



MAXIM



# JAMISON

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Dedicated to Renee and Ashley.  
Thank you for always seeing what I can't and for never giving up on me.  
Without you this book wouldn't be possible.

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## ***CONTENT WARNING***

The following story contains brief on page homophobic comments as well as a brief on page attempted sexual assault. Please read with caution.

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# 1

## *Jamison*

“Your music has garnered you a growing fan club, and I think you’re on the verge of hitting it big.” Lance Macallister, owner of Twisted Records, always starts these meetings the same: compliments on our music—because let’s face it, we’re good—followed by a reprimand for our behavior. Or, more accurately, Alex’s behavior.

“But?” I ask, prompting the reaming we’re all here for.

“But,”—he meets each of our stares—“we have to do something about the band’s image if you want to go any further in your careers. Ronnie spotted your talent that night six years ago, but talent only gets you so far.”

Ronnie offers me a polite smile. The man has been our manager since we won a battle of the bands contest in some hole in the wall bar, but he lacks any of the aggressiveness needed to keep a band of young twenty-somethings in line. Especially as he’s not that much older than us.

“What do you need us to do? I thought me dating Marcy was enough to eclipse any bad publicity coming our way.” The last time our lead guitarist, Alexander Gregory, pulled a stunt that got us called into this conference room, he’d trashed a hotel room and punched a bellhop. Macallister’s solution was to throw the popular up-and-coming actress, Marcy Dixon, at me. By redirecting the attention to my relationship with the popular starlet—no matter how fake it is—Macallister had kept Alex’s destructive behavior from the press. I’d do anything for Maxim, and it’s not as though pretending to date Marcy is a hardship. She’s gorgeous, and the sex is good. Our relationship may be fake, but I’m still a man with needs. Marcy understands that it’s all for show with a little fun on the side to ease the tension once in a while.

“It is. For now. But you’re gaining in popularity with your new single,

‘For Tonight’. It won’t be long until your faces are all over the entertainment rags. And when that happens, they’ll show the bad alongside the good.” Jude Thomas, Macallister’s friend and business partner, glares at us like the heathens he likely considers us. The man hasn’t had a smile for us since we met. Ronnie assures me he likes us, but that’s hard to believe when all he does is look down his nose at us and glare before rushing from the room after each meeting.

“Jude is right. We need to keep ahead of any potential disasters,” Macallister says. Meaning we needed to get Alex to fall in line before we lose the label any money. “I’ve hired a PR team specifically for Maxim. They’ll be here in two days for introductions before you leave for tour.”

“Tour?” Anderson—Anders—Cartwright, our keyboardist, asks.

“Yes. You’ll be opening for Tainted as they tour the country. I’ve also taken the liberty of hiring a stylist. He’ll be heading on tour with you and the PR team.”

I look at my bandmates to gauge their reactions to the news. Alex looks pissed. What else is new? Anders looks indifferent, ready to go with the flow of whatever we decide to do. Thierry Lachlan, Maxim’s drummer, and Rierdan Hughes, bassist, are both looking to me, concern for the band’s future clear on their faces.

“I’m sorry, okay.” Alex grits out the words between clenched teeth.

“You’re always sorry, Mr. Gregory,” Jude throws back at him, his tone clearly saying he doesn’t believe Alex deserves another chance.

“Which is why you will be required to attend anger management sessions. Since we can’t postpone the tour, they will be held virtually and to ensure you follow through, we have assigned a member of the PR team to attend alongside you.” Macallister gathers the papers sitting on the table in front of him. “I’ll see you in two days, gentlemen. Try not to get into any trouble before then.”

Jude hightails it from the conference room while Macallister and Ronnie leisurely take their leave. No one says a word until the door closes behind them.

“Fuck! Alex, you need to tame whatever the hell issues you have.” Thierry shoves a hand into his dark blond mane, gripping the roots and dislodging the hair tie holding his bun in place.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you, but Thierry’s right. If you don’t



get yourself under control, Maxim will suffer for it.” Even Anders, the usually carefree, go with the flow guy, is noticeably frustrated with our guitarist.

“I think this anger management Macallister has planned will be good for you, Alex,” I tell him, and I mean it. He’s always been the angriest of our group, but the past few years have seen him move into a wave of hostility I can only describe as self-hatred.

Alex grunts his disapproval but doesn’t argue. He wants Maxim to be successful as much as the rest of us. After six years, we’re finally getting a chance to prove we’re worthy of all Twisted Records has put in to get us here.

Rierdan slams his palm down on the table, jerking my attention to the smile stretching his face. “We’re going on tour. Maxim is going to be headlining for fucking Tainted!”

“Hell yeah! We should celebrate,” Anders chimes in, and Thierry nods in agreement.

“We have that VIP invitation to that new club. We could go there. Celebrate on someone else’s dime,” I suggest. None of us are swimming in the dough. Though signing with Twisted Records put us in a position to be financially secure, we still cut corners where we can. We could all be out on our asses tomorrow, and Maxim will be just a memory. Especially if Alex continues down this path of self-destruction he’s on.

We agree to meet back at the house we share on Macallister’s dime at seven and head out to go our separate ways until the evening.

My phone rings as I’m stepping from the shower an hour later.

“Hey Marcy, what’s up?” We might be ‘dating’ in the eyes of the public, but in reality, all we’ll ever be is friends, with occasional benefits. She’s one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met, and we’ve had some fun together in and out of bed, but I’m not looking for anything serious. I’m content to let Macallister use our fake relationship to improve Maxim’s popularity for now, but there will never be anything more than a few enjoyable nights between us.

“I heard you’re leaving on tour soon.” She pouts into the phone.

“Yeah. End of week.” I rummage through my closet and pull out a black button down and faded jeans so old they’re nearly white. Marcy talks about some show she’s filming this week, and I set the phone on the bed so I can

pull on my clothes.

“—reservations at an Italian restaurant for seven.”

I catch the end of her sentence as I bring my phone back up to my ear and frown. “Tonight?”

“Yes, James. Weren’t you listening?” I hate when she shortens my name like that, but don’t correct her. Macallister thinks it adds to our façade when she uses the nickname in public, so I’ve gotten used to it. Still grates on my nerves, though.

“Sorry. I’ve got plans. Rain check?”

“Oh?” I can practically see the eyebrow raise that accompanies that word.

“We’re celebrating our first tour with Twisted Records. You could join us. Italian restaurant or nightclub, it shouldn’t matter as long as we’re seen together.”

“Right. Is everyone going to be there?”

“If by everyone you mean Alex, yes.” Marcy’s dislike for him started the moment they met. She said he’s jealous. Personally, I think they have more in common than she and I ever will, and Macallister should have matched the two of them instead. *Hmm. Is that Alex’s problem? Does he have a thing for Marcy?*

“I’ll see what I can do.” Her words mean the exact opposite of her tone. “We should have dinner tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow works. Text me the details and I’ll be there.”

I end the call and make my way to the foyer to wait for the others.

The Uber ride to the club is uneventful and short.

“What kind of club is this, J?” Rierdan asks, looking at the plain brick building. The only sign we’re in the right place is the line of people waiting to get inside.

I shrug. “Don’t know. But the owner told Macallister the invitation was for any of his signed artists. That’s Maxim, so…”

“Free drinks, right?” Alex eyes me until I reluctantly nod. “Then who cares. Let’s celebrate!”

“You’re not drinking. You heard what Macallister said,” I tell him.

“Whatever.” He rolls his eyes as the other guys whoop at his exclamation, but I make a mental note to keep a close eye on him. Last thing we need is a drunken Alex in a brawl.

The club is like any other. Loud music, sweaty bodies, and lots of

alcohol. The guys drink and dance. Even Alex seems to have a good time while refraining from drinking anything alcoholic, choosing instead to sip on water with lemon. And though I've been offered company for the night from several men and women, I'm content enough to just sit and watch the people around me, especially those grinding together on the small dance floor below.

A wave of newcomers enter the club and an extremely flamboyant and attractive man grabs my attention along with the rest of the crowd. But it's not him who has my heart racing faster and my breathing reduced to rapid puffs of air. Beside him, looking out of place and maybe a little scared at the other man's intensity is the only thing from my past I regret leaving behind. *Vance Martin*. Childhood best friend. Partner in crime. My first and only love.

I suck in a breath as I take him in from my vantage point on the second floor VIP balcony. The years since I've last seen him have done nothing to diminish how handsome he is. In fact, I'd say he's even more captivating now than he was at eighteen when I last saw him, and when he smiles at the man he's with, I'm out of my seat and moving toward the stairs before I fully register the movement, drawn to the man who will always hold my heart.

## *Vance*

### *Earlier That Day*

“Welcome to Wallace and Associates. We’re glad to have you on board. Being an intern is a rewardless and thankless job with very little pay, but without you, I’ll be lost.” Klaus Peterson, the PR manager I’ll be working under, winks at me. “I hope you’re ready for all the headaches that come with managing some of the most stubborn musicians and entertainers in the biz. If you make it through the next six months, you’ll have your pick of any PR firm in the industry. Of course, we hope that you’ll choose to stay at Wallace.”

I’m a couple years older than most interns, though still younger than the PR managers and reps at Wallace, but I worked my ass off to be here. Taking a year off to save money, then five years at university rather than the typical four, has finally led to this opportunity. There were other internships over the last few years, but this one is the only one that matters. To work for, and with, the best. It’s the only thing I’ve wanted for the past six years. *Well, except for...* I shake away that train of thought before it can take hold.

Klaus directs me to a conference room, his larger-than-life personality taking over the room instantly. The man commands attention. From the way he speaks to the clothes he wears—currently a bright purple suit with a green button down—the man will always stand out in a crowd.

I take a seat at the large table, then rub my sweaty palms on the thighs of my cheap gray suit pants.

“All right folks, let’s get on with it,” Jack Wallace says as he enters the room, and everyone immediately quiets and takes their seats. “Klaus, you’ll be heading a team to represent one of Twisted Records’ rising stars. Marks,

Young, and the new intern...”

It takes me a moment to realize he’s waiting for me to say something, preferably my name. My mind has latched onto the words Twisted Records and is malfunctioning.

“Vance Martin,” Klaus helpfully supplies and gives me a quick smile in reassurance.

“And Martin.” Jack nods. “Lance Macallister has called a meeting in two days for introductions and a game plan. I’ll forward the details this afternoon.”

After that, it is a whirlwind of assignments and briefings of current clients. I zone out for most of it. The thought of working with Twisted Records occupying my mind.

“Hey, you should come out with me tonight. I know this great club.” Klaus interrupts my thoughts about working with one of the biggest and most well-known record labels.

“Sure, why not?” I agree. I need to make friends and Klaus, with his big personality and flashy attire, seems to be the most welcoming. Besides, I should get to know the man if we are going to be working together for the next few months. What can it hurt? He’s harmless, right?

A few hours later, I’ve resigned myself to the knowledge that Klaus is anything but harmless as he drags me inside a crowded club. Every head turns in our direction, and while I’m not ashamed to be seen with him, it means I garner just as much attention for being at his side. The tight leather pants and black see-through top he’s wearing leave nothing to the imagination. Every man and woman we pass can clearly see the size of his package and the piercings in his nipples. I look and feel out of place in comparison with my jeans and an old Nirvana t-shirt.

When we reach the bar, Klaus orders a couple of shots and some fruity concoction for the two of us. I look around, taking in all the people. My eyes drift across the club, over the dance floor, and up to the second floor.

A glass wall surrounds a balcony sitting area where the VIPs avoid the crowd of commoners literally beneath them. Sitting at a table in the corner is a face I would recognize anywhere, even at a distance. I blink and he’s gone. *Did I imagine it?*

Klaus hands me a shot and I toss it back, letting the burn that slides down my throat bring me back to reality and the here and now.

“Here.” He hands me one of the fruity drinks. “Let’s dance.”

Maxim’s latest hit plays over the sound system and the buzz of alcohol and the steady beat of the music flow through me. The sexy, gravelly voice of Maxim’s lead singer lulls me into a sexually charged state. I close my eyes and let the rhythm take over, my body swaying in a dance learned years ago.

Jamison Black’s voice has seduced me, consoled me, and left me wanting since I was a teen. His rockstar looks: long dark hair and ice-blue eyes lined with kohl stirred my libido before I fully understood my attraction to men. Late night fantasies of his talented mouth on my skin, fantasies that still claim me when I’ve gone too long without release, flash through my mind.

The DJ switches songs, and my Jamison-induced spell is broken. I open my eyes and take in the club. Klaus, in all his flamboyant splendor, is dancing between two well-dressed men, probably corporate businessmen here to unwind. Too bad Klaus has set his sights on them.

I laugh and move from the dance floor to the bar for another drink. My inhibitions slowly drift away as the warm and sensual caress of alcohol unfurls in my veins. I glimpse myself in the mirror behind the bar. My cheeks are pink with the heat that permeates my body, and my hair is a ruffled mess from dancing.

The bartender hands me another of the fruity drinks Klaus had ordered earlier.

“Damn. That’s too bad. I’d hoped to make it over in time to buy you a drink.” A man that screams sleazy Hollywood moves to stand next to me. “I’m Chad. I hope I’m not being too forward, but are you here alone?”

“Uh,” I stall, searching the crowd for Klaus. “I’m here with—”

“There you are. I thought I’d lost you out there.”

The rich, melodic voice comes from behind and I close my eyes as an arm wraps around my waist, fingers gripping my hip.

“My apologies.” Chad sounds more annoyed than apologetic about the newcomer’s intrusion.

“No problem.” I can practically hear the forced politeness in *his* voice and open my eyes to tell Chad that I am not here with anyone but a friend. But he has since moved on to another target farther down the line of people at the bar.

Breathing deeply, I step away until the man’s arm at my back falls away,

then turn to face a blast from my past. A sexy as fuck blast from the past.

“Vance,” Jamison Black breathes out, the word barely a whisper. My name on his lips shoots an arrow of lust straight to my dick. “I thought it was you. What are you doing here? In California, I mean, not the club.”

*I’m here for you.* I can’t say those words out loud. He probably expects that I have moved on. He obviously has, considering his girlfriend is on his arm in all the magazines lately.

“I took an internship out here.” I shrug as if it’s inconsequential that we are in the same place at the same time when my brain and my body are both highly aware of just how close we’re standing.

He nods, his eyes shifting to look around before he leans closer to whisper in my ear. The scent of his cologne invades the air around us and memories of the last time we were together wash over me.

“Vance?”

“Huh?” I meet his eyes, the blue of the irises capturing me in their gaze. When he smiles, my gaze flicks to his lips and I swipe my tongue over my own.

“God, I missed you, Vance. I didn’t realize how much until now. Wanna get out of here? Catch up?” He looks so hopeful that I almost give in. It’s what I’ve wanted for so long, but I know he doesn’t see me as anything more than an old friend to reminisce with.

“Sorry, I can’t. I’m here with someone.”

“Oh.” The disappointment in his voice has me reconsidering, and I open my mouth to tell him I changed my mind.

“Vance!” Klaus shouts my name before I can say anything, and I glance over my shoulder and wave him over. When I turn back around, Jamison is gone.

# 3

## *Jamison*

### *A Few Minutes Prior*

My voice sounds over the cacophony of the crowded club as I step off the staircase onto the main floor, the DJ playing Maxim's latest single. Vance has left the bar and moved onto the dance floor. Eyes closed and lips parted, he's lost in the music and I can't keep my eyes off him. The way he sways his hips in time to the beat has me mesmerized and my jeans growing tighter around a certain part of my anatomy that remembers all too well what it was like to be inside him. It's been years, but it might as well have been yesterday from the way my body is reacting to just the sight of him.

Nothing matters to me at this moment except getting to Vance. Not Maxim. Not the crowd surrounding us. Not the upcoming tour or my pretend girlfriend. Right now, there is only Vance and my need for him.

I push through the throng of people dancing and chatting at the edges of the dance floor, drinking and working up the nerve to let themselves be as free as Vance appears to be. Breaking through the wall of bodies in time to see him walking over to the bar, I shove my way to the other side.

A man is chatting him up, and as I move closer, I hear him ask if he's here alone. It's irrational, and Vance may even want to leave with this guy, but I can't help the possessive urge that comes over me as I wrap my arm around him. "There you are. I thought I'd lost you out there."

Vance stiffens against me, and the other man glares at me as he apologizes. "No problem," I tell him and force a smile. When he moves on to immediately pull the same move on another man just a few feet away, I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't noticed Vance in the crowd and sought him out.



Vance pulls away and I let my arm fall to my side as he turns to face me. “Vance, I thought it was you. What are you doing here? In California, I mean, not the club.” I’m an idiot. Less than a minute in his presence and I can’t speak coherently.

“I took an internship out here.” He shrugs and I inwardly flinch. Does he not feel the same as me? *Of course he doesn’t. It’s been years, Jamison. He’s clearly moved on.* I ignore the voice in my head and quickly check that we’re not being watched before leaning in close enough that he can hear me without having to shout. “Vance?”

“Huh?”

He looks up at me with slightly glazed eyes the color of burnt sienna. I grin as I remember how he used to look at me with that drunken gaze when things got hot and heavy between us. Only it’s the alcohol and not lust for me that has him closing his eyes and swaying closer. “God, I missed you, Vance. I didn’t realize how much until now. Wanna get out of here? Catch up?”

The frown and sigh of regret remind me he didn’t come here alone before he speaks. “Sorry, I can’t. I’m here with someone.”

“Oh.” I must sound as crestfallen as I feel because I can see the wheels turning in Vance’s eyes as he tries to come up with a solution that will keep both me and his date happy. But I don’t want to be second to the man he truly wants, so when his companion shouts out for him, I slip away back to the VIP area.

Maybe it’s a ridiculous thought to have wanted Vance to still be as hung up on me as I am him, but I didn’t realize until I’d seen him after all this time that I’d never moved on from what we’d had. I’ve satisfied my sexual urges with both men and women, but there’s never been anyone serious. Not even Marcy. And most were just a quick fuck in secret, especially the men. Macallister had expressed his concern of my sexuality overshadowing the band in a negative light. One reason he’d jumped at pairing me with Marcy for the public’s eye. He, like a lot of people, assumes because I’m attracted to more than one gender that if they shove a woman on me and I accept, I’ll suddenly become straight. That’s not how it works, but I don’t bother trying to correct that assumption anymore.

I watch Vance leave with a man who would never hide any part of himself. Jealousy fills me. If I hadn’t listened to first Alex and then

Macallister, would I have left Vance behind to follow my dream, or would he have been at my side for the last six years?

*Fuck.* That's not something I want to think about. I take a long swallow of the beer one of the many VIP servers keeps in supply for the club's patrons and try to drown out the what-ifs.

"Who pissed in your beer?" Alex asks.

"No one. Where'd you go?" He hadn't been at the table when I got back.

"Nowhere."

I sigh. So that's how it's going to be. I don't feel like rehashing the past with him. He'll just point out how he knew that me and Vance wouldn't last and our future as Maxim would have ended before it began if I hadn't left the way I had. I'd heard various versions of his viewpoint in the first year after I left Vance alone in his bed with only a note to explain my absence.

"Being sober sucks."

I laugh at his change of subject before addressing him more seriously. "It only sucks because you haven't been clearheaded for a long time. All those thoughts and feelings you're running from don't have anything to keep them at bay."

"I'm not running from anything. It's just more fun to have the buzz of alcohol." He stares me down, daring me to tell him differently. Any other night I would accept his challenge happily, but I can't tonight. Not after the devastatingly short reunion I just had with Vance.

We sit without talking for a few minutes, watching the people come and go around us.

"Where's Marcy? Couldn't make it out tonight?"

Something about the way he asks and my having just seen Vance spurs my response. "What is your problem with me and Marcy? Not that there really is a me and Marcy, but I'd thought you'd be just as happy as Macallister for me to have a girlfriend, no matter how fake our relationship is. From the moment Ronnie approached us, you've been insistent that no one knows that I'm not as straight as the rest of the band. But you've acted like an asshole since Macallister announced our collaboration."

"Whatever. I'm heading out." Alex pushes his chair away from the table so hard it falls over behind him. He doesn't look back though, just angrily stomps down the stairs and out the door.

"What was that about?" Thierry asks as he rights the chair Alex knocked

over before sitting.

“Nothing. Just Alex being Alex.” It’s not exactly the whole truth, but I don’t want to admit that I was the catalyst behind his sudden departure. We need to stick together now more than ever if we plan to take our music careers to the next level.

He doesn’t look convinced but shrugs it off. “Do you think this stylist Macallister hired will change how we dress to look more like a boy band?”

I snort at the thought and take another swig from my beer. “God, I hope not.”

Thierry’s green eyes sparkle with amusement. “Yeah me, too.”

“But they might make you cut your hair.”

The horrified expression on his face has me rolling in laughter. The man has grown his hair out since we formed the band, only getting the occasional trim. He swears it’s for good luck, but I’m not sure I believe that.

“That’s not funny. Think I could convince Macallister to add a clause into our contract that prevents anyone from touching my hair?”

“I’m sure if it’s a concern of yours, he’d be willing to make the required concessions to prevent anything from happening to your precious strands.”

My mood lightened after my conversation with Alex, I spend the rest of the night drinking, dancing, and celebrating with the rest of the guys. Not once do I let my mind drift back to Vance and what might have been. Yeah, right, who am I kidding? I’m a horrible liar. He’s all my mind can focus on.

# 4

## *Vance*

Over twenty-four hours after I ran into Jamison, I'm kicking myself for not saying yes. My second chance with the man came and went in an instant. The chances of me seeing him again are slim, but not zero. Today is the meeting with Twisted Records, his record label. Maybe I'll run into him, if not today, in the future. I plan to be with Wallace long after my internship is over, which hopefully means I'll be working with Twisted Records long term.

Klaus picks me up from the crappy, but affordable apartment I found near the office.

"This place is an eyesore of epic proportions. I can only imagine what the inside looks like. How can you stand to live here?" He gives the building a disgusted grimace before pulling out into the traffic.

"It's what I can afford for now. It's not as bad as you think." Which isn't necessarily a lie. My apartment isn't that bad, not after all the scrubbing I did after moving in.

"Ugh. I wish they paid the interns more. No one should live in a place like that."

I don't respond. What can I say to that, anyway? Silence fills the car as we drive toward the record label's offices.

"Fuck it. I can't hold back any longer. Were you talking to Jamison Black at the club the other night?"

Part of me had hoped he hadn't seen us together. When he hadn't asked any questions, I'd assumed that was the case. Well, you know what they say about assuming...

I let out a sigh. "Yeah."

"Shouldn't you be happier about that? He's a gorgeous piece of rockstar,

I'd be shouting from the rooftop if he just said hi to me."

"You're ridiculous. You talk to famous musicians all day, every day, and you expect me to believe Jamison Black is special?"

"Hello! Have you seen that man's ass? Stop trying to deflect. What did you two talk about?"

Might as well tell him. Who knows, maybe Klaus can arrange for us to have that catch up Jamison wants. "We grew up together. And we might have kinda been best friends." *And lovers.* "Then the band signed with Twisted Records and he moved away. I haven't seen him since we were eighteen." My voice breaks on the last words as I remember that night. I hope Klaus doesn't hear the emotion I can't hide, but that's a fool's wish as his next words confirm.

"Uh, huh. You were in love with him. Don't try to deny it. I can hear the longing in your voice. Must have broken your heart that he's straight. Nothing worse than being in love with a straight man, except maybe being in love with someone who refuses to come out of the closet."

Jamie's not out about his sexuality and even if he was, I'd never break his trust by sharing our most intimate moments with anyone else. Let Klaus believe what he wants.

"We're here," Klaus states as he pulls into the parking garage at Twisted Records. He parks near the entrance and we exit the car to head inside. Klaus gives me a look as we take the elevator to the floor a receptionist directed us to. I take that to mean he wants to finish this conversation later. I pretend I don't see it.

"Do we know who we're representing for Mr. Macallister?" I ask.

Klaus shakes his head. "No. Only information I have is that we're representing a band and one of the members has anger management issues."

"So it could be anyone."

A rumble of laughter leaves him as the elevator doors open. "Yep."

Jonathan Marks and David Young, the other PR reps on our team, are already seated when we reach the designated waiting area.

"Macallister is with the band now. Apparently they need a stylist as well as PR," Young remarks as Klaus and I take the two remaining available seats.

"Mr. Peterson?" A tall dark-haired man in a suit asks, and Klaus quickly stands to greet him with his hand extended, the rest of our team following

his lead. I notice Klaus is dressed similar to the man in a suit that is dark gray in color instead of his normal bright eye-catching attire, and I wonder if that is indicative of the client we have been hired to represent for Macallister.

“Call me Klaus. This is Jonathan Marks, David Young, and Vance Martin.” Klaus introduces each of us.

“Jude Thomas. You’ll report any concerns or issues with the band to me directly. Follow me and we can get this meeting under way.”

I enter the room just ahead Klaus, Jude along with Marks and Young having already made their way inside. No one is paying us any attention yet, so they don’t see when I freeze in the doorway. Well, no one except for Klaus.

“What are you doing?” he asks, then takes in the room and its occupants. “Oh. Looks like you and your BFF get to reunite for longer than a quick hello.”

He smacks my back in a friendly slap and uses his hand to propel me forward into the room. I keep my head down and sit as far from the band as I can to avoid any unnecessary questions.

