



# Pistol in the Petals

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**Category:** Romance, Action

**Description:** Behind every strong person is a story that gave them no choice.

Before I became Pistol, one of the best female drummers in the world, I was Bristol, a girl from a small town in Oregon who learned how to play the drums to connect with my childhood friends. Those friends became a family, and that family skyrocketed to superstardom. We traveled the world, rocked out in sold out arenas, and partied harder than we ever thought imaginable. Unfortunately, what goes up must come down, and the fallout caused me to walk away from the only band I've ever known and the only man I've ever loved.

When a tragedy brings them back home, I'm faced with a decision that will change the course of my life.

By staying or going, the destruction is the same, but maybe, just maybe, the truth I thought was real was all a lie, and maybe, just maybe, the music will reveal the answers to the questions I've had since walking away.

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# Page 1

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Prologue

Bristol

March 26,2000

Nostalgia, by Greek definition, means ‘the pain of an old wound,’ and while it’s not painful anymore, the wound still exists. I heard once that when you create a memory, a little piece of your heart stays there, wherever the location is—good, bad, or otherwise—and we leave tiny pieces of our hearts everywhere, like fragmented glass.

The coffee warms my palms as I look out over the bay in Seattle. When I heard the news of what they were doing today, I knew I had to be here, had to watch a place that held so much be desecrated. The people surrounding me on the overlook all chat animatedly about their memories of this place. I smile lightly as they recount some of the same memories I have, just from a different vantage point.

“60 seconds.” Comes over the loudspeaker, and anxiety creeps up my spine. I’m getting my memories back today; I’m getting the pieces to the stained glass window that is my life back. From this high up, you can see the entire stadium, every entrance and exit, and the domed roof that held so many classic songs, looks decrepit against the new stadiums that surround it. That’s life though, out with the old and in with the new. Always progressing, always moving forward.

“5,4,3,2,1.” The announcer calls out.

There’s a moment before an explosion, or implosion, that everything goes completely

silent, like the earth has to prepare for the aftermath of what's to come. There's a moment before every good or bad thing that happens in your life that everything goes still too—nothing happens instantaneously—but there's always that moment when fate decides the aftermath of your decision.

The columns of the roof disappear in synchronization, one after another, and I watch with rapture as the rest of the building falls to the ground. A massive plume of dust and debris fills the air below us, covering everything in sight with memories and history.

Once the building has settled to the ground, I turn around and wander through the throng of people back to the stairway. When I reach the stairs, I turn around one last time to see the rubble, a feeling of completeness fills me, and I laugh as I take the stairs back down to the ground.

## Chapter 1 Bristol

White lace falls over my eyes, and the view in front of me becomes hazy. My shoulders feel bare without my leather jacket, and the missing weight makes me itchy. I try to remember that this monstrosity of a dress is all the rage this year, and my label would have a shit fit if I walked down the aisle looking anything less than the drummer princess they signed. My tattoos are covered by the puffy sleeves of the dress, what I wouldn't give to rip these sleeves off and show off the ink I paid good money for. I spot the reporters and paparazzi standing in the roped off corner of the lawn. Every news outlet in the country is going to be running this night for months to come. They'll critique my dress and my music choices until my wedding is a dead carcass that even Seventeen won't touch.

I take a deep breath and remind myself that John is waiting for me at the end of the aisle; tomorrow, we will be halfway to Hawaii for our honeymoon and one day closer to forever. Forever is a really long time, and I swore after my last failed relationship I

wouldn't count on forever, wouldn't hold anyone to that promise. The funny thing about promises is they're only as good as the person who held the promise. John came into my life at a time when I had sworn off men and relationships and focused solely on the music. He was sweet and patient and never made me question his intentions. Like a trickle of rain rolling down a gutter, I slowly fell in love with him. It wasn't all at once and totally consuming, it was a drop here and a drop there until I finally caved under the weight and realized my feelings for him were more than friendly. John is a safe bet. He won't break my heart; he won't hurt me.

John is an accountant for my record label. We met at the release party for my band, Petals and Poison's latest album. After all the pictures and schmoozing with men twice my age, I needed a break so I wandered out to the balcony overlooking Los Angeles. After I took off my shoes and perched myself on the railing thirty stories up, I just sat there. No noise, no people, no one but me and my thoughts. The last album was doing amazing already, and I was thankful for that. I'd poured every emotion I had into those lyrics, all the rage and heartbreak leaked out of me like toxic sludge. I'm still happy I don't have to actually sing the lyrics, I don't know if I could be honest. I couldn't replay every emotion I felt for months to come while we went on tour. With thousands of people staring at me every night, ripping that bandaid off and picking at the partially healed scab isn't my idea of fun. It was difficult enough to sing the backup choruses. Julie, our lead singer, is happily married to the love of her life and has no problem belting out the lyrics to my emotional downfall.

I felt John's presence before I heard him clear his throat. If I could describe him as a color it would be yellow, he's warm and inviting, pulling happiness from you whether you want him to or not. We chatted for a bit about the album and agreed to have lunch the following day. The rest, as they say, is history. He doesn't ask why I wrote the lyrics I did, he knows. Hell the whole world knows about the implosion. The reason I'm no longer with the band I started as a teenager.

Classical music plays in the yard signaling the start of the ceremony. The nail polish

sitting on my fingernails doesn't allow me to bite them like I'd like to. Instead, I pick at the rhinestones on the bodice of this ridiculous dress. My nails running over the tiny jewels does nothing to calm the storm brewing just beneath the surface of my skin. The house my record label owns is decorated to the nines, with a damn ice swan sitting in the middle of the lawn for no reason. It's hot as hell in July in LA, it's going to look like a sad duck by the end of the day, but just like every other piece of today, it wasn't my choice. The record label took the reins on the wedding once they realized it would skyrocket publicity for Bristol "Pistol" Graham to marry someone so opposite of her previous love life. Everyone who's anyone is here today, celebrities and musicians alike. Hell, even the President himself got an invitation.

I watch from my spot on the balcony as the flower girls make their way down the aisle in their cute dresses, giggling with each other as they toss petals on to the ground.

"Ready?" My dad asks from behind me, his voice startles me, and I pull back from the edge of the balcony. I turn slowly, taking in his sharp black tuxedo with a red rose pinned on the breast pocket. He's a far cry from the mechanic covered in grease from Southern Oregon. Today, he looks the part, very old Hollywood with a combover and gold cufflinks.

"Ready as I'll ever be." I say, forcing a smile. It's not that I'm not happy, I am, it's just not what I envisioned for my wedding. As a little girl you dream of a big fairy tale wedding with roses and Disney animals singing in the background, but I don't see a single animal today other than the swan that is slowly deconstructing. My father clears his throat bringing me back to the present.

"John's a good man. He'll take good care of ya, Tol." He boops me on the nose with his index finger like he's done since I was a child. "You look absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you." I say, wanting to touch my overly teased blonde hair. I have so much

hairspray in my hair right now that if someone lit a match in the Hollywood Hills today, I'm going up in smoke. A full bottle of Aquanet and an hour of teasing achieved this look, and a half-pound of eyeshadow weighs down my lids. I look nothing like myself, and again, it's making me itchy.

## Chapter 2 Bristol

Taking slow, measured steps, I make my way down the stairs leading to the lawn outside. The white heels I'm wearing are not my normal choice of footwear, and if not for the death grip on my father's elbow, I would look like a baby deer after birth right now—knees wobbling, ankles turning in odd directions. When my heels hit the bottom step of the stairs, the audience in front of me rises and turns slowly to watch my father and I amble down the aisle lined with rose petals. Don't get me wrong, it's absolutely beautiful, and any bride would be ecstatic to walk down such an elaborately decorated aisle, but it's just not...me.

The music slowly changes from a soft symphony as we approach the rows of white fold-up chairs. My eyes find John standing at the altar in his black tux, his eyes skate appreciatively across my form before making eye contact with me. He smiles, causing his eyes to crinkle at the edges; I smile back. I cautiously take the steps leading towards my future, my forever. The speakers surrounding the venue boom with the opening verses of a song I prayed I'd never hear again. I jerk my head from John to the DJ as the voice I hear in my dreams croons about a hard-won love.

The days bleed into night

I know I'll be fine with you right by my side

The city lights don't hold a candle to your smile

Don't worry baby, I'll be waiting at the end of the aisle.

I stop mid stride, every emotion these lyrics hold pouring out of me like a faucet that won't shut off. Anger, heartbreak, humiliation, and...longing. All the air feels sucked out of my lungs as the lyrics continue. Rhyit doesn't deserve to hold this power over me, but he still does. He always will. He's been my sunshine before I knew what it meant to need someone else's warmth. I've been in his orbit for so long that I don't even remember what my own solar system looks like.

I clutch my father's arm tighter and wait for the panic rising up my body to subside, but it never comes. I close my eyes as my world tilts on its axis. My father grabs my chin, forcing my face to meet his. When I open my eyes, his soft expression makes my heart crack. This should not be the day that Rhyit burns brighter, if anything, he should be a snuffed out candle slowly dwindling until the smoke is the only remaining sign it was ever burning. I probably look like a lunatic having this much of a visceral reaction to a stupid song, sung by a stupid boy who broke my heart into a thousand tiny shards. Yet here I am, clinging to a memory of a man and what could have been. What will never be.

## Page 2

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“Go.” He whispers softly. Tears cresting in the corner of his big gray eyes. “Get outta here ‘Tol. This wasn’t meant for you. You found your soulmate, nothing is going to change that.” I’ll never understand how he knows me better than I know myself, but he does. I can feel my heart ripping into two separate parts, my future and my past.

“But John?” I whisper, the murmurs around me and the flashes from the cameras only amplifying my embarrassment.

“You aren’t his soulmate, baby girl. He’ll find her and thank you one day. Now go.” He releases my arm, and a collective gasp falls across the audience. I turn to run back to the house, but the heels of my shoes catch on the grass. I lean down to remove them; undoing the straps carefully, I remove the shoes and find a very confused looking John staring at me from the altar.

“I’m sorry.” I mouth the only words that will leave my mouth. I pick up the frock I’m wearing to run as fast as I can towards the house, the billowing lace chafing my freshly waxed legs.

When I reach the top of the lawn, I spot the limo John and I were supposed to leave in for our honeymoon. The driver leans against the passenger side door, reading the newspaper.

“Hey!” I yell, drawing his attention from the newspaper to me. His eyes widen at me, and he looks behind me, I assume looking for John. As I get closer to the long black car, I notice the just married sign written on the back. Fuck. This was not a well thought out plan, this was a 'I need to get the fuck out of here,' mission abort-style plan.



“Can you take me to LAX?” I ask. He nods, looking from the ceremony down the hill to me and back again.

“Don’t ask.” I snap, wrenching the car door open and throwing myself inside quickly. My heart pounds against my chest as he pulls away from a future that would have been secure to chase after a future that could break me more, but I need to know.

### Chapter 3 Rhyit

The crowd roars, and the energy they’re giving off makes me feel invincible. Whoever said you couldn’t get off on a vibe was fucking nuts. The energy in the Tacoma Dome tonight could wake the spirits. I bring the microphone back to my mouth and toss a lazy smirk to the hot blonde in a hot pink tube top standing front row. Denny, our replacement drummer, counts me into Riot Act, our latest number one single.

The song starts, and I miss my cue as the blonde pulls the front of her tube top down exposing her very large, very natural tits. It’s a damn good day to be me. My band counts me in again, and this time I don’t miss my cue. I take a deep breath and belt the lyrics to a song of destruction and heartbreak. It’s a masterpiece and one of my hardest songs to sing night after night. I take two steps to the left, closer to the blonde with her tits still on display. I lean down, the leather of my pants sticking to the sweat on my legs, and she mouths every word to the song as I place the microphone in front of her mouth. Her cherry red lips almost touch the windscreen as she sings the song, perfectly on cue. Her eyes never leave mine as her voice lowers to almost a growl. I’ve been in this business long enough to know that that is one of those chicks who would purposely poke a hole in the condom. She’s beautiful, sure, but she’s a fame whore. I can see it from a mile away, she’s only in it for the notoriety of fucking a rockstar. Works for me, I’m not looking for a long time, I’m looking for a good time. I motion to Jonah, my security, to bring this girl backstage. He nods back to me, message received. I pull the mic back from her lips and give her my best ‘I’m gonna fuck you’ wink.

I continue the song, feeding off my band mates as I strut across the stage. Boston, my bassist, rolls his eyes at my theatrics but steps up next to me to participate. The dude's so blitzed, he probably doesn't even know what city we're in, but I don't care. As long as he shows up on time and plays the fuck out of his instrument it's no bother to me what he shoves up his nose.

Alex, my best friend and guitarist, steps in front of the crowd and swings his long blonde hair as his fingers fly across the strings of the guitar. The man is a legend with an ax, and I couldn't be more proud of the following he's gained. Some dude in the front row even has the same haircut and T-shirt as Alex. He backs up from the crowd, and some girl in the back screams how much she loves him. He pulls his hand away from the guitar and blows her a kiss. She screams even louder, and he looks over at me with a full smile. He loves this life as much as I do, we were made for this.

Sweat pours down my face as I place the mic back on its stand. I grab the bottle of Jack from the base of the stand and let the liquid fire cascade down my throat. The burn of the whiskey calms my aching voice, and I revel in the cheers the crowd makes as I take another hefty gulp.

"Thank you, Seattle! It's been so fuckin' real! See you in '86!" I yell into the microphone. "Give it up for Boston, Denny, and Alex. They played their fucking hearts out tonight, am I right?" My voice echoes back to me above the deafening roars of the audience. I love this life. There's nowhere else on earth I'd rather be than right here and right now. As I head off stage to prepare for the encore the crowd knows is coming, I grab the bottle of water one of the roadies hands me and a fresh towel.

"You guys were incredible." Garrett, our manager, yells over the crowd. Garrett is about as useful as a used tampon, he spends eighty percent of his time chomping at the bit for our leftover women, and the other twenty, kissing our asses so hard I have permanent lip prints on my left cheek. Perfect idea for a tattoo; I'll run it by the boys

later. I chug the bottled water and pour the remains over my head to cool me off. Water droplets fall over my face as I drench my ink black hair, and after taking a deep breath, I grab my Fender off the stand for one last song.

It's the same song I sing to end every show. It's the same song that sends me into a tailspin every single fucking night, but it's my last hope. The last good thing I've done in a long fucking time. The opening chords to Pistol start, and I once again lose myself in the lyrics that haunt my dreams.

## Chapter 4 Rhyit

Pounding on my hotel room door pulls me from unconsciousness. The knocking of the door matches the boom in my head. I haven't even opened my eyes yet, and the hangover is in full swing. Fuck! I crack one eye open and take in the room around me, why the hell are the blinds open? The Space Needle might as well be the devil's dick with how hard this place is fucking me right now. A warm tanned hand slithers across my chest, and I grab it before it can follow course to the deep south.

"Who the hell is here?" she mumbles into her pillow.

"ANDREW!" someone's voice yells from the otherside of the door. It sounds like Boston, did I see Boston last night? The whole night feels like a blur, most nights do these days. The show, the drinking, the blow, the women. Speaking of women, I've got to get this girl out of here.

"Up you go, darlin." I tell her, slowly pushing her naked body up from the sleeping position we were in. I sit up slowly, following her motion. The movement causes my head to feel like it went from being under the ocean to the top of a mountain. Too much blood too quickly. The nightstand clock reads just after eight in the morning. I haven't seen eight am since... I honestly couldn't tell you. Somebody must be in jail for Boston to be pouding on my door at the break of dawn. Tubetop Girl grabs her

white shorts off the ground and starts pulling them up her legs, but a flash of a memory from the night before plays before my eyes. A white dress, long with something on her head, blonde hair, walking away from me.

“Were you wearing that all night?” I ask, pulling my boxers from the side of the bed where they landed last night.

“Yep.” she nods, not questioning why I asked if she had a wardrobe change in the middle of the night. I need to start picking smarter women.

“Huh. Okay.” I shrug as I push myself off the bed and make my way to the still pounding door. Boston is going to lose his damn voice if he keeps this yelling up. I grab the pack of smokes sitting on the entry table and pull one from the pack. I flick the lighter I found next to the pack and inhale the tangy tobacco taste. The exhale kind of makes me want to vomit, but I hold back the swirling in my stomach. I’m no amateur, I’ve been doing this exact same routine for years.

I flick the lock on the white door and twist the knob. Boston and Garrett stand on the other side of the door, their faces solemn, eyes bloodshot, and whatever had them banging down my door in the middle of the damn night can’t be good.

“You need to get dressed.” Garrett whispers like his voice might not make it if he raised it an octave.

“What’s going on?” I inhale another drag from my cigarette. Tubetop Girl steps up beside me, fully dressed, kisses my cheek, and nods at the two men blocking her exit. They part for her, and I give her ass a light slap as she exits. Her head turns back at the contact, and I give her a quick wink.

“Please get dressed, Rhy.” Boston’s voice quakes at my name. His eyes pleading for me to do what he’s asking. “Meet us back in Denny’s room.” I nod and shut the door.

Whatever is going on has my bandmate and manager absolutely shaken.

I grab a pair of jeans off the floor, giving them a quick sniff to make sure they don't smell like desperate pussy or booze. When they pass the smell test, I shove my legs into them. The small baggie containing exactly what I need to deal with this shit storm falls out of the small pocket and lands on the floor. I look around the room, making sure no one can see me before I dump a small amount of the powder onto the webbing between my thumb and index finger, lowering my nose between the two fingers and inhale quickly. The quick burn is followed by the familiar feeling, the one that I've grown used to. It isn't euphoria anymore, I would need a lot more than a quick bump to get me where I want to be, but this is enough to keep me stable. Level-headed. Ready to tackle whatever comes my way. I grab a t-shirt from the bag one of the roadies dropped off in my room last night, pocket the little baggie and my wallet.

## Page 3

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I stroll down the hall, letting the substance speed through my veins like a freight train with no end in sight. That is exactly what I needed. Two girls pass me on my way to Denny's room, both of them awe-struck, eyes wide, whispering to one another.

"Hi Ladies." I smile with a half wave. This isn't a new occurrence, it happens fairly often.

"Holy shit, are you Rhyit Denson?" The cute brunette asks. Her friend looks like she's going to faint, her face is white as a ghost. "L-lead singer of The Plight?" Her stutter makes me smile wider.

"I am." I reply, extending my hand to shake theirs. They both eye my hand like it's a snake about to bite them. The brunette is the first to come to from her trance. Her small palm meets mine, and she stares at it like I might disappear. I squeeze her palm lightly and let her hand go. Her friend looks at me and timidly places her palm in mine.

"Nice to meet you." I say. "Always great to meet a fan." I smile wider, hoping to calm her down before she gives both of us a heart attack.

"Nice to meet you too," she replies, pushing the hair that's fallen into her face back behind her ear. "We're huge fans. You guys were absolutely amazing at the show last night."

I clutch my heart theatrically, making them both blush. I've been a master flirt since age three, ask my mom. "Thank you, seriously. It means alot." I reply. "I've got to go, but take care okay?" I start to walk away from the girls when the quiet one clears

her throat after I've made it two steps.

"You and Pistol should get back together. You guys were the cutest couple," she says timidly. While her voice is meek, her words are a fireball straight to the gut. I spin around, ready to spew venom at this teenage girl as rage bubbles just below the surface of my skin; she doesn't know shit. It's at that moment I remember, no one knows. Bristol did the most selfless thing anyone has ever done for me. She walked away, broke my heart into a thousand pieces, and didn't tell a fucking soul why. She didn't tell the press I was giving my dick out like Oprah on her favorite things tour. She didn't tell anyone that I was snorting mountains of coke every night just to stay awake enough to play the songs we had written together. She didn't say shit.

"Tell her that." I say instead of spewing hateful comments at teenyboppers.

"When we saw her at the show last night, we thought she was there for you," the brunette replies with hope glimmering in her eyes. Is this where we're at right now, people randomly asking if Bristol and I are going to get back together? But hold the fucking phone.... Did she say Pistol was at the show last night?

"At the show? What show?" I ask as the door to Denny's room opens.

Boston steps out into the hallway, his eyes skate from me to the girls and then back to me. "Jailbait." he mouths.

"I wasn't trying to fuck them." I scoff, offended that he would assume I was trying to pick up chicks in the hallway, especially underage chicks. I'm not a classy individual, but I do have standards, they must be a solid dime piece and over eighteen, the rest is semantics.

"Mmmhmm." He nods, "Get the fuck in here." He rolls his eyes at me and returns into the room. Annoyance radiates off of him, I can feel it ten steps away.

“That’s my cue, bye ladies.” I continue my steps to the room, giving them a two finger salute. Was she at the show last night? No way.

## Chapter 5 Rhyit

The room is eerily silent when I enter. No one even looks up from their palms as the door clicks shut behind me. Boston and Denny are staring at their hands like they hold the secrets of the universe. There’s a black cloud hanging over all of them, and the tension in the room is high enough to be palpable.

“Jesus, who’s in jail?” I ask with a laugh. No one laughs at my joke as Garrett enters the room from his adjoining suite. His face is solemn and emotionless as he takes the steps leading to the center of the room.

“Now that we’re all here,” he states, glaring at me from his perch. Who the fuck is this guy, and what have they done with my fun-loving manager? “We need to decide how we are going to handle this with the press? Do we call off the tour?” Horror strikes my features like a bitchslap.

“Handle what?” I spit. “What in the actual fuck is going on?” I fling my arms out, letting them fall back down, clapping my thigh. What are they talking about?

“Why don’t you have a seat?” Denny says, rising from his seat by the window. His hand grabs my elbow, trying to sway me into his seat. I pull my elbow from his grip aggressively and turn to Boston.

“Bos, tell me what is going on? Where’s Alex?” I ask, realizing he’s missing from this impromptu band meeting. I spin around the room, assuming he’s perched against the wall, his usual MO. Four sets of eyes find mine as I ask where Alex is again. Emotion clogs my throat when no one answers again. All of them stare at me with a haunting look. I know that look; I saw it in Bristol’s eyes when she told me she



couldn't be my lighthouse anymore.

"Where's Alex?" I whisper, my eyes fill as wave after wave of emotion rolls through me.

"Alex," Bos starts, his eyes watering too, "is gone. He overdosed last night, man." A sob breaks free from my chest at his words. My throat burns as I try to keep my composure. I've lost enough people in my life to never need a lesson in heartbreak again.

"No." I wail, fear ripping through me like an earthquake. "Bullshit. That's a shitty fucking joke you guys." I'm frantic at this point as I stalk to the bathroom, assuming he's in there chalking up a line for us, getting his dick sucked by some groupie. I wrench open the door to find the room empty. The hole in my chest opens further, he isn't there.

I stalk into Garrett's room next, praying to whoever is listening that Alex will pop out from behind the door, playing one of his usual pranks on me. Alex is an original member of The Plight, he was there when I was a snot nosed kid with big dreams and an ever bigger ego. He's been there for all the highs and lows of this ride, every heartbreak, every fight with Bristol... everything. He is my rock, the one person outside of my family and Tol who knows me, the real me way before I donned the persona Rhyit. When I was still Andrew with the lanky body and braces, when my dreams were so damn big people called me crazy. I knew this life was for me before I ever put a Fender in my grasp. Alex knew my dreams were big enough for the both of us, and he learned how to play guitar because he was shit at drums.

I stand in the middle of the empty hotel room with my arms at my sides, letting every ounce of grief wash through me. Every late night spent in his grandmother's garage, playing like we were already rockstars, every gig we played in bars we weren't even old enough to legally be in, every memory floods me like a tsunami. I don't know

how long I stand there watching every good and bad time, like a snapshot reel playing before my eyes.

