Which the rest of us have found hilarious. Such levity escapes me now.

“Where’s Oz?” I ask as I make my way to the foot of the eight-seater table and sit down.

“On his way,” Ned says. “He’d just picked Hannah up from uni when I called him. He said he’d drop her home and then head over.”

I grimace. “How did Hannah take the news?”

“Not well if the non-stop swearing was any indication.”

I’m not surprised. For how protective Calum is of his younger sister, she is every bit as protective of him. I’m glad she’ll be with him when I can’t be.

“What about Calum?” Toni asks. “Is he okay?”

“He’s trying to hide it, but he’s devastated.” I shake my head with a rueful smile. “Still, all he could talk about was the band and how we should negotiate our next move with Rush.” As if we’d want to stay tied to those arseholes. “You know, they told him he could keep his job, despite breaking the rules, if he convinced me to go public about my sexuality. Something about it being good for our branding.”

My words cause a stir of surprise and outrage from the three men, while Charmaine grabs a nearby pen and starts writing in a notebook. “He turned them down?” she asks.

I nod. “Of course, he did. Even after I told him I’d go along with it, happily. My parents know now anyway.” A few curious eyebrows lift, but it’s a story for another time. “He still refused. Because he’s stubborn and proud and too fucking honourable for his own good.” Sighing my frustration, I look at Charmaine. “What can we do?”

“In terms of getting Calum his job back, probably not much,” she says with sympathetic eyes. “Fifth Circle does have options, though, thanks to the clauses added by both Ned and Rush when the contract was first signed.” She flips back to another page in the document. “If you decide you want to stay with Rush, you can make a unanimous decision to choose a new manager. If you want to leave Rush, the clause Ned added will go a long way towards getting you out.” She glances around the table at each of us. “Thoughts?”

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the crumpled ball of paper Calum pressed into my hand and toss it down the length of the table. Gavin catches it before it bounces off the far end. “What’s this?” he asks, opening it up.

“Calum fully expects us to sail off into the sunset without him. Not only did he encourage me to go,” I nod to Gavin’s hand, “he provided recommendations for which Rush managers we should work with.” My gaze turns to Ned. “He told me not to let Arthur get anywhere

near you in particular.”

Toni visibly bristles at my words, a soft but somehow menacing sound emanating from his throat.

Swallowing, Ned holds his hand out towards Gavin. “Can I take a look?”

Gavin hands the paper to Ned, who flattens it out on the table before reading over the list of names. “These are Calum’s possible replacements?”

I hold my breath, my body rigid, as I nod.

“Sweet.” Picking up the paper, Ned slowly begins to shred it. My chest aches with relief as the pieces flutter down onto the table. “I vote we choose none of them. Who’s with me?”

Gavin lets out a hearty guffaw. “Yeah, fuck it. Calum is one of us now. We’re not letting him get shafted when he makes our boy over here,” he jabs a thumb in my direction, “so stupidly happy.”

They turn to me with matching grins. “Agreed?” Ned says, lifting his eyebrows at me.

My smile is wide enough to hurt my cheeks. “Yeah, one hundred percent.” I wasn’t looking forward to fighting them on this if they wanted to stay with Rush. I’m glad to know I don’t have to.

Oz comes barrelling through the door at that moment. “What did I miss?”

Charmaine looks up at him with a cheery smile. “Everyone is casting their vote on whether to accept a new manager from Rush.”

His face falls. “Oh, shit.” The words burst out of him in barely a whisper before he pulls himself up to his full height. “Right, here it is. I’m in love with Hannah, and I’m not about to hurt her by screwing over her brother. I vote no new manager.” He stares each of us down, with crossed arms and an intense glare we’ve never seen before on our youngest and quietest member. “Any of you have a problem with that?”

We all sit there stunned into silence, until Toni pipes up, “Damn. That was hot.”

Oz’s eyes widen as the rest of us dissolve into laughter.

“It’s unanimous,” Charmaine declares. “We fight for Calum.”

\* \* \*

On Friday morning, we arrive at the Rush offices right on time. Each of us is wrapped in thick layers of rock star confidence, with the hope no one looks close enough to see the nerves lurking beneath. Thankfully, we have Charmaine’s genuine confidence to help us sell the facade. She’s managed to wrangle the morning off work to be here with us. While she’s

not a contract lawyer, she knows enough to help us pull this off. We hope.

We're ushered into a boardroom upon arrival, with assurances someone will be with us momentarily. Fifteen minutes later, we're still waiting.

"How much longer do you think they'll make us sit here?" Ned grumbles. His legs are bouncing lightly under the table, and he can't keep his fingers off the pendant around his neck.

Charmaine's pen pauses on her notepad, where I'm pretty sure she's churning through her own work while we wait. "However long they think it will take to unnerve you." She looks up at him. "Are you unnerved?"

Ned clears his throat. "No, ma'am."

"Good." She winks at him before returning to her work.

Another minute passes.

Oz is tapping away on his phone. Probably providing updates to Hannah. Gavin is sitting beside Charmaine, studying the details of the room as he slouches in his chair. Of the four of us, he's definitely the most chill about this whole situation.