“Mr. Peterson, you and your team come highly recommended by Wallace himself.” Lance Macallister starts the meeting with no preamble. “We’re all busy, so I’ll make this quick. Maxim is climbing the charts and while they’ve been doing okay these past few years, my intuition says they’re about to blow up. I fully believe these men have what it takes to make it to the top and stay there, but there’ve been a few... mishaps. Twisted Records will not be associated with behavior that threatens the reputation of the company. The short of it is that Maxim is headlining for Tainted on their tour across the country. I need your team, Mr. Peterson, to keep any incidents that occur contained. Your team and Mr. Nichols here will travel along with the band and shape their public image into that of rock legends. Are there any questions?”

I look up as Macallister ends his little speech. No one is paying me any attention and I can only assume they don’t care that I’m here or they don’t know who I am.

“Yeah. I don’t have to cut my hair, right?” Thierry asks, looking back and forth between Macallister and a stylish man sitting at the opposite end of the large table.

“I told you, Mr. Lachlan, as long as it fits the overall aesthetic Mr. Macallister is looking for, your hair is safe,” the man tells Thierry with an exasperated fling of his hands and an eye roll.

Macallister ignores both men. “Good. I’ve made arrangements for three buses. One for the band, another for Mr. Nichols and Mr. Peterson and the PR team, and the last for the roadies. Prepare to hit the road on Sunday. I’ll send out a detailed schedule this afternoon. And the rest of you”—he points to the other members of Maxim one at a time—“are to report any concerns you have about Mr. Gregory to Mr. Peterson. Now, I have somewhere else I need to be. Stick around and get to know each other.”

Macallister leaves with Jude hot on his heels, and an awkward silence fills the space.

“I’m not cutting my hair.” Thierry crosses his arms and glares at the stylist.

“We’ll see.” The other man smirks at Thierry.

“I’m Klaus Peterson.” Klaus introduces himself and draws the attention of the room to him and, by default, his team, aka me. I can only hope that his over-the-top personality distracts from anyone noticing my presence. “I’m the PR lead on your team. Anything you need, good or bad, I’m your guy. My associates, Jonathan Marks and David Young, will carry out the publicity for Maxim and the tour. Vance Martin will be my right hand. If for any reason I am indisposed, Vance will have authority to make decisions in my stead.” Klaus nods and smiles, sure of his position while dashing my hope that I can avoid confrontation with the guys for a while longer.

“Vance? No way! How have you been, man?” Anders asks, the first of the band’s members to acknowledge that they know me.

“Hey, Anders. Guys.” I wave awkwardly to include everyone while simultaneously avoiding looking in Jamie’s direction.

“You know each other. Great. That will make things easier,” Klaus states as if he didn’t already know that I have a history with at least one member of Maxim.

Alex lets out some weird snort cough and mutters not so quietly, “yeah, right.”

“You must be Alex.” Klaus gestures at the man in question. “We’re going to be good friends, you and I. Just call me Elmer, because I’m gonna be glued to your side.”

“Whatever. Do you think you could tone down the gay while you’re up my ass?”

Damn. Alex had always been an asshole, but I don’t remember him being homophobic. Not around me, at any rate.

“For fuck’s sake, Alex! What the fuck is up with you?” Jamison’s face is red with anger, and something tells me this isn’t the first time they’ve had this conversation.

“Nothing. I’m sorry, okay.”

“I’m not the one you should apologize to.”

“No worries, sugar. Alex will have plenty of time to apologize and make up for his attitude. But I think it’s only fair that I let everyone know that this —” Klaus motions down his body—“is me with the gay toned down. Don’t expect to see it again any time soon. We’ll see you gentlemen on Sunday.”

Klaus makes his way toward the door with Marks and Young following. I hesitate, for what I don’t know.

“Bye. It was nice to see you guys again,” I say, turning to go. My eyes lock with Jamie’s on the way out and I will him to say something. To acknowledge me. But he doesn’t and soon enough, the door closes between us with a resounding click.



# 5

## *Jamison*

I watch the door close behind Vance, shutting me in with the rest of the band and firmly away from the man who has haunted my every thought since I'd seen him at the club.

Thierry and our new stylist, Hawke Nichols, continue to argue about his hair. It's obvious the man is only fucking with Thierry because he's so upset about the possibility of losing the security blanket he claims as a good luck charm.

"You good, J?" Alex asks, and I know what he's really asking is if I am going to be able to keep up the façade with Marcy now that Vance is coming on tour with us.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Man, I can't believe Vance, of all people, is part of the PR Macallister set up. What are the odds?" Anders smiles broadly, clearly delighted in the coincidence.

"It'll be nice to have him around again. He was always our number one fan." Rierdan adds in his thoughts, and it appears the only person upset with Vance's arrival is Alex. But he's upset about everything lately, and I have a feeling Klaus Peterson will end up putting him in his place again and again on this tour.

"It will," I agree. "Thierry, quit bickering about your precious locks and let Mr. Nichols get on with his day."

"Please, call me Hawke. I hate the stuffy and formal addressing of mister. I'm not an old man. And while I have nowhere else to be, I'll get out of your hair,"—he smirks in Thierry's direction—"I'll see you on Sunday."

Hawke gathers his messenger bag, then with an elegant wave of his hand, he leaves the conference room.

“That man is a menace.” Thierry sulks and glares as the rest of us laugh.

“That man just likes the way you look when you pout. It is a rather adorable expression on you. No one would guess you’re the oldest with your bottom lip sticking out like that.” Rierdan’s comment only makes Thierry pout more and another round of laughter fills the room.

My phone pings with a notification for a new email. Macallister has sent over the details for the tour. There are dates and times, some to be determined, and a set list of the songs he wants us to perform. But what catches my eye is the list of names and contacts at the bottom of the message. Vance’s cell number seems to jump off the screen at me.

Before I can overthink why it’s a bad idea, I type out a quick message asking if he wants to meet for dinner tonight and hit send.

**Vance: Who is this?**

*Shit.* I forgot he doesn’t have my number.

**Me: Jamison. I just got Macallister’s itinerary and wanted to discuss a few things.**

**Me: Unless you think I should contact Klaus instead.**

It’s bullshit. The itinerary is solid enough. But the thought of starting this tour and being so close to Vance without at least some kind of friendly understanding between us feels counterproductive. He may not want me the way he used to, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.

I watch the bubbles that indicate he’s typing come and go for a solid two minutes before I set my phone to the side with a sigh. Whatever he is going to say is not something I want to read in front of my bandmates.

“Anyone have any objections to the order of the set list? Additional songs we should play or swap out?” I ask, focusing my mind on preparing for the tour.

“I have a few suggestions that will help the flow and create a better experience for the audience. I’ll need to listen to the set in order to be sure it works first, though.”

I nod at Anders. “Okay, send them to me once you’ve done that and I’ll let Macallister know of the changes. Anyone else got anything?” A collective “no” sounds from the rest of the band. “We leave Sunday, spend the next few days getting things in order and packing. Try not to get into trouble if you go out. I’ll see you guys on Saturday to pack up the instruments and put them on the bus. I know Macallister hired roadies, but

until we know we can trust them, I'd rather we do it ourselves."

An incoming text notification goes off amid the rustle of chairs and feet as we prepare to leave. I hang back inside the room until everyone is gone before pulling up the message.

**Vance: Okay. No need to contact Klaus. When and where?**

It took him that long to type such a short response? *He probably wanted to tell you no, but it's his job. If he refuses, he's out.* I should tell him never mind and forget the ridiculous idea of us being friends, if only for the length of the tour.

**Me: 6 at Rinaldo's.**

Maybe choosing the new Italian place I went with Marcy last night isn't the smartest thing to do. However, it's quiet and public, which will hopefully ease whatever apprehension Vance may have about being alone with me.

**Vance: See you then.**

I call the restaurant and make a reservation for a table with some privacy, citing a business meeting as if the hostess cares. No one cares about me having dinner with a member of my PR team except me. And I care for all the wrong reasons.

I arrive early, eager to see Vance. To talk to him and catch up. But my hope of reconnecting dwindles as the time ticks by. At twenty past, I resign myself to eating dinner alone tonight and a long awkward tour with a former lover in the near future. I raise my hand to wave the server over, but a commotion draws my attention to the entrance.

"I'm so sorry I'm late." Vance approaches the table. "I had trouble getting a car, then there was traffic. I should have left earlier, but I'm not used to this city yet."

"It's no problem. You could have called, though." I know I sound put out over his tardiness, but I don't care. It's the least he could have done, considering I am his client, and this is a supposed business meeting.

"I... you're right. I should have let you know as soon as I realized I would be late."

"It's fine, really." I pick up one of the menus the server had set on the table for us and hand it to Vance. The soft smile he gives me in thanks turns into a frown and his eyes widen more and more the longer he stares at the list of entrees and their price. "Don't worry, I'm paying. Or rather,

Macallister is. Get whatever you want. It's his dime." I wink and watch the blush that brightens Vance's cheeks.

The server comes back around, and I order a bottle of their best Sangiovese and the caprese stuffed chicken while Vance gets the baked spinach and ricotta ravioli.

Vance looks around as the server leaves to put in our food request. "This place is amazing. A little out of my price range for now, but if the food is as impeccable as the decor and atmosphere, I'll definitely be coming back in the future."

He turns his wonder-filled eyes in my direction. The giddy smile on his lips reminding me of how contagious his excitement can be. I used to do anything I could to put that look on his face. To know I am the reason for the bright, awe-filled expression once again gives me a growing sense of rightness, of being exactly where I'm meant to be. I let hope that we can be more than friends flutter its wings.

Vance clears his throat. "So, what did you need to talk to me about?"

And just like that, whatever fantasy I had of Vance and me rekindling our past vanishes. The best I can hope for is business acquaintances and possibly friends. Nothing more.

# 6

## *Vance*

I'd lied to Jamison. I wasn't late because of traffic or trouble getting a car. No, I was late because I kept flip flopping about coming. In the end, I decided it was best if I showed up. I really need this job, and I want to reconnect with Jamie, but I'm not sure if I can keep things professional.

"So, what did you need to talk to me about?"

"Oh, uh, it doesn't seem as important as it did a few hours ago."

The server appears from nowhere and places our entrees on the table before pouring Jamison a sampling of the wine he'd ordered. At Jamie's nod of approval, the server fills our wine glasses then fades away back to wherever he came from.

"It might seem unimportant to you now, but no matter how insignificant a thing may seem, I should know about it. It's the little things that end up turning into the big things in the media," I tell him.

Jamie scrunches his brows, contemplating if it's worth telling me whatever small thing prompted this meeting. I take a bite of my ravioli as I wait for him to decide whether to tell me or not. The moan I let out at the exquisite taste is embarrassing and I can feel the heat of a blazing inferno blossom in my cheeks.

"It's good, right?" Jamie asks and I look up from my plate in time to see him place a bite of his chicken in his mouth. His lips close around the tines of the fork and the hum of appreciation he makes as he slides the utensil from his mouth causes my dick to twitch and harden in my slacks.

"I think good is an understatement and you know it." I take another bite to occupy my mouth so I don't end up saying something I'll regret. Jamie has, and probably always will, reduced me to a ball of lust ready to explode at any moment.

“So?” I ask once I’m sure my libido is under control. Well, as much as it can be in his presence.

“So, what?” He lifts a brow in confusion.

“Why are we here, Jamie?” I set my fork down, focusing on our conversation rather than my dinner.

“Fuck. Don’t get mad.”

It’s my turn to scrunch my brows in confusion. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because... there isn’t any important business to discuss. I just wanted to talk to you.” Jamie blurts out the words and gives me a sheepish smile.

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I told you the other night at the club. I missed you and I wanted to catch up. This seemed like a good way to make that happen, but now I’m thinking I should have just left you alone.”

“Why?”

“You obviously have moved on from us, which is fine. What we had was years ago. Things have changed, but I thought we could be friends. It would make this tour easier.”

“Of course we can be friends, Jamie. And I missed you too.” *More than you’ll ever know.*

“Good.” Jamie takes another bite of chicken, then tells me about the fight Hawke, the new stylist, and Thierry had over Thierry’s hair. The rest of the dinner is easy and companionable, each of us reminiscing and filling the other in on what the last six years have been like. Jamie has been focused on the band and me on school.

“What about Marcy Dixon?” I ask.

“Huh? What about Marcy?”

I laugh. “You can’t not tell me about your girlfriend, Jamie. How did you two meet? Was it love at first sight?” *Is it as magical as the love we had?*

“Did you read the dossier sent about the band? All the boring stuff is in there.” Finished with his meal, he pushes his plate away and picks up his wineglass.

“Not yet. But your relationship isn’t part of the boring stuff. Come on, spill.” I don’t know why I’m insisting he torture me with tales of his romance with the actress. Apparently I’m a masochist.

“Uh, we’re not really together. I mean, we’re friends and occasionally we... but we’re not actually a couple. Macallister set it up to help to deflect

from some possible bad publicity and to bring Maxim into the spotlight. Which is apparently working since we have this upcoming tour with Tainted.”

“Oh.” A wave of relief that there might be a chance for us is quickly quelled by the realization that I could only ever be his dirty little secret. That might have been enough for me before, but I won’t settle for hiding who I am. Not even for Jamison Black. Everything I’ve wanted for the past six years goes up in flames as I become cognizant of the truth: the future I’d worked so hard to achieve is a fairytale never meant to be.

Oblivious to my inner turmoil Jamison asks, “Hey, you wanna go somewhere a bit more laid-back?”

“Yeah, sure.” My dream of being with Jamie may be shattered, but that doesn’t mean a friendship is out of the question. I’ll just have to remember that’s all we’ll ever be.

“Thank God. As delicious as the food is here, I hate all the pretentious posturing that comes along with it.”

Jamie waves down the server and pays our bill, then ushers me outside to a waiting car. I slide into the backseat as Jamie gives the driver an address. The car is expensive, and I’d guess not one readily available to the public.

“Macallister’s hired driver. Being part of Twisted Records has its perks.”

The car takes us out of the city proper and to what looks like an old, rundown bar. Neon signs half lit advertise popular beers. The parking lot is full of beat-up pickups and older generation vehicles. There’s no way this car won’t stick out and cause a scene.

“Thanks, Frank. Swing back around at closing,” Jamie tells the driver, then grabs my hand and pulls me from the car. I follow him inside and to the bar. While he orders us a drink, I take in the place. There are a few high tops and booths, a stage set up for a band, and a small dance floor. It screams local hole-in-the-wall and reminds of the times I’d watched Maxim play at the dive bars back home.

“Looks like we’re just in time,” Jamie says as he hands me a glass filled with what looks like soda. “Rum and coke. They don’t have any fruity cocktails here. Come on, the band’s about to start.”

We stand near the stage and for the next few hours, I watch Jamie as he listens and dances along to the band. They’re not that good. With more practice they’ll have a chance, but the pure delight on Jamie’s face makes

me want to claim them as my new favorite, after Maxim, of course.

The night has been one full of nerves and dashed hopes, and now magic. It's like I'm a teenager again, waiting for Jamie to notice me. The hope I squashed earlier in the evening comes back full force as we leave the bar and Jamie instructs me to tell the driver my address.

I cringe as we stop outside my rundown apartment building. "Thanks. I had fun," I tell him and exit the car.

"Vance! Hey, hang on a minute." Jamie follows me inside and up the stairs.

I stop at my door, lean my forehead against the warped wood, and grip my keys in my fist hard enough to almost break the skin. "Jamie..." I trail off, unable to say what I need to.

"Van, look at me," he demands. So I do. I take in every gorgeous inch of him. A sigh of want leaves me and I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly too dry. His eyes follow the movement and he leans in, stopping just a breath away. "I should stop before I do something we'll both regret in the morning, but I don't want to."

"Then don't." As if the words are all the permission he needs, Jamie closes the distance between us and takes my lips with his. His tongue sweeps inside my mouth and any logical thought I had to resist the man is gone.



## *Jamison*

I push Vance's body against the door as I plunder his mouth and grind my painfully stiff cock along his, the barrier of our pants doing nothing to hinder the delicious friction. His tongue has the faintest taste of rum leftover from his drink earlier tonight and I suck on it, trying to take all the flavor of him into me.

His loud moan echoes in the hall, returning a little bit of sense. Not enough to stop this, but enough to move us behind closed doors. I take the keys from his hand and, without breaking the kiss, unlock and open the door. We fall inside, landing on the floor in a heap, and breaking the kiss for a moment.

My heart pounds in my chest at the look of unbridled lust in Vance's dazed eyes. I kick the door closed with my foot and pounce. My fingers undo his pants and shove them down as far as they'll go in this position, which is enough for his dick to spring free—so just enough—while my mouth returns to his. My hand wraps around the firm yet soft skin of his shaft and—

*Buzz.*

*Buzz, buzz.*

The vibrating rhythm of an incoming call comes from the pocket of Vance's slacks.

"Ignore it. I can call whoever it is back in the morning," Vance says between panting breaths, but the buzzing starts up again before I can agree.

I pull back to sit on my heels as Vance digs the phone from his pocket and looks at the screen. With a groan, he answers the call.

I should leave, but Vance hasn't moved from his position on the floor. His cock is leaking pre-cum and I salivate, thinking about tasting the pearly

bead resting on his tip.

“What?” Vance sits up and all sexy thoughts leave my brain when he mouths “Alex” at me. “Are you sure you don’t need me to come with you? Yeah, all right. See you in the morning.”

Vance clicks off the call and stands, pulling his pants back into place and hiding away his softening cock. Following suit, I rise to my feet as well.

“What’s going on with Alex?” I ask, though I’m sure I don’t want to know.

“Uh, I don’t really know. Klaus just wanted to inform me there was an almost incident, and he was on his way to take care of it.” Vance shrugs, then walks to the small sofa and sits.

I take in the small apartment, now that my little head isn’t calling the shots. It’s one room that just manages to hold a counter with a sink and stove top, a fridge, sofa, television, and the smallest bed I’ve ever seen inside its four walls.

“Jamie,” Vance starts to say something.

I don’t want to hear the rejection I can sense is coming, so I interrupt. “Don’t worry, man. That call saved us from making a mistake. I get it. It would have ruined our friendship.”

“Right. A mistake.” He doesn’t look any happier than I do, but if we hadn’t stopped when we did, the next few months would have been awkward at best.

Vance slaps his thighs and stands. “It’s late, Jamie. You should get back home.”

I nod. He’s right. “I had fun tonight, Van. We should do it again sometime. Except without the, you know.” I gesture at the floor.

“Yeah, me too. I had fun. And we should definitely do it again, without the, you know.” Vance’s smile remains in place as he tells me goodbye and shuts the door behind me.

I climb into the back of the car and tell Frank to take me home. I’m suddenly exhausted. The city passes by in a blur outside the window and my thoughts seem to go just as fast. Regret. Acceptance. Want. Necessity. *Vance. Vance. Vance.*

Frank pulls up to the house just as Klaus climbs behind the wheel of the sedan parked near the front door. He waves at me as he speeds off. He doesn’t appear pissed, so I can only assume whatever Alex did wasn’t too

bad. This time.

The man in question is sitting at the dining table with a steaming mug in front of him and a bewildered, faraway look in his eyes. He shakes his head when my footsteps on the hardwood floor announce my arrival.

“Hey,” he says with a chagrined attempt at a smile.

“Hey, yourself. What was Klaus doing here?”

Alex’s shoulders tense. “What did he say?”

Curious response. “Nothing. He was already pulling away when I got here.”

He relaxes and reaches out a finger and smooths it over the rim of his mug. “Nothing happened. Klaus was here because he thought something was going to happen, but he was worried about nothing.”

“Why did he think that?” Klaus had to have had a reason to show up. He seemed to enjoy teasing Alex, but I can’t believe he would just drop everything to continue their banter.

“Anders thought he heard something he didn’t and called him. It was a mistake and it’s not a big deal. Do you really think that rainbow McGee would have left if it was?”

I roll my eyes at his nickname for Klaus, whose wardrobe tonight appeared to contain all the colors of the rainbow like the name suggests. I don’t know if I believe Alex that it’s not a big deal, but I’m willing to give him a chance to prove himself. “Okay.”

“Okay? That’s it? Okay.”

“What do you want from me, Alex? A fight over something you say didn’t happen? I won’t argue with you over nothing.” I throw my hands up and leave the room.

A nice, long, cold shower is needed to rinse away the residual lust still clawing at me, along with the irritation Alex has awakened. I scrub at my body, ignoring my dick as it tries to persuade me to offer some relief. If I do, I’ll only think of Vance and end up in the same state I was in before I stepped beneath the freezing spray of water.

Once I’m clean, I wrap a towel around my waist and head to my bedroom. I sleep naked most days, but I learned the hard way not to walk the halls in my birthday suit.

My phone sits on the nightstand where I set it before heading into the shower, the blinking notification light a beacon drawing me in. I toss my

towel in the direction of the laundry basket and climb beneath the light comforter. After settling in, I reach for my phone and enter my passcode. The number three over the text icon begs me to open the app. I click the little green comment box.

**Vance: Let me know when you make it home.**

**Vance: Is everything okay?**

**Vance: Are you dead in a ditch?**

I laugh at that last message. Vance was always a worrier and I know if I don't answer him soon, he'll be calling in reinforcements, mostly in the form of Klaus.

**Me: Calm down. I was just taking a shower. All good.**

**Vance: Okay. That's good.**

**Vance: Good night, Jamie.**

**Me: Good night, Van.**

I lock my phone and place it back on the nightstand. My damn dick is hard again from just a simple text conversation with Vance, and I glare at the tented comforter, willing the appendage to go limp.

Ten minutes later, I punch my pillow and blow out a frustrated breath. Closing my eyes, I attempt to fall asleep with an unrelenting boner. Something tells me I'm not getting any rest tonight. Or I guess morning since it's almost dawn now. *Goddamn fucking hard on.*

# 8

## *Vance*

Sunday took decades to arrive. At least it felt like it. I'd spent the days prior obsessing over Jamie and what had almost happened. It wasn't a good idea for a lot of reasons, but I was having trouble remembering them as I watch him loading the bus. His muscles flex with each movement and when he bends over, his shirt rides up to expose skin while his jeans hug his ass just right.

"You've got a bit of drool on your chin," Klaus says, pointing at my face.

I wipe the back of my hand across my face and glare at him when he laughs. "You're not funny."

"Yes, I am. But hey, I can't blame you for checking out the... assets we've been asked to keep in line." His eyes narrow in on Alex as he speaks.

After everything has been loaded, Klaus calls for a quick meeting before we board the buses and head out.

"Last night something was brought to my attention and because of this I spoke with Mr. Macallister this morning." Everyone exchanges confused glances at Klaus' words, except for Alex, whose eyes throw daggers at the man. "Don't worry, nothing major happened, and it's only going to require a slight change to keep it that way. Thierry and Rierdan, you'll be on the second bus with Young, Hawke, and Mr. Thomas. Marks will stay behind to keep things in check on the home front. Vance and myself will be on the first bus with Jamison, Anders, and Alex. Questions? No. Good. Let's get this show on the road!"

Klaus claps his hands together and makes a shooing gesture toward the buses. Alex stomps off and onto his designated bus as the others hesitantly head to theirs, with only a little grumbling about the change in bunking arrangements.

“This has something to do with Alex and whatever happened the other night, doesn’t it?” I ask Klaus as I follow him to the bus.

“Nothing happened that night.” He stops, turning to face me. The smiling mask he usually wears falls away to seriousness. “And I’m going to make sure that nothing does happen. No matter what that insufferable prick thinks about it.”

If anyone can keep Alex in line, it’ll be Klaus. I have every confidence he’ll have the other man straightened out before the tour ends.

I step onto the bus and freeze. It hadn’t occurred to me I would be spending so much time in close proximity to Jamie. Anders says something and Jamie laughs, his head thrown back and throat exposed. *Good God. I’m not gonna survive this tour with my heart intact.*

“Vance!” Klaus calls me over to the small aisle between the bunks. There are four and a master bedroom, though bedroom is stretching it as it’s really just a room with a slightly bigger bed taking up most of the space. “Alex has his first virtual session in about fifteen minutes. We’ll be in the bedroom if you need anything.”

I nod. “Yeah, okay.”

“Oh, and Vance?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do with a sexy rockstar while I’m gone.” He winks, then walks away laughing.

Shaking my head, I bend over to dig my ear buds from my bag that someone had the forethought to put on the bus for me.

As I stand upright, the bus hits a pothole and a body slams into mine, hands gripping my waist to keep themselves from falling.

“Sorry.” The word is soft, spoken directly into my ear, and sends a shiver through me. Jamison’s fingers dig into my hips as he clenches his hands and steps closer, dragging his nose up my neck as he inhales. *Fuck me.* Why is the man sniffing me, and why is it so fucking hot?

“That’s okay.” I need to get away from him before I do something stupid, like pick things back up where we left off the other night. But I can’t move. I’m pinned between Jamison’s body pressing into me from behind and the bunks in front of me. “Uh, Jamie.”

“Yeah?” he asks as he continues to nuzzle into my neck.

“Are you sniffing me?”

“You smell good.” Somehow he manages to press in even closer, his hard dick wedging itself along my crack even through our jeans.

“Jamie.” His name comes out as a moan, so I clear my throat and try again. “Jamie. We can’t. I can’t let you do something you’ll regret.”

His hands fall from my waist and he moves away. Instantly I feel the loss of him like an arrow through my heart. But I meant what I said. I will not give in to him just so he can regret it in the morning. If I do, I’ll lose him for a lot longer than a few years this time. I’ll lose him forever.

Jamie looks around the bus, checking that no one saw. “You’re right. As much as I wish you weren’t. Um, excuse me.”

He slides past me and down the aisle to the tiny washroom. I walk in the other direction and sit beside Anders on the bench seat. He’s playing some shooting game on the small television installed on the opposite wall.