“Just give him some time.” Garrett whispers to someone in the doorway. I hear the footsteps behind me but don’t have the energy to turn around. I close my eyes as large arms wrap around my shoulders. A sob rips through me as the tears continue to roll down my cheeks. My knees give out and I sink to the floor, the weight of losing Alex too much to carry. I didn’t realize I was crying until I feel the wetness pool at the base of my chin. Boston’s grip on my arms tightens as I let myself continue to sob for the life cut way too damn short. Quaking of the chest at my back does nothing to help the emotion running rampant, tearing me apart. Boston chokes on a sob as we kneel, holding each other in the middle of an empty hotel room grieving our friend. My best friend. My bandmate. My brother.

“The fucking 27 club.” Boston says with an audible swallow. Alex celebrated his 27th birthday a couple months ago. He followed his idols Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison. I just wish I could hear him call me Andrew one more time.

Chapter 6 Rhyit

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

Black Raybans cover my bloodshot eyes as the limo pulls up alongside the jet, taking us back to LA. Of course today would be sunny. Seattle gets rain something like sixty percent of the year but today, today the sun shines. It feels like a giant fuck you from the universe, it should be gloomy and rainy with thunder and lightning. It's been twenty four hours since Alex was pronounced dead, and I've spent the last twenty of them in a pendulum of crying and drinking. My blood, at this point, could probably fuel this plane with the amount of alcohol running through it. Whiskey is easier to swallow than the thought of him not coming back.

Heroin. I knew that Alex had been dabbling in drugs harder than the coke and quaaludes we'd become so accustomed to. I knew he was dabbling with heroin, but I had no fucking clue he was so wrapped up in it. How did I not see it? Have I become so selfish that I didn't notice my best friend was on a downward spiral to junkieville? When did I become so diluted to think that he wouldn't do anything like that without me?

The car comes to a stop, and my band mates start piling out the opposite door to the one I'm sitting against. I stay seated, not because I don't want to get out and get the fuck out of here, but because I physically can't leave the last place I saw Alex alive.

"You coming?" Denny asks as his blue eyes search my face. My frown pulls deeper against my lips. I need to get out of this car. Need to get on the plane. I grab the door handle and pull, opening the door fully as I take a deep breath before I place my feet on the tarmac. My band mates all stand at the bottom of the step, waiting for me to either freak the fuck out or destroy something. That's been my MO for the past 24 hours, I go from breaking down emotionally to breaking anything in arms reach. My feet hit the tarmac with a decisive thud, and this is it. Alex is gone.

I should have hugged him longer-tighter the last I saw him. Now I have to remember him for longer than I've known him. They say hindsight is 20/20, but it feels like I'm looking at the past through dirty glasses. Everything seems smudged and dull.

“We'll land in LA about noon. We have a press conference at one thirty at the record label. After that, you boys can go home.” Garrett says as I enter the plane. Home. I don't want to go home; I don't want to walk past Alex's room in the condo Boston, Alex, and I share in Malibu. I'd rather burn that motherfucker to the ground than see his Fender sitting in the living room, knowing he will never play again. I take my seat in one of the recliners and shrink into my thoughts. The plane taxis towards the runway, and I watch the Seattle skyline start to shrink as the plane takes off.

“Did anyone call Pistol?” Boston asks from his seat behind me, his voice carrying throughout the confined space. Sudden alertness flanks me, and I sit up from my slouched position. Panic rises up my spine, I hadn't even thought of how she's going to take the news. Alex was like a brother to her. I can only imagine she's feeling the grief as hard as I am right now. Or maybe she doesn't know yet. Maybe the press conference will be the first time she hears that someone so close to us lost his life to a drug I tried so fucking hard to keep away from him.

## Chapter 7 Bristol

Breaking News: Alex Simpson has died from a suspected overdose. Seattle PD has yet to comment, but The Plight will hold a press conference inside Paperweight Records this afternoon. This is a developing story.

The newscaster's voice wanes into the background as disbelief washes over me. Alex isn't dead. I just saw him. He was fine. He is fine. He has to be.

I sit on the couch watching the blonde woman in front of me babble on about Alex's accomplishments and a highlight reel of Alex with Rhyit and Boston and... me.

Picture after picture slides past the screen like a sick time lapse. Us, the night we played at the Watering Hole in Seaside. Us, the day we signed with Paperweight Records. Us, on stage for our first arena show. Us. Us. Us. Tears roll down my cheeks as I watch the history of our time together play out in front of me.

The last picture is one of just Rhyit and Alex as teenagers. I have no idea how the press got the picture, but I can still feel my finger on the shutter as I told them to smile for the camera. They were both deep in thought, trying to perfect the riff that came after the chorus. They both turned towards me when I said smile, giving me the most authentic smiles I think they've given since that moment. My heart constricts at the memory. It feels like I've been transported back ten years, and I can still smell the incense burning in Alex's garage. I can still hear the feedback from the amp, the static playing in my ears like I'm underwater. I could feel him in every picture, in every moment except the one happening right now, and it fucking hurts. A lead weight sits on my chest as I imagined The Plight taking stage without Alex, without his cheeky warm up quotes or the random shots we used to take of the best shittiest well vodka he could find. That's how he ordered it, the best shittiest well vodka.

The slideshow ends, and I sit excruciatingly numb. That's the best and worst thing about a picture, it's a constant reminder that even if for only a moment, everything was perfect. There was no pain, no arguments, nothing but the moment captured by a lens held by someone who felt the need to document a single second in time to look back on.

The phone in the kitchen rings, pulling me from the emotional tsunami wall I feel approaching. I lift myself from the couch and float down the hallway of my parents house. I can't feel the carpet under my feet. I don't feel the cold linoleum under my toes as I pad through the kitchen. The phone mounted on the kitchen wall blares louder as I approach.

"Hello." I say, my voice sounding miles away.

“Tol, it’s Boston. We just got back from Seattle, I don’t know if you’ve seen the news but-“ Boston’s voice cuts off before he can drop the invisible bomb.

“I saw.” I whisper, not trusting my voice to say anything more. Tears dam on my lower lashes, it doesn’t feel real. This whole scenario is normally written in drama movies, not real life. Not Alex’s life.

“I’m so sorry, Tol. I didn’t know he was that bad. I didn’t know he was-“ A strangled sob breaks through the phone, and the tears I’d been trying to hold back flow freely down my face. Boston and I sit on my phone, silently sobbing for what feels like hours. The question I have for him burns the tip of my tongue as I try to find the words.

“How is he?” I ask lowly. Boston knows exactly who I’m referring to, and why I can’t say his name aloud.

“Bad. He’s in rough shape.” He sighs loudly through the phone, his voice bringing me a sense of calm I didn’t know I needed. “He’s been on a tirade since he found out. I think he’s broken, Tol. He’s on a one way track to the same fucking fate if he doesn’t stop soon.”

The thought of losing Rhyit, too, sends a shot of pain through me that I can only equate to being hit by a semi-truck. I almost drop the phone as the imagery surrounds me.

“You need to get him to the studio. Get him a pen and paper and let him go.” Some of the most explosive lyrics The Plight has ever written were at the height of an emotional implosion. Rhyit is a mood writer, like most musicians, but he has the uncanny ability to word a song so that it makes you feel like you’re going through the emotion with him. It’s a remarkable talent...but it has to be caught. Almost caged like a butterfly. You know it needs to be set free, but you appreciate the beauty far more

when it's in your face. That's Rhyit; a caged butterfly. Behind the eyeliner and the leather pants is a broken boy who sold his soul to the world for the chance of being heard.

"Can you talk to him?" Boston pleads, pulling me out of the Rhyit spiral I was falling into. Boston isn't one to ask for help often. I've known him since third grade, before he had long blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and a guitar. He was just Boston. The goofy kid who lived next door to Alex, who learned how to play because we did. He's been like my brother since before I had boobs. In all those years, I can count on one hand the number of times he's asked me for help.

"I can talk to him, but not today. I'm not in a good place, Bos. I won't be much help to him, and you know what talking to him does to me. I just can't today." I concede. Damn, that sounded really freaking vulnerable.

"We'll be home tomorrow. Can you talk to him then?" He pleads again. The begging in his tone is pulling on my already shredded heart strings. They'll be home tomorrow. To bury our friend.

"Yeah." I sigh, "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Commotion on the other end of the phone plays through the receiver. "Who are you talking to?" echoes through the handset, and at the sound of his voice, I pull the receiver away from my ear and hang up. At the definite clicking of the phone hanging up, I lean forward and place my face against the cool countertops. I can't talk to him. Hell, I can't even hear his voice without having a visceral reaction. Not after seeing our life splayed out across the TV screen, knowing that without Alex, nothing will ever be the same again. How am I going to tell him he needs to slow down?

Chapter 8 Bristol

## PAST

Warm fingertips travel down my spine, pulling me out my sleepy haze. The small bed quakes from Andrew's movement. He rolls to his side as his fingertips make small movements against my lower back. I open my eyes slowly, taking in the room around me before my eyes fall on the black-haired boy currently tracing my panty line. His green eyes hold mine as he gives me a crooked smile.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Guess what?” He whispers like it’s a secret, whatever he’s about to tell me is exciting because he looks like a kid standing at the top of the stairs on Christmas morning. Waiting for the go ahead to go check out what Santa brought them.

“What?” I ask, a slow smile pulling at my cheeks. He pinches his lips between his teeth to hide the grin I know he’s trying to conceal.

“We’re playing the Watering Hole tonight.” He says, and the grin he tried to hide breaks free. He could have told me he made waffles, and I’d be just as excited with the grin he’s giving me. His face beams with pure happiness, and I fall into his happiness like Alice down the hole to Wonderland.

“You’re shitting me?” I ask, grinning wildly.

“Nope. Barney just called while you were sleeping and said the other band canceled. They’re out, and we’re in.” He almost squeals. His excitement is contagious, and I sit up excitedly, realizing quickly I don’t have a shirt on. I cross my arms in front of me to cover up my breasts. His eyes fall to where I’m covered, and he clears his throat, looking away quickly. Andrew and I have fooled around a few times, this isn’t the first time he’s seen me topless, but it is the first time we weren’t in the heat of the moment. Using one arm, I cover my breasts and grab my t-shirt that was discarded to the floor the night before. At seventeen, I’ve filled out nicely. I have thicker hips, and I’ve grown at least a full cup size over the last year. My arms are toned as hell from the constant practice we attend, and my long blonde hair flows down my back. Andrew quickly averts his eyes as I right myself, we’ve been playing this cat and mouse game for over a year. He peeks, I peek, we make out and dry hump, but it never goes further than that. I wish he’d shit or get off the pot at this point.

“Get dressed.” He winks as he stands from the bed and exits my bedroom.

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I twirl my sticks in my hand anxiously as Andrew, Alex, and Boston check their instruments. We’re sitting in the back room of the Watering Hole, waiting for the first band of the night to finish their set. We aren’t legally old enough to be here, but no one cares. This place isn’t on the up and up with the law and allows minors in all the time.

“This could be it.” Andrew says excitedly from his seat across the room.

“Could be.” Alex nods, taking the shot he got from some waitress who passed by the room. He tosses the liquor back and sighs dramatically. His head tilts back to the ceiling, and I watch as he visibly loosens his muscles. I don’t really mess with alcohol often, once in a while at a party or after practice I’ll partake, but I prefer to be sober. You don’t have to blame your antics on alcohol if you stay sober, less to apologize for.

A clear shot glass lands on the coffee table in front of me, the shot full to the brim with an amber liquid.

“Drink up, Bristol. We’re cheersing.” Andrew says as he pours a shot of his own. This is a celebration after all. We’ve played at school functions and a couple of birthday parties but never for a crowd this big.. A lead weight sinks against my chest at the thought of fucking up my drum solo in the second song of our set list. Andrew gave it to me specifically because it’s a knock off of my idol. I set my sticks down on the table and reach for the shot glass. Three sets of eyes meet mine as they hold up the tiny glasses.

“Cheers to making our mother fucking dreams come true.” Andrew says. Holding his

glass higher than the others.

“Cheers!” We all say in unison. I press the glass to my lips and take a deep breath. The liquid burns down my throat and settles warmly in my stomach. It’s not until I exhale that I taste the putrid taste of whiskey. I set the shot glass down on the table and wiggle a little bit, trying to get the taste out of my mouth and nose.

“You’ll get used to it, babe.” Alex says with a wink. He grabs his guitar from the stand and pushes his arm through the shoulder strap. His dark hair covers his face as he looks down at the guitar, checking strings. He must feel my eyes on him because in the next second he looks up and shoots me a smirk. I smile at him, in a way I hope is friendly not come fuck me. I love Alex, he’s a great guy. But he’s not Andrew. Never will be.

Drumming is like punctuating life with a rhythm. A song can soar or drop dead with the drums; it’s a heavy burden, and one I don’t take lightly as my feet rest on the pedals for my drum kit. My palms sweat from the nerves overtaking me, and I have to fight the urge to set my sticks down and run my palms across my pleated black skirt. A lump rises in my throat as the bright lights shine directly in my face. I can’t do this, I think to myself.

Just as I’m planning my escape route, Andrew turns around and smiles at me. His smile is warm and encouraging. He throws in a cheeky wink, reminding me that I can do this. He believes in me; these boys believe in me. I swallow the dam in my throat and force a smile, praying to whoever’s listening that it doesn’t relay how terrified I am. Andrew nods to me, his signal that he’s ready for me to count him in. With shaky hands, I raise the sticks above my head and clack them together three times. At the last click, I hear the whining of Boston’s bass, and all nervousness leaves me as I watch Andrew step up to the mic to deliver the opening lines of a song that we co-wrote. His shoulders visibly descend from his neck as he gets comfortable.

Andrew has the voice of an angel. I knew the first time I heard him sing that the world wouldn't know what hit them after they heard his deep gravelly voice on their radios. I knew he was going places. He was headed straight to the top, and I'm forever thankful he chose this gang of misfits to join him in his rise to stardom.

My arms move quickly across the plastic drumheads, and I close my eyes and let the tempo pull me into the abyss. I know these songs like the back of my hand, we've practiced them daily for almost a year. As the final song of our set approaches, my solo looms heavily like a dark cloud above me. I know it. The guys know I know it, but as my arms move quickly, I can fight the nagging feeling that I'm going to miss a beat and fuck the whole thing up. Boston's guitar wanes, pulling me from the internal panic attack. I take the cue and drop into a synchronized rhythm pattern that would have John Bonham himself tipping his hat at me. My arms move at record speed, nailing every single beat with the precision of a seasoned vet. My blonde hair whips around in front of me as sweat coats my arms. I've never felt more alive than I do at this moment.

When the sticks finally stop pounding against the drum set, I lift my head tentatively to gauge the crowd. I push the hair out of my face to find all three boys staring, instruments abandoned as they gawk at me. The audience is silent, their eyes wide as well, either my performance was so terrible they are stunned silent, or it was so amazing they can't even cheer. I'd give my left tit for it to be the latter. I've never been so into a session in my life; I felt like I was hovering above myself. Like it wasn't even my arms working the sticks, but like I was a bystander, an audience member watching from the sidelines.

The guys regain their composure quickly. Andrew grabs the mic, holding it to his lips as his eyes hold mine. His back is tilted away from the audience as he starts the last chorus. His eyes hold mine as he sings, and I feel electric, not just from my solo but the way he's looking at me. Adoration is the only way to describe the look in his eyes. He turns his lithe body back towards the crowd in front of us. The moment

between us passes, and I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Thank you, Seaside, we're The Plight!" Andrew yells into the microphone, his voice carrying through the small room out onto the boardwalk. The crowd cheers for us as we all stand to walk off the stage.

The boys hoot and holler as we make our way down the staggered hallway leading to the back room we left our stuff in.

"You were fucking incredible." Alex says as we turn the corner into the room. Heat rises to my cheeks as I accept his praise. He leans forward and plants a sweaty kiss to my cheek, shooting me a wink as he pulls away. I fight the urge to cup my cheek where his lips just left my face. I smile bashfully at him as he backs away. As soon as my eyes leave his, they find a set of green eyes from across the room. Andrew stands rigid as more people fill the cramped space. He quirks an eyebrow at me, his eyes shooting from me to Alex in question. I shrug a single shoulder and move to the threadbare couch sitting in the middle of the room.

A shot appears in front of me, and I grip the tiny glass like my life depends on it. I feel more loose than I have in years, riding the high of the performance and the crowd's reaction to our music.

"Cheers, Pistol" Andrew says, flopping down into the seat next to me, his shoulder knocks mine as he invades my space. The motion causes the liquid in the glass to cover my hand. Wait, what did he call me?

"Pistol?" I ask, a smile playing on my lips. "Where'd that come from?"

"It rhymes with your name and your speed on the drums." Andrew shrugs, embarrassment creeping into his features..

“I like it.” I smile and tap my chin dramatically, looking lost in thought.

“You’re like a quick draw in the old west.” He says, pulling an imaginary pistol out of his pocket and firing. We both laugh at the imagery and settle into a strange silence.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Riot.” I say after a long moment. A smile spreads across his lips, and I would do just about anything to see his full lips and straight white teeth on display for me.

“Riot? Like ‘start a riot’? R-I-O-T?” he asks, the smile still holding steady.

I think on it for a moment, he can’t be Riot with that spelling. It wouldn’t fit, and it sounds childish, like a name he gave himself.

“Rhyit. R-H-Y-I-T.” I say with a smile, the name fits him perfectly. He’s a summer storm, the thunder on a hot day. His face twists as he ponders my new nickname for him. He mouths the name several times before he turns back to me.

“Rhyit and Pistol.” He says, knocking my shoulder with his. “Sounds like chaos.”

### Chapter 9 Rhyit

#### PRESENT

My feet land on the tarmac of the Portland International Airport, the private jet Boston and I took sits behind us, waiting for the taxi to cart it back to the hangar. I haven’t stepped foot in Oregon in at least three years. It’s not that I don’t like coming back here, I do. I just don’t make the time necessary to visit this place. My hometown sits about three hours south of here, the place where Alex will be buried tomorrow. His final resting place. The crisp Northwest wind whips across my face as I stand on the tarmac waiting for the car to arrive.

“Fuck, it’s cold here.” Boston exclaims behind me. He pulls the soft pack of

cigarettes from his jacket pocket and offers me one. I take the stick from the pack and place it between my lips. Boston zips his jacket after reaching for the lighter and lights his smoke before handing the lighter to me. We stand in proverbial silence, neither one of us having anything to say to the other, all the words gone after the media frenzy, the press conference, and the flight here.

“Where are we headed first?” I ask as the car approaches. Boston shrugs as he exhales the smoke into the misty air. The only place I want to be right now has liquor bottles on the walls and a stale cigarette scent. Just the thought of a double shot of whiskey has my mouth watering. I’d do just about anything to numb this ache sitting on my chest.

“Watering Hole?” I throw out on a whim. Boston isn’t a partier, that was Alex. He was my anytime, any place, friend. Where Boston is known to be rowdy on a Friday night after a gig, he’s no Alex. The thought brings me pause. No one is ever going to be Alex. I pull my bottom lip into my teeth and pick at the dried skin in hopes of squelching the tsunami that’s threatening to swallow me whole.

“One drink,” Boston says, throwing me a life preserver he has no idea I need. Grief is perspective, it can be an ocean to one person and a rain puddle to another. You can’t judge someone by the way they grieve, and there is no way to know how deep the loss is going to cut someone. Me, I’m drowning and bleeding out. I’ve never felt this level of pain before, not just emotional but physical. My heart physically hurts. Being back here isn’t helping, and as the car whizzes down the freeway, it makes me remember everything I’ve blocked out.

“How do you think his grandma’s holding up?” Boston says from the other side of the town car. His head is turned out the window, and I don’t know if he actually meant for the question to be answered or if he was just thinking out loud. Alex’s grandma is one of the nicest ladies in history, she raised Alex after his parents split when he was a baby. They got really wrapped up in the 60’s, and no one has seen



them in a long time.

“I don’t know.” I reply after a long silence. Margie Simpson is a saint, and the thought of her thinking anything less of Alex because of his drug use feels like a hot fire poker going through my chest. I imagine her sitting at her tiny kitchen table surrounded by photo albums, telling anyone who would listen, the story held in each picture. My eyes well up thinking about her, and I use my thumb and forefinger to wipe the tears before they crest. Boston and I sit in silence for the remainder of the trip, both of us lost in our own sorrow.

The car comes to a halt outside the rundown bar. I must have nodded off at some point as my eyes adjust to the gray lighting. I sit up and stretch my ink covered arms above my head, shaking off the sleep I didn’t know I needed. I yawn as the rear door opens, the driver holding it open for me to exit. I’ll never get used to people waiting on me, it’s still surreal even six years after we hit it big. The fresh sea air slaps in the face as I exit the car and tip the driver.

“You boys be good.” Carlos, the driver, says cheekily.

“Will do.” I reply with a two finger salute. Boston follows behind me as I push open the wooden doors of the bar that gave us our break. The place that started it all.

“God damn, as I live and breathe. Andrew and Boston...is that you?” Jared, the bartender/owner, bellows from his place behind the bar. The other patrons of the bar turn to see what all the commotion is. I give him a smile and pull the baseball cap down further on my head. I don’t usually go incognito, but everyone knows why we’re here, and I can’t do the condolences right now. I just want a drink and a bump—not in that exact order. We have three hours before the viewing at the funeral home, and I plan to make the most of them.

Chapter 10 Bristol

Present

“Thank you so much for coming.” Margie’s frail voice coos as she pats my hand in hers.

“I wouldn’t have missed it.” I reply, swiping my long hair to one side. It’s a nervous habit, one I’ve tried to break countless times.

“He would have loved that you came.” She says, her vibrant blue eyes clouding with unshed tears. I bite my lower lip trying to hold the tears at bay, if she starts crying, I will too. I have no doubt.

“I wish we weren’t here.” I whisper, my voice barely audible. It’s the same mantra I’ve been telling myself since I saw the news, we’re not here. This isn’t real. It can’t be. But as my eyes find the white casket in the middle of the room, I realize we are here. This is real. This is happening, and there’s not a damn thing I can do to bring him back. I keep my eyes trained on the finite details of the coffin, the gold and silver engravings on the side. The sleek bracketing reminding me of one of his guitars.

The front door of the funeral home bursts open, pulling me out of my trance. I turn slightly, but I don’t need to look to see who it is, my body acutely aware of his presence. Rhyit stumbles into the vast room and sways as he makes his way to the casket. The case in his hand knocks a couple of people who are milling about, but he pays them no mind as he approaches our friend’s final resting place. I watch in wonder from the side of the room with Margie as Rhyit sets the case on the ground. He takes a deep breath, and I don’t have to wonder where he’s at on the sober scale. I can smell the alcohol wafting off of him from here. The fact that he’s shown up to our friend who overdosed’s viewing fucked up shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. The lack of respect almost pisses me off, but then I remember that he’s not my problem. In a couple days, he will be gone, and we will only have to see each other at similar events, even though part of me wishes things were different.

Rhyit opens the case, and my breath catches in my throat when I see what's sitting in on clear display. Alex's black and white Fender Stratocaster, the same one he learned to play on, the one he performed with almost every night because she was his favorite, is pulled from the case and a collective gasp is heard from everyone in the room. Rhyit grips the guitar by the neck and holds it up to his face. I watch in rapture as he presses his lips to the head of the guitar, saying a silent goodbye to Alex. He places the guitar inside the casket, and I bite my lip to stop the tears again.

"You forgot this, man." Rhyit croaks, his voice shredded with the emotion holding him back. "Give heaven some hell, brother. I don't know that I'll get to meet you there but keep my seat warm, will ya?"

Tears spill down my cheeks, and I chance a quick look around at everyone's misty eyes, even the men wipe the moisture away quickly. I continue to bite my lip to stifle the sob that threatens to break free. Rhyit knocks his knuckles against the porcelain casket and starts to walk away. I want to run to him, to hold him and tell him everything is going to be okay. To let him break for me, with me. But I don't. My feet stay rooted to the floor, and I watch his back as he leaves the room. The door thuds behind him, and I let the sob that I'd been holding break free.