Sighing heavily, I stand and walk over to a large window at the other end of the room, but I barely register the sprawling streets of the city far below. I miss Calum. We haven't spoken since I left his apartment all of thirty-six hours ago. It feels like a year. I've sent multiple texts, to tell him I love him, that we'll get through this, and I'm not going anywhere. He hasn't responded.

Every cell in my body has screamed at me to rush to his side, to break down the damned door if I have to, but I'm determined to give him the space he seems to want. I've done enough harm without forcing myself on him when he's asked me to stay away.

All that ends today, though. Whichever way this meeting goes, we'll be together soon.

"Everything okay?" Ned's voice comes from beside me and I turn my head to see concern in his eyes. "You're sure about this, yeah?"

I give him a questioning look. "About our strategy?" He nods. "Of course."

His lips press together, as if he has more to say and I frown. "Ned, if you're having second thoughts—"

"No," he says, cutting me off. "Not at all. It's just... I remember how excited you were when we signed with Rush. About moving forwards and making all our high school dreams come true. Since then, you've been so focused and driven to make it happen." He gestures to the room behind us. "We're about to put it all at risk. At best it'll be a setback, at worst... we could miss our shot at the big time." He hesitates for another moment before finally spitting it

out. “I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

That’s what he’s worried about? That if things go pear-shaped, I’ll regret not being famous? My shoulders relax and a laugh escapes me as I put a hand on his shoulder. “Mate, it wasn’t the thought of fame or money keeping me focused this past year. It was Calum.” At the lift of his eyebrows, I grin. “The way he looked at me every time we hit another one of his targets. Like he wanted to strip me naked and cover me with gold stars.” My eyes roll back in my head as Ned bursts out laughing. “I’m telling you, it was like a drug.”

Ned lets out another peal of laughter before he leans over to murmur in my ear. “Who knew, all these years, you’ve been dying to be somebody’s good boy.”

My face goes up in flames as I glance at the other people in the room. Thankfully, they’re used to our shit and haven’t even bothered to look up. “I never said that,” I whisper to Ned, “but... maybe a little.”

“I understand,” he says, his own cheeks rosier than they were before. “I understand completely.”

By the time our laughter fades the air between us is clearer. It’s good to know we’re still on the same page.

“The truth is,” I go on, “all I truly need to be happy is my guitar, a stage, and Cal. Even if we do end up playing beer gardens and small pubs again, it won’t bother me.” If I have to go back to working at a pharmacy to make it work, so be it.

Ned flashes me a wicked grin. “If you don’t add a *but* to the end of your sentence, I’ll do it for you.”

“But,” I drawl, turning to face the fancy boardroom we’ve been dumped in, “if we can manage to cut this lot loose, keep Cal, *and* go on to smash more of those targets he loves so much, it would be exceptional. For us and for him.”

“Gold stars all around?” Ned asks, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“No.” My gaze narrows. “The gold stars are mine.”

He makes a tutting sound. “Spoil sport.”

At that moment, the door opens and three people sweep into the room. The first introduces herself as Genevieve, the CEO of Rush. Arthur is second, and the third is Rush’s lawyer.

I zero in on Arthur—the man who threatened to make private details about my life public knowledge, without my consent. Impeccably dressed in a navy suit, with neat salt-and-pepper hair, he’s a smug looking son of a bitch. He’s expecting us to fall in line with whatever plans Rush has for us, like the hungry little rock stars they believe us to be.

Giving in to a mischievous smile, I choose the seat directly opposite. I’m about to take

great pleasure in disappointing him.

## THIRTY-THREE

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### CALUM

It's after midday when Hannah gets what feels like the three-millionth text from Oz.

"The meeting with Rush is over," she says, frowning at her phone. "Oz is on his way out of the city now. He has to work this afternoon."

I turn my head on the arm of the couch and grab my phone from the coffee table. Nothing from Johnny. "Is the tour going ahead?" I ask, not bothering to sit up.

Hannah taps at her phone for a bit and then waits. "He's responding," she murmurs, right before letting out an infuriated shriek. "It's going ahead as planned, but this is a good thing. Trust me." Jamming a finger on the phone, she puts it to her ear as she storms out of the room. "Tell me how this is a good thing for my bro—" The slam of her bedroom door cuts the end from her sentence.

Taking a deep breath, I release it with a slow, shuddering exhale. "This *is* a good thing," I say to the empty room. It's good for Fifth Circle. This is what I want for them.

The acknowledgment does nothing to remove the crushing weight from my chest. The last two days have been a maelstrom of phone calls and emails. I've contacted every management company in Brisbane and its surrounds, touched base with my contacts in the industry, and introduced myself to job recruiters. When that was done, I spent hours trawling through multiple job websites, applying for anything that seemed even vaguely promising. Now, I'm stuck in the limbo that is waiting. I figure, if I'm ever going to take some time out to feel sorry for myself, it's best to squeeze it in now.

Lifting my still silent phone from my chest, I wonder if I should call Johnny. He might be pissed with me, considering I've ghosted him for the past two days. It's not that I don't want to talk to him. I do. But I don't see how the two of us will work in the long-term and I'm struggling to come to terms with the possibility of a future without him.