“Not cool, man,” he says, not taking his eyes from the screen and it takes me longer than it should to realize he’s not talking to me, but to whoever is on the other end of the headset he’s wearing. “Fuck. Thierry, your brother’s trying to kill me. Tyler, man, we’re on the same team.” A round of gun shots sound from the television and I let out a small laugh. Some things never change. Anders has always been into gaming, and he gets competitive when he plays. Tyler, Thierry’s brother, loves to piss him off when they play together.

I sit for a little while and just enjoy watching Anders play and listening to the one-sided commentary I’m privy to.

“Don’t give up.” The phrase comes from Anders while he’s in the middle of a shootout on screen. His voice sounds off and pulls my gaze to him. For the first time in hours, he’s not looking at the screen. He’s staring directly at me. I squirm in my seat, feeling like a bug beneath a microscope. He nods, then repeats, “Don’t give up on him yet. Hold on just a little longer.”

*Damn observant son of a bitch.* I should have known he’d seen us. “There is nothing to hold on to. I thought there was. For six years I’d held on to that hope, but I’m holding on to a wish. Maxim’s success is worth more than anything I can ever give him. Being with me threatens that. I won’t be the reason that Jamie, you, and the rest of the guys lose that dream. I can love him from afar. I have since we were teenagers.”

I don’t tell him I’m scared to let Jamie close. Because as much as I want him, I don’t want to have my heart broken again. I barely survived it

shattering the first time.

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## *Jamison*

I'm an idiot. Vance told me after I'd almost had his cock in my mouth the other night that we couldn't, that it would ruin our friendship. And what was the first thing I did when we were within touching distance again? Fucking try to molest him.

I splash cold water on my face, grateful that Macallister hadn't skimped on the tour buses. We'll be staying in hotels near the venues, but it's nice to know I won't have to do without a shower while we're traveling.

With water dripping down my face, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I give myself a little mental pep talk about being friends only with Vance. *Friends only*. How the fuck am I supposed to do that?

Taking a deep breath to prepare to head back out to the main area of the bus, I inhale the lingering scent of Vance in my nostrils. The heady mixture of the sandalwood soap he's used since he was sixteen and the salty sweat of his skin stirs my libido, making it nearly impossible to hide the erection straining against my jeans. I've been hard since the moment Vance walked into that club, with no relief in sight. *I'll just have to get used to it*.

I step from the washroom to find Vance sitting with Anders, watching him play his game. He looks content to just sit and watch, and I'd hate to interrupt and fuck it up. So I climb into one of the top bunks and adjust positions until I'm comfortable and can see Vance.

I don't know how much time passes as I just watch, taking in his entertained smiles and sympathetic grimaces to Anders' actions and I assume commentary. I can't hear him from where I am. The spinning of the tires on blacktop amplified in the bunk's alcove. But I've played with Anders enough to know how it goes with him.

At one point, the conversation turns serious judging by the looks on their

faces, and I have to hold myself back from jumping down and running in to save Vance from whatever Anders is telling him. Whatever it is, it leaves a stain of melancholy in Vance's eyes for a long while after the game has resumed.

Hours later, I'm awakened by hushed whispers. I don't remember falling asleep, but the exhaustion I'd been fighting must have finally caught up to me. It's dark and the only light comes from the television, illuminating Anders, who is still going strong in his on-screen battles, and a sleeping Vance beside him. The whispering sounds again, and I strain to make out who it is and what they're saying.

"No." That's Alex.

"Yes. I'll get Macallister involved if I need to." Klaus.

"Haven't you ruined my life enough in the past twenty-four hours?"

"I'm trying to save your life, you ungrateful ass."

"Whatever."

The sound of a door closing cuts off any more of their conversation from reaching me. I'd thought Alex was just being Alex, granted a more extreme version lately. Maybe I should pay more attention. But Klaus would tell me if something was seriously wrong, right?

Wide awake now, I roll from the bunk and grab a bottle of water on my way to the main area. There aren't any seats except the two farther up directly behind the driver, so I sit on the floor and lean against the bench where Anders and Vance sit.

"How's it going? Kicking Tyler's ass?" I don't need to ask who he's playing. No matter who else is signed on, Tyler is always there.

"Of course. He wouldn't know what to do if I wasn't constantly on his ass."

I laugh a little too loud and Vance shifts in his sleep. He'd be more comfortable in one of the bunks, but I don't want to wake him. Carrying him is an option, and I seriously contemplate it until the bus hits a bumpy patch in the road, gently shaking us around.

The soft glow from the television highlights Vance as he sleeps. His lashes form shadows on cheeks that are lined with stubble after the long day. Lips slightly parted, puffs of air blow them outward with every exhale. He looks peaceful and sexy as fuck. I want to climb onto the bench seat and gather him in my arms. If Anders wasn't right beside him, I might have

already done it.

“You should tell him what he means to you.” Anders’ voice breaks through the silence that had settled around us.

“What do you mean? He’s my best friend. He knows that.”

Anders arches a brow at me, the resulting expression creepy in the near darkness. “Does he?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

And with that, he goes back to his game.

Vance knows what he means to me. It’s been years since we’ve seen each other, but we both agreed at his apartment that we were friends. And that is the most important thing to both of us. The only reason we’d stopped before taking things too far, well besides Klaus’ call.

Despite my certainty, Anders’ words haunt me well into the morning, and I decide to show Vance how much I value our friendship and him.

The bus pulls into a truck stop to refuel. Vance is in the shower, but the rest of us file out to stretch our legs with the members on the second bus.

Anders runs inside to the fast-food joint connected to the station to grab us all something to eat. There are light snack foods on the buses, but nothing beats a greasy burger and fries.

Klaus sticks close to Alex, like he’s the other man’s shadow, but ignores his snide remarks and the sneering lift to his lips. Judging from the looks Thierry and Rierdan send in my direction, they’re more than a little curious about what’s going on. I shrug. I’d like to know as well, but that’s not our business. Not unless it threatens Maxim’s future. Until then, I’ll let them hash it out.

Vance steps off the bus and, like a magnet, my gaze follows his every move. His hair is wet and slicked back off his forehead, the brown strands looking as black as mine with the water darkening their color.

“We’ve got about seven hours until the next refueling, then from there it should be a straight shot to Austin,” Vance tells the group, presumably having gotten the information from our driver.

Klaus nods. “Okay. Anyone need to grab anything before we head back out?”

“Yeah, a bottle of Jack,” Alex mutters.

“No. Anyone else?”

“I think we’re good with the food Anders ordered.” I point at the man, who is carrying at least six oversized bags of greasy goodness.

“Here.” Anders hands Thierry a few of the bags. “And this one has a salad for Jude.”

Anders hands the bag to Rierdan as Thierry shivers in feigned revulsion. “Who the fuck willingly eats a salad?”

“Old man Thomas, apparently.” Rierdan snickers at his own joke, as do the rest of us. “Come on, let’s get the man his rabbit food.”

He and Thierry head to their bus and the rest of us board ours. Vance is ahead of me and as he mounts the stairs, my eyes latch on to the way his ass fills the slacks he’s wearing.

*Friends, Jamison. You’re just friends.*

Maybe if I repeat it enough, I’ll believe it.

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# 10

## *Vance*

We arrived in Austin and checked into the hotel in the early evening. I'm thankful to be off the bus. It held too much Jamie for me to last much longer without offering myself as tribute to his heated stares. I'd pretended I hadn't noticed the way he looked at me. But I had, holy fucking hell, I had.

It didn't help that he made an effort whenever possible to include me and Klaus in conversations and interactions I'd guessed were usually reserved only for his friends and bandmates. It was an olive branch. An acceptance of friendship between the two of us.

Like the bus arrangements, the hotel rooms required some adjustments. Lucky for me, Klaus put me up with Anders. "It's where Alex was supposed to stay, so it was easiest just to switch the two of you," he'd said with a shrug.

The guys are downstairs hanging out with Tainted before we are scheduled to have a very public dinner at Klaus' suggestion. I'm taking advantage of the quiet alone time to just relax, currently spread out on the bed with only a towel around my waist. Not that I hadn't enjoyed my time on the bus, but the small space meant I couldn't have any alone time, something I've grown used to over these past few years. I can meet the other band at dinner. Besides, I'm not the only one forgoing the meet and greet. Jude had to take a business call, and Thierry was on a video chat with Tyler.

My phone pings with a notification and I roll onto my side to reach where it sits on the small nightstand between the two single beds.

**Klaus: There's been a change in room assignments.**

**Me: Okay.**

The bubbles that indicate he's typing come and go, and a knock sounds at

the door before he responds. Dropping my phone on the bed, I secure my towel around my waist as I stand and walk to the door.

Shaking my head when I notice Anders' keycard is on the long dresser, I open the door with a laugh and a smirk. "Did you forget your key?" The last word catches in my throat. It's not Anders standing outside the hotel room. It's not Anders' eyes devouring me from head to toe.

"Oh, uh," Jamie stammers, then licks his lips. "Klaus was supposed to tell you about the change."

"Umm, yeah. He did. Sort of." As if on cue, my phone goes off with another alert. "Come in."

Jamie enters the room with his bag slung over a shoulder. *Wait a minute.* I grab my phone and stare at the unread messages Klaus sent. Then I read them again for good measure. Yep, it still says the same thing.

**Klaus: Jamison will be bunking with you.**

**Klaus: You're welcome.**

"Is this okay? Anders and Thierry wanted to have a game night with Tyler. Klaus suggested we switch, but I can stay in the other room if you want."

"What?" Apparently, I've lost the ability to form words. "I mean, uh..."

"Vance, is something wrong?"

Jamie sets his bag down on the floor by the second bed and takes a step toward me. *Oh god, please stop testing my willpower to resist this man.*

"Everything is fine. I was just surprised. Klaus hadn't told me all the details."

"Are you sure?" he asks, scrunching his brows with a frown. The resulting crease between them and the wrinkles on his forehead shouldn't be as attractive as they are. But everything about Jamie is attractive to me. Even his wrinkly forehead.

"Yeah. I've already showered, so it's all yours. We have about an hour before we need to meet up for dinner." I shift my focus to work and Jamie goes with it.

He closes the door behind him, and I hear the shower sputter into life. My dick does the same at the thought of a wet, sudsy Jamie only a few feet away. *Fuck.* My hands clench, and I remember I'm still holding my phone.

**Me: You could have given me a little more warning.**

**Klaus: Why are you texting me? You're supposed to be naked with**

**the hot rockstar.**

I roll my eyes at his absurdity.

**Me: Not going to happen.**

**Klaus: Why not?**

**Me: 1- he has a girlfriend.**

**Klaus: Fake girlfriend.**

**Me: 2- we're just friends.**

**Klaus: Yeah, right. Keep telling yourself that.**

**Me: 3- His career—and mine—take precedence over anything my dick thinks it wants.**

**Klaus: I don't have time to text all the ways you're an idiot right now. One on one after dinner.**

**Klaus: I'll make it an official work meeting if I need to**

**Me: Fine. But you won't change my mind.**

Klaus doesn't respond and I'm thankful because as valid as my reasons are for staying firmly in the friend zone with Jamie, it would only take the slightest push for me to cross into more than friends territory.

I dress in jeans and a t-shirt. Klaus wants us to blend in so that it isn't obvious that the band has babysitters, as Alex calls us. The added barrier of a suit would make it easier to keep my distance, but Klaus is right. It won't look good for Maxim to have their PR so publicly involved at this stage. While they're not household names, yet, Maxim has steadily been growing in popularity and they have a decent fan base. One that will blow up if this tour with Tainted is as successful as Macallister believes it will be.

The bathroom door opens, a cloud of steam and heat billows into the room before Jamie steps out. His hair drips droplets of water onto his bare chest. I watch as a bead falls from a strand to slide down his pec, catches on his nipple for a brief moment, then drops to follow the curved indents of his abs.

I swallow hard, watching Jamie cross the room in only a pair of thin boxers. His ass fills the fabric like an innocently indecent beacon for my eyes. *Stop it, Vance.* Ogling the man is not something friends do. And it's certainly not what professionals do to their clients. I need to remember that. I may only be an intern, but Jamie is my client, my friend. Definitely not my lover.

"You missed meeting Tainted," Jamie says as he pulls on a pair of jeans,

leaving them unbuttoned, and turns to face me. “You’ll like them, I think.”

I shrug. “Maybe. But it doesn’t matter if I do or not. My job is Maxim, not Tainted. As long as they don’t threaten the band’s reputation, everything will be fine.”

“Your job. Right. I keep forgetting that’s why you’re here. That it’s not like it was before, when you used to come to meetups and shows just to hang out and hear us play. When we were friends.” Jamie sighs, turning away and grabbing a shirt from his bag.

“We are friends.”

“We keep saying that, but I don’t think we are. I don’t think we could ever be friends, Van.” With that proclamation filling the silence, crushing me with its weight, Jamie closes himself inside the bathroom again.

I’m confused and I think I have whiplash. Jamie’s heated stares and efforts at friendship don’t jibe with us not being friends, or possibly, hopefully, more. No, not more. But I’m certain we *are* friends. Even if I weren’t part of his PR team, and we’d never been lovers, our friendship would still be there. Jamie will always be my friend, if nothing else. I refuse to think differently.



## *Jamison*

I have no right to be hurt and angry at Vance for calling us friends. He's made no secret that is how he sees us and how he wants to keep things between us. And his reasoning is sound. So why can't I accept that?

*Because he's Vance.*

It really is as simple as that. He's Vance. My best friend, first love, and biggest cheerleader. Even now. Sure, it's his job to be in my corner, but it's more than that. He wants to be there. He wants to make my dream come true, even at the expense of the possibility of us rekindling what we once had. *Or maybe he doesn't want to be a dirty secret no one knows about again.*

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Retreating to the bathroom wasn't the best idea, but I couldn't stay out there. I pull the black Maxim t-shirt over my head and finger comb some hair serum Hawke gave me into my hair. It'll curl slightly as it dries, but this should help tame the frizziness, according to him.

I walk back into the main area barefoot, but otherwise ready. Vance is staring out the window, his back to me. The old jeans and shirt he's wearing look good on him.

"Vance, I'm sorry." I sit on the bed to pull my socks and boots on. It takes longer than I'd like for him to say something in response to my apology.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. This is hard for me, Jamie. We *are* friends. But this is my job. And your dream. I need to remember that, and so do you. Job first, friends second." He says all this to me while still looking out the window. If he's trying to hide his face from me, it doesn't work. His expression is clearly visible in the pane of glass it reflects off of. The hurt and the determination are unmistakable.

I shouldn't ask. I know what the answer will be before he answers, but I want to see the truth in his reflection. "And is third friends with benefits? Lovers even?"

His eyes widen, and his tongue swipes out over his lips. "No. There is no third. There can't be."

But he wants there to be. That's enough for me for now. To know he wants me when he knows he shouldn't.

"Relax. I know. But you can't blame a man for asking."

His phone beeps. "Klaus says the cars are here. Ready to go?"

I nod and let him lead the way out of the hotel room to the bank of elevators. One arrives within seconds of Vance pressing the call button, and the ride down goes just as fast.

Tainted's members ride in one car, while Maxim is split into two others. Part of me had been hopeful Vance would ride with me, but his claim that Klaus was already inside and that he should be in the other car just in case made sense. Even if it was a weak excuse to put some distance between us.

"Jamison," Klaus calls my name.

"Yeah?"

"Don't make a scene when we get to the restaurant."

"What? Why would I?"

"I can't say." He presses his lips together in irritation. "Just, don't. Okay?"

"Okay." I agree, though his cryptic request doesn't make any sense. Macallister probably has something planned Klaus thinks I won't react well to. Though I can't think what it could be.

Klaus leans in closer and whispers so only I can hear, "He thinks he's doing the right thing. You'll have to work to show him the right thing to do isn't always what you should do."

*He who?*

Before I can ask, the car pulls up to the restaurant and Klaus gets out ahead of everyone. He blocks the door for a moment, causing Alex to curse and gripe at him to move. I laugh when he turns and extends a hand out for Alex as if they're on a date.

Alex slaps him away and shoves out of the car, muttering under his breath. Klaus just smiles and says, "One day, Alex."

"You enjoying Alex squirm under Klaus' flirtations as much as me?"

Thierry asks

“Oh, yeah. Karma is a bitch. And I’m going to enjoy watching him get all he deserves.”

We leave the car and my eyes immediately find Vance standing next to Klaus near the entrance with an interesting half-scowl, half-frown on his face.

“What’s wrong with Vance?” Rierdan asks as he approaches us from the other car.

Guess I wasn’t the only one to notice. “I don’t—”

“James! Sweetheart!”

*You have to be fucking kidding me!*

Marcy waves and smiles as her driver helps her from the car that had pulled up behind ours. Now Klaus’ warning makes sense. I like Marcy. I really do, but I’m not sure what she’s doing here, or what Macallister hopes to gain from her showing up. Because this is a publicity stunt. No doubt about it. Marcy did not decide to show up on her own.

I hug her close when she steps in front of me. “You need to kiss me, James,” she whispers, reminding me we need to play our parts for our audience. So I do. Not liking for a moment that Vance is part of that audience.

Marcy links our arms together as I break the kiss and we walk over to where Vance and Klaus, along with the members of Tainted, are waiting. Klaus ushers us inside, and once we’re seated, I introduce Marcy to everyone. I avoid looking Vance in the eye. Marcy and I aren’t in an actual relationship, but I still feel guilty.

I want Vance and when we’re alone, I forget about the implications following through on that desire could have on both our careers if anyone saw the way I look at him. But he hasn’t forgotten, not once. Well, maybe for those few minutes at his apartment, but not since. It’s me that keeps needing the reminder that I’m supposed to be straight and in a relationship with a gorgeous Hollywood starlet.

“So Marcy, how long do you plan to hang around?” Klaus asks, and something in his tone tells me he knows the answer and that I’m not going to like it.

“Well, the show is on hiatus for the next eight weeks, so I thought I’d tag along on the tour until I have to go back for filming. Surprise!”

She turns to me with a wide smile that slowly turns into a frown. I'm not sure how I'm expected to react to that news, but I'm positive it isn't with the dread that's filling my veins at having to pretend I'm in a happy relationship twenty-four seven for the next eight weeks while Vance watches.

"That's great news! Isn't that great news, Jamison?" Vance kicks at my foot under the table.

"Yeah, sorry. That's wonderful news, babe. More time with my favorite person." The words taste sour in my mouth, and I wish I didn't have to say them. But we're in public and not back at the hotel. Macallister probably assumed correctly that if I'd known Marcy was coming, I'd have talked my way out of her staying. Dropping it on me like this ensures I can't say no to what he wants.

Klaus claps his hands. "A room is being readied for you next to the one Jamison is staying in with my assistant, Vance. You'll be close, but not too close."

He winks at us, but the look he directs to me speaks of a double meaning to his words. *Does he want me to sneak away into Marcy's room?* Not a chance of that happening when I can spend time doing nothing with Vance.

"I heard the walls are soundproof," Mitchell, Tainted's lead singer and guitarist, says with a waggle of his brows. "Anyone want to test out that theory?"

A round of laughter fills the air as the waitstaff brings out the dishes someone, most likely Klaus, had preordered for us when the reservation was made. As we eat, Mitchell's comment about the soundproofing spins around in my mind, and I'm tempted to test out the accuracy of the rumor with Vance. *If only I could convince him to let me.*

# 12

## *Vance*

Marcy's arrival was both a relief and a nuisance. I didn't have to worry about giving in to Jamie's persistent innuendos and daily flirtations when we were alone because the thought of her walking in on us kept me in line. But she was always there. Any time Jamie left the hotel room, she somehow knew and tagged along wherever he went. The way she was acting made it seem as if their relationship was one hundred percent real to her and not the publicity stunt I knew it to be.

Her arrival also had the added benefit of getting me out of the one-on-one talk with Klaus where he'd planned to convince me why it was a good idea to let a hot rockstar use my body, or however he would word it.

Austin's show went well, Dallas' was even better. Macallister knew what he was doing when he paired Maxim with Tainted. The fans loved them together. Mitchell, Kaden, and Arlo meshed well with the guys and even with most of the crew. Hawke changed up their wardrobe a bit, but nothing that didn't feel like Maxim. Though he said he was easing them into the fashion of iconic rockstars. Whatever that is.

We were on the road to New Orleans now, our buses following Tainted's. Somehow, Marcy had managed to sweet talk her way onto the bus with us and commandeered the master bedroom for her and Jamie, who avoided the room at all costs. He slept on any available bunk until she bugged him enough to move to the larger bed with her. That arrangement never lasted more than a few hours before he was back out in the main area watching a show or Anders playing a game. She'd only been with us a few nights and she was already on my last nerve with the way she hung all over Jamie.

"You'd think she'd take a hint by now." Klaus' voice sounds directly over my shoulder. I'm standing near the bunks, watching Jamie as Marcy tries to

climb onto his lap. He keeps pushing her away, but she keeps coming back.

“Maybe she just likes to really get into her roles. Jamison’s girlfriend is the role she’s playing for the immediate future, so...”

“Hmm. Maybe. Mitchell wants to stop in some parish outside Shreveport.”

“Okay. What for? Are we stopping too?” I ask after he doesn’t offer any more information. If we’re not following them on this detour, there’s no reason for Klaus to bring it up.

“There’s some paintball establishment that uses black light paint in an indoor facility. I guess Mitchell saw pictures online and thinks it looks like fun.”

“And...”

“And it might be a nice release of tension and stress for the guys. Plus, we’ll get to see them all covered in paint. Who doesn’t want to ogle a hot man dripping in a rainbow of colors? I can make them strip before allowing them back on the bus.”

“You’re aware they’ll most likely have some kind of changing area at this place, or protective gear to wear, right?”

“Yes. But it won’t hurt to thoroughly investigate that every drop of paint has been removed from their persons.” He winks at me, then moves farther into the main area to grab everyone’s attention and tell them about the detour.

It’s no surprise that everyone except Marcy is excited to stop for a little fun. Klaus informs her she can stay on the bus and if she needs anything, Jude, Rierdan, and Young will also be staying behind on the other bus. It’s on the tip of my tongue to offer to stay behind as well, but the narrow-eyed stare Klaus gives me keeps my mouth shut.

The paintball facility is an hour’s drive from our current location. I’m exhausted from constantly watching the push and pull between Marcy and Jamie. Settling onto one of the bunks, I close my eyes, intent on taking a nap.

“Hey.” The thin mattress dips, causing me to roll into Jamie’s side. “What are you doing?”

“I thought that was obvious. I’m performing a solo at an opera house. Where’s Marcy?”

His lips thin at the mention of his girlfriend. “Locked herself in the

bedroom because I won't stay behind with her when we get to the paintball facility."

*How mature.* "I guess she was hoping for some alone time with you. That girl has it bad for you, Jamie."

"No. We're just friends. That's all. We get along well, but there's nothing between us."

"Nothing at all? She seems to think there's something," I ask, curious why she would think they are more than friends if things are as straightforward as Jamie thinks they are.

Jamie's cheeks flush a bright red. "Well, we might have... kept each other company a few times."

"You slept with her?" I whisper to avoid anyone overhearing.

"I was horny and lonely. She said she was too. We agreed it wouldn't change anything, and we'd remain friends."

"And do you always fuck and remain friends with people when you're horny and lonely?" *Is that why you fucked me? Because you were horny and lonely?*

Jamie stares at me in shock, understanding slowly dawning. "No, Vance. No. Never. You were—"

"James!" Marcy calls from the bedroom.

"Go. Take care of your *girlfriend*." I roll away from him, forcing myself not to glance back when I feel the shift in the mattress as he stands.

I want to believe that I meant something to him. He made me feel like I meant something. But maybe he's just as good an actor as he is a musician and vocalist, because from the outside, anyone could say that it appears Marcy means something to him. He's either a terrible liar, or a really, really good one.



Jamie stays with Marcy for the remainder of the drive. I give up trying to sleep and join Klaus, Anders, and Alex in the main area, taking turns playing one of Anders' fighting games. I lose every game I play and

eventually just watch, my mind too occupied with stewing over everything said between me and Jamie.

“Hey, you okay?” Anders asks, concern lacing his tone, emphasized by the fact that he isn’t paying attention to what is happening on screen as Klaus kicks Alex’s ass.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. But it’s cool. You don’t have to talk about it.”

“Um, thanks.”

“No problem.” Anders turns back to the game, the conversation over.

*Well, that was interesting.*

Shortly after, we pull into the parking lot of the establishment and Jamie comes out to join the rest of us, Marcy hanging on his arm. My eyes meet his and he pulls free from her grip, only to have her stand on her tiptoes and take his face in her hands to press a kiss to his lips. It’s showy and territorial, and neither makes sense on a bus filled with people who know her relationship is a fraud.

If there is truly nothing between them, Jamie wouldn’t have let it happen. It pisses me off and I’m glad I decided to keep things between us as friends only. Maybe their relationship is fake, but whatever is between them is very real. At least on Marcy’s end.

Suddenly filled with anger at the sight of them and in need of an outlet, I head to exit the bus, calling back over my shoulder, “Who’s ready to get their ass kicked?”

Whoops fill the air as the others follow me. Marcy thankfully stays on the bus, and we meet the others inside. Teams are picked quickly, and I don’t really care whose I’m on, but I get a small satisfaction knowing that Jamie ends up on the opposite team.

The staff passes out equipment and helps get everyone suited up. They read off a list of rules and then we’re set loose to annihilate each other. Their words, not mine. I keep my eyes on Jamie as we head in opposite directions. He doesn’t know it, but there’s a target on his back and I intend to hit it. Even if the strike won’t give me the satisfaction I want.