Several hours later, I feel like a wrung-out dish towel set on the side of this sink to dry. I'm emotionally exhausted and the funeral hasn't even happened yet. I wish I hadn't promised Eve I would meet her at Frank's diner for burgers and shakes. I don't want to people anymore today. I want to go home and hide under the covers until I'm required to go back to the studio in six months. Six months is the longest I've ever gone without performing, hell, one month seems like an eternity. The need to get behind my kit makes me itchy. I tap out a beat on my steering wheel as I wait for the light to turn green. It's surreal to think I would still be in Hawaii right now if I hadn't pulled a runaway bride on John. He hasn't accepted a single phone call from me and for good reason. With Alex's death happening so quickly following my not so happy nuptials, the press hasn't really piqued for our event.

I pull into Frank's Diner, and I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia. I haven't been here since the night before we left for LA six years ago. It was the last time we were all together at home. The outside of Frank's hasn't changed a bit, still the barn-red with black lettering and neon lights around the eaves of the building. It's nice to know that some things never change, even if you do.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

I get out of the car and push open the heavy metal door, the bell chimes above my head as the smell of fried food and cleaning product assaults my senses. My little sister Eve sits in the back, in a red leather booth, surrounded by several people we went to high school with.

“Bristol!” Eve shouts as I make my way further into the diner. At the sound of my name, several heads turn my way. I raise my hand and give a timid wave hello. I don’t know these people well, sure I went to high school with them, but I spent ninety percent of my time in school in Alex’s garage, working on drum solos and smoking pot. This wasn’t my crowd, but they were Eve’s. These are her people.

I take a seat on the edge of the booth, plotting my escape if necessary. The other people at the booth say hello and continue on with their conversations, paying me no mind. I sit in silence, watching them all interact, the familiarity they have with each other hurts to watch. I had that, Alex, Andrew, Boston and I were familiar, we spent years on the road together, every night with one another. I wanted to ring their necks sometimes, but in the end, it was a family. A home within each other. I didn’t just break up with Andrew, I broke up with all of them. Even if I wasn’t physically involved, they still held a piece of my heart.

“Bristol, it’s so nice for you to join us peasants.” Casey snides across the table from me. She’s always been a bitch, and if jealousy were a color, she’d be the hulk right now.

“It’s for charity.” I quip. My eyes holding hers, daring her to say something else.

“Heard your wedding didn’t go as planned.” Casey says as she rolls the cherry from

her shake between her overly lipsticked lips.

“Gee, nothing gets past you, huh?” I roll my eyes at her remarks.

“I heard you freaked out from hearing your own song.” She laughs, like it’s the funniest thing ever.

“And I heard you got a nose job last summer.” I glare. I pretend like her words don’t cut me, but they do. Someday this pain will be useful, not today, but someday.

“You think you’re so much better than us.” She spits.

“Careful, Casey, your insecurities are showing. Better tuck that shit back in.” I smile.

“You-“ she starts, but the bell over the door chimes again, and in walks Boston, followed by a still not sober Rhyit. I lock eyes with him, and all the air gets sucked out of the room. His greens hold my blues with handcuffs. His pupils are so blown you can barely see the gold flecks that make up the inside of his eyes. He rubs his lips together, and I fight the need to pull my legs together tighter. He snuffles and rubs the red raw skin below his nose, and I purse my lips. He’s on another level right now, he probably doesn’t even see me. I look across the table at Eve, her eyes wide as she realizes who just walked in.

“I’m gonna go.” I say to Eve as they approach the table. Her eyes bounce between me and Rhyit, not one to state the obvious, but she nods her head. “I’ll see you at home.” I scoot out of the red leather booth and attempt to make a run for it. I pass both of them on my way out and mouth a silent “I’m sorry” to Boston as I race to my car. He nods as he and Rhyit take a seat at the table I just vacated.

I drive aimlessly for a while, no real direction planned, just enjoying the peace and quiet. No radio, no voices, just me and the steering wheel. My mind drifts back to a

time before we were this broken. When I could stand to be in the same room as him. Hell, I loved being anywhere with him. When the animosity didn't suffocate me, and the secrets we spilled weren't used as threats. I don't know when Andrew and I went down Toxic Avenue, but we've made a home there, and we're living quite nicely. I pull at the straps on the wrist of my leather jacket. My engagement ring shines at me as I place my hand back on the wheel. I really should take it off, but the black diamond in the center fits me so well. I'll take it off when John starts talking to me again, I tell myself. A tiny voice inside my head tells me that I could be wearing this ring for a very long time.

## Chapter 11 Bristol

I put my Toyota Celica in park and sit in the driveway of my parents' house for a moment. I need to go in and shower and go to bed, but the images of today haunt me. The pictures of all of us on the tri-fold boards surrounding the casket, the records from his room scattered across the table in front felt like a shrine to a life cut short. But I guess that's what they are, memories, pieces of the life of a person no longer here to tell their story. I let out a shaky breath as I unbuckle my seatbelt and open the door.

A light shines in the old treehouse in my backyard, odd. The rickety structure probably couldn't hold my weight now, my dad built it for Eve and I when we were kids. As we got older it became a hideout and hangout for all of the kids in our neighborhood and later, a make out pad. I think Eve even lost her virginity up there. Again with all this god damn nostalgia. I stand at the bottom of the tree, wondering if I should even go up. It might be one of the neighbor kids at this point. Or, it's Eve and one of the boys from the diner. I grimace at the thought. I listen for a moment and don't hear anything, no panting or sloppy kissing or children's laughter. I grab the ladder step, which is actually just two by fours nailed to the tree itself, and begin the climb.

“Please don’t let me fall and bust my ass.” I say to myself as I climb higher. When I get to the opening, the floor creaks from my weight on the door, and I push my body faster through the opening, praying that if I fall, at least I’ll have all this soft wood for my landing. Morbid humor is apparently who I am as a person these days. The sound of a throat clearing brings me out of my ‘falling to my death’ comedy stand-up show.

Rhyit sits in the bean bag chair across the room from me, his leather jacket is draped over the side of an old TV and his boots are crossed at the ankle in front of him. He’s every bit the badass rockstar you would imagine, sitting on a bright red strawberry shortcake bean bag chair.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, bewildered. Why, of all places, would he show up here? He looks up from the photo he’s holding between his fingers, his eyes still mostly pupil, but there’s a softness there too.

“I...didn’t know where else to go.” He says softly.

“Um, how about your mom’s house? Your dad’s? Hell, Boston’s?” I say, raising my arms in confusion.

“Nah. I can’t go there.” He shakes his head solemnly.

“Because you’re high.” I spit. “Because you don’t want your mom to know you’re headed down the same fucking path as-“ I don’t finish my sentence before he’s inches from me. He holds my eyes as I swallow audibly.

“Say it.” He seethes. “Because I’m on the same path as...Alex?”

“Y-yes.” I stammer.

“No. I’m not. I didn’t have a complete breakdown when you left. It hurt, sure, but



Alex. It fucking ruined him ‘Tol. I can handle my drug use. Don’t worry about me.” He says, lighting a cigarette he pulled out of his dark jeans. The white T-shirt he’s wearing stretches across his toned shoulders and shredded stomach. My mind wants to hate him, but my vagina would really like to renegotiate the previous war treaty. I lick my lips as I continue my perusal. He notices, of course he does, he’s a sex symbol, of course he would notice when a woman is interested. Wait, I’m not interested. I’m surprised he doesn’t have a pheromone gland at this point, sniffing out bitches in heat.

“Like what you see, Pistol?” He asks, flirtation lacing his tone.

“I wouldn’t fuck you with someone else’s pussy.” I quip, taking a step forward to invade his space the way he did to me.

“That so?” He replies, taking a drag of his cigarette, looking smug as ever. I rub my temples, why is he so fucking infuriating.

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“Yes, now what are you doing here?” I steer us back to the question at hand because this man could have me naked in two point five seconds flat, and we both know it. I may talk a big game, but I’m putty in his hands, and that pisses me off.

“Just taking a trip down memory lane, I guess.” He says flicking his cigarette.

“Which memories would you like to recount? The ones where you promised to take care of Alex? Or the ones where you promised me it was a one time deal, and it would never happen again?” I sneer, squaring my shoulders. Memories of the hurt he caused in his drunken escapades smacking me back down to size. I continue to stand though; I refuse to show him weakness when he doesn’t deserve it.

“You fucking left, Pistol.” He throws his hands up, like that’s the answer for all of life’s questions.

“You know why I left.” I snip.

“You leaving pushed him over the fucking edge.” He bellows, pain lacing his tone.

“Don’t put that blame on me, Rhyit. You swore you would take care of him.” I roar back at him, my fist hitting his chest in an attempt for him to back up from my space. He grabs my wrist, inspecting the ring perched on my left hand.

“Yeah...and you promised you'd love me forever. Guess we’re both shit at keeping our promises.” He says as he wrenches the engagement ring from my hand.

He palms the ring and holds it like a hot coal. His face twists like he’s in physical

pain.

"Is this what you want?" He throws the ring against the wall.

The ring hits the wood of the floor with a resolute thud. His eyes turn back to me, and we hold our stare. His pupils are blown, and for the first time in my life, I'm terrified of what might happen being this close to him.

He closes the gap between us, letting out a deep breath, blowing the hair away from my face. "You promised me forever." He says with a deep rasp.

He releases my wrists, and I fight the urge to rub the place where his palms just were. Even now his touch leaves a delicious burn that I want to chase like an addict desperate for another hit. His eyes swim with emotion undoubtedly matching mine.

"I didn't go through with it." I whisper.

His face softens but only a little. With a force that I've missed, he grabs my face and pushes me back against the wall. "Because you belong here." He says. "With me." My breath catches as I feel his lips attack mine. My heart thuds painfully in my chest. This isn't sweet kissing, this isn't hello or goodbye kissing, this is anger and frustration, missing each other with every ounce of our souls kissing.

His lips move against mine, and every word we haven't said to each other pours from this kiss. A thousand missed apologies, a million missed goodbyes. I feel the tip of his tongue against my lips requesting entry, and his hand snakes down the side of my body until it reaches my thigh. He grabs it with force and brings it to rest against his hip, effectively opening me up to him. It takes every ounce of self control I have to pull away.

"You don't get to take liberties with my body anymore, Rhyit. I said I'd love you

forever, but I'm not yours." I whisper against his lips.

He pulls away quickly, anger racing through him as he runs his hands through his hair with an exhale so deep, it echoes through the small room where we have so many memories.

"How can you love me and not be mine?" His eyes are glazed over from his high, but they are filled with tears. That's the emotion I want to see, the real Andrew. Seeing past the facade to the soul who used to own my heart.

"Why didn't you go through with it?" He asks lowly.

"I can't tell you that right now." I reply. I can't. I can't tell him that his voice and a song we wrote together almost a decade ago when we were in love was played by mistake by a backup DJ who thought it would be cool because my name was in the song. I learned that fun fact when I returned home with my tail tucked between my legs.

"Someday soon?" He asks, hope lilts in his tone, and because I'm a sucker for this man, I nod my head.

"Go home, Rhyit." I plead. He looks around the room and then back to me.

"I am home." He says, falling back against the bean bag chair. "Stay with me?" He pleads.

"I can't." I concede.

"Can't or won't?" He prods. His eyes holding mine again.

"What's the difference?" I ask, tilting my head toward the wood beams above us.

I see him nod in my periphery, and I turn to head back down the steps.

“Good night, Rhyit.” I murmur.

“Good night, Pistol.” He replies.

### Chapter 12 Rhyit

I cannot believe this motherfucker got me in a suit and tie. I haven't worn anything outside of my leather jacket and boots in public in half a decade, and here I am tying a tie in the bathroom of our hotel.

I wasn't lying when I told Bristol I couldn't go home. It's not because I don't want to, but because my family doesn't want to see me. They watch the news, they see the kind of lifestyle I live and how far away from the church I have run. My dad is less so than my mom. My mom forgets she has a son, concentrating fully on my little sisters. I send them both signed vinyls of whatever album we currently have available every year for Christmas just to spite her. I have no idea what she does with them, but I know those girls will appreciate it someday when they're older. I wonder if they'll be there today. My mom loved Alex. It would be nice to see Claire and Julie.

I comb my shoulder length black hair back and style it so it sits out of my face. I don't normally care about what my hair looks like, but today I need to look presentable for Alex. Not that he'd care. But I care.

Yesterday when I left his Strat in the casket with him I almost broke. When we got to the house and the roadies dropped it off, I wanted to smash it. Hold it over my head and watch it break into a thousand pieces, but that's not what Alex would have wanted. He would have wanted me to keep it, but I couldn't do that either. I couldn't look at it everyday sitting in its stand collecting dust. I could have donated it, but Alex would have been pissed if some rich prick had it sitting in his living room, and he only played it when he had other rich pricks over for cocktail parties. I laugh lightly at the imagery.

I inspect my face in the mirror, applying a small amount of Vaseline to the cracked skin below my right nostril. My mind goes back to the conversation I had with Bristol last night, like it has multiple times since I left the cold little treehouse in the wee hours of the morning. Her telling me I was headed down the same path, plays on repeat in my head. I'm not. I know I'm not. I can control myself, I don't use heroin.

Garrett meets me in the lobby of the hotel; I spot him as soon as the elevator doors open with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"You look like shit." He says with a smile. "Where'd you get this suit?"

"I stole it out of your dad's side of the closet after I got done fucking your mom." I reply with a wink. He grimaces at the thought and then smirks at me.

"You obviously haven't seen my mom. She looks just like me with boobs." He replies, and I grimace at the imagery of a gangly woman with slicked back hair and coke bottle glasses.

"Touché." I smile as we walk out of the sliding doors.

"All jokes aside, you okay?" Garrett asks, concern lining his features. I turn away from his stare and look towards the parking lot. I can feel his eyes on the side of my face as I assess whether or not I'm okay.

"No." I answer after several moments. It's as honest as I can be. I'm not okay, don't know if I ever will be.

"Yeah, I hear that." He says, exhaling loudly.

"But life moves on right?" I reply, forcing the emotion down.

“Does it? Or do you just train yourself to live without them?” Garrett replies, his head tilted towards the parking lot in front of us.

The black town car pulls up ,saving me from an answer that would pull the emotion back up. I don’t want to learn to live without Alex. I don’t want life to go on.

Garrett and I sit in silence as we approach the graveside service. The paparazzi are standing on the side of the road like vultures waiting to pick apart their next victim. I hate that they’re here, witnessing this private occasion. I pull the Raybans out of my suit pocket and set them on my face. No way I’m letting these asshats see me looking anything other than stoic.

The rear door to the car opens, and the flashes start instantly. I haven’t even stepped out of the car, and they’re already heckling me. Jesus. I clench my teeth so hard, I’m surprised they don’t crack as I step out of the car. My mouth sets into a straight line as I walk the designated path to the service. I spot Boston talking to Bristol as Garrett and I make our way through the throng of people. Bristol looks stunning in her fishnet tights, leather skirt, and button down black shirt. Her platform black combat boots help her short stature, and they look like she takes no shit. Her eyes are hidden behind black shades, but I don’t need to see her eyes to know she just checked me out. We’ve been checking each other out since I had my first boner. Hell she caused it.

“Garrett!” Bristol squeals when she spots our manager. She stops her conversation with Boston and bolts to Garrett. Wrapping her arms around him in a full embrace, she holds onto him like he’s her long lost brother. Jealousy pulls at me, she wasn’t as excited to see me as she is our douche canoe of a manager. I lie, the guys alright, I’m just being petty at this point.

Once they're done hugging like he just survived the Titanic sinking, she turns to me and gives me a light pat on the shoulder. A pat on the shoulder. Like I’m her weird



uncle she doesn't want to get too close to, like I didn't have my tongue against her lips last night begging for entry. Fuck that. I pull her towards me, and at the impact of our bodies, she lets out a soft sigh. Her body feels so damn good against mine. I've thought about her a lot, more than I'd like to admit. I still sing our song every night for shit's sake.

"You don't have to fight me." I whisper into her hair as we hold our embrace.

"I'm not." She replies. "I don't want people to get the wrong idea."

I let her go unwillingly, I miss her warmth as soon as her body is away from mine. I'm acutely aware of the audience we have and the paps waiting in the wings ready to snap and misconstrue every action. The people surrounding us start making their way towards the gravesite, signaling the start of the funeral. Eve, Bristol's little sister, walks beside Boston and Garrett, while Bristol and I hang back.

"I cannot believe we're here." Bristol sighs. "It still doesn't feel real."

"Tell me about it." I nod as we all take our places surrounding the white casket. Bristol comes to stand next to me which I appreciate more than she will ever know. With Boston on my left and Bristol to my right, it feels like a homecoming of sorts, like bringing the family back together.

The pastor starts with an opening prayer and the service draws on, the only thing I can think about is that Alex would have hated this. He would have hated the monotony of it all, the ashes to ashes, dust to dust bullshit wasn't him. I turn to Bristol who is staring at the casket with the saddest expression on her beautiful face. It's how everyone looks right now I notice as my eyes track the people surrounding the hole.

"Wanna do something crazy?" I whisper, her eyes turn to me, and for a single

moment, she looks like my Pistol. The one person outside of Alex who was always ready and willing to cause a ruckus with me. Her blue eyes light up with a mischievousness I've missed in the years we've been apart. But as quickly as the look came, it's gone again. Her face morphs back into a solemn expression. The pastor opens the mic up for anyone who would like to say a few words. I grab Bristol's hand and pull her with me, my feet moving before I even have the chance to think too much about it. Her hand melds in mine as we take the few steps to the front of the mourners.

I step up to the mic and immediately regret the decision to come up here.. Bristol fidgets at my side, and I can feel her eyes burrowing into the side of my face. Fuck it. Alex would be so damn proud to have us up here for him.

"Hello-" I croak into the microphone, "I'm Rhy-..." I stop myself, I'm not Rhyit today. I'm Andrew. Alex's best friend. Son of Tracy and Allen Denson. Alex's band mate and brother. "I'm Andrew. And I'm or I was..." I stammer over the next words. My throat tightens "Alex's best friend. He was the brother I chose and the best friend and bandmate a guy like me could ask for."

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I choke the last words out, the reality of what I'm doing smashing into me like a brick wall. I'm saying goodbye.

"I uh-" I stop again, tears starting to trail down my cheeks as the weight of this goodbye hangs heavily around my neck. I grip the microphone tighter as a tiny palm meets my free hand. I turn to see Bristol, tears well in her eyes, her expression conveying everything I can't say right now. "I'm going to miss you." I whisper in the mic, still holding Bristol's eyes. And I don't know if I meant to say it to her or to Alex, but tomorrow, I'll be without both of them, and the thought hurts more than I can bear.

"Goodbyes aren't supposed to be easy, I know this much is true. I didn't think it would be so damn hard saying goodbye to you. I know they say it'll get easier as the time passes by, but I'd kill for one more day with you by my side." I sing into the microphone, the lyrics coming to me from the depth of my broken soul. "I know you're in a better place, I know there were a lot of things you couldn't take, but please know that down here, there isn't a soul who could fill this space." Bristol hand squeezes mine with a silent reassurance that it's okay.

I'm breaking, and I hate that I'm breaking with an audience. I hate that I'm breaking in front of the whole goddamn world. My shoulders quake as I pull the microphone away from my mouth. A strangled sob leaves me, and a moment later, I'm pulled into an embrace. Large arms wrap around my shoulders as Boston pulls me in tighter. I feel Bristol's body behind me as we stand together and cry for a life cut way too damn short.

The graveyard workers approach the casket as Bristol, Boston, and I stand near it.

None of us have said a single word since the funeral ended, what is there to say? The paparazzi have all gone home or to Margie's house for the wake, which is where we should be but watching our friend lowered into the ground felt like the last piece of this shitty puzzle. Bristol is the first of us to move, she takes the few steps that lead to the casket and places her hand against the top tentatively. This feels like a private moment, one I should be walking away from, giving her the space she deserves. But I don't, the selfish part of me wants to be the one to console her when this is all over, the one to dry her tears and hold her broken pieces as we navigate this fucked up new normal together.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, her hand making small circles against the top of the casket. "I didn't mean it. You have to know that. I didn't mean it. I wanted you to grow old." Her voice breaks as the grave diggers clear their throats, signaling that the time has come. I want to scream, to tell them we need more time, that we're not ready yet. I can feel the scream, I hear it in my head, but nothing comes out. I guess that's what grief is; a silent scream only you can hear and feel.

I know now that my life will be categorized into two segments, before this and after this.

## Chapter 13 Bristol

Margie's house is overflowing with family and friends, the small house splitting at the seams with the amount of people who came to give their condolences and food. I'll never understand why people bring food to a mourning family, it's a universal expression though. No matter where you go in the world, food is a currency for love. I stand in the kitchen, attempting to help Margie rearrange her fridge to fit all the casserole dishes.

"My goodness I will never eat all this food by myself. You should take some home, Bristol." Margie says, her back turned towards me as she shoves the last chicken dish

in her overflowing fridge.

“We’d love to.” My dad says from the entry of the kitchen. I shoot him a quick smile, thankful he and my mom are here. I hand him two large casserole dishes from the fridge and move out to the living room, chatting with everyone I can to keep myself away from Rhyit. I spot him and a few other guys on the back deck smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. I stare for a moment, watching him as he throws his head back and laughs at something one of the other guys says. Rhyit laughs with his whole body, it’s one of those characteristics that not many people have, one of the things I loved most about him. It’s hard to stay mad at someone when their laugh makes you laugh. The moment he’s done laughing his head turns like he can feel me staring at him, our eyes lock and the look he gives me tears me apart, it’s pain coated in sugar. I can see the hurt he’s carrying, but it’s not noticeable to the naked eye, no it’s taken years to decipher his emotions, and right now, he’s hurting just as much as I am.

Hours later, after the last paper plate is thrown away and Margie has gone to bed, I step out into the cool July air and take a deep breath. I’m physically and emotionally exhausted from the last few days. It doesn’t help that I barely slept last night after meeting Rhyit in the treehouse. A nice hot shower and my bed are calling my name. I can practically feel myself falling into bed.

“Pssst. Hey Pistol, you got a minute?” Rhyit says from the side of the house, the breezeway light casting a shadow around him. Fuck, I thought he left and I was in the clear. I take the concrete step off of the back porch and head in his direction. He opens the door to the garage, and I’m blasted back to our childhood. My old drum kit sits in the middle of the garage, a white tarp covering the set. Boston stands in the corner, his bass already slung over his shoulder, hanging loosely around his midsection. Rhyit walks to the center of the room and pulls the tarp off the drum kit. Dust flies through the air at the movement and I cover my mouth, 8 years of dust can’t be good for the pulmonary system.

“You want to play for a bit?” Rhyit asks, his eyes fixated on the drum set. A set of sticks with hot pink tips sits in the holder, no doubt they’ve been here as long as this thing has. Alex used to paint the tips of my drum sticks for me, it was his thing. Even now, I buy them with pink tips. It’s one of my signatures.

“I don’t know, Rhy.” I say, swallowing a lump in my throat. I want to get behind the kit. I want to smash my sticks against the plastic so badly I can taste it. I want to work out this anger I have coursing through me on the plastic heads of the drums, but playing with them without Alex sounds like taking two steps forward and a million steps backward. My internal battle is cut short when Boston plugs the bass into the amp and riffs. The scratching of the feedback reverberates through the room.

“We need this, babe. Please. For old time sake.” Rhyit’s eyes hold mine, and I wonder for a moment if I’ll ever be able to say no to this man. If he will always hold this power over me. I nod tentatively as I take the steps leading to the stool behind the kit. Once the sticks are in my hand, I feel the peace only the drums can bring wash through me. It’s been weeks since I played. I twirl the wood pieces through my fingers twice and tap out a familiar rhythm, the guys following suit, and Rhyit sings into the mic stand with no microphone. ‘Stairway to Heaven’ by Led Zeppelin was one of the first songs we ever sang as a band, and as the sticks hit the drum heads, I feel fresh hot tears roll down my cheeks. The guitar is missing, drums and bass don’t make this song what it’s supposed to be. Rhyit stops singing, and I take a second to bow my head and wipe the tears, but as I look up, I notice tears staining both Rhyit and Boston’s cheeks. Neither one of them doing anything to stop the torment.