I've lost my job, possibly my career. In a few weeks Johnny will leave the pharmacy behind for good and go on tour. He'll be thriving, both as a person and a musician, while I'm stuck here figuring out how to make ends meet. By the time he returns, who knows how he'll

feel about us. People change their minds about what they want all the time.

A familiar pounding starts up on the front door, and I jump up from the couch. My fingers try to tunnel through my hair, but they get caught in knots. Glancing around, I see the mess scattered around my apartment. Multiple scrawled to-do lists. An empty pizza box. Coffee cups and my discarded hoodie.

“Calum,” Johnny’s muffled voice comes from outside the door. “Please, let me in.”

Sighing, I turn away from the evidence of my anxiety and try to school my features into something less than despairing. Johnny’s future has been saved from the broken remains of my career. It’s something to be grateful for, even if I’m not actively feeling it.

Once my smile is firmly in place, I open the door. “Hey—”

It’s as far as I get before his arms are around me. His face lowers into the curve of my neck and the scent of him invades my nostrils. All my good intentions collapse. My body sags against his. Clawed fingers clutch at his jacket and my eyes burn. *Whatever I have to do, I’ll do it. Please, please, please. Don’t let me lose him.*

After a long moment, he pulls back enough to press his mouth against mine with a low hum of satisfaction. “I have good news,” he says against my lips. “You can quit your job search. At least for now.”

I stiffen, my gaze narrowing as I straighten my arms against his chest. I can feel his heart pounding, even beneath the layers of his suit. “Tell me you didn’t make a deal with them about coming out to get my job back.”

“No,” he’s quick to assure me. “I know you don’t want that. This is…” he pauses to huff out a laugh, his smile wide, “this is so much better.”

“Johnny?” We both turn to see Hannah coming out of her bedroom, shoes on and a bulging backpack over her shoulder. With a short squeal she rushes over to give him a hug. “I can’t believe what you did.”

I’m still reeling from the sight of my sister hugging *anyone* other than me, and recently Oz, when her words register. I meet Johnny’s gaze. “What the hell did you do?”

Hannah releases Johnny. “You haven’t told him?”

“I just got here,” he says with a smile.

“Oh, right.” She backs up towards the door. “I’m gonna go to the library for the afternoon and then I’m meeting Oz for dinner and staying at his place. So, you guys will have the whole night to, you know, talk. Or whatever. See ya.” The door slams shut before I manage to get a word in.

Johnny gestures to the couch, still grinning from ear to ear. “You might want to sit down

for this.”

The second my butt hits the cushion I’m staring at him. “I’m sitting. Now spill.”

“Okay,” he begins. “The four of us went into the meeting knowing Rush had more to lose than we did. If the tour got cancelled it would suck for us, but with all the resources they’ve already poured into it, it would suck way worse for them. Yeah?”

“Of course,” I say with a nod. “It wouldn’t just mean refunding all those tickets. Their reputation would suffer as well.”

“Exactly. So, the first thing we did was make it clear we were willing to take the hit and walk away. End the contract right then and there.”

“Christ, Johnny,” I cry, dropping my face into my hands. “I told you not to do that.”

He snorts a laugh. “Yeah, well, as my ex-manager at that point you weren’t the boss of me.” He pulls my hands from my face, holding on to them as I meet his gaze once more. “Of course, they threatened to take legal action, but Charmaine stepped in. She told them in no uncertain terms how not worth their while it would be. So, then,” he says, eagerly moving on with the story, “they tried to make out like any manager who came with us on the tour would be a temporary measure, until the contract issues were sorted.”

I roll my eyes. “When, in truth, the second you accepted someone into that spot, you’d be stuck with them.”

“Right,” he nods. “But, thanks to Charmaine, we knew that, too.”

I’m shaking my head in confusion. “How is the tour going ahead then?”

He grins, licking his lips before he continues. “We proposed a solution of our own. Fifth Circle will do the tour, exactly as planned, on the condition you’re hired on a consultant basis to act as our manager for the entirety of the tour.”

My eyes widen. “They agreed to that?”

Looking down at our joined hands, he says, “We might have offered them another incentive.”

“Like what?”

He shrugs. “They’ll be taking a bigger cut of the profits from the tour.”

I frown. “Johnny.”

“Don’t even start,” he insists, shaking his head with a smile. “I would have given up every cent if that’s what it took. The good news is, when the tour ends, so do our obligations with Rush.”

My mouth drops open. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” His smile fades a little as he looks at me. “I know it’s not ideal for you. After the

tour you'll still be unemployed, apart from that one rock band you'll be managing into the distant future," he adds, his grin making a reappearance. "But we don't exactly make enough for your cut to cover all your living expenses."

"Maybe not yet," I say, rising to kneel on the couch. "But I'm just getting started with you four." Moving forwards, I lift one leg over his lap to straddle him. "I swear to you, right now," I continue while he drops his hands to my hips. "I will launch your star into the heavens if I have to build a rocket ship and deliver it there myself."

He laughs out loud. "Kind of an odd visual, but I'll take it." He kisses me then, his mouth lush and languid against mine.

"I can't believe you did this," I say between kisses. "You do realise there was a real possibility they would have told you to fuck off and cancelled everything."

He nods. "They could have. Yeah."

I stare at him in awe. "You risked everything. For me."