## *Jamison*

I'm covered in paint. We all are. Some of us more than others. Vance had shot me several times. In fact, I think he used all his ammo on me. I am going to be bruised and sore from the force of the paintballs hitting my body, but it was worth it. Everyone seems to have had fun, but the smile that had crossed his face whenever he landed a shot at me was the highlight of my day. I'd begun purposely moving into his range just to see it in the faint glow of the black lights.

Now we were heading to shower off the paint in the facility's locker room before hopping on the bus and finishing the drive to New Orleans.

I take my time under the hot spray, watching for Vance to enter the shower area of the locker room. He's pissed. That much is obvious. So am I. Marcy had been acting like we were truly a couple. She still is, and I'm not sure I buy her excuse of needing to stay in character so she doesn't slip in public. We had a long talk after she'd called me back into the bedroom. She claims she doesn't want to ruin either of our careers with an accidental lapse in her portrayal as my girlfriend. I understand the reasoning she gave, but it feels like there is more to it than that. But Marcy and her intentions don't matter right now. I need to talk to Vance and explain the situation to him.

Everyone has finished showering and moved back into the main area of the locker room except me. Vance still hasn't made an appearance and I sigh in defeat. Maybe he's so pissed he doesn't even want to shower near me.

Footsteps sound across the floor as I reach for the dial to turn the water off. My hand stills, and I glance up in time to see Vance enter one of the stalls. Water splashes against the tile in his stall, amplifying the wet echoes

in the room before I turn my own spray off. I quickly wrap a towel around my waist, not bothering to dry off and make my way to the stall Vance occupies.

His back is to me, so I call out his name to get his attention. My brain issues a warning, something about what a bad idea this is, but it's lost as Vance faces me. The showerhead rains water over him and color swirls down his naked body as it washes away the paint in his hair and on his skin. My gaze follows a colorful stream, riveted by the way it catches in the light trail of hair on his lower abdomen before I catch sight of his semi-hard cock decorated with streaks of watery blues and purples.

"Stop looking at me like that," Vance says, breaking the fantasy I'm having of going to my knees and taking him down my throat despite the horrid taste of paint I would inevitably swallow in doing so.

"Like what?" I lick my lips and step forward, forcing him to take a step back.

"Like you want to devour me."

"I do." I take another step, and he retreats backward.

"We're just friends, Jamie." Step. Retreat.

"I don't want to be just friends." Step. Retreat.

"We can't."

"We can."

His back hits the wall, and the shower is now cascading over me, soaking the towel hanging from my hips and weighing it down.

Vance shakes his head, sending droplets of paint and water splattering over the stall's walls. "No, we can't. What about Maxim? And Marcy?"

I shrug. Marcy isn't a concern. I'm sure we would both agree we need to keep things quiet for our careers, but we can talk that out later. "Nothing to worry about right now."

"Jamie—"

I cut his words off, covering his mouth with mine. Vance kisses me back at first, his hands caressing up my chest before they turn to fists and he tries to shove me away, though not with any true strength.

"Stop. I can't think when you do that, and there is a very good reason we shouldn't do that."

"And that is?"

He glares at me. "I can't remember with you this close."

I put some space between us. As much as I want Vance, I won't force him. My towel can't take the movement as it is sodden down with water and it falls to the floor with a wet splat.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Cover yourself." Vance stares at me wide eyed before squeezing his eyes shut and waving in my direction. "That should be illegal."

I laugh. "The same could be said about you."

His dark eyes open and meet mine.

"Tell me what you want, Vance. Not what you think is best for me, or Maxim. Don't tell me what you think you should. Forget everything outside this shower stall. What do you want?"

My heart aches at the pain that shines from his eyes before he speaks. "I want the same thing I've always wanted, Jamie. Something I can never have. Not fully. I want you. And not just your body. I want it all. Your mornings and your nights. The smiles and the tears. I want to share your secrets in the dark and shine with you in the spotlight. I want everything you are, Jamie, and I want to give you everything I am. I want the impossible."

Tears well in his eyes, then spill down his cheeks. I can't stand to see him like this. It's the reason I left him with just a note six years ago. I never wanted Vance to cry over me. "Vance, you already have me. Give me a chance and I'll show you just how possible it is for us to be more than just friends."

"You can't. If you out yourself now, Maxim will suffer."

"I can keep up the Marcy ruse if that is what's needed. But that's all it is between me and her, Vance. She may play that she's my girlfriend at inconvenient times, but she knows it isn't real."

Vance doesn't look convinced, but the only way I can prove to him that Marcy means nothing and he means everything is by showing him. And I need him to agree to be more than friends if I have any hope of doing so.

"Please, Vance. I never should have walked away that night. You won't get rid of me so easily this time. Let me show you what you mean to me. Give me a second chance to make you mine forever."

It's the longest minute of my life as I wait for him to answer. At his loud exhale, my shoulders drop and curl in.

"Okay."

“What?” I must have misheard him.

“I said okay. I’m going against all my instincts, but I want you. Even when we were apart, I wanted you. I’m fairly certain this is going to blow up in our faces, but what the hell.”

Rushing forward beneath the spray of water, I take his face between my palms and press our lips together.

He pulls away, gasping for breath. “But we’ll have to be careful. I meant what I said about not outing yourself yet. I’ll talk to Klaus to see if we can come up with the best way to do it. It may take some time. So as much as I hate it, you’ll have to let Marcy hang all over you for a little longer. Just... if you’re horny or lonely, come to me from now on.”

“I will,” I tell him and take his mouth with another kiss.

“We’re leaving in ten minutes,” Klaus shouts into the showers.

Leaving Vance to finish washing up, I head to the lockers to get dressed, a smile on my lips the whole time.

## Vance

I climb onto the bus and search for Klaus. Alex leaves the master bedroom with a scowl on his face, and I'm pretty sure that means I've found him.

Klaus sits on the bed, glaring at the ground with his hands fisted in his hair. Knocking to make him aware of my presence, I wait in the doorway for him to acknowledge me.

"Oh, hey," he says as he looks up. "Is something wrong?"

I shake my head. "No. At least I don't think so, but I do need to talk to you."

Klaus waves me inside and I close the door behind me. Everyone on this bus and the other Maxim bus should be trustworthy enough to know about me and Jamie, with the exception of Marcy, who I don't trust. Still, I don't want anyone to overhear. I tell Klaus about my conversation with Jamie, leaving out the part where we were naked in the shower.

"So we want to try to make it work, but aren't sure how best to present our relationship to the public."

"You don't." Klaus gives me his stern PR look. The one that means there will be consequences if I don't listen to what he says.

"What? Why not?"

"Calm down. What I mean is you can't yet. Maxim is still too new. Yes, they're gaining in popularity, but something like this would mean suicide for the band. Macallister knows that. That's the only reason I can come up with that he brought Marcy in. I mean, besides directing attention away from Alex. Macallister is smart and ten steps ahead of everyone else. It's how he's been so successful in this business. In a few years, after Maxim has cemented themselves in the industry, it might be plausible."

"A few years?"

I can't be Jamie's secret for years. Been there. Done that. Got a Dear John letter to prove it.

"At least that. I know you've got history with him, but he's already proven Maxim comes first. And if you want to become a full-time rep for Wallace after this internship, you need to adopt that attitude as well."

"I have. How do you think I've resisted him for so long?"

Klaus laughs. "It's been what, a week since you saw the man again after years apart? Look, Vance, I'm not saying for you not to pursue whatever it is between the two of you, just that you wait to make it public."

"Yeah. For a few fucking years." I blow out a breath and try to calm myself. "Sorry. I know it makes sense in my brain, but my heart says that's too long. And honestly, I thought you'd tell me to follow my heart. Perhaps throw a party to celebrate."

"Well, if this was a normal reunion with your high school sweetheart, I'd be telling you to handle this differently. But it's not. Jamison is at the center of a band set to do big things, which makes the situation anything but normal. And for the record, you don't actually have to take my advice. Not if you are both in agreement. But there are others to consider. Maybe talk it over. Talking is always a better solution than walking away or hiding."

I nod at his words. I've waited this long. What will it hurt to wait a little longer? Especially if I have Jamie in my life as more than a dream. "Thanks, Klaus."

He stands and I follow him out to the main area of the bus. Laughter fills the space, along with a few insults from Anders that I'm guessing are directed at his gaming partner.

I smile, my mood brightened by the others' enjoyment. That is, until I see Marcy and remember she will be claiming Jamie as hers in public, and apparently privately too. Jamie had said she wasn't an issue, and he's clearly just being polite to a friend, but the way she's practically sitting on his lap causes jealousy to flame hot in my veins.

Before anyone can notice, I turn back around and quietly slip into the bedroom again. I just need a few moments to come to terms with the fact that being with Jamie will be a lot harder than I'd thought when I agreed to his pleading in the shower room.

I close the door, then press my back to the flimsy wood and slide to the floor. Pulling my knees to my chest, I let myself sit there and feel sorry for

the situation I've walked heart first into.

Maybe I should tell Jamie no, that I've changed my mind. I sigh. Who am I kidding? I'll never give up the chance to be with Jamie again. Even if it means no one can know. I really had tried my best to keep my distance and remain just friends, but I knew it was futile. All it took was a naked Jamie saying all the right things while looking at me with those bright blue eyes for me to give in.

Knocking sounds against the door, followed by a quiet, "Vance?"

*Fuck.* I stand and open the door, gesturing Jamie inside.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?"

I debate lying, but I have to tell him what Klaus said, anyway. "Having a pity party for myself."

"Okay. Why?" He takes a seat on the bed as I close the door, then sit beside him.

"Klaus says it's not a good idea for us to make our relationship public."

"Well, yeah, but waiting a few months will allow the band's following to grow and time for me to figure out how Macallister wants me to break things off with Marcy. It makes sense. Nothing I wasn't expecting."

I shake my head, then look at my lap to avoid meeting Jamie's eyes. "Not months. Years."

Silence. The only sound filling the room is our breathing and the hum of the tires on the road.

"Say something," I whisper into the quiet.

Jamie's hand covers mine and he squeezes. The sentiment in his action calms some of the worry in my mind, but I know it will only take a tiny reminder to cause apprehension to wash out any sense of positivity. Can I do this? I don't know. *Do I want to try?* Fuck yes. More than anything.

"Vance." Jamie's other hand grips my chin and turns my head until I have to look at him or close my eyes. "Klaus' priority is Maxim, and what's best for the band."

"I know. That's your priority too. As it should be. Logically, it is the best thing to do."

"Right. But Vance, if you need us to be out, then I'll call Macallister right now. I won't let him off the line until we come to an agreement that allows us to be public with our relationship."

While the thought of being publicly acknowledged as Jamie's boyfriend

would be nice, we've only just rekindled our relationship. A very private, only behind closed doors relationship that might not even work out. There has been a lot of time between then and now. "No. Don't do that. We don't even know if this thing will work. What if I'm not the same as the man in your memories? If we push forward full steam then split, the consequences will affect more than just us. I don't like it, but let's take Klaus' advice. At least for now."

I see the relief that passes quickly over him. He'll never admit it, but Maxim means more than I ever will. I have no doubt he'll do exactly what he said he would if I wanted, but then if things didn't work between us or with Maxim, I'd feel guilty and Jamie would most likely resent me for it.

"It's not like I don't know how to sneak around with a hot musician. It's been a while, but I think I remember how." I wink and smile at Jamie, locking my worries and doubts away for another day.

"Hmm. Do you? Care to test that?" Jamie leans forward, brushing his lips over mine, then along my jaw to my ear so he can whisper, "Think you can keep quiet when I'm doing this?"

Jamie pushes me back onto the bed and undoes my pants. My cock is in his mouth before I can process what is happening, and a low moan escapes my lips.

"I don't think so. If you can't stay silent, then I'll have to stop. Wouldn't want anyone to catch us now, would we?"

*Oh, god.* Jamie swipes his tongue over me, his eyes locked with mine. A soft whimper escapes me and he stops. His mouth is open, his tongue is just close enough to brush along my dick as it twitches, seeking more of his attention. I hold my breath and suck my bottom lip between my teeth, biting down hard to keep any noise from breaking free as Jamie lets his tongue wander over me again. With a wicked smile on his lips, he swallows me down.

It takes everything I have to stay focused enough to keep quiet. Through it all, Jamie keeps his gaze on mine, allowing me to see the challenge in them for a fraction of a second before he releases me and frantically tears the clothes from his body, then mine. He crawls over my body to place a kiss to my lips, then trails kisses across my jaw, down my neck and over my chest. His mouth on my skin is hot, wet bliss as he makes his way back to where he started.



There's a bus full of our friends, my coworker, and his fake girlfriend on the other side of the thin door. I need to stay quiet. When he gives my cock a long, slow lick from base to tip, I can't stop the tortured moan that fills the room. Judging from the way his eyes gleam as he holds himself still, just his breath caressing my skin, Jamie isn't as worried about my sounds calling attention to us as he is about playing his game. This man is going to shatter me into a million pieces. I just hope it's only my body and not my heart too.

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## *Jamison*

I love to hear the whimpers and moans Vance makes as I touch him. But keeping us a secret means we cannot afford to get caught. I smile as I lick him again and watch him bite down on his lip to keep quiet. I'm having fun toying with him, but I can't play this game much longer. My cock is throbbing with the need to be inside him.

I swirl my tongue around his head one more time before moving up his body again. My dick rubs against his and I grind myself down onto him, pushing him into the bed with the force of my frotting.

"Vance?"

"Huh?" he asks as he rolls his hips to create a delicious friction for both of us.

"I want you." I kiss the corner of his mouth.

"God, Jamie, I want you too."

Grabbing the back of Vance's thighs, I bend my knees and push his legs toward his chest, lifting his ass off the mattress and sliding my cock along his crack. Vance's fingers dig into the skin of my back when he grips me to him, using my body as leverage so he can thrust against my stomach. The head of my dick snags over his hole with our movements, desperately trying to gain entrance. I bite and suck at the skin of his throat, then pull away, needing to grab the lube and a condom from the shelf in the small storage closet where Alex had gleefully told us he'd stashed them when we were loading the bus.

Vance lets out a greedy sound that is both filled with frustration and want. He'd always been that way, and I'm glad that hasn't changed. Despite his worries, I don't think much has changed between us. Not anything that would tear us apart.

I grab the bottle and a strip of condoms, too lazy to stop and separate them. Tossing both items on the bed beside Vance, I stand there and take him in. He lets his legs fall open, giving me the perfect view of his hole that visibly contracts around nothing when he grabs his shaft and strokes. I'd love nothing more than to watch him get himself off, but we've been in here long enough that I'm surprised we haven't been interrupted yet, and I am not leaving this room until I've been inside him.

Moving onto the bed, I crawl over him until we are face to face, then I kiss him as I flip the cap on the lube and blindly pour the liquid onto Vance's ass, hoping that at least some of it goes down his crack. I swallow his gasp at the cool sensation when it hits his skin. My fingers glide over his ass cheek, gathering some stray lube and spreading the slickness up and down his crack. I tease the tip of a finger over his hole, circling the wrinkled skin, then moving away before coming back to push inside at Vance's needy whine.

"Shhh. We have to be quiet, remember?" I murmur against his mouth.

I want to take my time opening him for me, but not only am I impatient to feel him surrounding me, but I'm cognizant of the others who could grow curious any minute. So when Vance tells me to quit playing and fuck him, I remove my fingers, tear off one of the square packets, and use my teeth to rip open the condom. Rolling the rubber onto my dick takes less than a second, then I am pushing into the only man, hell, only person, I've ever wanted for anything more than quick fuck. I laugh at the irony of that, picking up speed with my thrusts as I feel Vance loosening around me.

Pounding into him brutally, I quickly reach the precipice of orgasm. I cover Vance's mouth with my palm when his groans become louder and more frequent, struggling to hold out until he's right there with me.

"Close. Oh, god, Jamie." His muffled voice sounds from behind my hand as his ass clenches around me and I can no longer hold back my release. I press tight against Vance and continue humping into him with shallow thrusts.

We come, not together, but close enough that we finish within seconds of each other. Vance's cum covers his stomach and mine fills the condom, and it isn't until I pull free and tie it off to dispose of it that I realize there isn't anywhere inside the room to toss it. Which brings my attention to the fact that there isn't anything but our clothes to clean Vance.

“Shit.”

“What?” Vance sits up, brows scrunched in concern as he looks around the room. “What’s wrong?”

“No trash bin or towels in here.”

He grimaces as I gesture at his stomach with the hand holding the full condom.

“One of us could slip out to the bathroom. Toss the rubber and grab a washcloth.”

I nod. It’s a solid plan. “Okay. I’ll go. We—”

Soft, rapid knocks interrupt me and my eyes widen when I notice I didn’t lock the door before fucking Vance senseless.

“James? Are you in there? What are you doing?”

*Fuck.* “I was just talking to Vance about something. I’ll be out in a minute, Marcy.”

Vance holds out a hand and forcefully whispers, “Give me that.”

He snatches the condom from my hand when I don’t move fast enough for him. I grab my clothes from the floor, wipe my hands on my boxers, and hurriedly pull them on, cringing at the feel of dampness, cum and lube now pressing against my thigh.

Leaning over the bed, I give Vance a quick kiss. “I’m sorry.”

He smiles, trying his best to convince me it doesn’t bother him. “It’s okay. Go. I’ll take care of this. Just keep everyone away.”

I give him another kiss, then nod.

Slipping from the room brings me face to face with Marcy, and I close the door promptly behind me so she can’t see Vance in the bed, covered in cum.

“Hey, what’s up?” I ask.

“Nothing. You were just gone for a while and the guys don’t really like me.” She shrugs, then runs a hand down my arm until I step out of reach.

I don’t refute her words. Alex isn’t fond of her. I’m not really sure of the others. They seem to like her well enough, but they might not want to stir up trouble like Alex seems to love to do. Plus, I’m not too fond of her myself right now.

“We’ve talked about this, Marcy. We’re only a couple in public.”

“I know. But, James, we can still have fun.”

“No. We can’t be friends with benefits anymore.”

“What? Why? I’ll back off, James. I won’t be so clingy. I’m sorry. I’m

just lonely. You know how it is. Please don't do this. I need you as my friend."

"I'm still your friend, Marcy. But that's it. I won't sleep with you anymore. And I know you think you'll slip up in public, but please, while we're on the bus at least, let me have some sense that I have control over my life."

She nods, an unhappy frown still on her face before she quickly replaces it with a smile. "Okay."

Marcy heads back toward the sound of tinny gunshots coming from the main cabin area. I follow after a quick glance at the bedroom door. I'd never thought much about what Vance had to deal with trying to keep us a secret years ago, but if it's like this all the time, I don't think I can do it.

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# 16

## *Vance*

I wait for probably fifteen minutes before I even move from the bed. Picking my shirt off the floor, I attempt to clean my slightly dry and very sticky stomach. The cotton removes some of the cum, but I'll need to use a wet cloth to get the rest. Now I have the issue of leaving the bedroom and grabbing a change of clothes before heading to the bathroom, all without being seen by the other five occupants of the bus.

I grab the condom wrapper from its perch on the corner of the bed before pulling on the rest of my clothes, then cracking the door enough to peek out. Thank god no one is in the short aisle because I'd have blown this whole sneaking around thing already. *Shit. How did I ever manage to not get caught as a teen?*

My bag sits on the bottom bunk I've been using. I hadn't put it away after our stop at the paintball facility. Reaching inside, I grab the first t-shirt I find, then quickly lock myself in the bathroom.

I take the condom and its foil package from where I'd wrapped them in the shirt I'd used to partially clean the cum from my body and toss it into the small trash bin. The damn thing draws my attention as I scrub the dried, flaking bits of semen from my skin. Anyone who uses this bathroom—meaning everyone—will see it and know someone on the bus had sex.

*Fuck.* I grab several paper towels from the wall holder. The disposable product just made sense, considering laundry would only be done at the hotels every few days. And I'm grateful to whoever had that foresight as I use more than necessary to dry my skin and throw the wad on top of the condom, effectively covering the evidence of my and Jamie's reckless behavior.

Pulling my clean shirt over my head, I make a mental note to not have

sex on the bus without planning first. It won't do any good to sneak around if we're going to be found out because of a lack of preparation. Spontaneity is not something we can afford. Not when there is the risk of being caught and destroying the future of Maxim.

Thinking of preparation reminds me the lube is still on the bed. I ball up my soiled shirt and leave the bathroom, throwing the shirt in my laundry bag before rushing back to the bedroom. The lube bottle is still where Jamie had absently tossed it, along with the strip of unused condoms. I snatch both from the bed and shove them back onto the shelf where Jamie had found them, letting out a breath in relief that I wasn't seen.

"Are you going to join us?"

I jump at Klaus' question and spin around. He raises a brow at my obviously guilty behavior.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I say as I move away from the storage closet.

"Uh huh." Klaus eyes me up and down, then takes in the rumbled state of the bed.

*Shit.* The bed had been made when we'd talked earlier. "Klaus—"

"Nope. Not my business. But maybe you should be a little more careful next time. The bus is small. I'm not sure how we didn't hear anything, but I wouldn't assume the same results in the future."

I blush at the reminder of what Jamie and I did and how he kept me from being too loud. Klaus already knows about our newly rekindled relationship, so I don't bother denying it. "I know."

He nods. "Make the bed, lover boy, then come join the rest of us before the others begin to wonder what's up."

Klaus leaves and I don't waste any time straightening the sheets and setting the room back to the way it'd been before. As much as I want to hide in here and avoid seeing Marcy all over Jamie, I'd agreed to the secrecy. And Klaus is right. If I stay away, the others will question it.

Sighing, I make my way down the small aisle and into the main area. Alex is glaring at Klaus as he sets out some containers of food on the table. Anders is still playing his game, and Jamie is sitting with Marcy at his side. She's not climbing him for once, which is an improvement, but doesn't make me like her presence any more than if she had been.

"I had some Chinese delivered while we were playing paintball. I'm sure

you're hungry, Vance. Grab a plate." Klaus gestures to the stack of paper plates on the counter behind me.

The smell of the food drifts through the air and my stomach growls, reminding me I hadn't eaten since this morning. I think. Maybe it was last night. I don't know. Marcy's pawing of Jamie has distracted me almost to the point of obsession.

I inhale deeply and turn my back to the others, using the guise of grabbing a plate to hide the emotions I'm sure are written on my face. Jamie is mine. Even if I can't publicly acknowledge that, I can find some solace in knowing Marcy will only be in his life temporarily.

Loading my plate with fried rice, dumplings, and sweet and sour chicken doesn't take nearly as long as I'd like, and I find the only empty seat is next to Jamie.

Our thighs press together when I sit. Jamie doesn't pull away and the heat of him seeps beneath my clothes. I pull my leg back just enough that we're not touching and answer Jamie's quizzical stare with my eyes, looking at the others pointedly. He nods, a barely noticeable tilt of his head.

Scooping up a forkful of rice, I take a bite, only to choke when Jamie's fingers graze over my knee.

I cough as he pounds a fist against my back, using the opportunity to get close enough to whisper in my ear. "Sorry. I didn't expect you to have that reaction." A little louder so the others can hear, he asks, "Are you okay?"

I nod, still coughing at the irritation in my throat. "I'm fine."

"Here." Marcy hands me a bottle of water, and I want to hate her for the sweet gesture. She seems nice enough when she's not fondling Jamie, but I still don't like her.

I unscrew the cap and down half the liquid in one swallow before taking small sips until the cool wetness soothes the scratchiness away.

"Thank you," I tell her.

She smiles at me, then turns her attention back to Jamie. "It was nothing. I'm sure James' quick actions kept you from any serious danger."

I meet Jamie's stare, and I can't help the small laugh that bubbles up and out of my mouth at the sheepish look on his face. If only Marcy knew he was the cause of my choking in the first place.

*Hmm, maybe he can choke me in a different way later.*

No. Stop that train of thought right now, Vance Martin.



The driver lets us know we have a few more hours until New Orleans, and I put my head down and finish my dinner, determined to avoid any sexually charged contact with Jamie.

It's going to be a long few hours on the bus and an even longer few years of sneaking around.

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## *Jamison*

I haven't found a moment to be alone with Vance since before New Orleans. The tour is going great, so great Macallister is talking about adding in a few stops. Maxim's latest release is climbing the charts. I should be stoked, but all I can think about is how much I just want to be alone with Vance. Just the two of us, relaxing, cuddling, sleeping.

Not that I don't want to have sex with him. I'm just exhausted, but in a good way. Tainted is an amazing band and I'm grateful to work with them. I just need a minute to be me, and some uninterrupted alone time with Vance. *Is that too much to ask?*

The hall backstage is crowded with roadies and fans. It's nearly impossible for me to squeeze my way through, but I need to get outside and breathe in air that isn't a cloud of perfume, alcohol, and cigarette smoke.

The exit sign shines red, beckoning me to the peace beyond its doors. I press the metal bar and push outside. Dark stillness and clear, breathable air greet me, and I suck in huge lungfuls of the crisp clean oxygen. Well, as clean as it can be in an alleyway outside Pittsburgh.

The door slams closed behind me, the noise echoing loudly in the alley. A startled yelp sounds out from my right, and I turn to see a dumpster and a head peeking over the top. Whoever it is moves closer, I assume to investigate the noise and to see who or what caused it.

When they round the metal trash bin, I'm shocked to see Jude. He's as immaculate as ever in his suit and he really doesn't fit in with the litter and the smell of the alley.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask.

"Getting some fresh air, same as you, I'd guess."

"In the dark behind the dumpster?"

“I thought I heard something.”

At his words, the sound of someone or something sifting through the garbage, rattling the empty bottles and cans that were thrown out after the venue’s successful night reaches my ears.

“Must be an animal searching for food.”