“Fuck.” Rhyit snuffles as he grabs the old Fender laying against the wall and plugs it in. He nods to me once the strap is over his shoulder. “Again.” He says, his voice breaking. I tap the sticks together counting us in, and the guitar wanes as Boston starts on his bass. Rhyit starts singing again and we play, for old times sake and for each other.

My arms are heavy from exertion, and my heart is heavy as we exit the garage we spent a major portion of our adolescence in. It feels final, like we may never do this again, never play together again. Boston shuts the light off as we stand awkwardly in the breezeway.

“I’m gonna head home.” Boston says, hooking a thumb in the direction of his house next door.

“Yeah, me too. Do you need a ride?” I ask Rhyit. He nods as his eyes stay trained on the garage we just exited. He closes the door, and the finality of that closed door sits weighted against me.

## Chapter 14 Rhyit

Her bright red sports car sits against the curb outside the house. She hops to the driver's side as I approach the passenger. This thing is tiny, it’s a death trap, I’m not going to fit in this.

“When did you start driving a clown car?” I ask as I open the passenger door.

“It was a gift.” She blushes as she slides into the front seat. Ah, a gift from him. John.

“He got you a death trap. This thing is tiny, Bristol, if you got in a wreck you’d never win.” I spit, the thought of losing her in a car wreck plays in my head as I roll myself like an accordion into the seat.

“Thanks for the concern.” She quips as she presses the clutch to start the car. “Too little too late, though.”

“It’s not too late. You could easily trade this thing in for something bigger.” I nod, already preparing myself to buy her a new car when I get back to LA.

“You being concerned is too little too late. I love this car. It fits me.” She says, eyes training on the road as she weaves through Main Street. The hotel is only a few blocks away, and I panic, I’m not ready to say goodbye to her. I wasn’t ready the last time we said goodbye, and it’s haunted me nightly ever since. There are only two hotels in town, and they’re only a block apart.

“Will you come upstairs with me?” I ask, my voice pleading. I just need more time. I need to ask her about what she said at the funeral, I need to-

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” She asks, her voice softening. I think it’s a great fucking idea. If I could, I would throw her in my suitcase and never let her leave again. I imagine her body under mine for a moment, the sounds she used to make, the way she felt. I clear my throat, pushing those thoughts out until later. I can jack off in the shower, I don’t need to think about Bristol’s perfect tits against my lips right now. Dammit.



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“Rhy?” She asks, her head tilting. We’ve stopped, and she’s waiting for an answer. I probably look like a lunatic, not answering her for however long as memories of our nights together play like a porno in front of my eyes.

“Please.” I ask, my eyes holding the floor. I can’t look at her right now, I can’t let her see how vulnerable I am right now. I can feel her eyes on the side of my face as she weighs what coming up to my room might mean. While I’d love nothing more than to get her on her back and let my tongue between her thighs wash all her worries away, she isn’t there yet. She might not ever be, and after what I did to her, I, unfortunately, have to be okay with that.

“Okay.” She nods, grabbing the door handle, I follow her movement, and we both exit her death trap and head for the lobby. I want to reach out and grab her hand, want to pull her in close, but her words from last night ring through my head as we walk through the lobby. I don’t get to take liberties with her body anymore. We enter the elevator silently, both of us lost in our thoughts and the memories we’ve made together. The hurt we’ve caused each other sits between us like an unwelcome guest.

“I know I’ve said it before, but I think it deserves repeating, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I hurt you, and I’m sorry I broke your trust.” I whisper in the confines of the steel box.

“Are you still using?” She asks, her eyes hold mine in the mirrored steel. She knows the answer, she saw me last night, hell she saw me tonight with the weed. I nod my head, and her eyes fall to the floor in embarrassment.

“Then your apology doesn’t mean anything. You can’t apologize for something and then continue to do it. That’s not how this works, Rhyit, I told you that when I left.”

She sighs, breaking eye contact with me to look at the ceiling. “I know you think you need it, but you don’t.”

“I don’t need it.” I say defensively, while my mind screams yes you fucking do. I’m already thinking about taking a shower, so I can close the door, cut a line on the bathroom counter, and not feel anything for a while.

“Prove it.” She says, her eyes fall back to mine in the mirrored steel. “Actions speak louder than words, Rhyit. Prove it.”

“I will.” I state. “I don’t need it, I like it, but I don’t need it.” Lie. Lie. Lie. The elevator reaches the top floor of the hotel, and the doors open with a resounding ding. We walk the corridor that leads to the suite the label booked for me. I grab the key from my pocket and place it in the lock, the door to the room opens and we both enter. Bristol’s hands twist in front of her as she moves her hair to one side again. She’s nervous. Hell, I’m nervous, I haven’t been this close to her in almost three years.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask as I make my way further into the room. The minibar sits in the corner calling to me.

“Sure, vodka soda would be great if you have it.” She smiles. I’d buy the entire Smirnoff distillery if it meant she’d keep that smile on her face. I take quick steps to the mini bar and grab out two tiny bottles of vodka and club soda. I start making the drinks as her eyes take in the room. I make her drink quickly and move on to mine, whiskey. I grab the glasses off the bar and motion for her to join me on the small sofa against the wall. We both sit down, and she takes her glass out of my hand. Her lips meet the glass, and for the first time in my life, I’m jealous of a piece of glassware. She takes a healthy swig of the drink and sets the glass on the table. I do the same, and we sit in an awkward as fuck silence.

“Can I ask you something?” I lean back against the cushions and look at her after the words have left my mouth.

“Sure.” She says, her bottom lip pulling in meeting her teeth as she picks the skin there.

“Why didn’t you get married?” The question has been burning at the tip of my tongue since I saw the ring on her finger last night. Her face blanches for a moment and then recovers quickly.

“You want the truth?” She sighs, her back meeting the cushions too. She looks up at the ceiling like it holds the answers to the world’s questions.

“Nah, lie to me.” I tease, knocking her shoulder with mine.

“You always did enjoy a good lie.” She quips, shots fired. My mouth opens to rebuke her barb, but she stops me before I can say anything.

“I’m sorry that wasn’t very nice.” She apologizes as she reaches for her drink, taking a hefty swig before placing it back on the table. “The truth, I was almost there. I was half way down the aisle. The dress, the flowers, everything was perfect.” She says, a far off look on her face, like she’s in the middle of a memory. “The DJ we hired got sick apparently. I had no idea, but as I approached what was supposed to be my future, my past slammed into me like a dump truck. The music changed and-“ she stops, her body turns to me. Hurt and embarrassment dance in her eyes. “He thought it would be a good idea to play a song with my name in it.” Realization dawns on me quickly. There’s only one song I know of that has her name in it, and it’s the same one I sing every night to thousands of people.

“No.” I say, shocked that a DJ would be dumb enough to play that song for her on her wedding day.

“Yep,” she nods, “so I panicked, I tried so fucking hard to keep it together but hearing your voice. God, our lyrics, it threw me Andrew. So I ran.” She says, grabbing and downing the rest of her drink. Bristol is a lightweight, always has been, so the two shots in that drink will have her floating here soon.

“And that’s that. No marriage. Poof. No condo in Malibu. Poof. No tours scheduled since Julie is on maternity leave, and I thought I’d be living marital bliss.” She sighs again, her head leaning back against the cushions. “So there I was, then Alex overdosed.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.” I say, placing my hand on her thigh in what should be a comforting gesture. Her eyes fall to my hand on her thigh, but I make no move to remove it.

“Can I ask you something?” She says, her head tilted up to the ceiling.

“Open book.” I say, reveling in the heat emanating from her skin against mine.

“Do you still sing it?” She asks, her eyes hooding as the alcohol takes further hold.

“Sing what?” I scoot a little closer to her, hoping like hell she doesn’t push me away.

“Pistol.” She sighs. “Do you still sing it? I can’t listen to it when it comes on the radio. I always change the station.” She confesses.

“Every show.” I confess. We’re apparently being as truthful as possible tonight, and I need to hold up my end of the bargain.

“Why?” She asks, her head lifting from the cushion to turn to me. Her eyes hold mine, waiting for the answer.

“I don’t know,” I sigh, “hope I guess. I hope that some guy sings it to the woman he loves to finally tell her how he feels.” I lean in a little closer, her eyes widen at my intrusion. “I hope that some woman holds out hope that her forever is still out there.” Closer. “And I hope that one day, you’ll see it in person and see how moving it is for a lot of people.” We’re inches apart at this point, I can feel her short breaths against my lips as I hold her stare.

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“Will you sing it for me?” She whispers against my lips. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I lean in further, tentatively melding my lips with hers. She tastes like vodka and cherries and everything I’ve dreamed of since she walked away. Her hands wrap around my shoulders as she deepens the kiss. Her mouth opens to mine as her tongue duels against mine. This is better than any line I’ve ever snorted and any pill I’ve ever taken, her body close to mine is a drug I’ll always be addicted to. In one motion, she throws her leg over mine, locking my legs under her as our lips devour each other’s. Her knees sit on either side of my hips as she slowly rocks her hips, her center grinds against my thickening cock, the fabric of the suit constricts the blood flow especially with her sitting on the poor guy, but I wouldn’t tell her to stop right now if my life depended on it. A small part of me wonders if I should stop this though, if I should pull back. I don’t need her to hate me in the morning.

“Where’d you go?” She asks against my lips.

“Just thinking.” I reply, pull her lips back into mine.

“About what?” She questions, her fingers fall to the buttons of her black shirt, and she pops each one slowly. When her cleavage comes into view, I lose all train of thought. I doubt I’d be able to tell you my name right now if asked. She pushes the shirt past her shoulders, and her tits sit in front of me. My hands stay plastered on her thighs as she moves to undo the straps of her bra. Woah, stop. Hold the phone. I grab her arms lightly as she tries to wrestle with the clasp.

“I don’t want you to regret this in the morning.” I whisper, more to myself than her. I know I won’t regret it, but I’m leaving tomorrow and she will still be here, alone.

“I’ve heard that before.” She winks, “I didn’t regret it then, and I won’t regret it now.”

“You’ve been drinking, babe. I’d love to sink into that wet pussy right now, but I can’t do that knowing you might hate yourself tomorrow.”

“I’m not drunk.” She coos against my lips. Her hands falling from her bra straps to my belt buckle. She pulls the black leather loosening the clasp. “I might hate myself in the morning, but let me live tonight. Please.”

Her eyes hold mine as her hand sinks into my slacks. Bristol palms my shaft, and I hiss at the contact.

“Jesus, I forgot how big you are.” She laughs lightly to herself as she strokes my length. Her fingers trail along the head, and her eyes widen comically.

“Did you get pierced?” She hisses, leaning back. I laugh as she tries to pop the button on the slacks, “let me see!”

I got pierced about a year after she left, Alex, Boston, and I were on a daring spree in Germany. I had to get a Prince Albert, but poor Boston ended up with a nipple ring with the tattoo of a bull behind it. Shits hilarious.

Once the button of my slacks is undone, she pulls at the zipper, ripping my pants off like a kid on Christmas morning. She tugs down the boxers, and my hard cock springs free. The shiny ball at the tip of my dick has a small bead of precum settling on it, and I watch as her mouth drops open in awe.

“If you’re going to leave your mouth open like that, I’m going to fill it.” I growl, giving my length a slow tug. Her hand joins mine as she scrambles from my lap to her knees in front of me. She leans forward, wetting her lips seductively, and wraps

her lips around the head of my cock. The warmth of her mouth on my tip makes me want to shove forward, filling her mouth fully, but I don't. I hold back, letting her get reacquainted slowly. She twirls her tongue around the tip, her eyes finding mine. Her pupils are blown with need, probably matching my own. She smiles around my length, slowly wetting more of me as she pulls me further into her wet heat.

"Fuck. Just like that, baby." I praise. Her head starts to bob with enthusiasm as my hands find her long blonde hair. I use my hand on the back of her head to keep a steady rhythm, reveling in the feeling of her mouth on me. A familiar rush passes through me as she continues to suck, I'm going to come. I don't want to come down her throat, I decide quickly. I grab the base of my dick and pull myself out of her mouth, but she chases me with her mouth, and I stifle a laugh.

"Get up here." I snap, patting my naked thighs. She stands quickly before straddling me, her fishnets giving me a perfect view of her black thong and wet thighs.

"Are you ready for me?" I ask as I tease the seam of her panties with my index finger. Her hands meet mine as she grabs the fabric of her fishnets, tearing the flimsy material quickly. In one of the hottest moves I've ever seen, she pulls the black thong to the side and impales herself fully to the hilt with my length. Her tightness envelopes me as she sits fully seated on my cock. She gave herself no time to acclimate to the size, and from the look on her face, I'm guessing she wished she would have. Her mouth is open, and I can't tell if it's in rapture or in pain.

"You good?" I ask through gritted teeth, her pussy feels so fucking good I could blow right now.

"Gimme a sec." She replies, panting. Each breath she takes, I feel her entire body quiver, squeezing me tightly, threatening to pull me apart.

"You can have all the secs." I laugh at my pun. Even with my ridiculous joke, I feel



like this is how it was always supposed to be. Bristol's tight body wrapped around me, her skin touching mine sets me on fire.

"Don't make me laugh," she says, swatting my chest. "It hurts."

"You feel so good, baby." I say, starting to move in slow measured strokes. If I move too quickly, this will be over far too soon, and I want to enjoy every single second of being inside her again.

"So..do..you." She pants as her body squeezes me tighter with each movement I make. I lean forward slightly and take her lips. Her hips start to rise and fall on their own accord as she rides me, both of us falling into a perfect rhythm, like we were never apart.

"Andrewwww" she moans my name into my ear, and she clings to my shoulders. The fact that she used my name, my real one, not the stage name millions of people scream every night, means more to me than she will ever know. Her body pulses with the impending orgasm, her stomach muscles tighten and her pussy pulses, milking the orgasm from me. Bristol throws her head back as she falls over the cliff.

"Are you on birth control?" I whisper through clenched teeth. It's easily the most unsexy thing to ask when you're about to come, but I need to know if she's okay with me blowing inside her or if I need to make other arrangements.

"Yes." She moans, and I don't know if she's answering my question or she's enjoying herself too much to care what I said. Fuck it. I grab her ass with both hands and pull her against my cock with brutal force. Her body slams against mine several times before I feel my balls draw up tight against my body.

"I'm gonna come, baby." I growl.

“Come. Yes. Fill me up.” She shouts, each word punctuated with another thrust, and her dirty words are the straw that breaks the camel’s back. I pull her hips down one more time as my dick jerks, releasing string after string inside her.

“Oh my god.” I moan as the orgasm rolls through me. I cannot remember the last time sex felt this good. Bristol lays her forehead against my shoulder as we both catch our breath. I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her tight as her body slowly sags into mine, and we come down from our high.

“I forgot.” She says after an extended period of time, I don’t know how long we’ve been sitting like this, but I felt myself start to doze off.

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“You forgot what?” I ask, pulling my half soft dick from its confines.

“I forgot what it was like to be with you.” She says, her eyes glossing over slightly. “I forgot how good it was, and for a moment, I forgot how much it hurts to walk away from you too.”

Her body leaves mine in the next second as she pushes off of me. My chest tightens because, for a moment, I forgot she’d have to leave. She walks to the bathroom and shuts the door behind her. Not even casting me a glance. God dammit. I knew this would happen, I knew as soon as I got too close again, she’d push me away, building her tower walls higher than they were before. I lean my head back against the cushions and curse to whoever’s listening for letting me get this close to my harbor and then shutting out the lights to my lighthouse.

### Chapter 15 Bristol

The water pelts against my back as I stand under the steady stream. I can’t believe I let myself get close to the sun again. And again, it burned me. You know the old saying fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me... is it still shame on me, if it’s the hundredth time? When does it become shame on them? I sigh as I lean my head back, letting the water cascade down my back. I need to get out of here, I need to run and never look back. Andrew isn’t mine, and Rhyit is everyone else’s, which he’s proved that time and time again. I squirt a small amount of shampoo into my hands and lather my hair up. As I’m washing away the last remnants of Andrew from my body, the door bursts open. A groan slips past my lips at my own stupidity. I knew I should have set that damn lock. I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me. Rockstars are so damn dramatic, it’s in their DNA.

The glass shower door opens, and I close my eyes, attempting to block out his presence. He enters the shower, and I'm aware of his closeness before I even open my eyes. He grabs the tiny bar of soap off of the shower shelf and starts lathering himself up. He sighs loudly, and I snap my eyes to him. His eyes find mine, and there is fire dancing below his green irises.

"Is this how we're going to play it?" He asks as his hands run along his tatted skin, the pistol in the petals glares at me from his chest. The shading makes it look like the gun was just dropped into a sea of rose petals, it's my favorite tattoo of his. It's also the only one on his body that I drew.

"Is it?" His voice draws me out of my inspection.

"I'm not going to play anything." I snap, grabbing the conditioner from the tiny shelf aggressively. His palm finds my throat as he pushes my body back against the shower wall. His large stature has my head tilting upwards to meet his eyes.

"You know what this weekend has taught me?" He asks rhetorically. "That life is so fucking short, and if you want something, you need to take it. You wanna run, I can see it in your eyes. Run, baby, I'll find you. We're far from over, Bristol." His thumb rubs at my pulse point in my neck as I try to comprehend what he's saying.

"You don't get to tell me that. It's been years, Andrew, and now, now you want to tell me we're not over. I won't do it again, I can't. I can't survive that again. You only think you want this because I'm right in front of you." I spit through gritted teeth. "But what happens when I'm not? Hmm?" I ask, pushing my neck harder against his hand. "Your dick in every groupie in sight and making a fucking fool out of me." My face is now inches from his, and the pressure on my neck is making my eyes water from the lack of oxygen. "I won't, I just put myself back together. I won't allow you to break me again. I turned a blind eye for too fucking long because I loved you. You hear that? Loved. As in past fucking tense." I lean back against the wall,

gulping oxygen. Rage burns against my skin, the need to cut and run grows by the second.

“I never cheated on you.” He snarks. “Not once. Did I fuck up? Absolutely. But I wasn’t with anyone else until you were already gone.”

“That’s bullshit. I saw you, I saw you on our last tour with girl after girl while we were together.” My eyes narrow. “Don’t lie to me, Rhyit. Fuck, the press saw you.”

“Did they?” He looks away from me, his face contemplative as he thinks. “Or did they see me, another girl and... Alex?” He bites, his eyes snapping back to mine. He holds my eyes as I try to remember all the pictures, all the women in the green rooms, everywhere. Alex was always next to him, a girl near him, but he was so standoffish towards women that they didn’t maul him the way they did Andrew.

“Alex couldn’t talk to girls. Other than you. He was painfully shy, if you don’t remember.” He rolls his eyes. “I made a pact with my best friend to help him.” He steps back from me. “I think you should probably go.” He states, stepping out of the shower.

“Rhy-“ I start, not sure what I should even say at this point. “I didn’t know-“

“Save it.” He snaps as he slams the glass door shut behind him.

## Chapter 16 Rhyit

The phone next to my bed wakes me up from a fitful sleep. After Bristol left without a word, I tried like hell to fall asleep, but I ended up staring at the ceiling for hours replaying the memories of Alex and I. Alex was shit at talking to girls, he was so damn shy it was almost comical. Once, in the beginning, we were on stage and a girl threw a pair of panties at him, and he was so discombobulated, he missed his next

chord. Bristol was the only woman he talked to outside of the random groupie he could work up the liquid or powder courage to seduce. On our last tour with Bristol, I made a pact with him to help him. He wanted the happiness, the companionship I had with Bristol. He always had a little crush on Bristol since we were kids. He drank more than the rest of us, always had a shot near his mouth and a bottle nearby, but it was only because he couldn't cope with even a female reporter interviewing him. I don't fault him for it. I had no idea Bristol thought I was cheating on her the whole time though. I thought she trusted me, knew I'd never hurt her intentionally.

The phone rings again, and I roll over, grabbing the receiver with a low sigh.

"Hello." I croak, my voice laced with exhaustion.

"Rhyit," Garrett huffs exasperatedly, "Jesus, I've called four times, I was getting ready to come up to your room to make sure you were still there. I need you to come down to the lobby. Right. Now."

"Why? I don't want to have breakfast with you." I whine. I don't; I want to lay in this bed as long as I can before I have to pour myself into a plane and fly home.

"Larkin is here." He whispers into the receiver, like Larkin is standing right behind him.

Steve Larkin is the head of Paperweight Records and a giant pain in my ass. He's slimy, and smarmy, and makes Mickey Cohen look like a carebear.

"Five minutes." I spit at Garrett and slam the receiver down. The last thing I want to do today is talk to Steve. He's probably got some half-cocked scheme to capitalize on Alex's passing. Probably wants to do a tribute show in Seattle. Fuck that. I'm never going back there.

I grab a pair of jeans from the suitcase on the floor and a clean black t-shirt. I brush my teeth quickly and throw my boots on before heading to the elevator.

Slicked-back black hair and a tailored suit greet me when I reach the lobby. Steve smiles at me as I take the last few steps to meet him, but it's not a normal smile, and it makes me uneasy. His teeth are too white, and it looks like there's too many of them, like a great white shark. Cue the Jaws music here.

"Andrew, so good to see you." He says, holding out his hand for me to shake. I grasp his palm in mine and plaster on a smile. This asshole holds the keys to my castle until the record deal is up in two years.

"Steve, I didn't think you'd make it up here." I say, gesturing to the hotel bar.

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“I didn’t want to come here, I hate this fucking place.” He spits. Ah, always such a charmer this one. We enter the bar together, and I shoot Garrett an ‘I’m going to murder you’ look. He cringes sheepishly and follows Steve to the open table in the back. Once we’ve sat down, a waitress comes over to take our orders. I order coffee because whiskey sounds like a terrible idea.

“Listen, I’m going to cut straight to it, kid, Alex’s death has skyrocketed album sales. We’re sold out in most cities.” He says excitedly. He says “we” like he put his blood, sweat, and tears into the albums, and the way he’s talking about Alex’s death like it’s a promo pitch pisses me right the fuck off. “And we need to get you back out on tour as soon as possible. The summer tour has sold out completely in over twenty cities. And that little stunt with Bristol at the funeral, fucking genius. The fans are eating it up.” He continues. Stunt? What stunt?

“What stunt?” I ask. “Do you mean us mourning the loss of our friend? Because that wasn’t a publicity stunt, you arrogant prick.”

“The press got pictures of the three of you yesterday, and the fans are losing their minds. We need Bristol to come out on tour with you and Boston.” He waves me off.

“We have a drummer, what the fuck is she going to play? The tambourine?” I seethe. My fists clench against my thighs under the table.

“We’ve given Denny the summer off.” He replies matter of factly.

“That’s not your decision to make.” I slam my fist against the table, causing the glasses to clink and my coffee cup to spill over onto the saucer.



“Actually it is.” He smiles maliciously. “You need to find a replacement guitar player.” His caustic words hit me in the face like a sucker punch, and I recoil at the burn his words hold. His words are like fire, pouring a bottle of vodka over an open wound. No one can replace Alex.

“Fuck that. I play guitar. I can play and sing. We’re not replacing Alex. We replaced Bristol and that was...okay, but I’m not going to have anyone play in Alex’s spot.”

“Fine, I’ll give you that concession.” He waves his hand again, sighing.

“I don’t think Bristol is going to want to come out on tour with us. She has her own band to think about, they should be headed out soon, too.” I say leaning forward.

“They aren’t even scheduled in the studio until this winter. The lead singer had a baby or something. I’ve already spoken to her manager, and she’s free.” Steve says.