His brows lower as he moves his head in a slow denial. "The only risk was in the thought of losing you." He sits up straighter, his arms coming around me to keep me secure in his lap. "I love you, Calum," he whispers, gazing deep into my eyes. "I love you because I can't stop myself from loving you. I trust you, because you've earned my trust. I want to share my life with you, because being apart hurts like hell." We're so close, our chests pressed tight, our breath mingling between us. "I'm happier with you than I've ever been in my life."

I kiss him then, because how can I not? "I love you, too," I tell him when we manage to come up for air. "The trust thing..."

"It's harder," he finishes for me. "I know. But trust is something we can build together. So, if you promise to give me the benefit of all your doubts, I promise to prove myself to you. Every day, with every breath. If you'll have me, I'm here to stay."

Grinning like a wild man, I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on tight. "I'll have you."

"Forever?" he asks.

I nod before touching my forehead to his. "Forever."

## THIRTY-FOUR

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### CALUM

This is a moment I never thought would come. A day when someone chose me, even when it went against their best interests to do so. Against all reason and commonsense. He chose me, anyway.

And it wasn't only Johnny. The whole band agreed to take their chances with me, despite the immediate rewards staying with Rush would have afforded them. They kept me close when I expected to be cast aside. Hell, I encouraged them to do just that. Not only because I didn't want to hold them back, but because I thought it might ease the sting when they followed my suggestion.

Instead, they stood up for me. They treated me like one of them.

Like family.

The whole thing seems like some kind of surreal dream. Yet, Johnny's right here. His body solid beneath mine. His hands stroking my thighs as he waits for me to recover from the shock of his fidelity.

My hands lift to cup his face as my mouth curves into a soft smile. "This is it, then? We get everything we wanted, and all our dreams come true?"

He chuckles. "It might take some time but... it looks like it, yeah."

I close the distance between us, brushing my lips against his, lingering there to relish the freedom of kissing him in the absence of guilt and fear. "We never have to hide again you realise," I murmur as I begin pushing his suit jacket off his shoulders.

Nodding, he shrugs out of the jacket and then rushes to lift my t-shirt over my head. "I can make out with you in public anytime I want."

"I didn't realise you were so fond of public displays of affection."

"Neither did I," he says as he loses his tie and then his business shirt. "Until I wanted so desperately to kiss you, and touch you, and knew I couldn't."

My back arches as he nuzzles the sensitive spot at the base of my throat. "Touch me now, Johnny," I whisper, the heat of desire rushing through me. "Don't ever stop."

With a quiet groan, he lifts his head to take control of my mouth. His kisses are slow and thorough, his tongue coaxing its way inside.

I spread my knees wider and begin to rock against him. Our growing erections rub together, separated by frustrating layers of cotton.

“Fuck, Cal,” he says, his eyes falling closed. “The way you move is obscene. You’re gonna make me come too soon.”

Despite the warning, I step up the rhythm, hoping to go from obscene to downright filthy. “Do you want me to stop?” I ask in my best bedroom voice.

His open mouth curves upward. “Don’t you dare.” Then he’s thrusting his hand between us, reaching into the waistband of both sweatpants and underwear to take me in hand.

My head falls back on a gasp of pure lust. “Ungh, yes. Right there.”

Closing his hot mouth over my nipple, he sucks hard while jerking me in a tight grip. On every upstroke, his thumb swipes the head of my cock, gathering pre-come to ease the way. It’s so good and too fast and soon I’m the one in danger of losing control.

“Get these off,” Johnny demands, pushing at my sweatpants. I quickly lever myself up off the couch and shed the last of my clothes before climbing right back onto his lap.

He licks his lips as he gathers me close. His hands roam every inch of me as he rains kisses on my face, mouth, neck, chest. He sinks lower on the couch, and I lift up onto my knees to make it easier for him to continue his descent. When his hot mouth wraps around me, I give a shout of delight.

He begins to suck. His mouth is like a vacuum, pulling me deeper and deeper until I’m quickly nudging the back of his throat. Shuddering, I risk looking down. His eyes are half mast, a blissed out look on his face as he strains to take me deeper. I lose it.

My fingers grip on to his hair as I shoot my load down his throat, riding the waves of my orgasm until all the strength leaves my body and I collapse against him.

He rises back up onto the couch and then his mouth is on mine again, feeding me traces of my own come as I quake with aftershocks.

“I need inside you,” he growls. Leaning forwards, he reaches around me to sweep the large coffee table free of my anxiety clutter. I send a brief plea to the heavens to protect my prized novelty mug as everything hits the carpet.

Johnny manoeuvres me onto the now empty table, and I hiss in a breath as my heated skin comes into contact with the cool wood. It might be old and covered in watermarks, but the heavy table is sturdy as hell, and I can’t help but be grateful to whoever donated it to the op-shop I found it in.

I watch Johnny from beneath heavy lids as he strips out of the remainder of his clothes. He fumbles for his wallet, where he's taken to keeping a sachet of lubricant. Just in case.

He pauses. His chest heaving in ragged pants. Eyes wild as he takes in the sight of me, spread out on the low table before him. "You're so gorgeous," he whispers, dropping onto his knees between my spread thighs. His hands run up and down the length of my torso. "The things I want to do to you."