“Yeah, most likely,” I say, agreeing with his observation.

“All right. I’m going to head back inside.” Jude tugs at his lapels and straightens his suit, then leaves through the door I came out.

I lean against the grimy brick wall, tilting my head up to take in the barely visible stars in the night sky. The noise sounds from near the dumpster again, but this time it’s footsteps and not rummaging.

I turn my head to see who it is and find Rierdan staring at me, eyes wide like a deer in headlights.

“Uh, I thought I was alone,” he says.

My mind tries to put two and two together, but I keep coming up with sixty-nine. *Jude and Rierdan?* I shake my head. No, there’s probably a logical explanation.

“Sorry to disappoint.” I smile. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Oh. I thought since you and Jude were both out here that... you know what, doesn’t matter.” Though it does spark my curiosity.

“Right. Well, I’m gonna head back to the after party. You coming?”

“In a minute. I just need to be alone for a few.”

“It’s a bit overwhelming, huh? But also so fucking awesome.” Rierdan smiles, and I nod in agreement. “See ya inside.”

Alone again, I close my eyes. The quiet of the night is broken by the occasional car horn or siren, but even that isn’t enough to disturb the calmness that washes over me from being able to just relax and breathe.

The door cracks open, squeaking just enough to garner my attention.

“Jamie?”

A grin breaks out on my face at the sound of Vance’s voice. “Over here,” I call out from off to the side. I’d moved into the near darkness close to the dumpster after Rierdan had gone inside. The light from a nearby streetlamp highlights Vance as he moves toward me, squinting into the dark.

When he’s close enough to touch, I reach out and grab his bicep, pulling him to me and spinning to cage him against the bricks. I press my forehead

to his, close my eyes, and just inhale his scent. Breathing him in does more to relax me than the last few minutes of quiet in a fraction of the time. *This is what I needed.*

I lift my head, severing the skin-to-skin contact, but only long enough to lean in and press my lips to his. My tongue swipes along the soft skin until his lips part. A duel of wet heat ensues as our tongues twist over and around each other.

I break the kiss, but I don't move away. Vance's rapid breaths puff over my mouth, and I'm seconds from saying fuck it and taking him right here.

"Jamie. Someone could see."

Vance's words are like a splash of cold water on my face. I push off the bricks and step back far enough that I can't touch him. "Sorry."

"It's not your fault."

But it is. If I'd come out as pansexual sooner, let the world know I'm into men as well as women and nonbinary folks, maybe I wouldn't have left Vance behind when we signed with Twisted Records. If I hadn't listened to Alex when he said it would ruin Maxim's future, maybe I wouldn't be kissing my secret boyfriend in an alley and worrying about the consequences if we are caught. *But would Maxim have made it this far if I had?*

"Stop." Vance closes the distance between us, but he doesn't reach for me and I know it's because he's more aware of our surroundings than I care to be. "Don't blame yourself for this. It is what it is, Jamie. Do I wish I could walk back inside holding your hand? Yes. But it's okay, because this isn't forever, and you're mine. You are mine. Whether or not the rest of the world knows it."

"Fuck. Vance. You're a much better person than me. How can you sacrifice what you want for Maxim's future?"

He puts his hands against my chest, palms flat. "I'm not. I'm doing it for your future, Jamie. Your success and happiness. I will always put you first. I always have. Hell, the only reason I'm here now is because of you. Why do you think I studied public relations for five years? This internship, I took it on the very slim possibility I would see you. Half the time I don't even know what I'm doing. I'm surprised Klaus hasn't recommended I be dismissed yet. So if we have to sneak around for months or years, I'll do it. I'll hate every minute, but I won't give you up again. Not until you decide

this is not what you want.”

I take his face in my hands and press a kiss to his lips. “Never. I will never not want this, not want you.”

“Good. But we need to get back inside. Klaus sent me to find you. Marcy’s standing around looking pouty, which doesn’t look good on you.”

*Fuck.* I’d forgotten about her. “I’ll call Macallister tonight. I don’t care what Klaus says. We may have to hide our relationship, but that doesn’t mean I need to continue to fake things between me and Marcy.”

Vance gives me a worried look and opens his mouth, probably to tell me to wait and listen to Klaus. *Fuck that.* “No. It’s not fair to you to have to hide *and* watch me flaunt my *girlfriend.*”

He nods. “Okay.”

“Okay. Now let’s go back to the party.”

I open the door and hold it as Vance steps inside, wishing I could wrap an arm around him as we make our way back to the others. Curling my fingers into a fist, I shove my hands in my pockets and follow Vance down the corridor.

Marcy latches onto me as soon as I’m back inside. I want to shake her off, grab Vance and run off somewhere, but I know it’s important for Maxim that I’m here. Until I can speak to Macallister, I’ll have to play the part of a doting boyfriend to a Hollywood starlet.

I let Marcy drag me around the room, but I’m constantly aware of Vance and where he’s at and who he’s talking with. He doesn’t move around as much as Marcy has me doing, keeping close to the guys, Klaus, and the members of Tainted. One of whom is looking at Vance like he wants to lick him like a lollipop. Can’t say I blame the guy, but knowing I can’t do anything about the wave of jealousy it’s causing pisses me off.

“Excuse me. I need to use the restroom,” I tell the circle of groupies and roadies entranced with Marcy.

I check the stalls and as soon as I know I’m alone, I dial Macallister. The time difference between Pittsburgh and Los Angeles means it’s still early evening for him.

“Jamison. How are things going?” If Macallister is concerned about my call, he doesn’t let it be known.

“I need to talk to you about me and Marcy.”

“Oh, wonderful. I’ve been meaning to get in touch with the next steps. I

wanted to wait until after the tour, but now is as good a time as any, I guess.”

“What?”

“I’ll have Jude pick out a ring. You can propose in New York.”

*What the fuck?* “No. Not gonna happen. I was calling to tell you I want to end the façade, not solidify it with a proposal.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not happening. Not now. You’re the hot new rockstar dating Hollywood’s newest princess. An engagement will only gain you more fans and push your career forward. I’m sorry, Jamison, but I have the final say in the matter. Don’t worry, I won’t force you to marry her. When the time is right, we’ll plan a split between the two of you that doesn’t reflect badly on either of you.”

I grit my teeth. Macallister doesn’t need to know about me and Vance. It won’t change his mind, but it would be a disaster for Vance. So I bite my tongue and instead try to negotiate with the man. “If I do this, I want the breakup to occur in the next month.”

“A Year.”

“Six months.”

“Deal.”

“Fine. Have Jude make the arrangements.”

“This will skyrocket you and Maxim into the spotlight with the media attention it will garner. I’ll be in touch with the details.”

Macallister clicks off, and I stare at my phone.

*Fuck. How had I gone from a fake girlfriend and secret boyfriend to planning a proposal?*

I need to tell Vance before he finds out from someone else. Just not right now. I have time. The next show isn’t until Sunday in New York. That’s four days for me to find the right words to let him know about my upcoming engagement and assure him it doesn’t change anything.

*Vance*

Jamie has been acting off since the after party in Pittsburgh two days ago. He hasn't mentioned talking with Macallister again, and I'm not going to bring it up. As much as I want the world to know Jamison Black is mine, I know it would be selfish of me to demand he come out.

"Hey, what are you doing awake?" Jamie asks with a yawn as he claims the spot next to me on the small bench seat. The bus is quiet. Everyone had gone to get some rest hours ago, even Anders, who is normally glued to his game.

"Couldn't sleep." I shrug.

Jamie looks around, then leans in to give me a kiss. I expect it to be just a quick peck, as that's all we've managed lately, but he surprises me by lingering and deepening the touch before pulling away.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist."

"Want to watch a movie? Something boring to put us to sleep?" I ask.

"Sure." He grabs the remote and logs in to one of the many streaming services. It doesn't take him long to push play on a historical documentary about horses in the Wild West.

My eyes glaze over as the narrator drones on about feeding and mating habits of wild horses. Jamie puts his arm over the back cushion and his fingers play with the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. The soothing touch and monotone narration lull me to sleep.



Something knocks against my shin and I curl up tighter against the warmth beneath me.

“Hey lover boy, wake up.”

My eyes snap open at Klaus’ words. The warm, cushiony pillow I’m lying on lets out a soft snore. *Fuck*. I fell asleep on Jamie. Literally.

“Might want to sit up and wipe the drool from your face before the others wake,” Klaus says with a smirk.

I glare at him but do exactly as he suggested before shaking Jamie awake.

He smiles when he sees me and leans in for a kiss. I cut my eyes toward Klaus and he follows my gaze, quickly sitting up and moving a respectable distance away.

“Good morning, Klaus.” Jamie stretches, his shirt riding up to reveal bare skin and a light smattering of hair on his abdomen.

“Good morning, lover.”

“Will you stop with the lover and lover boy?” I whine.

“Yes. But only because someone might hear.”

“Hear what?” Alex asks grumpily as he appears from the bunks.

“Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, sugar.”

“Fuck off.” Alex stomps back down the aisle and slams into the bathroom.

“Isn’t he just the sweetest?” Klaus asks us with mock sincerity.

“This hatred you two have for each other is gonna blow up one day,” Jamison tells him.

“Good thing I know how to contain the explosion. Though that man deserves whatever fallout comes from it.” Klaus shakes his head. “We’ll be in New York late tonight. Tomorrow we can do some sightseeing before the fancy dinner Macallister arranged for us at some swanky five-star restaurant downtown. Wear your nicest suit boys, there’s a dress code at this place.”

“Whatever. Do we have to go? Maybe I can stay in for the night this once.”

Klaus’ eyes bug out of his head at Jamie’s suggestion.

“Sorry. No can do. You’re a famous rockstar now. Which means fancy dinners for you.” I try to make light of the situation, but honestly, I’d much rather stay behind the locked doors of my hotel room than watch Marcy and Jamie pretend to be in love. “But if Klaus doesn’t mind, I’d like to stay in and rest. I’m sure the day will be exhausting enough.”



Klaus seems to pick up on what I'm implying and agrees. His relief at me staying behind tomorrow is greater than my own. You'd think he was the one dating the musician with a fake girlfriend from the sigh he lets out.

"Fine. Leave me to flounder alone in the spotlight." Jamie sticks out his bottom lip in a pout.

I roll my eyes. "What a hardship."

Alex reappears, and I jump up to take my turn. If I take a little longer than usual to clean myself inside and out, it has nothing to do with the hope that Jamie and I will get some alone time at the hotel tonight. Nope. Nothing at all.



It's late when we get to the hotel and I'm exhausted from trying to avoid Jamie to help him keep from eye-fucking me for everyone to see. Klaus has had us keep the same bunking arrangements since that first night, so Jamie and I are handed keys to the same room at check in.

Marcy insists on him spending a few minutes helping her carry her bags to the room next to ours.

I drop my bag at the foot of the bed and strip down before climbing beneath the sheets, grateful that Macallister didn't skimp on our accommodations. There's no way I would be able to sleep in a cheap hotel with sketchy stains on the bedsheets.

I sink into the mattress; the material conforms to my body and makes me feel safe and relaxed. My eyelids flutter closed a few times, and I force myself to keep them open. I don't want to fall asleep before Jamie even gets inside our room.

Darkness descends over my vision, and when I open my eyes again, the lights are dimmed. Fingers trail up my leg to my hip, then across my lower abdomen—dangerously close to my groin—to the opposite hip and down the opposite leg. Rough calluses make their way over my skin, ramping my lust higher with each pass that doesn't end where I wish it would.

"Stop teasing, Jamie. Please," I beg.

A husky chuckle fills the room. "I was beginning to think you were dead

to the world. A few minutes longer and I was debating waking you with my mouth instead.”

I close my eyes. “I’m still asleep. Do what you must.”

I open my eyes as Jamie crawls over my body until we are face to face, his blue eyes sparkling with want as he stares at me. The soft yellow glow from the dimmed overhead bulbs gives his skin a golden hue. He’s so beautiful it takes my breath away.

Jamie keeps his eyes locked with mine and he snakes a hand between us to wrap around both our cocks. He lazily jerks us until I can’t take anymore, and I try to thrust into his fist at a faster pace. Growling out my frustration when he holds me still by letting the weight of his lower body press onto me does nothing except put a smile on his face.

“Jamie, please.”

“Shh. Not too loud.”

I pull him into a kiss, knowing if my mouth isn’t occupied while he tortures me, I’ll scream out my irritation soon. There would be no more hiding for us. So I close my lips around his tongue, sucking on it to the same slow pace as his strokes.

“Damn it, Vance.” Jamie curses as he breaks the kiss.

His hand speeds up, and he lifts his weight from me, allowing me to thrust as he ruts into his hand. The slide of his slick skin against mine becomes too much.

“Fu—”

He cuts off my expletive turned moan with a hand over my mouth as I come in pulsating waves. His warm release rushes over his fingers to my dick, and a second dry orgasm wracks my body.

Jamie falls to the side of me and rests an arm over my waist. I’m covered in cum, but I couldn’t move if I wanted to.

“Give me a minute and I’ll clean you up.”

I nod, my eyes already closing as sleep rises to claim me once again.

## *Jamison*

Vance's alarm goes off much earlier than I expect. I groan at the annoying beeping, shoving a pillow over my head to muffle the noise. "Fuck. What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty." He laughs and climbs out of the bed. The spray of the shower turning on brings the memories of water cascading over Vance's body. I didn't get to touch him that day and I have no plans to miss out this time. My dick agrees, already half hard at the thought.

Wide awake now, I leave the cocoon of warm sheets. At the doorway, I pause to take in Vance and all his naked and wet glory. The glass shower door fogs up before my eyes, obscuring my view, but not doing a damn thing to calm my now fully erect and eager cock. The dark silhouette of his body moving beneath the water beckons me closer.

"Don't even think about it." Vance's voice is loud as it bounces off the tiled shower walls.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't open this door and join you."

"Because I have to meet with Klaus in ten minutes."

"And?" I open the door and step inside.

Vance steps back, retreating until his back hits the wall. "There's not enough time."

"Is that a challenge?" I lower to my knees and take myself in a tight grip, stroking slowly as I watch his dick twitch. Licking my lips, I let my gaze wander up his body until I met his eyes. "I want your flavor on my tongue. I'm starving for it. Can I taste you, Vance?"

"Fuck." His head hits the wall and his eyes close. "How am I supposed to say no when you're on your knees saying shit like that? It's not fair."

"Is that a yes?"

“Jamie.” My name sounds like a strangled curse falling from his lips. “Fuck it. Klaus can wait.”

Taking his words as permission, I lean in and lick around his tip, swiping up the bead of pre-cum that had formed before it falls away with the water flowing over us.

“Yes. Jamie.” This time, when he says my name, it ends in a moan.

I suck his length into my mouth, taking him to the back of my throat and swallowing. I keep him there until my need to breathe forces me to relent. His hands settle on top of my head, his fingers fisting in my hair. I catch my breath, then swallow him down again.

My hand moves over my cock, faster and faster as I feel Vance’s legs lock into place seconds before his body stiffens and he comes down my throat. My orgasm erupts, quickly washed away down the drain.

Vance stays against the wall and I release him from my mouth, licking my lips and chasing his taste with my tongue.

I stand and place a kiss to his lips before grabbing the body wash and washing first Vance, then myself. My hands glide over his skin aided by the soapy suds and though I’d just come moments ago, my cock is letting it be known I could go again.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you,” I tell him as I pull him under the spray with me, letting the water rinse away the soap from our bodies. “But you have to go see Klaus before he comes searching.”

“Shit.” Vance stumbles out of the shower. He tosses me a towel, then grabs one for himself. I dry myself with fast swipes of the cotton over my body, watching Vance rush as he pulls on his clothes and straightens his hair enough to be presentable.

“You look fine.” I leave the bathroom with my towel around my waist.

“I look like I just got a blow job.”

“So?”

“You’ve met Klaus. Do you think he’s going to leave me alone when he realizes why I’m late for our meeting?”

I laugh because he’s right. He glares at me, grabs his keycard, and races from the room. I don’t pity him having to deal with Klaus’ teasing, but I’m pretty sure I won’t escape the jabs either.

My phone rings and I snatch it from the nightstand. The caller id display sours the euphoric mood being with Vance had brought. “Yeah?”

“We’re all set for tonight,” Macallister says, taking my cue to skip the niceties.

“For what?”

“You know what. Marcy doesn’t know yet. We want her surprise to be real. Klaus and Jude have set everything up with the restaurant. No one else is to know. The more authentic, the better the public will receive the news.”

He clicks off the call and I squeeze the phone in my fist, wishing I could toss it across the room. It rings again before I can say to hell with it and fling the thing against the wall.

“What?” I snap.

“James? What’s wrong?”

Marcy. Shit. “Nothing. Sorry. Do you need something?”

“I wanted to see if you wanted to have breakfast with me. I ordered room service.”

My stomach growls, a reminder I haven’t eaten since sometime yesterday on the bus. I shrug. *What could it hurt?* “Sure.”



Breakfast with Marcy was fine. She didn’t glom onto me or try to flirt. Maybe because we were alone. But there was something a bit off in the way she kept looking at me, then turning away.

The afternoon is filled with touristy explorations of the city: the Statue of Liberty, the 9/11 museum, and the Empire State Building. Through it all, Marcy clings to my arm, playing the role of my adoring girlfriend for everyone we pass. I catch Vance sending murderous looks in her direction when he thinks no one is paying attention to him. Which honestly is all the time. He’s insignificant compared to the members of Tainted and Maxim, and the addition of the Hollywood starlet to our entourage.

I need to tell him about the engagement that’s planned to happen tonight, but there hasn’t been a moment for any privacy.

Our last tour for the day ends and we pile into the cars waiting for us.

“We’re running behind schedule. When we get to the hotel, you’ll have

fifteen minutes at the most to change and get your asses back down to the limos that will be waiting,” Klaus tells us.

The car pulls up outside the front doors and everyone hurries inside to change. I try to wait for Vance, but Klaus pulls him aside, and he waves me on with a smile.

It doesn't take me long to dress in the fancy suit Klaus had picked for me to wear, and I pace the room, waiting for Vance.

My phone buzzes with a text.

**Klaus: Two minute warning.**

*Fuck.* I type out a message to Vance.

**Me: Where are you?**

**Vance: Klaus needed me to run an errand for him. Why? Everything okay?**

**Me: Yeah. Just wanted a minute with you before dinner.**

**Vance: :(**

**Vance: I'll be there when you get back.**

**Me: You better be.**

A text message isn't the best way to let him know about my impending fake engagement. I pocket my phone and head down to the lobby. I'll just have to tell him when I get back.

## *Vance*

Klaus sent me to pick up an assortment of clothing Hawke had requested for tomorrow's show, and to call to confirm the appointment for the guys at a local salon. Hawke knows the owner, and he agreed to fit Maxim into his schedule.

Since our sightseeing had ended late, everyone was rushing to dress for the venue they had reservations at for dinner. It made sense for me to be the one to run out, seeing as I was the only one not going.

After sending one last text to Jamie, I shove my phone back into my pocket and grab the bags from the cashier. There are more than I expected, and far more than enough outfit choices for one show.

I shove the bags into the trunk of the car waiting outside the boutique. Sliding into the back seat, I let out a sigh. Today was exhausting. It was harder than I thought it would be to watch Marcy and Jamie act like the happy couple they're supposed to be.

It doesn't take long for the driver to arrive back at the hotel, but everyone is long gone to dinner by the time I'm inside and on the elevator.

I set the bags near the door when I get to the room, then change into some sweats and an oversized t-shirt.

My stomach growls, letting me know its displeasure at me skipping out on dinner with the others. I snatch up the room service menu and settle on a burger and fries. Order placed, I scroll through the cable channels provided and settle on watching a romantic comedy. I wait to hit play until my food arrives, and then I get comfy on the bed.

The movie is nearly over when a knock comes. I'm a romantic sap with a goofy smile as I open the door.

"Hey." Hawke greets me and I wave him in. "You're in a good mood. Is it

because of the engagement?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Oh, uh, nothing.” He sashays over to the bags I retrieved for him. “Thanks for picking this stuff up for me.”

I shrug as he comes back to the door where I’m still standing. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“You’re sweet. I’d love to stay and chat, but I have a long night of brainstorming how to convince Thierry he needs a haircut.”

“Good luck with that.” I laugh as I hold the door for him, then close it once he’s on his way down the hall.

The movie no longer interests me. I switch it off and flip through to find something else. A local news channel mentions Tainted and Maxim, so I stop to listen.

The older anchorperson with salt and pepper hair and deep voice details who the bands are, the connection to Marcy—because of course she had to pop up even in a news report about Jamie—and the restaurant Klaus had reserved.

The younger, bubbly blonde goes all swoony as the screen cuts to a shot of the group sitting together. The higher pitch of their voice narrates what is shown. All the attention at the table is centered on where Jamie sits next to Marcy. Her hands cover her mouth as I watch the man I love push back his chair and go down on one knee.

*What the fuck?*

Jamie holds out a ring, and while there isn’t any sound beside the commentary of the anchors, it’s obvious what he asks and what Marcy’s response is to the question.

They hug and the others clap as servers break out a celebratory bottle of champagne.

The screen cuts back to the news desk and I click off the television.

Jamie wouldn’t have asked Marcy to marry him. Not without a push from higher up. But why wouldn’t he tell me?

Frustrated at what I’ve just seen, I can’t stay in the room we’re sharing. There’s too much Jamie in here. I change into a pair of jeans and a button-up, pull on my shoes, and text the driver to meet me out front.

In the lobby, I run into Mitchell and the other members of Tainted.

“Whoa, where’s the fire?” he asks.



If they're here, Maxim won't be far behind. I need to get out of here before they arrive.

"I have to go." Sliding past the three of them, I step outside just as Maxim's limo pulls up. Luckily, my car is waiting and I slide right into the back, but when I turn to close the door, I find I'm not alone. Mitchell settles himself onto the seat next to me and, not wanting to cause a scene and pull attention to myself, I just sigh and wait for him to close the door.

"Where to?" The driver looks at me in the rear-view mirror, waiting for an answer.

"Uh..."

"Do you know that new club on Staten Island?" Mitchell asks. The driver nods and he tells him, "Take us there."

The car pulls out into traffic just as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to check just in case it's Klaus. But I should have known.

**Jamie: Where are you? I need to talk to you.**

**Me: Don't bother. I already know.**

**Jamie: Vance...**

**Jamie: Where are you?**

**Me: Out. Don't wait up. I'll grab another room when I get back.**

I power down my phone so I'm not tempted to check his response.

"I take it you heard about Jamie and Marcy." Mitchell doesn't ask, just assumes and my surprise must show on my face. "You two aren't subtle to anyone looking. And trust me, I was looking." He shrugs.

"Yeah." I don't say anything more than that.

"Look, it isn't any of my business what the two of you have going on. It's safe to say whatever it is, it's over, or will be. Tonight, let me show you a good time."

Mitchell places a hand on my thigh. His fingers caress over the denim, and I know I should push him away, but I'm still upset at Jamie and the touch is comforting. "Okay."

Mitchell smiles, then moves his hand from my leg and places his arm over my shoulders, hugging me to him. "I promise I'll have you too distracted to even remember his name."

The car parks outside a brick building with a neon sign and loud, thumping bass that vibrates the seats. I don't have the heart to tell him that forgetting Jamie will never happen. Instead, I smile and take the hand he

offers, intertwining our fingers as we walk to the entrance.

Mitchell's face is enough to get us inside ahead of the line. Within seconds, I have a drink in my hand. I down it and order another. Then another. At about the fifth, the buzz of alcohol warms my body and the beat of the music calls to me.

"Let's dance," I shout near Mitchell's ear.

We finish the drinks in our hands, then set the glasses on top of the bar.

The crowd is thick on the dance floor, but we squeeze into a space in the middle. I close my eyes and sway my hips to the sensual rhythm flowing over me.

The fogginess in my brain makes me feel like the only one in the room. Arms wrap around my waist from behind and pull me back into a warm body. His hands grip my hips and he grinds against my ass, making it obvious that he's enjoying being this close.

We dance for a few songs. I bravely press back into his groin, and I grow more aroused the longer we move together. His hands wander my body, stirring a need deep inside me.

Some part of me screams out that I shouldn't do this, but I slam a door at the reminder of why I'm here. Mitchell leans forward enough to speak into my ear, "Wanna get out of here?"

I should say no. I want to say no. But the combination of alcohol and hurt running through my system takes over and I find myself nodding.

Mitchell's smile is dazzling as he grabs my hand and drags me out of the club and to the car. Nervous tension fills the backseat. Neither of us move until we reach the hotel.

In the elevator, I press the button for my floor. I drag Mitchell along behind me until we reach my room. When I turn to face him, he backs me up against the wall and claims my mouth in a kiss. It's not as consuming and intense as when Jamie kisses me, but he knows what he's doing, and I give in to his questing tongue.

I barely register the click of the locks turning, but there's no ignoring the shout that booms and echoes along the corridor.

"What the fuck?"

## *Jamison*

I knew I'd fucked up before texting Vance. From the outside looking in, Marcy and I were a happy couple moving on to the next step in our relationship. My friends were ecstatic to have been witness to the momentous event. We all played our parts for the cameras Macallister had arranged to capture everything. Probably so I wouldn't back out.

I shouldn't have waited to tell Vance.

After dinner, Marcy hadn't left me alone until we got back to the hotel. And even then, it was a matter of me convincing her I needed to rest from all the excitement. Somehow, I'd avoided her efforts to get me into her room for the night.

I sigh at the thought of just how big of a mess I've created. Sure, Macallister set things up, but I didn't have to follow through. I could have, *should* have, found a way out of the doomed partnership with the crazed actress.