“Are you going to ask her?” I ask, leaning back in the leather chair. “Because she’s going to say hell no to me.”

“If I must, but I hoped you would be able to persuade her. The world wants the reunion, this tour is going to be lucrative for the label as well as you.”

“Money won’t bring my friend back,” I sigh, “I don’t want to capitalize off our loss. Donate my share to the Betty Ford Rehab center, okay?”

“That’s fucking brilliant.” He yells, his palm slapping the table. “We can donate a chunk of the proceeds to the rehab center. The press is going to eat that up.”

“Dammit, there’s more to life than money.” I snap, my teeth grip together with force at the audacity of this asshole.

“Spoken by someone who has no problem spending the money I send.” He smiles.

“Do you mean the money I made? The millions that cushion your bank account made off of our lyrics?” I growl, my anger reaching nuclear levels.

“Let’s not split hairs here, kid. It’s a mutually beneficial deal.” He laughs, waving the waitress over for another round of drinks.

“Let’s get Bristol on board and get the fuck out of this shit hole town.” Steve announces, lighting a cigarette.

## Chapter 17 Rhyit Past

Sweat rolls down my back as we exit the stage of the Watering Hole after one of the best shows we’ve ever played. We hoot and holler as we make our way back to the green room, also known as the back room of the bar. Bristol, Alex, Boston, and I take another shot in congratulations of a show well done. Alex compliments Bristol on her face-melting drum solo. She was absolutely incredible, I’ve never been more proud. We chat for a bit as the endorphins of the show wear off, and the buzz of the alcohol runs free.

“Andrew, some guy wants to see you.” The waitress says as she walks by, surely on her way out to deliver more drinks.

“Who is it?” I yell back from my spot on the couch next to Bristol.

“I don’t know, never seen him before.” She yells back from the hallway. I look to Bristol, her face pulls into a megawatt grin. I look around the room, and everyone is grinning back at me.

“Fucking go!” Alex yells from the other side of the couch. I hop up from the couch,

the alcohol hitting as soon as I'm at full stance. I lean forward, grabbing Bristol's face with both hands and press my lips against hers. Her lips feel soft against mine, the whiskey she's been drinking mixed with the cherry of her lipgloss is intoxicating. The boys hoot and whistle as we break apart, a dazed look dons her face as I move to stand.

"Wish us luck!" I yell as I head to the door. I walk the long corridor leading to the bar with excitement pulsing just below my skin. This could be it. This could be the next step.

A man with slicked-back black hair, a polo and slacks stands at the end of the hallway. He turns as he hears me approaching, my black combat boots aren't exactly subtle in the rickety old hallway.

"Steve Larkin." He says as I approach. He extends his hand to me, and I grasp his palm and give it a shake. "Head of Paperweight Records."

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“Andrew Denson.” I introduce myself, the conversation I just had with Bristol playing in my head. Maybe I should go by Rhyit. “Nice to meet you.” I say with a smile. Paperweight Records is a massive label.

“You too, some show you put on there.” He motions his cigarette and drink towards the stage.

“Thanks.” I reply.

“I’m only in town until Monday, wife and kids and what not. Then I’m headed back to LA. I’d like to invite you guys to come play in LA next week, what do you say?”

“I-uh...” I can’t speak, I feel like I’m dreaming. Snap out of it. “We’d love to.”

“Good, good. Here’s my card, call me when you get to town, and we will set up a meeting with my partners.” He hands me a simple white card with his name and phone number on it and the label’s logo in the corner.

I smile, my face splits as the smile over takes it.

“I will, let’s shoot for Wednesday?” I ask.

“Wednesday works, talk to you soon, kid.” He says as he walks back to a woman in the corner I assume to be his wife. I stare down at the card in awe; I knew tonight felt special, but this is unbelievable.

I walk back down the hallway in a daze. I can’t believe we’re going to LA next week

to play for the same label that signed the bands I have posters of on my walls. I stop at the doorway of the back room and watch as my bandmates talk animatedly about the show. Bristol laughs at Boston's interpretation of her drumming, his hands moving imaginary sticks at record speed. She's the first to notice me in the doorway, her laugh dying out as soon as she sees me.

"Well?" She asks excitedly. I take a deep breath, pretending like it didn't go well. All eyes fall to me as I step into the room.

"So," I start, "what have you guys got planned for next week? Because whatever it is, cancel it, we're going to LA!"

In the next instant, all three of the people I hold closest to my heart are surrounding me, jumping up and down like we just won a Grammy.

"Are you shitting me?" Alex says, pulling his blonde hair out of his eyes. "You're serious?" He's not looking at me though, he's looking at Bristol. His eyes linger there for too long, the longing there pisses me off.

"Dead serious." I snap, holding up Steve's card between my middle and index finger. The motion brings Alex's eyes back to mine. He looks away sheepishly—caught you, asshole.

"Holy shit!" Boston exclaims, grabbing the card out of my hand. He inspects it like it might not be real, "when do we have to be there?"

"Wednesday." I say, still shooting daggers at Alex.

"Well, let's celebrate tonight and get packed up tomorrow!" Bristol says, pulling away from the group to grab the bottle of vodka off the table. Shots are poured for all of us, and we cheers to the next steps in this dream.

Hours later, we're well and truly drunk. Alex is passed out on the couch, snoring heavily. Boston left with Eve, Bristol and I are sitting on the balcony, letting the wet summer air coat our skin.

"Can I ask you something?" She hiccups, her eyes glassy from the booze.

"Uh huh." I nod, looking out towards the ocean.

"How come you never pull the trigger with me?" Her head cocks to the side.

"What do you mean?" I reply, turning my head away from the ocean.

"Well-" she starts, a blush creeping up her cheeks, "like we'll fool around and stuff, but you never take it any further than that. Do you not want to-?" She asks, her palms moving from the railing to cover her face, embarrassment radiates off of her, and it has to be the cutest thing I ever seen. Her question makes me pause though, do I want to have sex with Bristol? Absolutely.

"Oh, I want to." I reply too quickly. I grab her palm from her face so she can see how serious I am. "I don't want to do anything you don't want to do. I don't want you to think you have to."

"Have you ever?" She asks, and now it's my turn to be embarrassed. I shake my head in response, telling her I've never had sex at almost nineteen seems a little pathetic, but I know she hasn't either. We've been so busy between practice and performances it's not like I had a lot of time to woo another woman into my bed.

"Me neither." She says, turning her head back to the ocean in front of us. I clear my throat after a few seconds.

"Do you uh-" I start, my voice cracking. I clear my throat, trying again, "want to,

with me?” My stupid dick wakes up at the thought of sinking in to her wet heat. I’ve felt her mouth around me a few times, but the idea of her pussy wrapped around my length is enough to drool over.

“Yes.” She whispers, her shoulder leaning into mine. “Right now.” She whispers again, my eyes widen at her words.

“Are you sure?” I ask as my dick throbs in my jeans. “You’ve had a lot to drink, I don’t want you to wake up and regret this.” I sure as fuck know I won’t.

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“Positive.” She replies before standing up and offering me her hand. I don’t know where we’re going, but I’ll follow her wherever she leads me.

We pass Alex on the couch, his sleeping form reminding me of his lingering looks from earlier.

“Is there something going on between you and Alex?” I ask as we start up the stairs that lead to the roof. I need to know, I need to make sure this isn’t going to cause a rift in our friendship. Alex and mine. Bristol and mine. And Alex and Bristol.

“No.” She turns slightly as her long blonde hair, cascading down her back, is pushed to the side. “He’s a great friend, but I don’t see him the way I see you.” I let out a staggered breath at her words. Relief pours out of me, I couldn’t imagine what a love triangle would do to the dynamics of our band. I follow her up the metal staircase, her short skirt lifting slightly with every step, showing me little bits of her ass cheek. When we reach the top, she pushes open the door, and the cool air hits us both. This is easily one of the best nights of my life, and it’s only getting better.

I follow Bristol to the sun-bleached lounge in the middle of the empty rooftop. She takes a seat and folds her hands in her lap nervously. I take a seat next to her and wrap my arms around her shoulders, pulling her into me.

“Don’t be nervous, baby.” I say, lifting her chin with my other hand. Her eyes hold mine as a slow smile pulls her lips. I lean forward and kiss her like I’ve wanted to all night, since I saw her half-naked this morning, and since she told me she wants this as much as I do. “I won’t hurt you.” I whisper against her lips.



“I know.” She replies against my lips as she pulls at her top. “I just want this to be good for you.”

I laugh lightly as she struggles with the black fringe. “Don’t worry about me, babe, I have no doubt that it will be good.” I grab the sides of her top to help her out of it. As soon as the fabric gives, I’m blessed with the image I haven’t gotten out of my head since this morning. Her breasts are perfect in front of me, rising and falling with each breath she takes. Rosy pink nipples pebble from the chill outside and her arousal. I tentatively skate my fingers up the side of her ribs and rest my palm against her breast. Bristol and I have fooled around before, this isn’t the first time I’ve seen her without her top, but it feels different, this time we are going to take things a step further.

Her fingertips graze my thigh as she leans forward to lock her lips with mine. I feel her tongue against my lips and need no further request for invitation. I meet her tongue with mine, tasting the vodka and cherries she always seems to taste like. I continue to explore her torso with my hand as her fingers trail up my thigh, stopping just short of the one area I want her to touch most.

I use my body weight to pull us back against the lounge we’re sitting on, the position allowing me more opportunities to explore her body. I trail my fingertips along the button of her corduroy skirt.

“Do you want me to take it off?” She asks, breaking the kiss.

“If you want to.” I reply, praying to Jesus and all of his disciples she says yes.

“Okay,” she says, her hand leaving my thigh to unbutton and shimmy the skirt down her legs. Once the skirt is off, she lays back down in nothing but her thin black panties.

“Are you going to take your clothes off?” She asks as my eyes wander her gorgeous body. I’m still fully clothed and haven’t even lost my shirt. I grab the back of my shirt and pull it over my head, the breeze from the ocean cooling my overheated skin. I stand and pop the button of my jeans, pushing them down around my ankles before kicking them and my shoes off completely. I take my spot next to Bristol, her skin soft against my rough. I trail my fingers along her arms and goosebumps develop.

“So...” she asks, a smile gracing her face. “What’s your plan here?” she whispers.

“I have no idea.” I confess with a laugh. I don’t know how to start this, but I feel like getting closer to her is the first step. With one swoop, I pull her body closer to mine, and she laughs lightly at the contact of her chest against mine. She uses her fingertips to graze my arms and my sides before stopping at my hips bones. I watch her intently as she takes a shaky breath and pushes her hand beneath my boxers. I follow her lead, not wanting to push her any further than she’s willing to go tonight. When her palm meets my shaft, I hiss at the contact. I try to hold it in but the feeling of her hand on my already leaking cock has me biting my bottom lip.

“You can touch me if you want.” she whispers as her palm moves slowly up and down my shaft. I take the invitation and push my hand inside her soaking panties, she whimpers when my fingers graze her clit. I continue the movements slowly, teasing her clit until it’s swollen beneath my fingertip. Moving lower, I dip a single finger into her channel, her juices coating my entire hand. Bristol’s hips buck against my hand as I continue moving my finger in and out, her hand on my cock has me ready to blow all over my boxers. Jesus Christ, her pussy feels amazing on my finger, the thought of what it’s going to feel like wrapped around my cock has me counting back from ten slowly.

“Are you ready?” I ask her lowly, my voice destroyed with need.

“Yes.” she moans, her body bowing as she rides my fingers. “Do you have a

condom?” she pants.

Condom. Fuck. Yes, I do. It’s in my wallet, which is in my pants, which are on the ground, a long way away from me at this second. “One second.” I say, pulling my hand away from her pussy. My hand is covered in her wetness, and I feel a compelling need to taste her. Sitting up, I grab my pants, the wallet falling out into my palm, and I grab the condom I’ve kept in there since my dad gave it to me a year ago. Looking down at Bristol, I’ve never seen anything more beautiful. Her hair is splayed against the lounge, her skin is flushed from her arousal. Leaning forward, I pull her panties down her hips, her scent driving me crazy as her panties slip off her feet. I hold her panties up to my nose and inhale deeply. Jesus, no wonder men lose their damn minds over women. I toss her panties on top of my jeans and lean forward, my face hovering inches above the apex of her thighs.

“Can I taste you?” I croak, the need nearly breaking me.

“Yes.” she replies, the words barely leaving her mouth as I bury my face against her folds. The tangy sweetness coats my tongue as I worship her body. I have no idea what I’m doing so I concentrate on her clit, slowly sucking it in and out while I twirl my tongue against the tender flesh. Her hands find my hair as she pulls my face further against her pussy. I continue to work her clit in rhythm, and her hands tighten in my hair as she starts to move her hips against my face. I can’t breathe, but fuck it, if this is how I go, this is how I go. Her thighs wrap tightly around my ears as her body starts to quake. Using my free hand, I slip a single finger inside her, her walls grip my finger like a vice grip as she moans my name.

“Ohhh..” Bristol moans into the night air. Her body slowly comes down from her high, her eyes are squeezed tight, and I want nothing more than to see her right now.

“Open your eyes.” I request against her still spasming pussy. “I wanna see you, baby.”

At my request, her eyes fly open and meet mine, they're glassy and far off from her orgasm or the alcohol, I don't know, but the fact that I was able to put that look on her face makes me want to punch the sky. I can feel my heartbeat in my dick right now, though, and the poor guy is so close to coming I don't know that I'll even make it inside of Bristol before I blow. Fuck it. Leaning back on my knees, I pull my boxers down and rip open the side of the condom with my teeth. I roll the latex down my shaft, hoping I don't break it. I inspect my handiwork, and when it doesn't look like it's torn anywhere, I shift my eyes back to Bristol. She's sitting up on her elbows watching me, waiting for me. A light sweat coats her skin, the reflection off of the street lights makes it look like she's glowing. Tossing her hair over one shoulder, she beckons me forward with her index finger, and I let out a staggered breath as I try to concentrate on anything but coming right now. Bristol lets her knees fall open, giving me a perfect view of her still dripping folds. I move on top of her, slowly, careful not to press all my weight against her. With one hand, I guide my cock to her entrance, and I watch her expression as I trail the tip against her clit before pushing slowly into her channel. Her warmth engulfs my tip, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to push all the way home and set up camp there.

"Holy fuck, Andrew." she pants, "It's not going to fit."

"It'll fit." I say with a smile. "Relax, baby." I take a deep breath and watch her follow, then I push myself in a little bit further, and she winces again.

"You good?" I ask, before going any further.

"Yeah," she nods, nibbling her bottom lip. Her eyes meet mine as I push all the way in, and her eyes widen in shock as her body envelopes mine. Holy shit, this is heaven. I'm torn between wanting to pull back and wanting to stay right where I'm at. Her body tightens below me, and I know that it had to hurt. She pulls her bottom lips between her teeth and her eyes hold mine. I still, hoping like hell she doesn't want to stop because I am so close to coming that I think even pulling out at this point would

make me come.

“Move.” she yelps through her teeth. “It’s too much, move. I can feel you in my lungs.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

I start to move my hips in slow measured strokes like I've seen in porn, and with every pump of my hips, I bring myself closer and closer to losing it. Her walls ripple around me, and I know, in this moment, my fist is never going to cut it again. I feel a zap of electricity run down my spine, and my balls start to draw up tight against my body. My eyes flutter closed as wave after wave of euphoria washes through me.

"Fuck." I moan, and as my eyes open, my hips meet Bristol's as I empty myself into the condom. I hold her eyes as the last of my orgasm washes through me.

"Are you okay?" I pant, using both hands on either side of her head to brace myself from collapsing on top of her.

"Yeah." says breathlessly, her hands coming to rest upon my shoulders. She pulls my face towards hers, her lips meeting mine halfway. Her tongue dances against mine slowly, this isn't a friendly kiss, this is a forever kind of kiss. Both of us realizing quickly that this will be a memory we hold onto for the rest of our lives.

### Chapter 18 Bristol PRESENT

The table in front of me is filled with every magazine and newspaper article I could find from the year we were on tour. Every single photo of Rhyit with other women has Alex in the background.

"Son of a bitch." I yell into the empty space. It's Sunday, my family has gone to my aunts for the day, and I've finished an entire bottle of wine to myself before noon. Rhyit was right, none of the women in the photos are close to him, they're close to Alex, but the camera angles and the headlines make it look like he's stepping out on

me. Plight Frontman Cheating? Mystery Woman Spotted with Rhyit Denson. Where's Pistol, Rhyit? I push all the magazines off the table, tired of seeing his stupid handsome face staring at me.

I throw myself back against the couch and stare at the TV with no sound on. I hate that I assumed he would do that to me, and I hate that he never told me he was helping Alex. The pieces of the puzzle slide into place as I remember the conversations we had about other women, the fights, him telling me not to believe everything I read. I was so frazzled by the outpouring of "evidence" that I couldn't comprehend what he was saying or why he was lying. Our other issue on top of the "cheating" pushed me past the point of no return.

The doorbell rings as I wallow in my own stupidity and mistrust...and hurt. I almost don't answer it, I don't want to see anyone right now. I wait for as long as possible, praying they'll walk away, but the second ding-dong of the doorbell proves the person on the other side is going to be incessant. I groan as I pull myself out of the couch. My blonde hair is wrapped in a nest on top of my head, the half-shower I took last night causing my normally wavy hair to take on a life of its own, a la Medusa.

I say a silent prayer when my hand hits the doorknob that it's Girl Scouts, and I can drain my bank account on thin mints. I'm sorely mistaken when I open the door. Two sets of black hair meet me, one belonging to the guy I rode last night, and the other belonging to the man who's ridden my ass for years.

"Gentleman," I snarl, opening the door, "I've already found our lord and savior, I don't need any insurance, and I'm completely up to date on long distance calling, so unless you're hoarding thin mints, please leave."

Larkin's head falls back as he laughs out loud. "I forgot how much of a firecracker you are. It's good to see you, Bristol." He says, extending his palm for me to shake. I don't want to shake his hand, but it would be rude as shit to leave him hanging, so I

succumb and place my palm in his. My eyes fall to Andrew after our palms have disconnected.

“Andrew.” I say, nodding my head in greeting like I didn’t ride his dick like it was my own personal sex toy just hours ago.

“Bristol.” He nods back, his eyes hold mine, and the current there feels like a live electricity wire. Why is it always like that with him? Dammit.

“What can I help you guys with?” I ask, my hand braced against the door frame. Andrew’s gaze falls from my eyes to the T-shirt and sweatpants I’m wearing. Yes, I’m wearing a Plight tour T-shirt. Yes, his dumb face is sitting over my tits. Dammit again.

“Can we come in?” Steve asks, his slimy eyes falling down my body too. Gross.

“I guess.” I say, pushing the door further open to allow them passage. I don’t want them here, I don’t want them in my space, I have another bottle of wine to drink and more magazines with Andrew’s face to siphon through. Oh my god, the magazines, the articles, they’re all over the floor in the living room. Fuck me. It looks like 1981 threw up everything Plight related. And I’m wearing this stupid fucking shirt. I look like a fan girl.

“Let’s use the dining room.” I say, panicked, steering them towards the table off of the kitchen. The living room is still in sight, but it doesn’t look directly at the Rhyit shrine that is currently sitting on my floor. The boys take a seat at the table, their backs towards the pile. Thank god for small victories. I clear my throat as their eyes wander around the room. I want to snap my fingers before they turn around. Panic rises up my body, and I can feel my neck start to sweat.

“What can I do for you?” I ask, attempting to push my hair to one side and failing



miserably. The hair wraps around my fingers, creating a large knot. When my hand doesn't move from the nest, I panic and yank, pulling the hair directly from the scalp. Strands coat my fingers, and I wipe them off on my sweats with a grimace.

"Are you okay?" Andrew asks, his eyes widening at me. I assume he's stunned at the fact that I just ripped a chunk of hair out of my head.

"Yup. Perfectly fine." As long as you don't turn around. "What's up?"

Larkin's eyes bounce from me to Andrew and then back to me. "We'd like you to go out on tour with The Plight this summer." My jaw drops, and I immediately want to say no. Every bone and cell in my body is screaming at me to say no.

"Why?" Is the only answer that leaves my mouth. My eyes dart to Andrew, but he's looking down at the table, his eyes never meeting mine as I wait for the reasoning behind this invitation.

"The pictures from the funeral are all over the press. Our album sales have skyrocketed, and the world wants the Plight back together." Larkin replies, his voice sounds far away as I wait for Andrew to look up, to hold my eyes and tell me he wants this too. After a few moments, the reasoning hits me like a ton of bricks.

"You want to capitalize off of Alex's death?" I ask, my eyes narrowing as I pull my attention away from Andrew back to Larkin.

"Losing Alex is a tragedy, the fans want to mourn with you, all of you." He replies, his used car salesman tactics don't work on me.

"And the label wants to make a fortune off of the mourning fans?" I add, letting him know I know his scheme.

“It will be lucrative, yes.” He nods, his hand leaving his lap to scratch his chin.

“You do realize how wrong that is, right?” I ask, my eyes ping pong between the two men.

“How is it wrong?” Larkin asks, “It’s a reunion of sorts.” His eyes hold mine, the blackness there reminding me this man is a snake and will do shady things to make a buck.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

“No.” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t think I can do that to the fans.”

“I think you should.” Steve says, leaning forward. “I’ve already spoken to your band manager, and you aren’t recording until this winter. You’re free until then, correct?”

“Yes, but—” I start, but Larkin clears his throat.

“Careful, it would be a shame if Petals and Poison didn’t get the studio time they had planned.” Larkin replies, a smile pulling at his lips on his stupid smug face.

“Are you threatening me?” I seethe, my teeth lock together as rage bubbles below my skin.

“Not a threat, my dear, just useful information.” He shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “I’m letting you know that it would be an awful shame if your band wasn’t able to record until later next year. That would put your record out to release in....August? I can’t imagine that Julie and the other girls would take too kindly to that.”

Julie, Maggie, and Blake’s faces come to mind at the mention of them. They would be severely disappointed if the studio time was cut. We’ve waited almost a year to get back in the studio, pushing it out further could make us irrelevant, and the thought pushes my anger to nuclear levels. I don’t want to go on tour with Andrew, I had big plans for the summer. I was going to work on my tan and spend time with Eve. This motherfucker is pushing me over a barrel, and it makes me want to punch his smug face.

“Fine.” I yell, slapping my hand on the table. “But I want premium studio time, you

shiesty prick. I want the best of the best come December. I'm going to need that in writing before I get on that damn bus too." Steam pours out of me, my voice carrying through the length of the house.

"That's fair," Larkin smiles as he holds out his hand for me to shake, and I look to Andrew who has been silent for this entire exchange. "Also, no new guitar player. If I'm coming, Alex's spot is empty. I don't care if we sound like shit, nobody deserves to step into that spot." I narrow my eyes at Larkin.

"Jesus, yes. You both are like a broken record over the guitar player, my god. Andrew has volunteered to play guitar and sing." Steve rolls his eyes and wiggles his outstretched hand reminding me that I still hold negotiating power. There's one more thing I want, one more ask.

"And I want Pistol removed from the set list." I snake my eyes over to Andrew just in time to see his eyes widen. He sits back in the chair, letting out a defeated breath. He knows why, there's no reason to mention it right now. Even though this shady asshole holds half the responsibility.

"Bristol-" Steve starts, but I cut him off.

"It's those three things or I won't come. I had big plans this summer and you're impeding on them, I'm doing you a favor remember?"

"Fine." Steve huffs, his palm meeting mine. "You know everyone loves that song."

"I do." I say, keeping my lips sealed on the subject.

"Whatever." He says, heading for the front door. He turns toward us as his palm meets the knob. "Bus leaves Wednesday night after the show. Don't be late." And with those parting words, he leaves. I look back at Andrew and want to yell at Steve

that he forgot to take his dog, but I don't. Instead, I take my seat at the table and wait for an explanation.