"Do them," I say, the rough quality of my voice belying the purity of my overture. "Have me."

His eyes flash at my use of the words he said to me on our first night together. When our hope was brought low and our craving for each other seemed all we had left.

I sit up then, my knees bracketing his hips, and pluck the small sachet from his fingers. Tearing it open, I drizzle the liquid onto my palms and fingers, getting everything nice and slippery. I reach down to take hold of his erection, revelling in the heat and hardness of him. Then, perching on the edge of the heavy table, I lower my other hand between my cheeks.

"Johnny." With a little manoeuvring, I manage to sink a single finger inside my hole, and a whimper slips from my throat. "Love of my life. Keeper of my heart." I'm no lyricist, but I try for some sweetness before abandoning all control of my tongue. "I need you to fuck the living shit out of me." The stretch of a second finger has my mouth falling open with a desperate whine. "Please, fill me."

With a whispered curse, he's on me. One hand pulls my head up so he can invade my mouth with his tongue. The other moves my fingers away from my slick hole so he can take over. His touch is rougher than mine, more insistent, more desperate. I welcome every second of it.

My back hits the table once more before arching wantonly. A smile I can't shake stretches my mouth wide, and I allow my eyes to close as I concentrate on the sensations of Johnny wreaking carnal havoc on my naked body.

He grabs a thick cushion to shove under his knees before positioning the head of his cock at my entrance. I can't help but wriggle my hips, seeking more of that delicious pressure. "Cal, babe," he murmurs. "I'm gonna need you to hold still for a minute."

I try to quit my writhing but he's Right. Freaking. There. His weeping tip is pressed tight against me, and I want it so badly. "Need you."

"I know." His hands travel over me with long, languid strokes from my shoulders all the way down to my freshly hardened length. "I need you, too." He bends to drop tender kisses to my chest, but then his flat stomach brushes my cock, and I buck against him. A quiet chuckle

rises from low in his throat. “So eager,” he croons, laving a nipple. “Don’t worry. I’m gonna take care of you.”

Reaching out to grip the edge of the coffee table on either side of my head, he moves his hips, increasing the pressure on my greedy hole for a single, delicious moment and I keen softly. “That’s it,” he murmurs. “Just like that.” On the next thrust, the head of his cock pops past the quivering ring of muscle and I cry out, desperate for more.

He settles into a rhythm then, working his way inside my body with slow, steady thrusts. Our breaths rush between us with harsh, heavy pants. My arms lock around his torso, my legs around his hips, as I try to force him deeper. Deeper, still.

By the time he bottoms out all control is lost. My throbbing cock is trapped between us. The hot, wet slide of our perspiring bodies provides enough friction to get me to the edge and hold me there. Then he slides his hand between us to take me in hand and there’s no holding back. My balls tighten as the oncoming tide of my orgasm rushes at me. It drowns out the broken declarations of love filling my ear. It overwhelms the slapping of bare flesh and the cries of impending completion.

The wave crests, taking me with it and my body clamps down as I come all over Johnny’s eager hand. He groans as his own release fills me with great, pulsating spasms.

By the time we come back to our senses, my mobile phone is ringing.

It’s not just any ring.

Flinching, I try to sit upright, struggling under the weight of Johnny’s still sluggish form. “That’s Genevieve.”

His eyes widen and then we’re both scrambling to find my phone in the mess we’ve created.

I manage to answer on the last ring before it goes to voice mail. “Good afternoon, Calum Ellis speaking,” I say, attempting to get some sort of control over my racing heart.

“Calum, dear, how are you doing?” The tinny sound of her voice tells me the call is on speaker. I have no doubt Arther is listening in with bated breath.

“I’m excellent. Thank you for asking.” With a smirk, I grab my sweatpants and use them to cover the couch cushion so I can sit beside Johnny, allowing him to hear both ends of the conversation.

“That’s good news. Listen,” she continues without pause, “I feel things got a bit out of hand at our last meeting. Some less than savory ideas were put forward. Hasty decisions were made. Let’s have a do over.” I’ve never heard her so cheerful. “I want you to come back to work.”

The look Johnny gives me falls somewhere between shock and indignation, and I almost snort out a laugh.

“I’m sending you over a fresh contract now,” Genevieve continues. “I think you’ll be pleased by your new and improved package. All you need to do is sign on the dotted line and shoot it back to me within the hour.”

My eyebrows lift. “Why the hurry?” As if I don’t know she’s hoping I’m still clueless about the deal she made with the band. If I sign this new contract, that will be dead in the water.

“I have an entire company to run,” she says with a condescending laugh. “Things move fast in this industry. If you’re coming back to Rush, you’ll need to keep up.”

“Actually,” I say with a thoughtful tone, “I’ve decided to try doing some consulting work for the next few months.” Johnny smiles widely, pressing a kiss to the top of my head before getting up to wander down the nearby hallway towards my bedroom. “If you have any offers in line with that, I’ll be happy to consider them.” In the long pause that follows, I hear Johnny start the shower in my ensuite.

“You’ve spoken to your boyfriend then,” Genevieve says in a flat tone.

A grin covers my face as I look down. My stomach is still sticky and there’s a growing wet spot on the pants I’m sitting on. Thank god I covered the couch. “You could say that.”