It's clear to me now that Marcy has expectations of our mutual arrangement that far exceeds what Macallister has promised. I'd believed her behavior was just as she'd said: honing her acting skills and making sure we aren't found out. Now I'm not so sure.

A noise outside the room snares my attention and jerks me out of the morose thoughts I'd been spiraling down since I returned to an empty room.

*Maybe Vance wants to talk things out.* I unlock the door and yank it open, then immediately curse at what I find. "What the fuck?"

Mitchell pulls his lips from Vance's slowly—too slowly for my liking—and I glare at the man.

"Jamie?" Vance's voice sounds slurred and when I meet eyes that are glazed over, my anger turns into rage.

"Are you drunk?" I ask him, before turning to Mitchell. "Did you ply him

with alcohol to get into his pants?”

“Whoa. Calm down, man.” Mitchell holds his hands up, palms facing me, and backs away to the opposite wall. “We went out, had a few drinks. We were just having a good time.”

“I’m not drunk. Just a little buzzed.” Vance crosses his arms and tries to glare at me, but in his state he just ends up squinting in my direction.

“You’re drunk. You both are.” Some of my anger dissipates knowing that Mitchell is just as wasted as Vance, but I’m still pissed he was out drinking and whatever else with *my* Vance.

A door down the hall opens and Klaus steps out. He walks in our direction and points to my and Vance’s room. “Inside.” He looks at Mitchell. “You, too. Now.”

We shuffle inside under Klaus’ stern guidance. It’s funny because he’s dressed in a pink silky pajama set, but I keep my laughter to myself because he looks just as pissed as I am.

Once inside, Mitchell sits in one of the chairs near the window. Vance falls onto the bed, and I move to follow, but Klaus grips my bicep, stopping me from moving any farther and pushing my back to the wall with a palm. I give in and lean against the wall, waiting.

“What the hell is wrong with the three of you? Do you want to be caught up in a scandal on Jamison’s engagement night?” He throws his hands up.

Vance snorts from the bed. “My apologies. Jamie’s *engagement* is of utmost importance. How dare I go out and have fun outside of that.”

Mitchell snickers at him and Klaus sighs in exasperation. “Yes, it is. And it should be important to you if you want to keep your internship.”

“Maybe if it was that important, I should have known about it beforehand. I shouldn’t have learned about it on the fucking news,” he shouts.

“He’s right,” I say before Klaus can make up some excuse for why Vance didn’t need to know. Meeting his eyes, I tell him, “You should have known as soon as I did, and I’m sorry I kept it from you. I just couldn’t find the right time to tell you.”

“I’m partly to blame here. I shouldn’t have purposely kept you out of the loop. But I didn’t want something like this to happen in public.” Klaus tries to reason with Vance, but the alcohol he consumed earlier makes him brave.

“Fuck you both. I could have handled this if I had known. It’s not like the

marriage will happen. But what you did—” Vance finally manages the glare he’d attempted in the hall as he directs his words at me. “That was a betrayal of what I thought we had, what we were rebuilding.”

“Vance—”

“No. I can’t do this with you right now. Klaus, can you get me a room, please?”

“It’s late. But I can check with the front desk.”

“No need.”

I’d actually forgotten Mitchell was still there until he spoke.

“What do you mean by that?” I grit out, certain I know exactly what he means.

“I mean, Vance can stay with me. I have a suite and there’s plenty of room. It would be my pleasure to share with him.”

“No fucking way.” Vance can’t stay with him. I need him here with me so I can apologize and show him this mistake changes nothing between us.

“That’s not your choice.” Mitchell smirks at me.

“Mitchell’s right. This is Vance’s call,” Klaus says, the voice of logic and reason in all his pink splendor. “What do you want to do, Vance?”

I look at him and silently plead with him to say no. To stay with me. But after several minutes, he breaks the intense stare down we’re having and plunges a knife into my heart.

“I want to stay with Mitchell.” He stands and gathers his belongings, even the toiletries he’d unpacked earlier when we’d showered together. Within minutes, he’s following Mitchell from the room.

“I fucked up. I should have known this would happen. Fuck. I did. I was just too distracted to give it my full attention.” Klaus runs a hand over his hair, ruffling the usually perfect strands. I’ve never seen him so disheveled or anything less than his usual flamboyant perfection.

“It’s not your fault, Klaus. You did what was right from your viewpoint. I’m the one who thought waiting would somehow save Vance from the hurt. I knew he’d hate the thought of me putting a ring on Marcy’s finger, but I did it anyway without saying anything.”

Klaus nods. “You’re right. We both fucked this up. Just give him time. Are you going to be okay alone tonight?”

“Yeah. Go back to your *distraction*.”

A sad smile lifts the corner of his lips. “I’ll see you in the morning. And I

meant it. Give him time. Let him come to terms with it. He's smart and reasonable. If he was willing to be your secret, I'm pretty sure this won't be a deal breaker. He just needs to be mad for a while. You have a show tomorrow. Focus on that. You can grovel later."

Klaus flounces out the door, his normal flamboyance returning as he heads back down the hall, leaving me to wallow in the aftermath of the disaster I'd created.

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## Vance

There's a construction worker jack hammering inside my head. I sit up in bed with a groan. The room isn't the same one I'd shared with Jamie the night before, and for a moment I'm confused. Then the events of the night come rushing back, making the pounding in my head intensify.

*Fuck.* I shouldn't have drunk as much as I had at the club. At least I hadn't blacked out. I remember it all. Jamie's engagement. Kissing Mitchell. Jamie yelling. Klaus reprimanding all of us. Staying the night with Mitchell. I've never wanted anyone other than Jamie, and I'm not sure why I allowed Mitchell to kiss me.

"Morning sunshine. Want some coffee?" Mitchell stands in the doorway of the room with his own steaming mug of caffeinated goodness. He's an attractive man, and with the way the light from the window shines on him, he looks almost exactly like Jamison. Maybe that's it.

"Yes, please." I follow him to the kitchen. His suite is more of a well-equipped apartment, and a treat after staying on the bus and in small hotel rooms where a bed is the focal point. Not that I had minded. But that was before.

"I want to apologize." Mitchell takes a seat on a stool at the small island and I take one opposite after pouring a cup of coffee and adding a splash of cream to give a bit of sweetness.

"What for?" I ask after taking a sip.

"For trying to move in where I'm not wanted. I underestimated the relationship between you and Jamison. I'd assumed, wrongly, that you were just a fun fling for him while on tour."

"Doesn't matter. Whatever we were is over. He deliberately kept me out of the loop on something that affects both of us."

“Yeah, but that man is gone for you. Same as you are with him. Sucks for me.” Mitchell smiles and his blue eyes grab my attention. They’re similar in color to Jamie’s, but deeper, darker.

We finish our coffee in silence, and I lose myself to my thoughts. It’s better this happened now and not months or years down the road. Before I became too attached to Jamie. Who am I kidding? I’ve been a sucker for Jamie since high school. There wasn’t a chance of me not falling for him. I’d already fallen deep years before. I just hadn’t realized how far until now. Last year I could have moved on, could have survived never having him again. But now, after tasting what I’ve so long been starved for, I have no chance of ever moving on from the man. I have to let him go, or risk being his dirty little secret forever.

A knock at the door makes me jump and I fall off the stool, splashing coffee on the counter and down my shirt. “Shit.”

Mitchell tosses a hand towel at me and laughs. “That’ll be room service. Figured you’d be just as hungry as I am, so I ordered a buffet style breakfast for us.”

He leaves to answer the door as I wipe up my mess. The liquid is drying on my shirt, but the stickiness left behind from the cream causes the material to cling to my skin, so I take it off.

“I’m an idiot.”

“Hmmm?” I ask while toweling the last drops of coffee from my stomach.

“Just mourning my chance with such deliciousness.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll be right back. Save some food for me.”

“You don’t need to cover up for my benefit.” Mitchell waggles his brows at me, then takes the covers off the trays he’d placed on the table.

After breakfast, Mitchell and I hang around in his suite getting to know each other. It’s obvious immediately that we would never have worked out. Besides the fact that I’m lost on Jamie, Mitchell isn’t looking for anything serious. He’s sworn off relationships, saying commitment isn’t something he believes in. I’m certain there is a story there, but he refuses to share. And all I’ve ever wanted is to settle down, to build a home and family with the man I love.

By the time we have to head over to the venue, we’ve discussed our favorite foods, colors, and movies, though we both steer clear of talking



about anything serious. Though a serious demeanor would occasionally cross his face, it disappeared within seconds to be replaced by his devastatingly handsome smile, so I let it go.

When it comes time to leave for the venue, I ride with Tainted and try to ignore the look of hurt on Jamie's face. Which is actually pretty easy to do with Marcy hanging on his arm and flashing the diamond ring he gave her at anyone looking in her direction.

"Most guys would love the attention."

"What do you mean?" I ask Mitchell as he stares at Jamie and Marcy.

"Being in the spotlight like Jamison is right now. Most would kill for just a chance to be where he is, but he doesn't seem to care."

I shrug. "Jamie's never really cared about the fans or the attention. Sure, he wants both, but it's always been more about the music than anything else for him."

"You talk like you have intimate knowledge of his past." Mitchell shifts on the seat, his leg bumping against mine.

I'm aware of Kaden and Arlo sitting across from us, pretending not to listen, but doing a poor job of it.

"We went to school together. I've known all the guys since before their voices dropped and they grew facial hair."

"Yeah? What was he like?" Mitchell asks, something in his tone lends to more than just curiosity, but I can't pinpoint what that more is.

"Pretty much the same as he is now."

"What about his family? Any brothers or sisters?"

"Mitch," Arlo hisses out his name and gives him a look that could mean back off or quit being an idiot. It's hard for me to tell since I don't know either of them well enough to understand their dynamic.

"What? Just curious. That's all."

"It's fine. It's not a secret that Jamie is an only child, or that his dad took off when he was two. Anything more than that, you need to ask Jamie. Just because I know some of his past and secrets doesn't mean I'll tell them to you. Even if I don't particularly like the man right now." I cross my arms and lean back on the seat. Mitchell's questions are harmless, but I feel a defensive need to protect Jamie.

"Sorry, man. I didn't mean anything." Mitchell holds his hands up, palms facing me. "I can actually relate. My dad left too."

I nod, accepting his apology. I stay quiet for the rest of the ride, leaning my head against the window and watching the city pass by. Kaden and Arlo talk about Tainted's set and a few changes they want to try tonight. There's no more questions from Mitchell, and I'm glad. The less I have to think about Jamie, the better. I can't avoid the man because it's my job to be around him, but I can choose to keep him strictly as a client. Like I should have done all along. Maybe I was never meant to be with Jamie.

When we arrive, Maxim's crew is already unloading their equipment and I look around, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jamie. Not because I want to see him. Nope. I *need* to see him. With Marcy. I need to let him go, though it's far too late to save myself from heartbreak. The reminder of the two of them together will help my resolve to keep our interactions business only.

Maybe if I repeat the words enough, they will eventually become the truth.

## *Jamison*

Vance has been avoiding me for the last few days, ever since New York and the engagement fiasco. He's constantly with Mitchell and the rest of the guys from Tainted, though he does occasionally hang out with me and the guys. Just never in private where I can talk to him. He even had Klaus change the bus and bunking arrangements, so I don't even have him for company while we travel to the next city.

Then there's Marcy. She's become attached to me. Wherever I go, she's there. I try to be polite and smile, giving the public the act Macallister insists Maxim needs to climb the charts. And if the latest rankings are to be believed, it's working.

Everything is perfect on the outside. Inside, my heart is a tortured mess that's slowly bleeding out into the rest of my life. I haven't slept for more than an hour or two every night since Vance left me in that hotel room. When I do, all I dream about is how he left with Mitchell.

"James, I'm tired." Marcy grabs my hand and tugs, trying to drag me to the bedroom with her.

"So go to fucking bed," Alex snarls out and glares at her.

When I make no attempt to move, she huffs and stomps back to the only bedroom on the bus. She's taken over the room, refusing to trade off and allow the others any privacy, at least before the engagement she'd let the others have it from time to time.

"That girl has got to go." Alex turns his death glare on me.

"He's right," Anders agrees, surprising me. He's always been casual and goes with the flow. "Whatever the deal between you and her that Macallister arranged, she's taken this way too seriously. Plus, the whole thing has Vance distancing himself from all of us. I'd rather have him than

her any day. And I know you do too.”

“Yeah, well, he won’t talk to me. Besides, he’s too busy being Mitchell’s shadow. He’s moved on.”

“You’re an idiot.” Alex points at me, his finger in my face. “Even if he has, this is all on you and you need to fix it. Because she needs to be gone, like, yesterday.”

“I thought you wanted me and Marcy together. Weren’t you the one who told me it was what was the best for Maxim?”

“Yeah, but that was before.”

“Before what? Before you started thinking about more than yourself and whatever issues you have?”

“Fuck you.” Alex shoves out of his seat, and if it hadn’t been bolted to the floor of the bus, the chair would have ended up in a mess across the small space.

Anders stares at me and I squirm in my spot on the bench seat next to him. “What?”

“Alex hasn’t made the best decisions in the past, but even he can see what this engagement is doing to you, and by association, the rest of us.”

“Even if I wanted to, I can’t call off the engagement. Macallister has it in our contract that we have to do whatever he deems necessary for the success of both Maxim and Twisted Records. I’m stuck.”

“So what? You’re going to keep up this façade until you end up married?”

“No. Fuck!” I shove my fingers through my hair and pull on the strands hard.

“Do you have your contract?” Klaus asks. He’d been quiet throughout the whole back and forth between Alex and me. “I’m not a lawyer, but I know someone who might be able to find you a way out of that specific clause. That is, if you want out.”

“Of course I want out. I tried to call off the whole thing.”

“Send me your contract. I’ll see what Lincoln can find. I owe you for my role in this mess, anyway. I can admit when I’m wrong and try to right my mistakes.”

I nod just as Marcy’s whiny voice sounds from the back of the bus.

“I suggest you have a talk with her. She will not go away quietly.”

“You’re right. She’s become obsessive since we started this tour. Nothing

like the Marcy I'd become friends with."

I send him an electronic copy of the contract, then head back to see what Marcy wants and to set her straight again, and hopefully for the last time.

"What's up, Marcy?" I ask, closing the door behind me, then turning to face her.

"Nothing. I just thought we could spend some time together. You never seem to want to be around me lately." Marcy pouts, pushing her bottom lip out and giving me her sad puppy eyes.

Sighing, I scrub a hand over my face. "Marcy, we've talked about this. We're not in an actual relationship. The engagement Macallister engineered doesn't change that."

"Of course it does. You can't fake an engagement, James. You wouldn't have asked if you didn't want to be with me. Which is such a relief, because I was beginning to think you weren't interested in me the same way I am you."

"No. Marcy, listen to me." I move to sit next to her on the bed, looking her in the eyes so she can see the truth in mine. "I did not want this. I told Macallister no. But in the end, I had no choice. I'm sorry you think this is something it's not, but I've been as truthful and up front with you as I can be. There is nothing between us but friendship."

"No. Stop lying. Is this because of your *friend*? The one who switched buses and is hanging out with Mitchell? Don't throw what we have away because of him. He's already moved on to someone else."

"It has nothing to do with him." Though I have hope that eventually Vance will talk to me again, ending things with Marcy needs to happen, regardless. "I don't want to be with you, Marcy. When we first started this, we agreed that this was a business transaction and nothing more."

"Things have changed. He said you would be mine. It's in our contracts. If you break this off, I will ruin you. I'll tell everyone you left me for a man. No one will want to buy your music. You'll lose everything. Maxim will lose everything."

The smug smile Marcy gives me lets me know she's serious about destroying me. "Calm down. I'm not breaking things off. I just don't want you thinking this is something it's not." I won't end things with her, not yet. I'll wait to see what Klaus' friend Lincoln finds out. If I can get out of this mess, I will. But not until I am sure it won't affect Vance or the guys.

Which means negating Marcy's threat, as well as finding a loophole in the contract.

"I knew you'd see things my way." She runs a finger down my chest.

"Stop." I stand and move toward the door, desperate to get out of the room. "I won't break the contract agreement, but I will not pretend we're something we're not during my own personal time."

"We'll see about that."

I leave the room, shutting the door on her words. The thin wood does nothing to contain her laughter and I have a feeling she won't give up on either claiming me for the sick fantasy in her head or destroying everything and everyone I hold sacred in this world.

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## Vance

Jamie looks miserable. His performances have been subpar for the past week, and I know that it's because of me.

Marcy, though, looks like she's living her best life. Who can blame her? She's engaged to one of the sexiest and most coveted men. Plus, she's the center of the country's attention. I wouldn't be surprised to learn she has offers rolling in because of her engagement to Jamie.

The entertainment industry is all about what's hot. Talent doesn't always get you the job. It's disheartening, but if it was all about talent and not popularity, I wouldn't have this internship. PR wouldn't have to work so hard if we only had to capitalize on talent instead of making, and keeping, our clients palatable to the public. Just look at how some of the greatest talents ruined their careers by going against what the fans wanted. It happens far too often. Which is why I, along with Klaus and the rest of our team, are so important in keeping our clients in good standing and minimizing any potential damage before it's too late.

I watch as Jamie and Marcy walk into the club together ahead of the rest of us. This isn't a fun night out, more an obligation scheduled by Macallister to show off his rising stars, Maxim, along with fan favorites Tainted.

"Hey, you want anything?" Arlo asks.

I shake my head in answer. I don't feel like competing with the loudspeakers overhead.

"You know, you *are* allowed to have fun and do something for yourself." Mitchell leans in close so I can hear him. "I promise not to try to get in your pants this time."

I laugh. Since the night of our first, last, and only kiss, Mitchell has

become my friend and being anything more has been the furthest thing from my mind. He reminds me of Jamie sometimes when he smiles or the light hits his profile just right, but he's not Jamie. And we are much more compatible as friends. "We would never work and you know it."

"True. But there is more than just me here tonight." Mitchell nods his head to the side of the dance floor and I groan. "Give the man a chance. He might surprise you."

I glare at him, and he bursts out into laughter. Charlie is one of the roadies for Tainted and he has taken to following me around like a puppy. He's asked me out several times and doesn't seem to want to take no as an answer. It's not that he's not a nice guy. From what I know of him, anyway. I just don't want to lead anyone on. Maybe I'll be ready to date again in the future, but as it stands now, Jamie is the only man who occupies my mind. No one else can even attempt to compete for my heart. It's his.

Arlo and Kaden come back with drinks in hand and we set up at one of the sectioned off VIP tables reserved for Maxim and Tainted. It's much quieter than the main area and we can hear each other without shouting.

"He looks so wretched. Why doesn't he just call the thing off?" Mitchell doesn't have to tell me who he's referring to.

"Something in his contract won't let him."

Mitchell frowns. "It's in his contract that he needs to be engaged to her?"

"Not exactly, but for simplification's sake, yes."

"Shit." Mitchell's curse is out of place, but I don't have time to question him about it.

"Hey, Vance. You wanna dance?" Charlie stands next to our table with his hands in his jean pockets.

Mitchell snickers and Arlo and Kaden follow his lead. Charlie's shoulders slump in defeat and he turns to leave. For some reason, I feel sorry for him. "Charlie, wait. One dance."

I let him take my hand and lead me to the dance floor. It's awkward. I can't find the natural rhythm like I can with Jamie, or even like I had with Mitchell. Charlie is all jerking hips and groping hands. His breath smells like cheap beer and I turn my back to him so I don't have to breathe in the foul stench.

The longer we're on the dance floor, the more I regret saying yes. Then I lock eyes with Jamie's. The club and all the people inside fade away as he



stares me down and I let the music flow through me. Swaying to the pulsing beat, I find the rhythm I couldn't before. It's only a brief instant, a few seconds out of the millions in a lifetime, but I want to stay suspended inside this moment forever.

Marcy rips through our connection, stealing Jamie's attention away and placing it back on her. I become aware of my surroundings and Charlie once again. No longer able to pretend I want to be in his arms, I yank from his hold and push through the crowd of people around us.

I see a sign for the restrooms and make my way along the hall and through the door marked with the stick figure commonly associated with men.

It's so much quieter inside the small room, and surprisingly empty. I bypass the urinals and go directly to the sink to splash some water on my face.

The loud music penetrates into the room as the door is opened, but quickly recedes. Footsteps sound across the floor, stopping near me. I can see Charlie's reflection in the mirror.

"You okay? You ran off awfully fast."

Our eyes meet in the mirror. I shouldn't have led him on, but it's too late to play the shoulda-woulda-coulda game. "I'm sorry, Charlie. I was just being nice. I—"

"You're a fucking cocktease is what you are. Rubbing yourself all over me on that dance floor for everyone to see, then running off." Charlie steps in close behind me, caging me between the sink and his body.

"Charlie, please. Stop."

"No. You've been stringing me along for a week. Now I'm gonna take what you've been waving in my face."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I try to shove away with my hands on the sink, but he covers them with his own and presses down painfully. He slurs into my ear, telling me what he's going to do to me.

The door opens again, the loud music slowly fading as Charlie continues to breathe in my ear.

"Get away from him." Mitchell pulls Charlie away and I turn around to face them, shaking my hands out as I do. "Leave. Now. Your bags will be waiting for you outside the bus, as well as your final paycheck. I never want to see your face again."

Charlie doesn't argue, just gives Mitchell a look full of hatred. "Whatever. You can have the cocktease. Maybe you'll have better luck getting into his pants." Charlie spits at Mitchell's feet as he leaves the restroom.

"I'm sorry, Vance. I thought he was all bark and no bite. I should have known better. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Physically, anyway. "I just want to get out of here."

"Okay." Mitchell pulls out his phone and types out a message to someone. "Come on. The car is out front waiting."

I let him wrap an arm around me and steer me out of the restroom and then out of the club.

## *Jamison*

“Oh, look at the lovebirds sneaking off early.” Marcy points toward the exit and I look to see Vance leaving with Mitchell, his body curled into the other man who holds him close.

“What’s your point, Marcy? I told you, Vance has nothing to do with how I feel about you.”

“I don’t believe you. As soon as you realize he’s moved on, I know you’ll want me again.”

*Fuck. This woman is something else.* “I never wanted you. You were convenient and, like I’ve told you before, a business arrangement. Nothing more.”

I shove away from the table and head to the bar. I need a drink, and while I could have flagged down one of the servers in the VIP area, I can’t stay in Marcy’s presence any longer.

“What’ll it be?” the bartender asks.

“Two shots of your strongest whiskey and a drink to make me forget my own name.” I half joke, but the truth is I wish I could forget the last week. I’d give anything to go back and do it all over. Do it right. As long as I’m being honest with myself, I might as well admit that the reason I held off telling Vance about Macallister’s planned engagement for me isn’t because the timing wasn’t right. If only that was the truth. I was scared. Scared Vance would see it as one obstacle too many in the way of our relationship, which it is. He’d already sacrificed so much to be with me, I couldn’t fathom him wanting to add this bullshit. Hell, I didn’t want anything to do with Macallister or Marcy and this false narrative they have created for me.

The bartender sets the shots in front of me, and I order two more before downing them both. The alcohol burns my throat, causing me to cough. A

hand slaps my back twice. I look over to where Klaus now sits on the stool beside me.

“You good?” he asks, pointedly looking toward the second round of shots as the bartender sets them in front of me.

“Just fucking peachy.” I grab a shot glass and offer him a salute. It goes down smoother than the first. “You want one?” I nod at the last shot, downing it when he shakes his head.

“Do you think getting drunk is the answer?”

“Depends on the question. Will it help me get Vance back? No. But will it drown out the incessant sound of Marcy? I’ll have to say yes.” I pick up the mixed drink the bartender left with my first round of shots.

“If you want my opinion—”

“I don’t.”

“—you should talk to him. You’re only making things worse the longer you keep up this charade and avoid him.”

I finish my drink before responding. “I’m not avoiding him, Klaus. Anyone can see he is doing his best to stay as far from me as he can.”

Klaus scrubs a hand over his face and back through his hair, making him look like a haggard mess. He has dark bags under his eyes. I don’t know how he’s hidden how exhausted he is, but maybe he hasn’t been hiding it. I’ve been too in my head about Vance and this stupid engagement. I wouldn’t have noticed even if I was looking.

“I’m fine, Klaus. You have your friend looking over my contract. All I can do is wait for a way to end this torture.”

“If you wait too long, he might move on without you.”

“Ha! He’s already moved on,” I scoff.

Klaus shakes his head as he stands. “He hasn’t. Yet. Don’t make the mistake of letting him.”

I grab the bartender’s attention as Klaus walks back to the VIP section. My eyes meet Marcy’s when I turn back around with a fresh drink in my hand. Even from across the room, I can see the smirk on her face.

What had I been thinking to agree to the arrangement with her in the first place? It could have been anyone. Macallister has an evolving list of potential *girlfriends* for his musicians. But I hadn’t cared. I’d only said yes because I believed him when he said it would help Maxim’s image to pair me with her. Macallister suggested Marcy, and I agreed to save myself from

sitting in a conference room as Ronnie presented a PowerPoint on each candidate deemed worthy enough to forward my career.

I could have told him no, that I preferred men and saved everyone the trouble. Except I do like women. Maybe not as much as I like men, or Vance specifically, but I know from experience that the distinction doesn't matter. People tend to ignore what they don't understand or what they don't agree with. Macallister would have latched on to the small tidbit of my attraction to women and ran with it, anyway.

I lift the glass to my lips, finding it empty. I'd finished it while lost in should-haves.

"Another?"

I turn to the bartender and nod.