"Soo..." I start, attempting to gauge his mood, "do you want to talk about last night?"

"Do you?" He snaps, his eyes cutting to me, his tone biting as his eyes hold fire.

"Kind of." I say lowly. "I had no idea you were helping Alex. You could have told me."

"He asked me not to. He didn't want you to know for whatever reason, and I kept that promise to him. I thought you trusted me, knew I wouldn't do that to you, to us." He spits, rolling his lips between his teeth.

"I did trust you." I say defensively. "I trusted you until you couldn't tell me why the pictures kept showing up. I trusted you with so much, and then you broke it. You—" I stop myself, my chin wobbling as the heartbreak rolls through me. His betrayal still sears me. "You didn't break my heart, Rhyit, you broke my fucking soul. It was a solid month before I even left my apartment. I've never had that kind of pain, ever."

"I know I fucked up, I know I hurt you. You know now that I didn't cheat on you, so that has to be worth something. There isn't a goddamn thing I can do about it other than apologize. Which I've done a thousand times." Andrew yells, his voice booming through the dining room. Remorse flashes across his face.

"You can do something," I yell. "you can take—" I start again, but he cuts me off.

"It's already out there! What do you expect me to do?" His voice rises again. "I'm tired of having this fight with you."

"Me too." I sigh. Leaning back in my seat, the fragments of our love story sit between

us like a ripped book. Torn to shreds, no amount of tape or glue can put the pieces back together.

We sit in silence for a long time, both lost in the memories that sit between us.

“Nice shirt.” He finally says, breaking the silence, a smirk playing on his handsome face. I pull the shirt away from my body, pretending to inspect the shirt that I’m wearing. I know which one it is, I wear it constantly. Rhyt’s face sits forefront with Alex, Boston, and I behind him.

“Yeah. Look how good my hair looks.” I quip with a small smile.

“Your hair looks phenomenal, but look at my eyes. They aren’t that green, are they?” He asks, staring at his face on my chest.

“They’re prettier in person.” I whisper more to myself than him. He laughs lightly, and the sound sends a tingle down my spine.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“Do tell, Tol, just how long have you been obsessed with me?” He smiles playfully, and I can’t help the smile that forms on my face.

“Don’t flatter yourself, I’m not obsessed with you. It’s a cool shirt. You should really check your ego, rockstar!” Why the fuck am I flirting? I need to shut that shit down quickly, but when he throws his head back laughing, I feel a small piece of my heart click back into place.

“You’re terrible for my ego, always cutting me back down to size.” He throws me a flirty wink, and my insides liquify.

The phone rings on the wall in the kitchen, and for a second, I make no move to answer it. I like this little bubble we’re sitting in; I’m afraid that if I move I’ll pop it, and we’ll go back to the animosity. With the second ring of the phone sounding throughout the house, Andrew sits back, his face going from playful and flirty to serious; just like that, the moment has passed.

“I’ll be right back.” I say, pushing out the chair, then I walk to the phone and lift the receiver.

“Hello.” I answer, hoping it’s someone looking for my parents or Eve so I can tell them they’re not here and get back to Andrew.

“Hey Bristol.” John’s voice plays through the phone and sheer horror rips through me. Not here, not now. Andrew is literally in the other room, waiting for me to come back.

“Hi John, how are you?” I ask, my voice cracking slightly.

“I’m okay. Sorry I missed your calls, I wasn’t ready to talk yet,” he says. John, sweet John, loving John, his level of compassion is unrivaled. And I broke his heart.

“That’s okay, I understand. I just wanted to tell you how-“ I start.

“Please don’t say you’re sorry.” He spits, anger lacing his tone. “I already heard you’re headed out on tour with Rhyit and Boston.” He takes a long breath, a low chuckle leaving his mouth. “I really thought you’d change after we got married, quit that stupid band and be a wife, but I guess you’ll always be his whore. Good luck, Bristol, you’re going to need it.” I knew John would be angry; I embarrassed him in front of everyone.

“I know you’re hurt, but there’s no reason-“

“Hurt?” He says just as Andrew enters the kitchen, his low slung jeans and black T-shirt doing nothing to help this issue. Why does he always look like that? So effortlessly sexy. His pouty lips are down turned when he sees my face.

“I’m not hurt, I’m humiliated. How dare you do this to me? I hope you rot you stupid-“ the phone is ripped out of my hand before I hear the rest of his slew of insults. Andrew holds the phone to his ear, his eyes holding mine as John yells through the receiver. I had no idea he had this side of him, he was always sweet and caring to me but hearing him say he hoped I would quit playing to be a housewife tipped me over the anger scale.

“John is it?” Andrew says into the phone.

“Who the fuck is this?” I hear John say from the other end of the receiver.



“Rhyit, listen bud, you are never, and I mean fucking ever going to speak to Bristol the way you just did, you got me?” He replies through gritted teeth. “You spineless prick, you’re lucky I don’t call Larkin right now and tell him to fire you.”

“Larkin wouldn’t fire me on your authority.” He laughs, humorlessly. “You think you have that much pull, but you don’t.”

“Fuck around and find out.” Andrew sneers before placing the phone back on the wall. I can hear John talking before the resounding click of the receiver hitch.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I say meekly. “He’s just upset I ran away.”

“Don’t make excuses for him. The way he talked to you is inexcusable.” He replies, leaning back against the kitchen sink. “He’s a coward.” His eyes meet mine as I chew on my bottom lip. Embarrassment washes through me at the entire situation.

“Thanks.” I say, fisting my shirt in front of me. “When do you need to leave?” I ask, wondering how much time I have to endure his presence before I can freak out on my own. I don’t want to go on tour. I don’t want to play without Alex.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.” He replies, grabbing an apple out of the fruit basket on the counter. “You are welcome to come with Boston and me in the jet,” he says around the large chunk of apple in his mouth.

“I really don’t want to go.” I sigh. “I don’t want to play without Alex.”

“Me neither.” Andrew murmurs with a shake of his head. “I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like without him with us.”

“I don’t even like thinking about it.” I confess, my fingers finding my hair again. “I need to shower, you can stay or go, it’s your choice.” I say as I start towards the

bathroom. Andrew's hand reaches around my bicep and stops me lightly.

"Hey Tol?" Andrew's face screws up. "I've gotta know, you said some shit to Alex at the gravesite, what was that about?" I inhale sharply, hoping he doesn't notice the panic racing through me.

"Nothing. I was apologizing for not being there for him." I lie. The lie slips out so easily, it doesn't even feel foreign against my lips. Andrew narrows his eyes skeptically but doesn't call me out on it.

"Okay." He says, dropping his hand from my arm, and I miss the contact as soon as his warmth is gone. Dammit, what's wrong with me? My head wants to hate him, my heart still has a massive hole in it, but my vagina would like to welcome him back in with a cup of tea and a back massage.

I undress quickly, the steam from the shower fogging up the mirror in front of me. Andrew isn't the only one who fucked up, and it's making it difficult to look at myself every single day. The warm water pelts against my skin as I enter the shower, and I stand under the steady stream letting the events of the past hour play out in my head. The tour, the studio time threat, John's irate phone call, and Andrew's question. I shouldn't have said what I did to Alex, but I needed to get it out, I needed to not feel the grief and guilt that's been building in me since I saw the news. The relief I felt after apologizing was indescribable, cathartic almost.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

The door to the bathroom swings open, and I curse myself for not locking the damn door, again. Heavy footsteps stop just before the shower curtain, and I take a deep breath waiting to see his face. He pulls the shower curtain back slowly, his eyes are the first thing I see before the rest of his face comes fully into view.

“Why’d you pull the song?” He asks, his voice gravelly sending a shot straight to my downstairs.

“You know why.” I huff. “I can’t play it night after night.” Irritation pulls at me, he knows why, he just wants to rattle me at this point.

“But you love that song.” His eyebrows draw together like he doesn’t understand.

“Loved.” I reply. “I loved a lot of things I don’t anymore.”

“You think so?” He asks, his voice dropping an octave, and I feel my nipples pebble. Son of a bitch.

“I know so.” I reply with spite lacing my tone. His eyes hold mine as I wash my traitorous body. Heat is rising from my chest with every movement, and I squeeze my thighs together as the water runs down my body. Andrew licks his lips as the mist from the running water hits his face.

“Get out.” He commands, his voice rough

“I’m not done yet.” I smile back, teasing him as I rub the loofah between my breasts and lower stomach.

“Either you get out or I’m getting in. Your choice.” He growls.

I think on it for a moment, I have a better chance of not getting fucked six ways from Sunday if I’m not already naked. As much as I’d like to ride his face like a rodeo cowgirl, I know that it will only complicate things.

“We really shouldn’t.” I say, turning to the faucet to let the water wash the soap from my body.

“That’s not an answer,” he growls again.

“Last night was a one off, two grieving people coming together to feel less alone.” I say to the shower wall what I know I couldn’t say to his face.

“Don’t do that. Don’t cheapen it by making it sound like we were just lonely.” He says, hurt pouring off every word..

“It’s better this way,” I say, spinning around. “with the tour coming up and everything else, we don’t need to get involved.” His eyes flash with anger.

“Better for who? You? Because it sure as fuck isn’t better for me.” He snaps, his hand pulling the shower curtain open, and he steps into the shower fully clothed, the water drenching his face immediately. His dark hair falls into his face as he holds my eyes. “You think I don’t see the way you look at me, the way you’ve always looked at me. Baby, we’re end game, you just can’t see it yet. We’re meant to be, we just did it wrong the first time.” He says softly, his voice holding so much emotion it hurts to look at him. I turn slightly, hiding my trembling chin as I take a shaky breath.

“There’s too much behind us to start over. The hurt will always hang over us like a tornado, ready to destroy everything we build.” I whisper, my heart aching in my chest as I say the words. I turn back to him slowly, his green eyes meet mine, hurt

and sadness swimming between the connection. I've wanted this man since I was 16 years old, loved him for over a decade, ran away from my own wedding because of a song, and here I am turning him down. What the fuck am I doing? "I'm not saying never, I'm saying not right now. I need some time, Andrew."

He takes a step back, nodding his head. "I've got time. We're going to be together everyday for the next three months, I'll show you I'm different now than I was back then."

"Andrew," I say, taking a step forward, "you need to slow down with the drugs too. I know you're using, you say you have time, but if you keep this up, you won't have time." I reach forward and take his cheek in my palm. At the contact, his face leans into my touch, "I can't lose you too." I whisper.

"You won't, I haven't used at all today." He says, his eyes closing.

"But you want to." I reply, it's a statement, not a question. He's been fidgety since he walked in the door, and his mood swings are giving me whiplash.

His head falls further into my touch as what I assume to be embarrassment washes over him. He nods slightly, and my heart clicks again, another piece of the destroyed puzzle falling back into place.

"Thank you for being honest with me." I say, lifting his head to look at me. His eyes open slowly as he nods his head. I realize the water has turned cold and drop my hand from his face to turn off the water.

I grab the towel hanging on the rod and wrap the fabric around myself, the cover helping me feel less vulnerable. I hand Andrew the other towel hanging on the rack, and he wipes his face.

“You got anymore band tees I can borrow?” He asks with a smile and a tilt of his head. His long black hair is drenched, and his clothes are making a puddle on the floor of the bathroom.

“I’m sure we could find one that’ll fit you.” I laugh as we exit the bathroom. We walk through the house, dripping wet towards my bedroom. Andrew stops before we make it to the door, his eyes trained on the giant mess sitting on the living room floor. Fuckkkk...I forgot about the articles. I say nothing as he stares at the pile of pictures of his face. His head turns from the pile to me, a smirk resting on his lips.

“It was research.” I blurt out before he can say anything.

“Uh huh.” He says, leaning back on the balls of his feet. “I had no idea you were such a fan, I can sign something for you if you’d like.” He winks, holding his hands over his heart theatrically. I roll my eyes at his quip.

“I don’t need you to sign anything,” I snap, embarrassment flooding my cheeks.

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He takes a few steps forward towards the pile before leaning down and grabbing a magazine with him, Alex, and some girl on the cover. Alex is smiling at Andrew, and the girl has her hand resting on Alex's shoulder.

"I remember this night." He says as he flips open the tabloid, turning to the page holding more pictures. "You were already inside the club with Boston and Garrett, Alex spotted this girl," he points to the woman in question, "backstage and had me invite her to come with us." He smiles down at the image, but the smile is sad. He rubs his thumb over a picture of the two of them together.

"I miss him." He sighs sadly, his grief palpable. I pull the towel tighter around my chest, not sure what to do, how to comfort him.

"Me too." I croak, my voice hoarse.

"How was he? The last night you saw him." I ask softly. Alex's bright blue eyes flash in front of me, the lazy smile he gave me, and the sadness I felt walking away from him. A deep exhale pulls me from the memory as Andrew hangs his head as he lets go of the magazine.

"I don't remember." He whispers, emotion clogging his throat. "I remember seeing him backstage after the concert, and then the rest of the night is a blur." I hold my breath waiting for him to elaborate, to tell me what he does remember.

"We were backstage, the show had just ended, we were taking shots, celebrating, you know?" He side eyes me, meaning they were drinking and doing blow. "The girl I was with... are you sure you want to hear this?" He asks, pulling his bottom lip

between his teeth. Do I? No. Should I? No. Am I going to anyway? Yup. Is it going to hurt even though he's not mine? Like a stab wound.

I nod, rolling my bottom lip between my index and thumb.

“Okay. The girl I was with wanted to fool around so we went down the hall to the other greenroom, leaving Boston and Alex to their own devices. Alex was pissed I was getting pulled away, but I didn't really care at that moment.” He lets out a long exhale, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “That's the last time I saw him that I remember. I have no idea what he did after, if we were all back at the hotel together or if he went somewhere else. I'm a shit fucking friend.”

“You didn't know.” I cry. “You didn't know that was going to be the last time you saw him. You didn't know the last time you spoke to him would be the last words he would say to you.” I sob lightly, tears burning my eyelids, my throat burns from the emotion creeping up. I don't know if I'm crying for Andrew or for me, but I let the tears fall from my lashes.

“But that's the way you're supposed to live, that's the way you're supposed to treat people, like it might be the last time you see them.” His shoulders quake as a sob rips through his chest, so powerful I can feel it across the room. “I was so selfish, Tol, so fucking selfish, and now he's gone, and I don't get to tell him.”

“He knew. He knew you loved him.” I state, my feet carrying me forward, taking quick steps to reach him. I kneel down next to him, placing my arm around his shoulder and pull him into me. His head hits my shoulder as another sob breaks free from his chest. He wraps his arms around me, and we sit on the carpet of my living room surrounded by memories and miscommunications.

My fingers trails his spine as the last of the sobs subside. His arms are wrapped around me so tight, it feels like he's gripping a life preserver, like if he lets go he will



drown in his own grief and guilt. He has no reason to feel guilt, he had no idea that Alex would overdose that night. He had no idea that he wouldn't see him the next morning. It's weird to think that life will move on but won't be the same. Our lives will have a new normal, a different outlook on the people around us and how quickly they can leave. You never get over the death of someone close to you, but you learn to live with it because that's all you can do. Andrew lifts his head from my shoulder, his eyes are bloodshot and his cheeks tear stained, and in all the times I've ever seen him, he's never looked so beautifully broken.

"I'm going to kiss you." He rasps, his voice broken from the sobs. "I need to feel your lips against mine."

Without another word, and before he can, I grab his face with both hands and place my lips against his. The saltiness of our tears mixing together is the only thing I taste as his mouth opens to mine. A kiss that started out innocent quickly becomes ravenous, a mixture of tongues and teeth and lips moving in synchronicity. The towel that was holding the remains of my modesty falls from my chest as I wrap my arms around his neck, trying to pull him closer to me. I pull this body with mine onto the floor, the carpet scratches against my bare skin as my back hits the ground. His mouth leaves mine, finding the tender flesh of my neck, his breath skating against my ear before his teeth sink into my earlobe.

"Please." I beg as his hands move across my rib cage.

"Please what? What do you want me to do?" He whispers against the shell of my ear.

"Make me come." I say, as wetness pools in my center. I can feel my juices coating my inner thighs.

"Mouth, fingers or cock?" He whispers again as his hand moves lower, tracing the dip of my hips. The roughness of the pads of his fingers from his guitar drives me

wild.

“Mouth.” I moan, bucking my hips slightly, trying to get his attention to the right spot.

“I hoped you would say that. I’ve been dying to taste you.” Andrew says, scooting his body down mine, leaving hot open mouth kisses in his pursuit. My center throbs, my heartbeat thrumming against my clit, and I want to squeeze my legs together to relieve the pressure there, but his large body sits between my open knees. He leans back on his heels, his eyes appraise me appreciatively. He smiles down at me, his white teeth on full display. I feel vulnerable and praised under his gaze, the combination of the two making my skin heat.

“You’re beautiful.” He says, his voice low. I can see his erection bulging against the zipper of his still wet jeans. I smile at his compliment, the ‘thank you’ I should say clogged in my throat. His body lowers to the carpet as he throws one of my thighs over his shoulder, opening me up further to him. His mouth hovers over my pelvis, and his eyes lock with mine as he inhales deeply through his nose.

“You smell fucking delicious.” He growls before dropping his mouth to my aching center. At the first contact of his tongue against my clit, I jump, it’s been so damn long since anyone has had their mouth anywhere near my sex.

“Sorry,” I say embarrassed, “it’s been a while.” I look away from his face between my parted thighs.

“He didn’t-“ Andrew asks, his warm breath blanketing my wet floods, but he stops before the rest of the question leaves his mouth. Probably not wanting the answer. I shake my head no.

“Selfish prick,” he mutters under his breath, “you deserve to be worshiped. I would

eat this gorgeous pussy for every meal of the goddamn day if you were mine.” Using two fingers he spreads my folds, the air hits my clit causing goosebumps to scatter across my heated skin. His mouth drops to the nub, and he sucks and swirls his tongue against the flesh. I feel like I have a fever, the hot and cold shivers hitting me over and over again as my orgasm shifts from a whisper to a scream in my head. I can feel the wave starting to crest, my hands finding my heavy breasts. My nipples harden further at my touch as I massage the tight buds.

“Oooohhh shit.” I moan into the empty space, my back bows as I try to push myself further against his mouth. His tongue leaves my clit, and I could scream in frustration, but just as I’m about to tell him to get back to work, I’m blessed with two fingers plunging deep inside my channel. His fingers scrape against my walls deliciously as his tongue finds my clit again. My lower stomach pulls as my muscles lock, and I fall over the edge into bliss. Wave after wave hits me, my eyes fluttering closed as a low moan leaves me. It’s been too long, I’ve missed the way he pulls an orgasm from me like no one else has ever been able to.

When the aftershocks subside, Andrew pulls away from between my legs, his chin glistening with the after effects of my orgasm, and I almost combust when he puts both of his fingers into his mouth, licking them clean. Jesus, why is that so hot? Like he can’t get enough of me, he has to lick his fingers to make sure he doesn’t miss a drop. Pushing myself up on my elbows, I watch in awe as he finishes cleaning his fingers. Andrew’s eyes hold mine as his hands fall to the top button of his jeans, and once the zipper is down, he pulls his dick out of the confines of his boxers like zookeepers pull snakes from cages. My mind wanders back to me on my knees in front of him last night, his length in my mouth, hitting the back of my throat repeatedly. My mouth waters at the memory longing to taste him again.

“You want my cock?” He questions, giving himself a slow tug. The engorged tip leaks pre-cum onto my stomach. I watch mesmerized as he pinches the tip and smears the liquid across my lower stomach. I bite my lower lip, squelching the moan that

wants to break free.

“I need words, baby.” He growls as his eyes study my face. I know for a fact this is a terrible idea, that it will only complicate things between us further, but right now, I need to feel him, I need the connection. Don’t overthink it, I tell myself, nodding slightly. He cocks an eyebrow at me, a reminder that head movements will not suffice.

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“Yes.” I whisper as he runs the tip against my folds.

“Good girl.” He smiles, and my heart flutters in my chest at his praise. Andrew nudges his tip into me and inhales deeply at the contact. He pushes forward more, the slight burn of being stretched reminds me of last night. He’s going easy on me, savoring the moment, but I don’t want soft Andrew right now, I need ruthless Rhyit. I can’t deal with slow, soft lovemaking, it’s too much, too intimate. I reach up with both hands and pull his hips into mine effectively impaling myself against his length. I yelp at the pain of being stretched, and his eyes flutter as a low moan leaves his throat.

“I’m not fragile.” I say through my teeth. “Don’t fuck me like I’m breakable, fuck me like you mean it, Rhyit.”

At the mention of his stage name, something snaps. His jaw locks, and the veins in his neck protrude as anger replaces the softness. He pulls his hips away from mine, almost pulling completely out of me before he slams forward with brutal force.

“You want it dirty, baby?” He spits, all traces of sweet Andrew gone from his voice. Yes, I need this. I need him to treat me like I’m any other girl. It will make this so much easier to handle.

“Yes,” I yelp as he slams into me again, his piercing scrapes against my hot button deep inside me causing my muscles to tighten. “Yes!” I yell again. He pulls out of me, giving my asscheek a hard smack.

“On your knees, chest to the floor” he commands, his voice leaving no room for

question. I flip over quickly, the carpet burns against my knees from the motion. My chest hits the floor, my face stuck against the carpet. My ass is on full display from this position, and I can't even look to see what he's planning to do with my cheek pressed against the shag.

"You want me to sing to you, baby?" He asks, taking a full handful of my ass. "You wanted to fuck a rockstar, don't you want the whole experience?"

"Do your worst." I taunt him, my voice muffled. I don't know why I'm taunting him, the man can slay me with a look, his voice pushes me to an entirely different level.

"A quiet place, a million stars, I'm so happy you can't see my scars. You think you know, you think you're right, but baby, you have no idea who I am in the heat of the night." He sings, the melody is one I remember, but the lyrics don't match. In the next second, he thrusts into me, filling me completely to the hilt. I gasp at the fullness I feel from this position. He grips my hips, pulling me further against him.

"I don't want to know if it's over, I don't want to have to be sober. You think it'll be better this way, I know there's not a goddamn thing I can do to make you stay." His voice sends a shiver down my spine as he pulls my hips into him. My ass hits his pelvis with such force that I'm surprised he's still standing up right.

"Yes", I chant as his thrusts take on a brutal pace. I'm on the cusp of falling over the edge as my face smashes further into the carpet. My body tightens around him and a low hiss leaves his mouth as his fingers dig into my hips. The mixture of pain and pleasure is a heady combination and my toes curl...I'm so close I can feel my heartbeat in my lower stomach as the start of an orgasm rips through me. My body clenches, wound tight like a top, and then...nothing. Warm liquid hits my lower back, and I want to scream from the lost orgasm. I push myself up on my hands, and when I turn my head, I find Rhyit with his head tilted back, eyes closed, cock in hand as more cum hits my back. I narrow my eyes at him, pissed off he stopped knowing full

well that I was so fucking close. His eyes open slowly, finding mine instantly, a slow smile spreads across his face, and the need to punch him grows stronger.

“You asshole!” I yell, grabbing the towel I used for my shower to clean the evidence of his release from my back. “You knew, you knew I was almost there and pulled out anyway.” I run the towel across my back, getting more frustrated with how much there is.

“You wanted to fuck a rockstar, that’s what you got. I’m the selfish one, remember? I take what I want, when I want, and I wanted to come, so I did.” He replies angrily while he zips himself back up into his jeans and moves to stand.

“So just wham bam thank you ma’am.” I spit, my blood pumping from the lost orgasm and anger.

“I wasn’t planning on a thank you, but if you insist.” He smiles cockily, towering above me.

“You son of a-“ I start, but car doors slamming stop my sentence. I grab the towel from the floor and push him into my bedroom with me before my parents find me naked in a sea of Rhyit pictures. They’ll commit me, for sure. I don’t have time for a grippy sock vacation, although some peace and quiet doesn’t sound terrible right now.