Cutting all pretence, Genevieve assures me she’ll send the consulting contract by the middle of next week before abruptly ending the call.

Weak with relief, I make my way into the ensuite where Johnny is soaping up that hard body I can’t get enough of. “Is there room for one more?”

He opens the glass door. “Always.”

When I step inside, he hugs me close, and we take a minute to simply enjoy the hot water and each other. “You weren’t tempted to go back?” he asks, finally. “I know having that job helped you feel secure.”

“Not lately it didn’t,” I say with a shake of my head. The pressure to put the company’s profits above the good of my clients had only been increasing. I’m honestly not sure how much longer I would have lasted. “The idea of working for myself is terrifying, not gonna lie. But in some ways, it feels like the safer option.” No more waiting for someone to pull the rug out from under me. No one questioning the validity of my values. “You and the guys are taking a chance by believing in me. It’s time I believe in me, too.” I pause to consider some of the benefits that will come with this new kind of future. “This does mean you’ll have to keep doing what I tell you to.”

A mischievous grin appears on Johnny's face. "Based on forethought and planning?"

"Exactly."

"Remind me to buy you a pack of gold stars," he says, his hands starting to roam once more.

"Gold stars?" I tilt my head in question. "What would I do with those?"

Johnny smiles. "I have a few ideas."

## EPILOGUE

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### JOHNNY

#### *One Year Later*

Mid-morning on the day of Hannah's twenty-first birthday party, bolts of lightning crack the sky open, and torrents of rain fall from the heavens.

"Maybe we should cancel the party," she grumbles from the kitchen table, her fingers idly strumming the chords of her most recent song.

"No," Cal and I reply in unison as we continue to work around each other at the counter. He's busy rolling handfuls of beef mince into burger patties while I chop lettuce, tomatoes, and other sides. The buns are already buttered and ready to go. Thankfully, there's a roof over the outdoor patio of the small house the three of us moved into about six months ago. Even if all the guests have to stay inside to keep dry, we'll still be able to cook the meat on the barbecue.

Scowling, Hannah plucks aggressively at the strings of her guitar. "It's such a perfect day to stay home, though. People shouldn't have to risk drowning to celebrate my existence."

Beside her, Oz swallows the last bite of his late breakfast. "Sweetness, your guests will happily risk drowning for you."

"Not to mention," I say over my shoulder, "if we try to cancel because of a little rain, they'll show up anyway."

She looks out the window, where the unrelenting downpour continues. "A little rain? Seriously?"

Cal stretches a long length of cling wrap over the beef patties. "Rain, hail, or cyclone, people are going to start arriving in an hour. You should get ready."

"Fine." Sighing dramatically, she tosses her ginger curls over her shoulder and rises to head for her bedroom, her guitar still in hand. It usually is these days. "But I'm still in charge of the music. I've been working on this playlist for a month."

A secret smile crowds onto my face. When I sneak a glance at Cal, I see my amusement

mirrored in him. Despite her complaints, Hannah has been helping us plan this party for weeks. She's come to love having her new 'family' around her. Over time more and more of the 'sweetness' Oz glimpsed the night they met has started to shine through.

"Righto," Oz says after he's finished cleaning up from breakfast. "What can I do to help?"

Half an hour later, we're about done setting up when my parents arrive. Mum excitedly shows us the birthday cake she made for Hannah. "The white chocolate icing doesn't look fancy, but the inside is bright rainbow layers of sponge cake. Do you think she'll like it?"

Calum's eyes mist up as he drops a kiss on Mum's cheek. "She will love it. Thank you."

Dad holds up a small bag. "We weren't sure if you had enough candles."

"Hannah isn't a fan of birthday candles," Cal says as Dad puts the bag on top of the cake box. "Thank you, anyway."

My parents look at each other in confusion but follow Cal's lead when he moves to another topic of conversation.

Watching the three of them together, my heart swells with happiness. My relationship with my parents is better than it's ever been, though it's taken time for us to get here. After my revelations last year, they finally sat down and listened to Fifth Circle's album. They heard the song I wrote about them, and it hurt them—badly.

We fought about it at first. Then the anger turned into questions which turned into long and difficult conversations. We've learned to be more honest and open with each other. They'll probably never stop trying to convince me to go back to my old job 'as a backup' in case this 'rock'n'roll business' doesn't pan out. But they're doing their best to accept me for who I am, and I love them all the more for it.

In the end, it was easier for them to get used to me being in a relationship with a man than I imagined. It helped that Calum and Hannah came as a package deal. The first time I invited them over to my place to meet Calum, they naturally asked about his family. Cal didn't go into detail, but he did tell them the truth. They were bereft at the thought of two children left to fend for themselves. Within minutes they insisted on lunch at their house the following weekend so they could meet Hannah.

I wish I could say that lunch went smoothly. It didn't. A tense Hannah was overly snarky. Calum was ready to throw down in her defence. My parents were awkward and wary of them both. The stress saw me fall straight back into old patterns of trying to keep everyone happy at once. It was something of a shit show.

Until Mum served dessert.