The shots and two drinks I've already had buzz through my head and I feel like I'm swimming through the music playing overhead.

"Bad break up?"

"Huh?"

The bartender hands me my drink with a laugh. "Usually when someone is as determined to get drunk as you are, it's because they've been dumped."

"No. Yes. I don't know. It's complicated. I don't know what to do."

"It's never as complicated as it seems. What do you want to do?" He leaves to go fulfill a drink order at the other end of the bar, but I ponder over his words.

*Am I making this overcomplicated?* My head hurts thinking about the tangled mess of things between me and Vance, and me and Marcy.

What do I want? That's easy. Vance. How do I get that? Ditch the bitch and grovel hard. Easy answers, but the complications come when I think about what will happen to Maxim and the guys if I do. The repercussions will affect us all.

*Does it matter if he doesn't even want you back?*

*Fuck you, conscience.*

"James."

*Fucking great.* Just what I need. "What Marcy?" I ask as I turn to face her.

"I want to dance."

"So dance." I take a swig of my drink.

“Are you getting drunk?”

“Just leave me alone, Marcy.”

“We’re in public, James,” she hisses out, her eyes taking in the few people who are paying attention to us.

“I don’t care. If you want to dance, you’ll be dancing with someone else. I’m going to finish my drink, then I have somewhere to be.”

I hadn’t consciously made the decision to go to Vance. I guess drunk me knows what I need to do. The moment the words leave my mouth, I know I have to talk to him. I probably should wait until the morning, but sober me will find an excuse to put it off. And I need to know if there is any chance at all that I can fix this.

“If you go to him, you’ll regret it.”

“So you keep saying. But the only thing I’m regretting right now is that I agreed to this farce. It’s cost me the best thing I’ve ever had.”

I swallow down the rest of my drink in a few gulps and set the glass on the bar.

“Another?” the bartender asks.

“No. I’m leaving.”

“James,” Marcy grits out, a smile firmly on her face for anyone watching.

“Good night, Marcy. Enjoy dancing with whoever.”

I make my way to the exit, then flag down a taxi to take me back to our hotel. My only thought is that I need to get to Vance.

*Vance*

“I’m fine, Mitchell. You can go back to your room.”

He continues to pace the small space in front of the long dresser at the foot of the beds. I’m sharing a room with Anders, having switched bunking arrangements with Thierry to avoid Jamie. There is no way I can stay in the same hotel room as him and not fall back into being his secret.

“I’m sorry. This is all my fault.” The look he gives me is so serious I burst into laughter.

“Unless you put Charlie up to forcing himself on me, this is not your fault.” I pat the spot on the bed beside me. “Sit down. Relax. You’re more worked up than I am. I swear. I’m fine. I might have a nightmare about his bad breath, but that’s it.”

I’m telling him the truth. As much as it freaked me out in the moment and for a few minutes following, I really am okay. At least for now, I am. It was gross and violating, but it’s over and done. Mitchell sent Charlie away, and I’m uninjured. It could have been so much worse if Mitchell hadn’t come into the restroom when he had.

“No. I would never do something like that. But I am the reason you are here on tour to begin with. If I hadn’t asked for Maxim to come on tour with us, you wouldn’t have been there for Charlie to assault.” He finally stops pacing and sits on the other bed, facing me.

“You asked for Maxim to come on tour with Tainted?”

“Yeah.”

“The guys will love to know that you’re such a huge fan that you asked Macallister to put them with you.”

“That’s not why I asked him to do it.”

Mitchell looks guilty and shifts his gaze away from me to stare at the

floor. What could he be feeling guilty about? Inviting Maxim to tour the country with his band, no matter the reason, isn't something that makes me think he has anything to blame himself for.

"Okay. Then why did you?"

He doesn't answer right away and when he lets out a sigh and lifts his eyes to mine, they're filled with so much emotion. Guilt. Pain. Anger.

"To get close to Jamison."

"You did it to get into Jamie's pants?" I'm confused, and a bit pissed. Was his plan to break us up, then swoop in to take my place?

"What? No."

"Excuse me if I don't believe you." I cross my arms and glare at him.

"No. Vance, listen. I've never told anyone but Arlo and Kaden, but I didn't have the best childhood."

"I'm—"

"It's okay. You don't have to say you're sorry. I'll save you all the horrid details, but basically my dad left my mom when I was three to be with another woman he'd gotten pregnant. Mom couldn't cope and turned to drugs. All her boyfriends were deadbeat addicts, like her. Anyway, my life pretty much sucked from that day on until I signed with Twisted Records."

"Okay. What does that have to do with Jamison? How does it make you at fault for me being on this tour and what happened with Charlie?" I'm missing a huge piece of the puzzle he's presented.

"My dad is Damien Black. The woman he left my mother for? That was Sarah Johnston."

"Sarah?" That would mean...

"Jamison is my half-brother."

*Shit. That's why Mitchell reminded me of Jamie so much.*

"Your last name isn't Black," I blurt out.

Mitchell laughs. "No, it's not. My mother refused to give me Damien's last name until they married. She had thought it would make him want to stay. She was wrong."

Mitchell had it just as bad as Jamie growing up. "He didn't stay with Sarah and Jamie, either. So your plan was to have Maxim join the tour so you could bond with Jamie, brother to brother. Have the family you missed growing up?"

Mitchell shakes his head. "I wanted to ruin him and all his future plans."



I bring a hand to my forehead and rub, trying to stave off the headache I can feel growing. “What do you mean, you wanted to ruin him?”

“I thought he had everything that I never got to have. Damien. A nice life. A loving mother. It wasn’t until you mentioned his childhood hadn’t been great that I second guessed what I thought I knew about Jamison.”

“So asking me out was to get back at him because you thought he had the childhood you wanted with your father?”

“Yes. So was Marcy.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I am beyond pissed, and moving into rage territory the more he talks, but I need to know what Marcy has to do with it.

“Don’t look at me like that. Jamison dating Marcy wasn’t my idea. But I may have convinced her to come on tour with him and that he feels more for her than he does. I may have also talked to Macallister about an engagement between the two of them. But I did all that before. I didn’t realize there was a clause in his contract that would keep him tied to her. I thought it would break up the two of you, and then he would call things off with Marcy. In my head, he would end up alone, with no one. Just like I’d been growing up. But like I said, that was before.”

I stand and move until I am bent over and in his face. “I’ll give you until we leave Chicago to tell him everything. Now get out.”

“Vance, I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Get out!”

I wait for him to leave the room, then fling myself onto the bed, face down into a pillow, and I scream. Tears of rage and frustration prick at my eyes. I want to call him back in here so I can yell at him, and maybe punch him in the face a couple of times. But as much of a dick move what he did was, I can understand where he’s coming from. Kind of. And I was really starting to like the guy.

A knock sounds at the door, and I don’t want to answer. But the allure of cursing Mitchell out pulls me off the bed.

“You better have good reason to be knocking on my door, considering,” I say.

“Uh, I do. I think,” Jamie slurs out, then scrunches his brows together as if he’s thinking hard about his reason.

“I thought you were someone else. What are you doing here, Jamie?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“You’re drunk. Go back to your room and sleep off whatever buzz you have going on. If you still need to talk, find me in the morning.” I start to close the door, but he puts his foot out, stopping my progress.

“This can’t wait until morning. Sober me won’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Can I come in?”

I roll my eyes and hold the door open. “Sure. Might as well.”

I don’t know what he wants to tell me, but if it’s anything like the bombshell Mitchell dropped, it should probably happen behind closed doors.

Once he’s inside, I close the door and lean back against the solid wood. “What do you need to tell me?”

“I love you, Van.”

“I know, Jamie. That doesn’t change anything.”

“I’m going to fix things. I just need to know that when I do, you’ll be there when it’s over.”

“I can’t promise that, Jamie.” My head falls back to knock against the door. “I want to. But I can’t. I won’t be your secret. I won’t be anyone’s secret again. I can’t.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Jamie, you’re drunk. In the morning, you’ll see things differently.” I brush the back of my hand across my eyes, wiping away the tears pooling. “I want you to leave.”

I open the door and avoid looking into his eyes as he moves closer.

“I am going to fix this, Van. Then I’ll be back,” he whispers to me as he leaves.

I close the door behind him, then fall to my knees, no longer able to hold back my tears.

## *Jamison*

Marcy storms her way into my room. The one I insisted on getting so I could have some time alone.

“You reek of bourbon, James. Take a shower but make it fast. We’re going to be late.” She riffles through my bag and the articles of clothing Hawke had picked out in New York, tossing what she deems suitable onto the bed.

“Late for what? I don’t remember making plans for today.” I walk over to the bed and pick up what she’s laid out, then wad it up and throw it back into the bag before pulling a pair of old jeans and a black t-shirt from my suitcase. I’ll wear the ‘costumes’ on stage, but not for her. She can fuck right off if she thinks I give two shits about my image after how she’s treated my relationship with Vance.

“That’s because you drowned your feelings in a hundred proof and sulked back to the hotel, wallowing for your boy toy, who has obviously moved on. We have lunch plans with Tom and Sandra. And I refuse to be made to look like an idiot. So you better act every bit the rockstar in love.”

“Or you’ll what? Expose me? I don’t give a fuck anymore, Marcy. This charade is over. We’re over. Get out.” Schmoozing with a Hollywood power couple is not something I want to do, and definitely not with Marcy.

“I’ll ruin you, *James*. And not just you. I’ll take all of Maxim down with the tasty morsels I’ve gathered on this tour. And your little boy toy? He’ll never work in this industry again.” She steps closer to me until she can stab the point of her finger into my chest. The acrylic digs into my skin as she punctuates each word with increasingly painful jabs.

“You won’t come out looking like some pristine princess. You forget, I have enough secrets to destroy you, just the same as you do me. Try me if

you dare.”

Marcy pushes me away and marches to the door. “I’ll make you and boy toy pay, James. Don’t doubt that I will. You’ll regret this.”

She pushes through the door in a huff, and the door slams closed behind her. The satisfying click of the automatic lock fills me with renewed energy. I may have been drunk last night, but I remember everything. And I owe it to Vance to make things right.

I send off a message asking Jude if he can schedule a FaceTime meeting with Macallister. I need to talk to both of them about Marcy... and Vance.

With that set in motion, I finally admit that Marcy was right about my needing a shower. I stink.

I strip off last night’s outfit and toss it into my laundry bag. The shower barely has enough time to get warm before I’ve already soaped and rinsed. I’m out, dried, and have taken care of hygiene in under ten minutes, according to the clock on the nightstand.

Dressed in the jeans and t-shirt that appalled Marcy, I sit on the bed to wait for Jude. I flip my phone over in my hands, debating if a text to Vance is a good idea. Luckily, Jude shows up, preventing me from clicking into my contacts and making things worse before I can make them right.

“Macallister will initiate a call in five. Do you want to fill me in while we wait?” Jude asks as he pushes past me to set up his laptop at the small table by the window.

“I called things off with Marcy.”

Silence. The whir of the air from the vents and the clacks of the keys on Jude’s keyboard are the only sounds. After he finishes setting up for Macallister’s call, he turns to face me. I can’t read him, and I tap my fingers on my thigh to ease the anxiousness running through me.

“Okay,” he says. “It’s not preferable, but we can work around it.”

“And I plan to be with Vance. Publicly. That is, if he’ll even have me now. I don’t want to hide who I am anymore, Jude. I *can’t*. Not if I want a second chance with him.” I sit on the bed and stare at my fingers.

“Macallister won’t like it.”

“I know. But at what point do I stop following what everyone else wants for me and go after what I want?”

“Maxim’s future—”

“Fuck! I know, okay. But I can’t let him go again. Leaving Vance behind

to sign with Twisted was my only regret. Now I have a chance to fix that mistake. I won't give him up a second time."

Jude stares at me, surprise, and maybe a hint of admiration, in his gaze. "Is he really worth your career? Everything that Maxim has been building? You'd throw it away for him?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Why?"

"Because he is worth it. He's worth losing it. Without him by my side, none of it matters anyway."

Jude looks like he has more to say, but a ding sounds from the laptop signaling the call from Macallister is coming through.

A red faced Macallister fills the computer screen. "What the fuck is going on, Jamison? Why is Marcy's agent calling me and citing a violation of contract?"

"Because I violated the terms." My voice is a lot calmer than I had expected it to be. I don't know if there is a loophole that would have allowed for this as Lincoln hadn't gotten back to Klaus yet. But fuck if I'll wait any longer to take back my life and get rid of Marcy and her deceptive ways.

"I've gathered as much. Do you mind explaining why?"

"Sir," Jude interrupts. "If I could?"

"Please."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe there is a clause in the contract that states either party is free to terminate if they believe the other party to have ill intentions with the relationship."

"Yes. And?"

"Marcy did not enter into the agreement with the sole intention of publicity."

"What do you mean?" I ask Jude. What other reason could she have?

"I'd rather not say at the moment. I need more concrete evidence of my suspicions."

"Fine. We'll work on terminating with minimal fallout. Was there anything else?" Macallister's anger has subsided, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to light that flame again.

"Just one. I want to come out publicly. I'm not ashamed of who I am, and I'm tired of hiding. If I want to date a man instead of a woman, I don't want

to have to weigh the consequences.”

“That’s not a good idea, Jamison.”

“Let me rephrase. I’m not asking for permission or a negotiation. I *am* coming out. Now let’s talk about what that means for Maxim.”

I feel like one weight has been lifted. But I still need to control the amount of damage it will cause to my bandmates, my friends, my family.

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## Vance

“He did what?” *Goddamnit, Jamie.*

“He did what he thought was right.” Jude looks at me pointedly, not so subtly letting me know Jamie’s decision was about me.

“He can’t do that. I won’t let him. I resign from my position.” Without me around, he’ll see I’m not worth it.

“First, you can’t resign. You’re an intern. Second, Jamison is a big boy and can make his own choices,” Klaus not so helpfully tells me.

“Then what are we here for?”

“You know as well as I do, PR doesn’t extend to these types of decisions. We’re only here to negate the results.”

I pace the small path between bunks. There has to be something I can do to fix this. “I quit.”

“Vance—”

“I mean it. I’m done. I’ll give things a few days, then I’ll say goodbye to the guys. But I can’t stay on this tour. Truthfully, I probably should have removed myself from my position before we left on tour. I knew there was a conflict of interest.”

“If that’s what you want to do, I won’t stop you.” Klaus nods solemnly, accepting my decision. “Just so you’re aware, I think you’re making a mistake.”

Jude, who hasn’t said a word after confirming Jamie is martyring himself, finally speaks up. “I agree with Klaus.”

“Well, I don’t give a fuck! I won’t let Jamie sacrifice his dream.”

Stomping from the bus isn’t as satisfying as slamming a door, but it works just fine to get me away from that conversation and Jamie’s stupid *choice*.

“Vance!” Klaus catches up to me before I can make it inside the hotel. “Hey. I don’t agree with you leaving, but I won’t stop you. All I ask is that you wait to break the news to everyone until you’re ready to go. If Jamison knows you’re planning to go before you do, it could affect the band’s performance.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t do any good to say anything before then. Jamie would just try to stop me. Look, I’m tired. I’m going to go up to my room and get some rest before we head out.”

I don’t wait for his response, and the elevator opens immediately, aiding in my escape. The past twenty-four hours have been filled with too many secrets and declarations for me. At this point, I’m just waiting for the implosion of both bands at Marcy’s vengeful, hate-filled hands. But I refuse to add fuel to the fire.

When I get back to the room, I close the door behind me and breathe a sigh of relief. Until I spot the folded piece of paper on the floor with my name written in familiar handwriting. My mind flashes back to the last note Jamie wrote me four years ago when he left in the middle of the night.

I don’t want to read whatever is scrawled beneath the hotel letterhead, but I find myself reaching for the white parchment, regardless. With shaky hands, I unfold the paper to find just three words in blue ink.

*I love you.*

No accompanying embellished phrases. No hearts. Not even a signature. Just those three words.

*Damn it, Jamie. Love wasn’t the problem.*

Angry at the situation and Jamie, I pull out my phone and send him a message.

**Me: Quit declaring your love for me and expecting the words to magically remove every obstacle in our way.**

**Jamie: No.**

**Me: Please. I can’t take the heartbreak anymore.**

**Jamie: I’ll never break your heart again, Vance. That’s a promise.**

Fucking stubborn ass man!

**Me: Jamie, stop. Don’t ruin your future for me.**

He doesn’t respond, and I click out of the messages to resist continuing the communication.

When a knock comes at my door a few moments later, I roll my eyes.



“Jamie, that wasn’t an invitation to come see me.”

Marcy raises a brow at me. “Expecting someone else?”

“I wasn’t expecting anyone. Least of all you. What do you need, Marcy?”  
I plaster a saccharine smile on my face.

“Cut the bullshit. I know you convinced him to call things off. But I suggest you stay far away from James. Else you may get caught in the undertow when he goes under.” Marcy flounces her hair over one shoulder, spins on her heel, and saunters off down the hall, leaving me speechless at her threat.

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## *Jamison*

“What the fuck is going on with you, J?” Alex rounds on me as soon as we’re back on the bus.

And he has every right to be angry. It’s been one week since Chicago and my decision to end things with Marcy. Two stops later and we’re now in Milwaukee, but I haven’t been able to concentrate on the music since that day.

Macallister wants me to hold off on coming out until we have the Marcy situation under control. But that means I can’t move forward with Vance. I can’t make him the promise that he’ll never be a secret again with the caveat of until Marcy is officially out of my life. That’s not fair.

I haven’t even told the guys yet about what I’ve set in motion. Guess now is as good a time as any to remedy that. “I ended things with Marcy.”

“Thank fuck.”

I look at Anders in shock. I didn’t know he had such a strong feeling about her. “I thought you were okay with me dating Marcy?”

“Well, yeah, if that’s what you want. But it’s not. We all know that.” He shrugs.

“And she’s a fucking gold-digging bitch,” Rierdan adds.

“Okay. But then why have you been distracted? Marcy would never cause this kind of robotic, emotionless performance from you,” Alex says, bringing the conversation around full circle.

“He’s right. As much as I hate admitting that,” Thierry chimes in.

“I want to be with Vance.” They all stare at me, silently waiting for me to say more. “I want to openly be with him. I’m going to come out publicly.”

“What the fuck, J!” Alex explodes, kicking at the bench seat closest to him, then turning to stomp over to the bunks to kick someone’s bag down

the short aisle way. “You can’t do something like that without warning.”

“I know, Alex. My plan was to wait until everything with Marcy died down. Otherwise, the rumors would kill us. But I’ve talked it over with Macallister and Jude, and with Klaus’ assistance, we think we can make it work in our favor.”

“You should have consulted with us.” Alex is beyond pissed at me. His face is red and blotchy, his nostrils flaring with every breath he takes, and his mouth is a thin colorless line.

“I was going to tell you—”

He cuts me off. “No. Before you talked to Macallister. You should have come to us. We’re friends, brothers. This affects us as well. We should have been part of the final decision.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s finished talking. “Not this time, Alex. Will the consequences change things for all of us? Most likely, but we’ll have to wait to see if that’s a bad thing. And I’m sorry if it turns out to be. But this is who I am. I’m tired of hiding that. I’m tired of being alone when the one person I’ve always loved is so close. So, no. You don’t get to be a part of this choice. No one gets to dictate what I do. Not when it comes to this. Not anymore, at least.”

Alex takes a step forward, his hands clenching at his sides. “I won’t let you throw away my future so you can get some ass. We agreed when we first signed with Twisted that you would leave that lifestyle behind.”

“First, it’s not a lifestyle, it’s who I am. Second, that was six years ago, Alex. We’ve grown in our careers since then. Do we still have a long way to go? Yeah, but I think it’s time I can get some ass, as you say, from whomever I want.”

“Fuck you, J!”

Alex swings his arm, his fist connecting with my jaw and sending me flying backward onto the table behind me. He doesn’t get to land another. Thierry and Rierdan each have a hold on him and are pulling him toward the door. Once they’re outside, Anders offers me a hand and I accept, allowing him to help me up.

“You okay?” he asks.

I work my jaw and probe at the spot where his fist landed. Despite the slight pain at the touch of my fingers, I’m fine. “I’ll have a nice bruise to explain later, but I’m good.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you made the right choice. Alex will get over it, and if Twisted drops us, there’s always someone else. But I think things will go better than expected. Just stay true to yourself, J.” He pats me on the back, then heads outside with the others. Probably to tell Alex the same.

I grab some ice from the small freezer and wrap it in a t-shirt to hold against my jaw. Taking a seat at the table, I relax back on the bench seat, letting my head fall onto the cushioned back and closing my eyes.

“What happened?” Klaus’ voice reaches my ears before the sound of his footsteps.

“We had a disagreement.”

“I can see that. I need to know what it’s about. Not only because I’m in charge of your PR, but because I’m in charge of that man out there. And you might not believe it, but he’s close to his breaking point. I have to be prepared to circumvent his episodes before they can happen. So I need you to tell me, what happened?”

I lift my head, holding the ice in place as I look over at Klaus. He takes a seat opposite me at the table, his hands clasped together and sitting on its surface.

“I told him I was going to come out. Let the public know I’m not the straight man they’ve believed me to be. He didn’t take it too well.” I set the ice down on the table.

“Fuck. He wouldn’t. I wish I’d known that you were planning this.”

“What do you mean? Didn’t Macallister or Jude tell you?”

“Jude’s... preoccupied. And Macallister, well, you know. I know only what I need to and he made it sound like we had time on this. He may think if he doesn’t mention it or follow through, you’ll just keep waiting on his go ahead. I’m surprised he’s taking the Marcy situation as seriously as he is. He may be a brilliant producer and businessman, but he lacks compassion when it goes against his endgame. And right now, you Jamison Black are the opposite of his endgame.”

Klaus runs a hand through his hair, messing the usually perfect strands. “I need to go take care of Alex. Hopefully, this isn’t a huge setback.”

Klaus leaves me alone again, and I wish I could talk to Vance. He’s been avoiding me, well, avoiding me even more. I’m pretty sure he blocked my number, or maybe he’s just ignoring my texts.

*Fuck.*

Everything's up in flames and I'm not sure I'll be able to snuff out all the smoldering pieces. But Vance is worth it. He's worth burning it all to the ground.

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## Vance

This has been the longest week of my life. Knowing I would be leaving soon made everything harder. I couldn't face Jamison at all. Not even in a professional capacity. I was too afraid I'd break down or change my mind about leaving. Or both.

I'm just stepping from the shower when a knock sounds at the door. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I head out into the main area of my hotel room. When I check the peephole—lesson learned after Marcy—I see Klaus waiting to be let in.

"Hey," I say as I hold the door open. "What's up? Did something happen?"

"Yeah. Alex punched Jamison. Don't worry, he's fine, but I don't know about Alex. Anyway, that's not why I'm here. Are you still planning to leave?"

We move into the room as Klaus tells me what happened. He sits at the small desk in the corner, and I take a seat on the bed.

"Yeah. I have to."

"I think you should do it soon. Maybe even before we leave Milwaukee."

"Why? I thought you wanted me to wait. I haven't even told them I'm going home. What did Alex and Jamison fight about?"

"Jamison's plans to come out to the public. Soon."

*Shit.* I can just imagine the blow up that caused. "He can't. It could cost him everything."

Klaus shrugs. "He doesn't seem to care. But I think it will actually help. That is, if Macallister will quit cockblocking him." He holds up a hand. "I know. I was wrong when I told you both it was for the better for Jamison to be publicly with Marcy. But this tour has opened my eyes to a few things.

Mainly, no one should hide who they are to get ahead. It just isn't worth it."

"Klaus, I've never seen eye to eye with Alex, but I'm with him on this. Jamie can't come out."

"Not your decision."

His words give me déjà vu from New York. "Klaus, you can't let him do this. Calling things off with Marcy is one thing. Outing himself is another."

"I can't stop him. And even if I could, I wouldn't. He needs to do this for him, but right now, I'm afraid he's doing it for you."

Klaus stares me down, daring me to argue the truth. But I won't. He's right. Jamie is doing it for me. Because he thinks that's what I want. "I have to leave. Tomorrow. Let me say goodbye tonight and I'll be on a plane home in the morning."

"I'll call a meeting with the band." Klaus stands to leave but doesn't move to take a step. "Don't be shocked if he follows you when you leave."

"He won't. If Jamie truly wanted to give this up for me, he'd have already done it. It's just killing him that he can't have both me and the façade he's created. He'll realize it soon enough once I'm gone."

I walk Klaus to the door and lock it behind him. The towel at my waist is damp and itchy, so I toss it over the shower door and get dressed to face Jamie one last time.



Klaus meets me at the door to the bus with a clearly agitated Alex at his side. "You ready?"

"Not really," I answer him honestly.

"What's going on? I don't have the patience for this cryptic bullshit right now," Alex hisses out.

"Stop it. Vance has something to tell everyone, not just you. You can wait until we're on the bus." Klaus is firm with him, yet it doesn't seem harsh. He even directs him inside with a hand on his shoulder. And by some miracle, Alex lets him get away with it.

I take a few deep breaths before I follow them, my gaze locking on Jamie

automatically. Klaus claps to get everyone's attention, and I reluctantly break eye contact with Jamie.

"Today has been eventful."

"That's an understatement," Rierdan mutters, and Alex flips him off.

Klaus ignores him. "And this is shit timing, but Vance has some news."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "So, um..." I look around the crowded bus, suddenly overwhelmed by the choice I'm making. *But it's the right choice.* "I'm leaving the tour. Tonight." I say the words directly to Jamie, then look away, all the love, lust, and want for the man making it hard to stay the course.