Once we’re in my bedroom, I kick the door closed with one foot and move to the chest of drawers on the other side of the room.

“Jesus, this place hasn’t changed a bit.” Andrew says, spinning in the middle of the room.

“Well yeah, I haven’t lived here since I was 18.” I reply with my back to him,

searching for something to wear. I grab another pair of sweatpants out of the drawer and push my legs through the elastic holes just as the front door clicks closed. That was close.

## Chapter 19 Rhyit

The plane taxis back from the stairs at Portland International Airport. I stare out the window as rain pelts the glass. Bristol and Boston sit on the leather couch on the other side of the plane, laughing hysterically about something Bristol said. I wish I got the funny side of her, the goofy carefree girl I used to know. Now, I get cold and detached Bristol. I never know if she wants to fuck me or stab me, and as much of a turn on it is to fight her and fuck her, I miss laughing with her too.

After I left her house yesterday, I had the driver take me to my mom's. I wanted to see my sisters but neither of them were there, so I settled for an awkward as hell conversation with my mom about the tour and the weather. She and I weren't always disconnected like this, but after I left for my first tour, she left my dad for some other guy in town who got her pregnant with my sisters and skipped town. Don't get me wrong, I love my sisters, but if she'd have stayed with my dad, I think they both could have saved each other a lot of heartache. I try not to hold animosity towards either of them, but it's hard to see them both miserable now when they were so happy together. I guess that's life though, one choice or one mistake can change the entire trajectory of your life.

Leaning back in my seat, I turn my head to find Bristol again, and the moment our eyes meet, she looks away. I'm tired of the push and pull between us, tired of the almost, the maybes. I know she has no problem giving me her body, yesterday's afternoon delight is a testament to that, but I don't just want her body, I want her heart again. I want to go back to the way we were before I fucked everything up, the way she looked at me like I held her heart in my palm. I guess I did hold her heart in my palm, unfortunately I squeezed too tight, put too much weight on the love she had



for me and let her feelings for me slip through my fingers like sand.

“Hey Rhy, Pistol’s gonna stay at our place tonight, cool?” Boston shouts like he isn’t six feet away from me. I nod my head in agreement, our house in Malibu is huge, and she could probably live there for weeks and I would never see her. Tomorrow night, we get on a bus, and we’ll be gone for three months touring the country. I’m conflicted about getting up on stage again, a part of me is excited to perform, to feel the energy from the crowd. Another part of me is terrified to get on stage without Alex. I’ve never been up there without him, never not listened to his corny cheers before a show, and never not had him beside me to bounce my energy off of. Grief is like a raindrop in a sinkhole, you can see the water adding up, but you have no idea how deep it goes. The plane ascends into the air quickly, and it’s a heavy reminder that we left someone behind.

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I hate LA. I’ve hated LA since we landed here after we met Larkin. The people are rude, the traffic is terrible, and the level of fakeness within these city limits is bar none. Bristol sits beside me in the back of the limo, her blonde hair is massive and looks stiff from the ears up. The cherry red leather skirt she’s wearing hikes up against her thighs, and the cropped Jack Daniels T-shirt shows the bottom of her red bra, with black platform combat boots and a fuck you scowl, she looks like a rock and roll wet dream. When she stepped out of the car to get onto the plane, every guy there, from the flight crew to Boston and I, almost came in our pants. I have to physically stop myself from squeezing her exposed thigh right now.

“God, I hate LA.” She sighs, leaning back against the seat. Her thoughts mirroring mine makes me smile.

“Same,” I nod, “I couldn’t imagine living here full time.”

“Where are we playing tomorrow night?” She asks, changing the subject. Boston and I lock eyes across the car, she’s going to shit when she hears this. He smiles mischievously, and I almost laugh.

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“Whisky a Go-Go.” I reply, holding my smile. She leans forward in her seat abruptly, a megawatt smile forming on her lips.

“Get the fuck out of here.” She yells, excitement beaming off of her, “are you serious?”

“Yupp.” I nod. Whisky a Go-Go is on the Sunset Strip, it’s a shithole place, but all the best bands play there when they’re in town. It’s been the plan all along to start our tour there, Alex’s idea from months ago.

“I’ve never played there.” Bristol says, bouncing in her seat. Her excitement is contagious, and we all smile giddily. “Have you guys?”

“A couple times.” Boston says, shrugging nonchalantly, like it’s no big deal that we can book a place like that on a whim. It’s amazing how far we’ve come, I’m so damn proud.

“Holy hell, I’m so excited.” She squeals. I have another surprise for her, but she will have to wait until tomorrow to find out what that is.

After an hour in traffic, the car finally pulls into the driveway of our home. Bristol moves to grab her suitcase from the trunk but I’m quicker. I grip the handle and lug the massive case.

“What did you pack in here? You didn’t have to pack all those articles, ya know? You’ve got the real thing right here.” I shoot her a wink, and she rolls her eyes. I take a step forward into her space, she wants to retreat but doesn’t. “If you need some

midnight material, just let me know, babe. I'm all yours." I whisper in her ear as we turn to make our way to the house. Boston stops just short of the door, his massive frame blocking our entrance. He smiles widely, he's excited to have Pistol back with us. I thought he was going to lose it when I told him yesterday after I left my mom's.

"What articles?" he asks, his blue eyes bouncing from me to Bristol. I open my mouth to tell him we've got a fan girl situation, but Bristol shoots me an 'I will murder you and make it look like an accident' look so I suffice with a smirk.

"I did some research, Rhyit here walked in half way through." She says, hooking a thumb in my direction.

"By research, she means going through-" a soft hand lands against my mouth, muffling my voice. I smile underneath her hand as her eyes narrow. Sticking my tongue out, I lick her palm, the chemical taste of her perfume or lotion coats my tongue, but the look on her face is well worth the nasty taste.

"Did you just lick me?" She asks, her face turned up in disgust. She removes her hand from my mouth and wipes the spit on my T-shirt.

"I did." I smile, "you liked it when I did it yesterday."

"Shut the hell up." She hisses, looking over her shoulder at Boston. He's laughing lightly, a knowing smile playing on his lips. Boston's been with us since the beginning, he knows how we are together.

"Boston doesn't care, babe." I tell her as we enter the house.

"I do." She whispers. I don't know why she cares, it's not like Boston wouldn't know when we're sneaking off after shows. Wait, I hope we're sneaking off after shows, soaking up every minute of each other that we can. I follow her into the house, her

blonde hair sways across her back as she looks around the expansive space. I try to drink in the room through her eyes, the foyer opens up to a massive living room with an open kitchen on one side. Floor to ceiling windows adorn the entire side of the house with a view of the beach below.

“Where am I sleeping?” She asks, turning to Boston and I.

“With me if I have anything to do with it.” I murmur, my voice barely audible.

“You’re so fucked.” Boston whispers, laughing lightly.

“You can sleep in the spare bedroom.” I say, the room is directly across from mine, it’s also storage for all of our extra instruments but that shouldn’t be an issue. We stand there awkwardly, no one making a move towards the room.

“Anyone wanna show me? Maybe draw me a map?” Bristol asks, a cheeky smile on her face.

“I’ll show ya,” Boston says, his eyes lighting up in a dare. He’s pushing me on purpose.

“I’ll show her,” I growl. He lifts both hands in surrender, waiving an imaginary white flag.

“Put the alpha in your pocket and just show me where to put my stuff.” Bristol says, rolling her eyes at our theatrics. I motion for her to follow me, shooting a glare to Boston who tilts his head back with a laugh.Fucker.

Bristol climbs the stairs in front of me, I purposely let her go first so that I could get a front row seat to her ass cheeks in that skirt. The leather makes a swishing sound with every step she takes, and I wonder to myself briefly if she’s wearing underwear.

“Yes, I’m wearing underwear. No you can’t see them.” She announces. It’s scary that she can read my thoughts.

“How do you know I was thinking about your panties? Maybe I was thinking up new song lyrics? Maybe I was thinking about the weather?” I question, my tone laced in thinly veiled sarcasm.

“I can feel your eyes on my ass. So unless you plan on writing a song about my ass, you were wondering about my panties.” She replies as we reach the top of the stairs. She turns slightly, a smirk on her pretty face. “Please don’t write a song about my ass.” She laughs.

“It’s a great ass, people should write songs about it.” I nod, smiling. She knocks my shoulder with hers, her eyes rolling again.

We start down the hallway towards the bedrooms, mine is the master at the end of the hall with Alex’s and Boston’s staggered throughout.

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“Second one to the left.” I say, pointing down the hallway. In true Bristol fashion, she goes right and like a slow motion car accident she grabs the knob and opens the door before I can stop the impending crash. She pushes herself inside before a word can leave my lips. Like stop. Don’t go in there. Her hand trembles as it rises to cover her mouth as she stands in the middle of Alex’s catastrophe of a room. Clothes and empty water cups litter the floor, a guitar and amp sit in the corner, and his nightstand holds lotion with Kleenex, and as I take a step into the room, his scent surrounds me. The stale scent of no disturbance lingers heavy in the air. I purse my lips and try to hold my breath, not wanting to breathe in any more memories than necessary.

“I said left, Magellan.” I sigh, leaning my head back towards the ceiling.

“Who do I look like, Lewis and Clark? You could have just shown me the room like a normal host.” She spits, her arms flying out in exasperation.

“This isn’t my fault.” I seethe. “Let’s go.” I grab her arm and tug her out of the room. She fights me for a moment, but I can stay in here another second.

We walk across the hall to her room for the night, and I throw her suitcase on the bed. Anger rips through me, I didn’t want to go in there. I planned on leaving it just the way it was before he left for tour, but now that Bristol’s been in there, it feels like I have to do something about it. I’m not ready. I can go through his things, I can’t throw pieces of him away. Overwhelmed is the only word I can describe for how I’m feeling right now. A soft hand grips my shoulder lightly, pulling me out of the self deprivation tunnel I was walking through.

“I’m sorry.” She says, spinning me slightly so I’m facing her, her blue eyes hold

mine, and I know she means it. “I didn’t know.” She whispers.

“I know,” I nod, “I wasn’t ready to go in there yet.” I swallow hard, emotion rising up.

“When you are, I’ll help you.” She smiles lightly. I nod, not trusting my voice. I clear my throat and look around the room. Instruments line the walls and there’s barely room for the bed.

“Move whatever you need to.” I motion to the shit everywhere. “Get settled, and we can order a pizza, yeah?” I ask.

“Okay.” She says, a slight blush creeping up her cheeks.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

## Chapter 20 Bristol

The wooden sticks in my hands feel like coming home. I haven’t played since the other night in the garage, but I haven’t performed in months. I hit the sticks against my bare thighs, tapping out the beat to Riot Act. We’re only playing two songs tonight so I didn’t have to practice, they’re both songs I know like the back of my hand.

The back room of Whisky a Go-Go is one of the most infamous rooms in LA. Legends have walked these halls, the amount of drugs and sex that this room has seen is unfathomable. The couch in the middle of the room should have a biohazard sticker on it, and I wouldn’t sit on it if you paid me. The boys stand on the other side of the room, talking to some guy in a top hat and wild long hair. They laugh boisterously at something he said, and I can’t help but watch Rhyit and how happy he looks. His dark hair is down and hangs in front of his face slightly. He’s wearing a leather jacket



with no shirt underneath, ripped black jeans, and combat boots. His washboard abs and tattoos on full display for the audience, and the black eyeliner smudged around his eyes makes the green pop against his skin. He looks fucking delicious, and I know I need to tamp down the hormones if I'm going to survive this tour. I hate that I'm sucked back into his orbit, hate that I need his warmth. His betrayal sits at the surface of my skin, but that's it. It's not bone deep anymore, it doesn't hurt the way that it did years ago. Maybe I just don't care about it anymore, I think to myself, but then I remember that I do care. His apologies and a few orgasms aren't going to erase the hurt that I felt. That I still feel.

"Hey." A deep voice says from beside me, pulling me from my thoughts. I swivel the stool I'm sitting in slightly and look up. The most gorgeous pair of blue eyes I've ever seen meet me, and I take a second to appreciate how good looking he is. Blonde hair, blue eyes, a defined jaw and a Romanesque nose, he looks like a Viking god. Like he should be captaining ships in the sea not backstage at a rock show.

"Hi", I squeak, my words coming out quickly.

"You're Pistol Graham, right?" He asks, his voice is deep and reminds me of smoke and leather.

"Yup." I reply with a nod, holding my hand out to him to shake. His face breaks out in a huge smile as his palm meets mine. "Nice to meet you," I say.

"Babe, the pleasure is all mine. I'm a huge fan." The way he says pleasure sends a shot straight to my lady bits, and a blush creeps up from my chest.

"Aww, thank you." I say, his praise making my skin heat, "and you are?" I need his name.

"Alder. I'm the drummer for these assholes." He says motioning with his head to the

top hat guy and the bandana dude in the corner.

“Cool. I’m the drummer for these assholes for the next few months.” I smile. “You guys play here before?” I ask. Am I flirting? I think I’m flirting.

“Nah.” He says, shaking his head. “I cannot believe I got to meet you, though. Holy shit, you’re a legend, you know that right?.” His eyes hold mine, and I smile harder, a light laugh leaving me.

“It was really nice to meet you too.” I reply. “I wouldn’t classify myself as a legend. I appreciate the ego boost though.” I laugh harder. I can feel eyes on me, and when I turn my head away from Alder, I find Rhyit staring holes into the side of my head. Is he jealous? Oh fuck, he’s jealous. A green cloud might as well be sitting over his head with the look he’s giving me. Alder must notice I’m not looking at him anymore, and his eyes follow mine to Rhyit.

“Oh shit, I don’t want to get you in trouble with your man.” He says, sheepishly. He says that, but he doesn’t mean it. I’ve heard that line more times than I can count.

“He’s not mine.” I say, holding Rhyit’s eyes. He cocks his head to the side like he heard me. I shoot him a sweet smile and focus my attention back to the Viking in front of me.

“Really?” He asks, shock marring his face. “I saw the photos and the video from the funeral, I figured you guys were back together.” I shake my head. The photos of us have been circulating for days, Rhyit’s hand in mine, my head on his shoulder as we hold each other together.

“I’m only here because the label wanted a reunion tour, a united front I guess.” I shrug.

“He’s jealous.” He states. There’s no question behind it, he can see the jealousy written across his face just as easily as I can.

“Yup.” I reply, popping the p, pushing myself off the stool. My platform black combats only bring me to Alders chest—he’s massive. My foot gets caught on the inside steel bar of the stool, and I start to fall forward as I attempt to free my foot. In a split second, Alder wraps his arms around me, keeping me from hitting the ground.

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“Careful, babe.” He says as he holds me against his chest, his breath brushing the top of my head. He smells amazing, like cedar wood and something else. Finally I free my foot from the confines of the stool, and I can hold myself upright. Alder lets me go once I’m standing by myself, his hand sits lightly on my shoulder making sure I’m steady. “Let’s do that again in slow motion.” He laughs, and the adrenaline from almost falling races through me. I laugh with him and take a step back from his space.

“Thank you, that would have been really embarrassing.” I look down at myself, making sure my outfit is okay. The leather pants I’m wearing have a slight scuff at the bottom but other than that, they’re no worse for wear. The fringe black top lifted a little bit from the fall, so I pull it down quickly.

“I don’t think anyone saw.” He says, looking over my head to make sure no one is looking, but he cringes his straight white teeth against his bottom lip. “Except your boy.”

“He’s not my boy.” I say turning around to find Rhyit. His eyes are zeroed in on where Alder’s hand still sits on shoulder. There might as well be steam rolling out of his ears with the anger radiating off of him. Interesting.

“Do you want a drink?” Alder asks, pulling me from my standoff with Rhyit.

“I’d love one. Vodka soda with lime, please.” I reply with a smile. Alder turns to the bar next to us and starts making the drinks. I watch as he adds the ice, the vodka then the soda, and then he grabs the lime wedge and twists it so the juices sit at the top of the drink. He drops the lime in the drink and slides it to me.

“Thanks,” I smile, taking a small drink. He smiles back, and all I can think about is how many hearts this boy is going to break. He’s good looking, sweet, and...not for me. I sigh at the thought and take a hefty drink. I apparently have an affinity for damaged musicians, with cocky smirks and a drug problem. As if on cue, a plate full of white powder appears on the table next to the bar. Top hat and bandana notice it first and motion to Rhyit and Boston. I watch from my spot next to the bar as all four men make their way to the table.

Boston pulls a hundred dollar bill from his wallet, rolling it up tightly to make a tube. He hands the tube to Rhyit like they’ve done this a million times, and they probably have. They used to partake occasionally back in the day, but after I left, that’s when the real party started.

Rhyit takes the tube from Boston and hesitates before he lowers his head. He looks over at me, and he searches my face for...approval? I shrug my shoulders, I’m not his mother or his girlfriend. Boston asked me to talk to him about his using, but Boston is no better, the hypocrisy of the whole situation pisses me off more than the actual drugs.

“Do whatever you would normally do when you’re on tour.” I say with pursed lips. Rhyit narrows his eyes at me across the bar, the rolled up bill moving in between his fingers anxious.

“Is this a trick?” He asks. “Like you saying you’re fine and then not speaking to me for three fucking years.”

“Nope. We’re band mates, nothing more nothing less.” I spit, and even I know I’m fucking lying. We will always be more. His eyes narrow further, my comment pissing him off no doubt. He nods as his jaw locks, and he turns back to the boys as top hat guy cuts a line with the razor blade, the silver device cuts through the white powder like a shovel through the snow. Once the line is ready, Rhyit looks to me one more

time, but I'm not looking at him, I'm inspecting my drink like it holds the answers to the universe. I watch out of the corner of my eye as he places the bill against his nostril and covers the other. He looks at me with his face against the plate with a devilish smile, knowing I'm watching him even if I'm not staring at him. He inhales the powder through the bill quickly and pulls his head back from the plate. His index finger runs along the plate where the line just was, and he rubs the excess against his gums.

Boston takes the bill from Rhyit and repeats the process, although he doesn't look to me for permission. The boys stand back as the other two guys cut their lines. Another blonde guy, I assume from the same band, walks up to the plate and does his line as well. Alder stands next to me as the plate is passed to him.

"You wanna bump, Pistol?" Alder asks as he takes the bill from the blonde guy. I know I shouldn't, I don't like cocaine, never have, but if I did it with Alder, Rhyit would lose his fucking mind. I smile at the thought but shake my head anyway.

"No, thanks," I answer him, "but by all means." I motion to the plate. Alder isn't someone I would scold for drug use, I don't know the guy outside of the last half hour. It's no dirt off my boots if he wants to partake.

"10 minutes!" A guy with a clipboard appears in the doorway of the room. He takes a look around the room and rolls his eyes, I'm sure he's seen much worse.

I grab my sticks from the small side table I set them on and go to one of the vanity mirrors along the wall to check my reflection and makeup.

"I just wanted to tell you that you're beautiful. Like way prettier in person than in magazines." Alder says, startling me slightly. I didn't even hear him walk up next to me.

“I might need to keep you around, you’re damn good for my ego.” I laugh as I inspect my lipstick, my signature red heavily coating my lips.

“We’ll see each other a few times throughout the summer.” He says with a smile, his pupils blown. “We’re going out on tour too.”

“That’s awesome.” I exclaim, grabbing my drink from the vanity counter. I’m serious, it will be nice to have a familiar face out on tour.

“Maybe we can get together.” He shrugs, looking uncomfortable. He fidgets slightly with his hands, and the movement reminds me of Alex. He was comfortable talking to me, but he still fidgeted. The thought brings a wave of different emotions but the main one is happiness. I cup my hand over his fidgeting fingers, bringing his face back to me from the ground, the same way I used to with Alex when he got lost in his head talking to me.

“I’d like that.” I say with a smile. He smiles back, full teeth showing, and I swoon a little bit. Those poor girls aren’t going to know what hit them when he gets a little more confident.

“You gonna watch from the wings?” I ask, letting go of his hand to fluff my hair a little more.

“Hell yeah.” He says excitedly. “Getting to see you perform is on my bucket list.”

I laugh loudly, it’s still surreal that I have legit fans, people who dress like me, wear their hair like me, have my face on their shirts. I had a girl cry in a store once when she ran into me, she was so excited.

“Watch the lick in Nightmare, it’ll blow your mind.” I wink as I start walking towards the door. The look on his face is comical, a mixture of appreciation and lust.

Rhyit stands outside the door with his back braced against the cracked cement his ankles crossed, like he was waiting for me. When I exit the room, he looks up, his smirk cocky as he pushes off the wall. A cigarette sits between his fingers, and he takes a long drag before dropping his snide comments.

“Did you find a puppy?” He sneers, referring to Alder. “Bet he’d lick your boots if you asked him to.”

“Careful, Rhy, you’re jealousy is showing.... And he probably would lick my boots, but I might let him lick something else.” I wink, and he grimaces at me.



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“You wanna guy to inflate your ego? Tell you you’re the best drummer since John Bonham?” He quips, his body crowding mine against the concrete hallway.

“My ego is fine. You should check yours though, isn’t that why you pick up groupies? Girls who look at you like you’re a god, girls who will tell their grandkids they slept with a rockstar. Good for you, Rhyit.” I use my index finger and bop him on the nose. I love pushing him like this, he’s too easy to rattle.

“Pot meet kettle.” He spits. “You want a dude who will treat you like a rock and roll princess and fuck you like a dirty groupie. But you’re too chickenshit to put your heart out there so you settle for guys who fuck you like a princess and look at you like a rock and roll groupie. Take yesterday, you wanted to fuck a rockstar and that’s what you got, but you got scared. You didn’t want me, that’s why you called me Rhyit instead of Andrew. You needed to disassociate the two because you thought you were getting too close. I know you.” He takes another step into my space.

“You don’t know me.” I yell, anger coursing through me. “You know the girl you left behind, the girl you betrayed. I don’t need someone to pick up my pieces, Rhyit, I put myself back together just fucking fine. I’m fine.”

“Is that why we can’t play Pistol because you’re all put back together and just fucking fine?” He yells, matching my tone. I feel my eyes narrow, and a heavy weight sinks in my stomach. Anger is my first reaction, and if we weren’t going on stage in a few minutes, I would slap him so hard his balls would feel it.

“You know why we aren’t playing Pistol.” I say lowly. “You know exactly why we aren’t playing it.” My voice drops another octave, the thinly veiled threat apparent to

the two of us. His eyes widen, and he takes a step back, realizing my anger has reached a nuclear level. He levels me with a stare, and I hold his eyes, fire dancing in mine no doubt.

“How many times can I tell you that I’m fucking sorry?” He exhales. “I’m fucking sorry. There’s not a god damn thing I can do about it now, but I’m really fucking sorry.”

“Until you mean it.” I reply, moving away from the wall to walk down the hallway. I watch his head fall, and I wonder if he will even remember having this conversation with me.

The noise from the audience is deafening as we take the stage. It feels weird that it’s just the three of us, like a missing limb. I try to push those feelings away, these people paid good money to see us, and we can’t let them down. I can break down after the show, by myself, on the bus.

“What’s up, LA?” Rhyit yells into the microphone, his guitar slung over his shoulder. He turns, his eyes tracking from Boston to me. I nod, signaling I’m ready, Boston does the same.

“If you don’t know us, we’re The Plight.” He says into the mic again, the crowd reaching new levels of loud. “As most of you know, we lost a good friend of ours last week, Alex buddy, this one’s for you.”

I slam my sticks together over my head, counting us in and we drop right into Riot Act. It’s an upbeat party song, with references to fast girls and alcohol. The boys wrote it years ago, and it was an instant hit.

“Pistol, Pistol, Pistol!” The crowd chants, and I smile wide at them as I attack the drum heads with my sticks.

“You guys excited to see Pistol again?” Rhyit asks in the microphone. “Have you guys been following her on her journey with Petals and Poison?” The crowd screams loudly, and I laugh.