The triple choc swirl cheesecake had two sets of green eyes springing wide open and

tongues just about falling out of heads. Cal and Hannah both devoured two slices of cheesecake each while gushing about how delicious it was. Mum beamed. Dad nodded approvingly. That's how Cal, Hannah, and my parents managed to worm their way into each other's affections. With treats on one side and compliments on the other.

The rain eases as more guests arrive and before long the house is overrun. Our band family is here, of course. Oz's friends, who have become Hannah's friends as well, stream through the door. Hannah's even invited a couple of people from the new job she got after graduating university at the end of last year. To say Hannah dislikes her job would be an understatement, but for now it seems to be what she wants and we're all supporting her decision.

Calum, on the other hand, is loving every moment of running his new company, Ellis Music Management. He has continued to be our very own World's Best Manager, with the mug to prove it. Fifth Circle is growing and reaching new heights all the time. In fact, we'll be leaving Australia late this year to join Dante Sinclair for an international tour to promote his new album. He and Ned have become fast friends over the past twelve months and when Dante was considering who to have as his opening act, Fifth Circle's name ended up at the top of the list.

Calum will join us for most of the tour but will have to travel back to Australia from time to time, as he now has other clients to take care of. The Starling siblings Cal worked with at Rush have also kept in touch. They've made no secret of their plans to jump ship from Rush when their contract is up, thanks to Arthur's less than gentle approach. Cal's workload is insane, but he has an assistant now and is even talking about bringing another manager on board next year to help out. One of his old colleagues, Jess, has been losing patience with Rush's practices and Cal thinks he may be able to tempt her to join him. I have my fingers crossed.

It's not until after lunch has been served and devoured that the clouds decide to part. Not that anyone seems keen on breaking their food coma long enough to go outside and enjoy the sunshine. I can't say I blame them. This house might be small but damn it's cosy.

I'm chilling in a corner of the room, enjoying a beer with Gavin and Ned when my mother wanders by. She gestures to Calum, who is busy refilling drinks. "That man is going to make someone an exceptional husband one day," she murmurs with a pointed look. "I'm just saying, don't miss the boat." She's gone again before I'm even finished choking on my beer.

Gavin laughs his head off. "She's not wrong."

"That'll do it," Ned says with a grin. "We might as well get the calendars out now."

I roll my eyes at him. "Shouldn't you and Toni be booking in first?"

“What are you booking me in for?” Toni asks as he sidles up to Ned’s side.

“Wedding rings,” I say, waggling my eyebrows at him.

Toni snorts a laugh. “Who needs rings?” He wraps his arms around Ned’s waist. “I prefer to keep my man on a leash.” Ned slips a finger under the chain Toni wears around his neck, with its fancy scripted N. “Ditto.” The kiss they share somehow manages to be both chaste and unbelievably smutty at the same time.

Chuckling at the two of them, I straighten from my lean against the wall. “All right, you lot. I have a surprise to spring so I’m gonna need you to keep an eye on Cal for a minute.”

Toni rears back to stare at me with eyes wide. “Fuck a duck, are you proposing?”

I give him a look. “On Hannah’s birthday? I think I can do better than stealing my future sister-in-law’s thunder.” I glance at Cal, who is chatting with one of Hannah’s new friends. “Just make sure he doesn’t come into the kitchen. Gavin,” I add, turning his way, “can I get a hand?” He salutes me and we ease through the crowded living area and into the kitchen.

It takes less than five minutes to set up my surprise. While I’m finishing, Gavin goes back to the living room to get Hannah into position and turn down the My Chemical Romance song blasting through the house. Soon he’s giving me a thumbs up from the doorway. “All set.”

Picking up Hannah’s cake, I carefully make my way back into the crowded living room. “Can I have your attention, please?” Everyone turns to look at me, cheering when they see the decadent fire hazard I’m carrying. All twenty-one candles on top of the cake are burning brightly. “Happy birthday to you...” When I start to sing, the guests quickly join in and by the time we’re done, I’m depositing the cake on the table before the birthday girl.

Turning, I search the room for Calum. He’s the only one not smiling. Instead, he’s standing frozen. Lips pressed into a hard line. His gaze is locked on Hannah, as if worried about the reaction she’ll have to this simple tradition they’ve both been avoiding for so many years.

What he doesn’t know is that Hannah and I planned this together.

“Big brother,” she calls out, a smirk on her face and one arm outstretched. “Get your arse over here.” He walks over to stand beside her, and she takes his hand smiling up at him.

“Make a wish with me?”

His mouth falls open. “Really?”

She nods.

Cal breaks into a laugh, one hand swiping at his eyes. “All right, little sister. Let’s do it.”

I have my phone camera ready and record the moment when they bend over, take deep

breaths, and blow out the candles.

Everyone erupts in clapping and cheers, but Hannah's not done. "I want to tell you my wish," she says to Calum, loud enough for everyone to hear.

He blanches. "Then it might not come true."

"I'm feeling pretty confident about this one," she says, pausing to take a deep breath before she continues. "I wished to be the next artist to sign up to Ellis Music Management."

Cal freezes all over again. Except this time, it's a good kind of frozen. "Are you serious?" he whispers.

Hannah nods. "I mean, it still freaks me out, but I love making music. And why the hell shouldn't I?" she snaps, looking ready to throw down with anyone who says differently. "Not everyone will like my style. I can deal with that." Her green eyes lift to Cal's. "As long as I have you watching my back. We can do anything. Right?"