A chorus of "we want you to stay" and "we'll miss you" echoes around me. Jamie sulks off to the lone bedroom as I hug the guys, giving them each a personal goodbye. When Jamie hasn't returned after an hour, I hurry back to the hotel, slightly relieved at not having to confront him, though the closure would have been nice. Cowardly, yes. But I know I'd break if I had to face him.

Once I'm back inside my hotel room, I let myself have a few moments to mourn the loss of what I'd worked six years to achieve. Maybe I can salvage my career, but I'll never be with Jamie. This is the final goodbye, and I didn't even get to actually say the words to him. I have to face the truth I gave voice to years ago. We were never meant to be long term.

A loud banging on the door pulls me from my morose thoughts. There's no mistake who is standing on the other side of the door, so I don't bother with the peephole.

"You were going to leave without saying goodbye?" Jamie asks, as he barges in as soon as the door is open.

"You locked yourself away. And I was going to leave a note."

I can tell my words have the impact I wanted them to by the way Jamie freezes mid-step and turns to face me. "A note? Vance, I deserve more than a fucking Dear John letter."

"Yeah? Well, so did I."

"What?"

"You don't remember the note you left me before running off to become a rockstar? Need a reminder?" I dig the worn and yellow page from where I keep it in my wallet. A constant reminder of why I am a PR rep—well, intern, why I moved to California, and why I didn't pack up and haul ass



home as soon as Marcy showed up. Jamie's fucking Dear Vance letter with a hint of a promise for a future.

Jamie takes the letter and reads it over. When he meets my eyes, his own are full of pain and all the wasted promises he'd made. "This is from six years ago."

"I know."

"You kept it? All this time?"

"It was all I had left besides memories." I take the note back and gingerly fold it back into its neat little square and slip it back into my wallet. "It's all I'll ever have. I should have accepted that back then. Then neither of us would be in the mess we're in."

"Vance..."

"No, Jamie. Don't. I'm leaving. You need to move on. Become the rockstar you were born to be and forget about me. Please. Just let me go."

I open the door and gesture into the hall. Jamie doesn't move. "Jamie, please."

After another moment of hesitation, he nods and leaves me alone to pack my bags and call a car. I lie and tell myself I won't cry for what might have been. When a tear rolls down my cheek, I don't wipe it away. I refuse to acknowledge its existence, because if I do, I have to acknowledge I've lost Jamie. For good this time.

*Jamison*

Vance left.

It's been a month and Macallister seems to have the Marcy situation under control as she's all but disappeared from my life. But I don't care because... Vance left.

I haven't come out yet. Apparently, the time still isn't right, yet I couldn't care less because... Vance left.

One good thing has come from his going back to California. My muse is back. Somewhat. I haven't given her free rein to compose, but my performance has improved with the emotional turmoil she pushes from me. She wants to expel all the need and want and need and hurt and the goddamn fucking need I have swirling in my veins, begging me to do something, anything. Chase after him. Shut the world out. Fuck all the men and women who are throwing themselves at me. Anything to forget that Vance fucking left.

I deserve it. I know I do after everything I've put him through. It's just that I never thought he would ever leave me.

I stare out the window on the bus, taking in the stars and feeling like a speck floating through space. We're stopped at some rest stop diner combo in Missouri. At least I think we're in Missouri. Everyone is inside, Maxim and Tainted plus Klaus and Young. I refused to join them. My appetite hasn't been much lately. Don't worry. I'm sure Anders will force some food down my throat when they return. He's the only reason I haven't wasted away to nothing yet.

"Knock, knock."

I drag my attention away from the night sky to where Mitchell stands on the bottom step, half-on, half-off the bus. "Yeah?"

“Can we talk?”

I really don't want anything to do with the other man, but Vance thought he was a decent person. So I shrug and wave him inside before I can change my mind. “What do you want to talk about?”

Part of me hopes Vance called him and asked him to check on me.

“I have some things I need to confess.”

I listen as Mitchell tells me about my father and what he's done, the lives he destroyed with his infidelity. He broke Mitchell's mother. Ruined his childhood, his life. The same as he did to me and my mom.

“Wow. I'm so sorry for what you had to go through.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “You shouldn't feel sorry for me. I'm the reason you're here.”

I scrunch my brows together, his words not making sense. “You mean on tour?”

“Technically, yes, but I'm talking about Marcy.”

“What about her?”

“I have a past with Marcy. When I found out she was your fake girlfriend, I may have convinced her you had the same feelings for her as she does you, and that she should be on tour with you. I also suggested the engagement to Macallister.”

My eyes widen with shock. “Why?”

“Doesn't matter. I've changed my mind. She's a bitch who can hold a grudge, but you have nothing to worry about. I'm the one she really wants, and I'll make sure she leaves you alone.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but ultimately, I don't care enough about her to worry about it. “Okay. Don't think that will be an issue. She's already gone. What did you mean by technically you're the reason I'm on this tour?”

“I put you, well Maxim, on Macallister's radar during the battle of the bands contest.”

“You knew who I was six years ago! All this time, you knew we were brothers?”

Mitchell looks down at his hands on the table. “I hated you. I thought you had the life that was denied me. It wasn't until I talked to Vance that I learned how wrong I was in my assumption. Damien Black left both of our lives in shambles.”

“Vance knows? He didn't say anything.”

“I asked him not to. He told me I needed to tell you soon or he would.”

Mitchell’s gaze meets mine and for the first time, I notice the color is almost the same as my own. The icy-blue my mom had told me I’d inherited from my bastard father.

“For what it’s worth, I hope we can be the family we should have been from the beginning.” Mitchell slides from his seat and takes off back into the diner, leaving me with the heavy weight that my life, my career, has been a lie from the beginning.

It’s crap timing, but my muse perks up. I search the bus for a sheet of paper and a pen. Then I pour my heart and soul into a song so personal, anyone who hears it will have no doubt the hurt and love that bled onto the page.

When I’m finished, I text Klaus asking for a favor. It takes some begging on my part, but he agrees. I have a few months left on this tour, and I am counting down the days until I can show the world just how much Vance means to me.

## *Vance*

Life has been painfully boring in the months since I left the tour. There's no drama for me to deal with and no Jamie to distract me. My small apartment seems bigger than I had thought. Maybe that's just my loneliness echoing off the walls.

At first I was devastated at the loss of my dream, to have a career and Jamie. But I realized quickly that it wasn't my dream, well the career wasn't, anyway. I'd spent so long wanting Jamie and doing every possible to be with him again. I've never really thought about what I want.

What do I want? I'm still trying to figure that out.

I somehow snagged a job at a local art gallery as one of the artist assistants, which is a fancy word for errand boy. I'm not complaining though, it pays the bills and I've enrolled in an art class that focuses on a different medium of art each month—free of charge for employees. This month we're learning different sketching techniques. And if all my sketches resemble a dark-haired, blue-eyed musician, well, let's not mention it.

Because I still want Jamie, of course I do, but I've accepted he'll never be mine and moved him from the top of my list.

My phone rings as I'm gathering my things and readying to leave for the gallery.

"Hello?"

"Vance. How are you?" Klaus' smooth voice holds an edge as it sounds through the tiny speaker.

"Okay. On my way out. Is everything okay?"

I'd told Klaus not to keep me up to date during one of his first few calls after I left. It hurt too much to hear about the guys picking up the pieces and surpassing the energy and performances from the first half of the tour. But

hearing how well Jamie was doing felt like a knife twisted in my heart.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine. It’s just that the tour will end on Saturday with a final show in LA.”

“I know,” I say, pressing the phone between my ear and shoulder as I leave my apartment, locking the door behind me.

“You should come.”

“Klaus.”

“Vance.” He lets out a sigh before continuing, “I really think you should be there. It’ll be good for you and Jamie to get some closure. This tour promises to catapult Maxim into the spotlight beside Tainted. Bad blood between you and the band, especially Jamie, isn’t good for anyone.”

“I won’t do anything to jeopardize Maxim’s success,” I snap out, garnering a few stares from the people loitering on the sidewalks between my apartment and the gallery.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you would.” Another sigh. “Look, I can’t say anything, but you need to be at that show. Please tell me you’ll come.”

“Fine. I’ll be there,” I agree, but my mind is already trying to come up with an excuse not to show up. I have two days to talk myself out of going.

“Good. You won’t regret it.”

The line goes dead without a goodbye and I shake my head at the stubborn man.

The entirety of my shift at the gallery consists of coffee runs and daydreams of what will happen when I see Jamie again. My mind is already conjuring up what-if scenarios involving the two of us and happily ever after. I’ve almost convinced myself that seeing him won’t be the disaster I know it will be by the time I leave to head home.



The next day seems to fly by, with the gallery having a show in the afternoon and my sketching class that evening taking up most of my time. There’s no time for me to think about Jamie or come up with an excuse not to see him. I’m practically asleep before my head hits the pillow.

*Jamie props himself up on an elbow and smiles down at me, his blue eyes*

*shining with the same happiness that's flowing through me. "I'm glad you came tonight, Vance. I've missed you, missed this." He leans over to kiss me as his hand smooths down my chest.*

*"Missed you too." I moan into his mouth as his fingers wrap around my cock.*

*"I wish we could have this forever. But we have tonight."*

*I frown at his words. "What do you mean? You're here. You're out. We can be together now."*

*Jamie shakes his head. "Macallister and the guys decided that even though I came out about my sexuality, it would be best not to push it. I agree. But I can visit you when I'm in town and spend the night worshipping you."*

*"What? No." I push him away, but not far enough to stop him from touching me. "I can't be your on-call fuck boy, Jamie."*

*"Vance, it's just for a little while. Until the news settles and Maxim is established. You can wait that long, can't you?"*

*I want to say no. I should say no. Instead, I give in to his ministrations on my body and surrender to him without answering.*

The loud rattling buzz of the front door wakes me from the nightmarish fantasy of my dream. I roll from the bed and out of the bedroom in just my boxers. "I'm coming," I call out when knocking sounds before I can reach the door to answer the buzzer to my apartment. I curse when I check the peephole, then open the door and gesture for my guest to come inside.

*"Don't get dressed on my account."*

*"What are you doing here, Klaus?"*

*"We're spending the day together. I'm not letting you weasel out of coming tonight." He's a lot more excited at the thought than I am. "I've made us appointments at a spa and we're going shopping."*

*"I don't have the money for that, and I have clothes."*

*"I didn't ask if you had money or clothes. And I'm not taking no for an answer. Go get dressed. Hawke is waiting for us."*

I roll my eyes and do as he says. After slipping on a pair of jeans and a plain heather-gray t-shirt, I pull a pair of socks on, then step into my boots. "Okay. Let's go."

*"You're lucky we're going somewhere to remedy your horrendous fashion sense. What happened since I last saw you? You used to at least*

attempt to look decent.”

“I could stay home. Actually, you know what, I think I will stay home. Agreeing to go tonight was a mistake.”

Klaus looks panicked at the thought of me not attending tonight’s show, and it makes me wonder what he’s up to. “Please, Vance,” he asks, sticking out his bottom lip in a pout.

I know I’ll regret not going, so I nod and follow him out the door to his rental car. Besides, I can watch from backstage and Jamie never has to know I was even there. So what if it’ll break my heart to see him. I’m used to the pain.



Hours later, my hair has been trimmed and styled under Hawke’s careful instruction and I’m wearing the pair of black perfectly tailored slacks and dark amethyst colored button-up Klaus purchased during our shopping trip and insisted I wear.

Standing in the darkness near the curtains hides me from sight during Maxim’s set. It’s one of their best performances and only solidifies that I made the right choice in leaving the tour. I was holding them back, diverting Jamie’s focus from where it needed to be. But I’m happy to know it was worth it. As the final notes of “For Tonight” sound through the venue, I turn to leave.

“We have a surprise for you tonight.” Jamie’s words stop me from taking another step, but I don’t look back. “This song holds all the love I have for someone very special to me. I haven’t always made the right choices when it comes to our relationship, but I plan to grovel until he lets me make it up to him.”

I turn around in shock at Jamie essentially coming out to the crowd and soon the world with all the reporters present. A hand lands on my shoulder and I look at its owner. “He can’t do this. The timing isn’t right. Klaus, do something.”

“Shut up and listen, Vance.”

The crowd had gone crazy at Jamie’s use of him to describe his lover, but they’re quieting now and Jamie goes on with his confession. “Vance, I love



you. I always have and I always will. Please give me another chance to prove it to you.”

As soon as he’s finished, Thierry takes up the beat and the rest of the guys join in, playing a hauntingly beautiful piece that doesn’t need words to be felt. Then Jamie begins to sing:

*That night on the rooftop  
Touches we couldn’t stop  
Messy, perfect kisses in the dark  
I knew then I’d break your heart*

*Too many voices in my head  
Except when I’m in your bed  
You forgave me every time I did wrong  
Now all that’s left are memories and a song*

*You deserved so much better  
Than a shitty Dear John letter  
Leaving you was the hardest part  
I never wanted to break your heart*

*Too many voices in my head  
Except when I’m in your bed  
You forgave me every time I did wrong  
And all that’s left are memories and a song*

*Rainbows streamed down your chest  
As I begged you to please say yes  
To be my dirty little secret  
Because I wasn’t ready yet*

*Too many voices in my head  
Except when I’m in your bed  
You forgave me every time I did wrong  
Now all that’s left are memories and a song*

*It's too late to right my wrongs  
So I'm stuck with memories and a song.*

The final note reverberates around me and tears roll down my cheeks. I need to get out of here before I do something stupid. I turn to leave for real this time, but before I can Jamie looks in my direction and our eyes lock. His plead with me to stay. I ignore the silent request and run out of the building, flag down a car, and direct the driver to my apartment.

Holding back the tears is painful, but I somehow manage to not break down in a stranger's backseat. Once I close the door to my apartment, however, I press my back against the wood and slide to the floor, letting out all the pain I've held inside too long.

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## *Jamison*

Months of hard work convincing the guys to help me win back Vance had led to here and now. Unsurprisingly, Alex had been the lone holdout, but Klaus had somehow managed to get him on board.

Klaus had also promised to get Vance to the show, and I wasn't sure he had been able to follow through on that promise until the last word of "Memories and a Song". When I looked off stage, there he was. The bright lights caused the tears on his face to glisten. I silently begged him to stay, but he ran. I'm glad I'd convinced Klaus to give me the address to his apartment. I'd been there once before, but I hadn't really paid attention to where the driver had taken us.

Now I'm standing outside the rundown building, waiting for him to answer the buzzer so I can come in.

"Who is it?" Vance's voice is shaky and watery as it comes over the tinny speaker box.

"Jamie. Can I come up, please?"

"No. I can't—" He takes a shuddery breath. "I can't do this, Jamie."

The speaker cuts out, and I hit the buzzer again, but Vance refuses to answer.

"Shit." I run my hands through my hair, pulling on the strands and contemplating the consequences of punching the brick wall in front of me.

"You okay, man?" a guy whose appearance reminds me of Shaggy from Scooby Doo asks.

"Yes. No. I'm trying to grovel and apologize, but it's hard to do from outside."

"So come inside." He unlocks the front door and holds it open for me to enter.

“Thanks, uh, what’s your name?”

“Josiah. And don’t worry about it. I’m a sucker for romantic gestures. You better make it a good one, considering you don’t have flowers or chocolate. I’m in apartment 105. I expect a thank you note and an invitation to the wedding.”

“Does it count that I wrote him a song?”

“Oh yeah. Now go!”

“Thanks, Josiah. I owe you. I’m Jamison, by the way,” I call out over my shoulder, already moving.

I take the stairs two at a time, too impatient to wait for the elevator. When I reach Vance’s door, I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans and cover the peephole before knocking. If he knows it’s me standing outside his door, he might choose to ignore me. Not that I would leave if he did. I’d just camp out in the hall.

The door opens as far as the chain lock will allow and my heart hurts at the sight that greets me: a puffy-eyed and tear-streaked Vance.

“Please don’t close the door on me.” I mean those words literally and figuratively.

“Jamie, please don’t.”

“Vance, stop. You’ve always done everything for me and my dream. Even after I left you behind. You put me and my wants and needs before your own time and again while I was a selfish bastard. I wanted you and success, no matter the cost. My actions hurt you over and over, yet I chose to believe you when you said it was okay. I accepted your lies because I wanted it all and I thought you would stay. Then you left and nothing mattered anymore.”

“But Maxim is doing great. Tonight was the best show of the tour, I’m sure of it. You and the guys will be in high demand soon. Your dream is becoming a reality, Jamie. Please don’t ruin it for me.” Vance closes his eyes and a fresh river of tears leak from the corners as he sniffles.

“My dream is almost a reality. I’m still missing something. You. My dream will never be complete without you. I’m a fool for taking so long to realize it, but loving you out loud is the only dream I want to come true. Everything else is inconsequential if I can’t have you by my side.”

“But what about Macallister and Maxim? You can’t give everything up for me, Jamie.”

“Why not? You did.”

Vance opens his mouth, closes it as if reconsidering what he wants to say before finally telling me, “That was different.”

“How was it different?”

He leans against the doorjamb in the small space granted by the chain that’s still hooked. “I’m not important like you. You were born to be a star, Jamie. Your music is everything to you and that makes it everything to me. I’ll do whatever it takes so that the world can experience your talent the way I have since we were kids.”

“You’re wrong.”

The way his nose scrunches up with his confusion is adorable, and I can’t resist reaching out a finger to smooth the wrinkle it makes between his brows.

“Jamie.”

“Do you remember my response when you asked me if you could be him?” Vance had sent me the James Arthur song the night before I left him six years ago. He’d laid it all out and asked me for the only thing he wanted from me: me. And I’d tossed him aside for the chance at fame.

Vance nods. “I remember.”

“I lied when I said you could only be him for the night. You’ve always been him, Vance. You always will be. Every single night. You’re the one I want to come home to each day. I want you to tell me about your day after we make love. I want to hold your hand as we walk down the street and not worry about whether Klaus will have to spin it into something meaningless. I don’t want to hide how I feel about you anymore. The guys are on board, for the most part, and I’ve told Macallister my love life isn’t up for negotiation. No more stunts like the one Mitchell pulled with Marcy. Twisted Records has a say in the music and anything to do with the band. Everything else is my choice. I’ll consult Klaus if I need to, but the only person whose opinion matters is yours. Can we try again? No secrets this time.” I cup his jaw in my palm, stroking away the remaining wetness there with my thumb.

“I want to, Jamie. I really do, but I don’t know if I can.”

He pulls away and closes the door. I should have expected his rejection after all the bullshit I put him through. My head is heavy on my shoulders and I head down the stairs. If Vance wants me to prove to him that I’m done

hiding who I am and who he is to me, I will.

I push out the front doors, already thinking about recruiting Klaus to my cause, when I hear someone call my name. Turning around, I see Vance on the walkway.

“Will you stop?” he asks between gulping breaths.

“What are you doing?” I walk back the few steps separating us.

“Trying to talk to you.”

“But you shut the door. I’m not giving up, though. You are worth whatever I have to do to have you back in my life.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Huh? I don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to tell you yes.” Vance looks at me with a shy smile and vulnerability I never noticed before in his eyes.

“Yes?”

“Yes. With a few conditions.”

“Anything.”

“No more secrets. No more fake girlfriends. No more hiding. Hand holding and PDA required. And you don’t give up your dreams for me. Maxim takes top priority.”

“I agree with all except that last one. You are top priority to me. Maxim comes after. I’m done putting you last, Vance. You come first.”

“But—”

I cut him off with a quick kiss. “No buts. You, Vance Martin, are more important to me than anyone or anything else in my life. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it. I love you.”

“And I love you, Jamison Black. Always have, always will.”

I wrap my arms around him and press a longer, more thorough kiss to his lips. When I pull away, we’re both panting and eager to reunite in a much more intimate way. “That’s enough PDA for today. Let’s go back inside.”

“Shit. I forgot my key trying to catch you before you left. How did you get in earlier?” Vance asks.

“Josiah.” I press the buzzer for 105 and wait. Josiah doesn’t answer through the speaker system. Instead, he comes to the front door and opens it for us.

“Josiah? What are you doing here?” Vance questions the other man.

“He lives here,” I say, and Vance gives me a quizzical glance before

looking back at the man standing before us.

“Actually, as of yesterday, I own the building. Enough about me. You two lovebirds get inside and make up.”

“Thanks.”

“See ya tomorrow, Vance.” Josiah leaves off down the hall with a wave.

“See ya tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yeah. I, uh, got a job at a local gallery. Josiah is one of the artists.” He shrugs, then grabs my hand and pulls me up the stairs and into his apartment, where I plan to stay for the next twenty-four hours, making love to the gorgeous man I am lucky to have back in my arms.

The door is barely closed and locked behind us before I strip off my clothes, then Vance’s, too eager to be back inside him to take the time to worship him. I’ll do that next time. We have the rest of our lives, after all.

I hate his small apartment, but right now I’m grateful for the one room atrocity as it takes only a matter of seconds to get to the tiny bed. Pushing Vance down onto the mattress, I tell him, “You need a bigger bed if you expect me to make love to you in this horrible excuse of an apartment.”

Vance huffs in feigned indignation. “I’ll have you know that—”

I cut off his words by spreading his legs and running a finger along his crack, teasing his hole with the tip of my finger. I debate slowing down and savoring this moment of reconnection, but Vance decides he doesn’t want slow and pushes himself down onto my finger with a moan and a strangled “more” falling from his lips.

“Where’s your lube? And condoms?” I wish I didn’t need to worry about the latter, but it’s unrealistic to think that he waited for me, for this.

He gestures to the nightstand. “Top drawer.”

I grab both items, slipping the condom onto my dick before moving back between Vance’s legs. Squirting the lube onto my fingers, I don’t waste any more time opening him up and within minutes, Vance is fucking himself on my fingers.

“Jamie,” he calls my name, and I look away from his ass and into his eyes. “Quit teasing me and fuck me. I need you. Now.”

I chuckle at his urgency, but move to position my cock at the ring of muscle visibly clenching in need. Not once do I look away from his dark eyes as I push inside him, then pull out until just the head of my cock remains inside. I watch him squirm beneath me as he tries to force me back

where he wants me. His gaze holds lust and need, but most of all, love, and I hope that he sees the same reflected back at him in mine. But just in case, “I love you. You are the music of my heart. I can only hope to show you how much you mean to me.”

“I love you too, Jamie. Now please move,” Vance demands. And I do. It’s quick and dirty and not at all the lovemaking he deserves, but he doesn’t seem to mind that as he comes between us.

His orgasm triggers mine and I empty my release into the condom, once again wishing the barrier wasn’t there to prevent me from experiencing this moment skin to skin.

I pull out and dispose of the condom, then grab a washcloth on my way back to the bed. After I clean Vance of the cum cooling on his stomach, I climb onto the bed and gather him in my arms.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what?”

“For giving me a second—or is it third?—chance.”

“I’ll give as many chances as you need.”

“That’s good, because I might need another when I toss this small as shit bed out the door.”

I hold him through the giggles that overtake him at my comment, then I press a kiss to his lips. “You’re mine, Vance. I’m never letting you go again.”

“God, I hope not. It took six years to get you back this time. I don’t know if I can handle being without you for another six.”

“You’ll never have to find out.” I seal my promise with a kiss.



# EPILOGUE

## *Thierry*

### *One month later*

Jamison's relationship with Vance has been a blessing for the new material Macallister requested for the album he wants us to record. I hadn't realized how morose his muse had been until now. Though it was clear to me that the two of them belonged together, the effect Vance has on the music we play wasn't as easy to see.

"Macallister has scheduled an interview and photo shoot for 'Musicians Uncovered' next week. I'll have more info in the next few days, but Hawke will be here soon to discuss wardrobe options." Klaus pauses and looks at me. "This isn't like when we were on tour and things could be negotiated, Thierry. Fans expect certain things in the magazine."

Rierdan laughs. "Yeah, half naked pics of their favorite musicians. It's a borderline porn mag."

He's not wrong. "Musicians Uncovered" is well known for their risqué photos. Doesn't mean I have to like it. Maybe if it was anyone but Hawke telling me how little I should wear, I'd be more accepting. And it has nothing to do with the way my body seems to light up when he's around. I haven't had such a hard time controlling my dick since I was a teenager.

"I'll take that into consideration, but if that insufferable ass tries to put me in lingerie or something, I'm out."

"You might look good in lingerie, Thierry. You never know. But don't antagonize Hawke and you'll be fine," Klaus tells me.

"If anyone is antagonizing, it's him. Always touching my hair and making suggestive comments. The man needs to learn to keep his hands to himself."

"Just try not to be so resistant to his help, please."

“Whatever.” I cross my arms and slouch farther down on the couch where I’m sitting.

## *Hawke*

Hearing Thierry’s description of me hurts. The other band members don’t seem to have any issue with me, so I hadn’t realized how I came across to him. And he’s not wrong. I get a bit touchy feely at times. I’ve worked hard to control the impulse to touch everyone and everything around me since I was a kid, but something about the man short circuits the discipline I’ve learned over the years.

I love being a stylist in this industry and I’m lucky to have this chance with Maxim. I’ll just have to work harder to control myself around him. Or maybe take Marcy up on her offer.

Steeling myself, I take a deep breath and enter the room. Thierry glares in my direction, but I ignore him.

“Who’s ready to be sexified?” I ask and jump into discussing the various states of undress each of them will be in for the shoot.

I can feel Thierry’s gaze burning along my skin, but if I don’t look at him, I can pretend he’s not there and do my job without interacting or touching the man.

Avoidance. What could go wrong with that?

## *The End For Now*

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I hope I'm not forgetting anyone, but if I am, just know that you are very important to me and my brain is mush.

Lots of love,

A

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