She barely manages to finish talking before Cal engulfs her in a hug. They're both laughing when I approach them from behind Calum. Hannah's gaze meets mine and when she and Calum separate, she holds her fist out towards me. I bump it with my own. As surprises go, we nailed this one.

The afternoon wanes and guests slowly drift out the door. Oz and Hannah leave with their friends for a night on the town. Once it's back to just the two of us, Cal shakes his head in disbelief. "It's still weird to see Han surrounded by so many people and not threatening to bite any of them."

My eyebrows lift in question, and he winces. "There was this whole thing when she was fourteen. I thought I might have to muzzle her."

I burst out laughing. That's our girl. Which she is now—our girl. Hannah is the sister I never thought I'd get to have, and I love her to death. I love writing music with her and helping her improve her technique on the guitar. She offered to help me with my singing in return. I laughed out loud in response. That won't be happening in this lifetime.

Cal and I finish cleaning up from the party before falling onto the couch with leftover snacks and giant glasses of water to dilute the alcohol in our systems.

"I can't believe you and Han planned that whole candle thing behind my back," he says, grinning even as he narrows his eyes at me.

"She froze up when I first made the suggestion," I tell him. "Then she came back the next day and said she wanted to do it. Because she wants you to have 'more dreams and shit'," I add air quotes to the last few words.

He's quiet for a long moment, before he edges closer to me. Our limbs are tangled

between us, our faces inches apart. “I want to tell you my wish,” he whispers.

With a lazy smile, I reach out to cup his cheek in one hand. “Tell me, Cal. Give me your wishes, and I’ll make them come true.”

His throat moves as he swallows. “I wished to marry you some day. So the world will know we’re a family. That we belong together. Forever.”

Every word out of his mouth melts my heart. Because, while I might not have discussed this with anyone else, I’ve been thinking a lot about what getting married again would mean for me. In the aftermath of my divorce, I had doubts about ever marrying again. The commitment I’d thought of as being lifelong had fallen apart and I’d become disillusioned with the idea. What would be the point?

Calum is the point. Despite all he’s been through, the idea of family is still sacrosanct to him. Values like loyalty and commitment are not mere words, but the foundation of who he is. I trust that his vow, once given, will never waver. Just as my vow to him will be as rock solid in the decades to come as it is right here and now. Our marriage, when it comes, will be the outward expression of a commitment we’ve already made, and keep making every single day.

“I love you, Calum.” My lips almost touch his as I breathe the quiet words. “I will be honoured to marry you and be your husband. But…” I add with a slow smile, “first I want to organise the sappiest, most romantic proposal of all time.”

He laughs, his body softening against me until he’s all but in my lap. “Or maybe I should propose to you. This will be your only chance to have someone get down on one knee for you. Because I love you too, and I’m never letting you go.”

“My love, you will never have the chance.” With that, I tumble him onto his back on the couch and stretch out on top of him. My lips ghost over his neck. My tongue sneaks out to taste the salt of the day’s sweat on his skin.

“Shall we move this to the bedroom?” he suggests, already starting to tug off my shirt.

“Give me one more minute.” I gaze deep into his green eyes while I begin to rock against him. “I’m enjoying the feel of you.”

“I’ll give you all the minutes,” Cal says as his movements fall into rhythm with mine. “You and me? We have all the time in the world.”

THE END

Want to know more about Ned and how Toni helped him heal from his past? Read their story in [BONA FIDE FAKE](#).

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Love,

Rebecca Raine

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## ABOUT *BONA FIDE FAKE*

*My new fake boyfriend may not like me, but he needs me. There are worse foundations for a relationship.*

### **Toni**

I never meant to fake a relationship with the lead singer of a local rock band. The fib slipped out over lunch with my closest friend, and now the pressure is on to introduce my new boyfriend at his upcoming engagement party.

The good news? I'm not the only one in need of a date.

While pretending to be boyfriends for a month seems simple enough, I refuse to settle for a mere *fake boyfriends* arrangement. My condition is clear: I want a real relationship, and I want Ned to give it to me.

### **Ned**

Toni Fairweather is a liar and a fake. I suspected it the day our paths first crossed, but when he lies to his friends about us, all doubt is gone. I'll play along with his deception, but Toni will owe me—big time.

I have my own reasons for needing a boyfriend. Someone who can handle me. Someone who can keep me in line. Toni is demanding enough to fulfill my every requirement. I don't need to like the man to obey him.

As we navigate the complexities of our 'real' romance, Toni and I become caught in a tangle of convenient lies and genuine connection. Every glimpse of Toni's true nature seduces me further, but our predetermined break-up is fast approaching. Is our relationship truly a means to an end, or the beginning of a love I never dared to imagine?

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## **ABOUT REBECCA RAINE**

Rebecca is a long-time lover of all things romance. Whether it's a book, movie, or real life, she will always have more fun if there's a love interest thrown into the mix. She lives in Queensland, Australia with her very own hero husband, two quirky kids and one big, black dog. Other than reading and writing books, her favourite things include loud music, enjoying a glass of wine on the patio, organising everything in existence, and spending too much time on the Internet.

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