“Who wants to see the girls from Petals and Poison perform with us?” He asks, the crowd loses their mind as Rhyit turns around. A goofy smile plays on his lips as Maggie, Julie, and Blake come out from the side stage. My jaw drops at the sight of them, I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed them until their smiling faces greet me. Tears well in my eyes as I continue to lightly beat on the drumheads. One of the event staff hands Julie a mic, and she joins Rhyit front and center.

“Hey Whisky a Go-Go, who’s ready to have some fun?” She yells, her crazy red hair and leather skirt moving to the beat. Blake slides up next to Boston, and he shoots her a wink. She slides her hand across the neck of her bass, and I laugh at her facial expression. It’s a mix of disgust and interest. Maggie stands to my left with her hot pink guitar hanging loosely around her neck. She smiles at me, and I couldn’t tell you the last time I was this happy.

“Hey Rhy?” Julie asks. “What should we sing?” She turns her head to me, giving me a sweet smile. Her voice is like gravel mixed with honey. It sounds like she smokes five packs of cigarettes a day and then mimics Snow White. I love it.

“I don’t know, Jules, should we let them decide?” Rhyit asks, motioning to the crowd. I have no idea if Rhyit knows any of our songs but here’s hoping he does.

The crowd shouts all sorts of names to different songs, but the main one, the one they keep chanting, is one that Julie and I do together. It’s called Bitter Ends. I wrote it in the midst of putting myself back together, and it’s a fan favorite.

“Rhyit, do you know Bitter Ends?” Julie asks, and the crowd goes wild.

“I do, although I don’t sing it as well as you do.” He winks, such a charmer. The crowd ooohs and awwws. I want to roll my eyes at his compliment.

“Pistol, you ready? Blake? Maggie?” We all nod as Maggie gives a quick riff on her guitar. Julie and Rhyit turn back to the audience, and I count us into a song that broke my heart and mended my heart to write.

“I cried for you, and I lied for you. I played the part so well, you had no idea I became a shell. The life we lived was chaos wrapped in a bow, I had no idea you’d sink so low. I hope life brings you what you need, I’m just sorry it wasn’t me.” Maggie belts out, her voice reverberating across the walls. Rhyit holds the mic up to his lips, and I sit forward on the stool, waiting for him to sing the chorus. My chorus.

“The pieces are all back together, I mended all the damage you put me through. I keep my heart under lock and key now because baby, can’t you see, this is where the bitter ends... and I finally get to be me.” He sings the lyrics with so much passion that I have to bite my lip to stop the tears. He’s singing my song, my heartbreak anthem. I drop my head and pound the sticks against my kit, my arms moving so quickly I start to feel sweat at the back of my neck.

“What hurts the most is pretending that I had stopped hurting long before I was ever healed, breaking my own heart everyday just to make sure I could feel.” He continues singing, but he’s not singing to the crowd, he’s singing to me. My heart hammers against my chest as the crowd cheers uproariously at his back as he stands in front of me.

“I know I’ve said I’m sorry, I know you don’t think it’s true, I never meant to hurt you, and I’m going to prove it too.” He sings with a smile, those aren’t the words, not even close, but the girls around me are basically puddles from his serenade, and I nod slightly. I look to Julie who looks like she might cry, and she has been the most solid team member of the ‘we hate Rhyit’ brigade.

“Baby can’t you see, this is where the bitter ends...and I get to be me again.” Julie sings into the microphone, her voice a little choked up.

I cannot believe he did this, can’t believe he brought my band to sing with us tonight. He has no idea how much it means to me to be sharing the stage with all the people I love the most. I look around me as I lightly move my drum sticks across the cymbals. Blake and Boston are in an epic bass playoff, both of them trying to outdo the other, Maggie stands off to my side playing lightly like me while Rhyit and Julie sing with the crowd. The only person missing is Alex, he would have loved this.

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Julie’s arms wrap around my waist as we stand in front of the bus. Maggie and Blake stand at our sides waiting for us to distance, but she just keeps holding on to me.

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“Go easy on him, babe. He did this for you, he didn’t have to.” She says in my ear, I nod against her shoulder agreeing. He didn’t have to do this for me, but he did, even after I was a dick to him.

“I will,” I say against her shoulder, “now go back home to that sweet baby and that husband of yours.” I let her go reluctantly.

“Have fun, babe.” Blake says.

“Call us okay?” Julie says.

“Fuck in every city, okay?” Maggie laughs.

“Will do.” I laugh and make my way toward the massive black tour bus. “I’ll see you guys in a few months. I’ll have some bitchin’ material for our next album.” They all nod, and I take the steps to the top, the doors close behind me and the adventure begins.

“Bristol!” Marv exclaims, he’s the head of security for the band and one of the sweetest men I’ve ever met.

“Marv!” I squeal, moving towards him to give him a hug.

“You look a lot better than the last time I saw ya.” He says, giving me a once over. His heavy Boston accent is one of my favorite things about him.

“I feel a lot better than the last time I saw you.” I pat his shoulder appreciatively.

“Good good, don’t let any of these assholes treat ya bad, ‘kay? They’ll have me to deal with.” He cracks his knuckles animatedly, and I laugh out loud with a nod.

“Hey Marv, when was the last time you saw Bristol?” Rhyit says from the recliner he’s sitting in. He spins the chair like a villain in a bad action movie. He narrows his eyes at the two of us with suspicion. I didn’t even know he was sitting there, but his question makes all the blood drain from my face.

“Oh, it’s been a while.” Marv says, looking at me. I mouth a quick “thank you” with my back to Rhyit. Marv shoots me a wink and starts walking down the aisle towards the bunks, passing Rhyit’s spot on the chair. I drop my purse and leather jacket on the bottom bunk and head for the bathroom. I need to get this makeup off my face and sweats on as soon as possible.

The bus starts rolling as soon as I’m seated in the bathroom. The toilet lid is closed underneath me as I take the washcloth to my face, the cool water and soap feel amazing against my overheated skin. When most of the makeup is off my face, I stand and look at myself in the mirror.

“What are you doing here, Bristol?” I ask my reflection. The black of my mascara and eyeliner coats my under eyes, and I scrub the delicate skin to remove it. “Why are you chasing ghosts?” I sigh and set the washcloth down next to the sink. I open the door to the bathroom and walk out. Boston and Rhyit are sitting at the small table next to the kitchen area. Both boys have a beer in their hand, and it looks like they might be writing, the notepad splayed out between them has chicken scratch and a wet circle from the beer bottle.

“Pistol, come help us.” Boston says, waving me over to the open seat next to Rhyit. The scene in front of me is so similar to all those nights together on the tour bus years ago. The four of us sitting around the table, drinking, smoking, and writing until the wee hours of the morning. While the scene looks similar, the feelings are different,

there's loss and animosity sitting between us, betrayal and hurt hanging above us.

I take a seat at the little white table, and Rhyit scoots over to make room for me.

"What are you working on?" I ask, pulling the paper pad towards me. The title gives me pause, "Last Goodbye." It's the song he sang at the funeral, the one that only had a few verses but was hauntingly beautiful.

"The paps got a video of me singing this, and Larkin wants us to finish it." Rhyit says through gritted teeth. Annoyance radiates off of him, but I can't help a petty part of me from seeping out.

"Gee, it's gonna be pretty hard for you to share something so personal with the world every night, isn't it?" I say sarcastically, my mouth twisting to hold back what I really want to say.

"That song wasn't meant for the world, it was meant for Alex." He says, annoyance replaced with anger. "I don't want to sing it every night. I don't want to replay that feeling every day for however long Larkin wants us to play it."

"Hypocrite." I murmur under my breath. Boston's eyes widen across from me, and I could kick myself for saying it outloud.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Boston asks. His eyes ping-pong between Rhyit and I.

"Nothing." Rhyit says, trying to end the conversation but fuck that. Does Boston not know? Does he think I left because I wanted to?

"Hey Bos, what do you know about Pistol?" I ask, turning my head slowly to Rhyit just in time to see his jaw lock and fire to light up his face.



“You and Rhy wrote it.” Boston replies. “Damn good song.” He nods. “But you left before we could play it live, it’s so fucking cool, Bristol. People get their lighters out and wave them above their head, girls cry.” He smiles broadly.

“That’s right, you left.” Rhyit spews behind clenched teeth and angrily gets up and moves away from the table, stomping to the back room. I hear the door slam shut, and I can’t help myself, I have to follow him. He didn’t tell the guys the truth about why I left and I’m furious. My blood boils as I follow him to the back room. I don’t even stop to knock. With my full momentum, I turn the knob and push the door open.

He stands at the edge of the bed with his head down, his dark hair falling over his features. I take a step forward, and then another until I’m standing directly in front of him. His green eyes meet mine, and it’s a good thing neither one of us has laser vision because we’d burn this whole place to the ground.

“You’re right, I left,” My lip shakes as I stare up at him. “I left because of several things. Not just one thing. We were amazing at first, then the drugs happened. I could push through that. Then the cheating..”

His face lifts up, lighting up in anger. “I told you I never cheated.”

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I put a finger up to stop him from talking. "I understand that now, but back then, it was hard to determine what was truth when you guys were always high as a kite. Then." I pause as I feel my stomach drop. "You sold it."

His eyes hold mine as the hurt I felt, still feel, rages through me. He takes a step forward, and I shove him in the chest. "The second you sold the rights to Pistol, I was done. You swore that song was for us. And there you were, signing it away." My chin wobbles at the memory, I try to hold it back, but the tears dam on my lashes.

"You swore it would only ever be for us, the world takes enough of us day in and day out. You said we'd play it on the day we got married. Play it for our kids when they got older. You fucking promised me, and then all of sudden, it's all over the radio. Hitting number one on the billboard charts and for what? Because Larkin needed a love song. Fuck you," I scream, the tears now a steady stream running down my cheeks. "I needed a love song." My chest heaves from the weight I've been carrying for years.

"I know, and I'm fucking sorry." He spits, "Larkin wanted it after he heard us in the studio that day. We were new Bristol, what was I supposed to say, no?"

"That's exactly what you were supposed to say."

"You know that wouldn't have gone over well." He scoffs. "He's the head of the label, he gets what he wants."

"By any means necessary, huh?" I ask, indignation lacing my tone. "Enjoy breaking your own heart every fucking night." I growl before turning to the door.

## Chapter 21 Rhyit

I watch her walk out the door, the lock clicking against the metal with finality. Larkin told Garrett that he wants the song ready to record by the time we're done with this tour. I don't want to sing it, I don't want to hear it, I sure as fuck don't want to finish it. I knew as soon as she saw what we were working on that she would blow up, especially with my attitude to the whole thing. She has every right, I betrayed her. We wrote that song together, put our blood sweat and tears into the ballad, and when Larkin asked for it, I said yes sir, would you like anything else? A kidney maybe? How about my heart because I have no use for it now?

Hurting her like that broke me too. I knew it would hurt her, and I did it anyway. Also I'm just enough of a piece of shit to tell the guys Bristol wanted out of the band, never giving them the reason, because the reason was me. Alex, up until the day he died, thought that Bristol just left us, didn't want to do it anymore. I knew they would blame me for her departure so I took the selfish route and never said a damn thing. And isn't karma a bitch, I'm sitting in the same damn predicament, except this time, it's not Bristol's heart I'll break, it's mine.

I sit on the bed for I don't know how long, my mind replaying the day she left over and over. The hurt on her face when our song came on the radio. The track was rough, you can hear her sigh in the background as I sang it to her. It was never supposed to air, never supposed to be for anyone but us.

### Past

Bristol sits at the stool behind her kit in sweats and a cut off T-shirt. Her toned stomach on display as she arranges the cymbals just how she likes them. I watch her because it feels like I'm always watching her. I love this woman, I've loved her for a long time, but we don't say those words.

“Let’s play the new song.” I say, hoping she says yes, we’ve been perfecting the ballad for weeks, and I want to hear it all together. To be able to play it back. Her head pops up and excitement fills her face.

“Seriously?” She squeals, grabbing her sticks. Boston won’t be here for at least another half an hour and Alex the same. It’s the perfect time to play it, just the two of us.

“Yeah,” I smile, “the guys won’t be here for a bit, and we’ve got the sound techs already.” I motion to the smoke filled room on the other side of the glass. Two of the label’s sound guys sit in the room working on their emphysema.

“Okay.” She smiles. “Just us, right?” She asks.

“Yeah, babe, just us.” I reply, slinging the guitar over my shoulder. With her sticks in hand, she counts us in slowly, and I hold the headphones closer to my ear as I step up to the mic hanging from the ceiling. The red recording light shines bright against the darkened walls.

The days bleed into night.

I know I’ll be fine with you right by my side.

The city lights don’t hold a candle to your smile.

Don’t worry baby, I’ll be waiting at the end of the aisle.

She sighs lightly behind me, and I fight the urge to turn around to see her face. She loves this song as much as I do.

I hope you know, I hope you see,

my god, baby, what you do to me.

We can call it fate, we can call it love.

All I know is you were sent from up above.

I let my voice drag out as Bristol hits her drums, building up to the chorus. I play a quick riff on the guitar, letting the g chord twang as I step back up to the mic.

My heart is yours, my soul is too.

Everything I do, I do for you.

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Baby, I'm sorry if I'm getting wistful,

You'll always be my Pistol.

You're my lighthouse, my safe haven,

I'll keep you close, I'll guard your heart

I'll love you forever, it was you and me right from the start.

I turn around to see her expression, the last part of the chorus wasn't part of the song, I added it and didn't tell her. Her mouth hangs open as she realizes what I just said.

"I love you, Pistol." I say, my face turned away from the mic. She can hear me through the headphones, and her eyes light up as she drops her sticks and runs to me. I hold my arms open for her as she jumps, wrapping her legs around me.

"I love you too." She says into my shoulder, as her limbs wrap tighter around mine. "I love you so much." She lifts her head, and her mouth finds mine instantly. Our lips meet, and her hand finds the back of my head, pulling me in deeper for the kiss. Her tongue moves against mine, and a low moan pulls from the back of her throat.

"Forever?" She asks against my lips. Her eyes holding so many questions I feel the need to squash those worries.

"I'll love you forever, I promise." I state, and I know that I will, deep down I know that she's it, she's forever for me.

“Me too.” She smiles against my lips. She kisses me again, and if not for the throat clearing in my headphones, I would probably fuck her against the glass window. I forgot there were other people in the room, I was so wrapped up in Bristol I didn’t see the guys walk in either.

“Don’t stop on our account.” Boston says, laughing loudly.

“Yeah, please continue.” Alex laughs also, falling into the room behind Boston. His gray eyes are glassy, and if it weren’t for Bristol’s perfume, I’m pretty sure I could smell him from here.

“Jesus Alex, did you bathe in bourbon?” Bristol asks, covering her nose as she disentangles her limbs from mine.

“Whiskey actually. You know what they say, if you can’t fix it, whiskey can.” He shoots Bristol a wink, and she rolls her eyes.

“That’s not the saying,” she says with a laugh, “it’s if whiskey can’t fix it, nothing can.”

“Same same.” Alex replies with a shrug as he walks over to his guitar. “You guys ready to lay down some tracks?” We all nod and move to our assigned places. Alex and Boston put their headphones on, and I nod to the sound techs, signaling that we’re ready.

Hours later, we all drag ourselves out of the studio headed for the closest bar in sight. Bristol’s pissed she’s wearing sweats and we’re going out in public but not mad enough not to go. We walk the hallway of the studio together, each of us coming up with our own ideas for food.

“Rhyit.” A voice rings out down the hallway. I stop and turn to see Tony, our lead

sound guy at the end of the hall. “Larkin wants to see you.” He yells down the hallway.

“Ooooooo,” Alex laughs, “the principal wants to see you Rhyt!” The others chime in, lightly making fun of me.

“I’ll catch up to you guys, okay?” I tell them, pulling Bristol into me with a quick kiss to her forehead. “No tequila for her, okay?” I smile at the guys. They all nod, and Bristol pouts at me.

“I like tequila.” She stomps her foot.

“Tequila doesn’t like you.” Boston says with a laugh.

“Remember the last time...” Alex bursts out laughing, “you told that bartender who cut you off that you were going to fuck his dad and make him your stepson.”

I’m doubled over, laughing at the memory. Bristol gets so feisty on tequila that we had to swear her off of it.

“One god damn time.” She quips holding her finger up to show how many times that’s happened.

“Stick to vodka, sweets.” I say as I move down the hallway away from them.

What the fuck could Larkin want? We laid six tracks tonight, at least one of them has to be up to his stupid standards.

## Chapter 22 Bristol Present

Phoenix is basically the sun, and I feel like I’m melting as we sit under the small tent



outside the outdoor amphitheater. Rhyit is hunched over his notebook writing and then crossing out and then writing again. We haven't spoken since last night, neither one of us wanting to face the demons we brought to the surface.

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Boston sits across from me with his feet perched on the small table in the center. The table has bottles of water that I'm surprised aren't boiling at this point and snacks. He dumps a handful of the peanuts into his hand and shoves them into his mouth all at once.

"Why do you eat like a mountain man who hasn't seen food in weeks?" I ask, cocking my head.

"Why aren't you and Rhyit talking?" He asks, cocking his head to match mine. I narrow my eyes at him but don't answer.

"Exactly, mind ya business and I'll mind mine." He smiles and dumps the whole bag into his mouth. Peanuts fall down the front of him, landing in his lap, and I shake my head.

"Plight, you're up in 10." A girl with a clipboard says from the side of the tent. Her blonde ponytail stuck to the back of her neck as sweat pours down her face.

I instantly feel sorry for her, she has to run around all over the place looking for the next band while I internally complain about the heat from the comfort of the shade.

"Hey, you want a water?" I ask her, grabbing one of the bottles of water from the center of the table, extending it out to her. She steps forward and takes the water from my hand.

"Thank you!" She says, opening the cap and downing half the water in one drink. "Pistol, right?"

“Yeah, this is Boston and Rhyit.” I introduce the other non social asshats.

“Hey.” Rhyit says not looking up from the pad.

“Hi, I’m Boston.” Boston says, extending his hand to her. She shakes it and smiles at him.

“You have peanuts on your shirt.” Her eyes fall to the pile of peanuts sitting in his lap. He wipes them away quickly and shoots me a comical glare.

“I’m Andy. Well Andrea, but everyone calls me Andy.” Andy says, presenting her hand for me to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, I’m a huge fan.”

“Oh thanks!” I exclaim.

“I actually saw you guys in Seattle a few weeks ago.” Andy says, smiling at me. Oh shit.

“What did you think?” Boston asks, putting the full charm on now that he doesn’t have a squirrel’s amount of food for the winter in his lap.

“You guys were great. Would have been cool to see Bristol up there with ya.” She says, and all the blood rushes to my ears. “Oh shit, I gotta go. 7 minutes guys. Thanks for the water.” She hands the empty water bottle back to me, and I don’t need to turn around to feel Rhyit’s eyes on me.

“Why would you have been up there with us?” He asks, the first words he’s spoken all day.

“No idea. Maybe she just meant now that we’re playing together.” I shrug and play off the lie as best I can. “You guys ready?” I ask, grabbing my pink tipped sticks

from their pouch.

“Yup.” Boston answers, pulling a bottle of Jack Daniels from the backpack he brought with him.

“Cheers to another great show.” He says holding the bottle up. He takes a pull and then hands the bottle to Rhyit, who is still staring holes through me. God, I can’t do this right now. Rhyit takes a pull and then hands it to me. I bring the bottle to my lips and let the liquid fire cascade down my throat.

“Cheers.” I say a little breathless. I took a much larger drink than I planned to, and for the first time all day, goosebumps rise against my overheated skin.

I wobble slightly in my boots as I make my way to my kit, the crowd loses their mind when we all take the stage, they’re pushing and swaying trying to get closer to the stage. The set list sits in front of me, taped to one of the stands that holds my kit up. Okay first song, I can do this.

“Hello Phoenix! Jesus Christ, it’s hot here!” Rhyit yells into the microphone. There has to be at least seventy thousand people in the audience, and they all look like drowned rats from the heat.

“Pistol, Pistol, Pistol!” The crowd yells in unison, and I give a quick lick across my drums.

“Yeah, she’s here!” Rhyit says with his famous smile. “Can you believe it? Who’s here for Boston?” Rhyit asks with his hand up. The girls go absolutely bonkers, throwing shit on stage, bras and panties mostly. Boston gives a quick downbeat on his bass and grabs a pair of panties from the pile. He holds them up and the screaming commences.

“Alright alright, who’s ready to have some fucking fun?” Rhyit yells into the mic. He turns to me and I nod, then he turns to Boston and he nods. I crack my sticks together and start playing. Sweat pours down my back, and I wish I wouldn’t have worn this stupid fucking skirt, my ass cheeks are slippery against the leather, and if I’m not careful, I’m going to have an accident. In between the third and fourth song, I try to adjust myself on the seat, but it’s not use. I growl in frustration, forgetting that I have a mic in front of me, and the growl was much louder than anticipated.

“You alright back there, Pistol?” Rhyit asks as he grabs the bottle of Jack from the bottom of the stand. He takes a hefty swig and swallows before turning to me.

“Great.” I say with a smile. “It’s hot as hell.” The crowd cheers, and I want to hide, I cannot believe I forgot about the mic in front of me.

“Why don’t you come up here and have a shot with me?” He asks. “Doesn’t she look a little thirsty?” The crowd yells back at him, and he turns to me, giving me a ‘your move’ expression. I scoot the stool back from the kit, and my thighs make a ripping noise as I leave the seat. That’s cute, I think sarcastically.

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I take the steps leading down to him, his smile lighting up more the closer I get. Once I reach him, the audience loses their fucking minds. I'll never get used to the feeling of this, the love and adoration that comes off a crowd when you put on a hell of a show.

I give a small wave to the the audience as Rhyit hands the bottle to me. I take it out of his hand, our fingers brushing sends an electrical jolt through me, and I have to fight the blush I can feel coming. I tip the bottle up to my lips and take a drink, the whiskey's smoothness runs down my throat, and I shudder from the taste. Rhyit laughs into the mic at the look on my face and takes the bottle back from me.

"Don't worry, babe, you get used to it. Better?" He asks, cocking his head to the side in the cutest way. I might as well have cartoon heart eyes right now with the way I'm looking at him. Dammit. Pull it together. I clear my throat, the after taste of the whiskey lingers on my tongue as I smile and say a quick thank you before turning to return to my kit.

"Alright, now that Pistol's ready, are you guys ready?" He asks, and they scream a collective yes. I take my place back behind the drums and count us in to the song.

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"Hey Bristol, can I talk to you for a second?" Rhyit asks from his seat at the small table. The notepad sits in front of him, but it looks more like a painting than an actual song with all the ink on the paper. I set my bag on the bunk and walk the few steps to the table.

“What’s up?” I ask, wondering what he could possibly need with me.

“I can’t get the thing you said to Alex at the funeral out of my head.” He sighs, sitting back against the cushion of the bench seat.

I replay the conversation in my head, the apology, the miscommunication, then the last thing I said to Alex when he was alive. The guilt I carry is a heavy burden, but it’s mine, I can’t share that with anyone.

“What about it?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as neutral as possible. I don’t want to give anything away.

“It just doesn’t make sense, you said you didn’t mean it, what didn’t you mean?” He asks, leaning forward to place his arms on the table. His shoulder draw up to his ears as he levels me with a stare.

“I didn’t mean to leave him.” I lie. The lie tastes like ash on my tongue, bitter and dry.

Rhyit purses his lips like he doesn’t believe me and raises an eyebrow. I need to steer this conversation away from this topic right now.

“Why didn’t you tell the guys why I left? The truth I mean.” I ask, and now it’s his turn to look uncomfortable. He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and holds my eyes.

“I didn’t want them to know.” He replies honestly. “It was easier to just let them think you didn’t want to do this anymore with us.”

“Easier for who?” I question, crossing my arms across my chest.

“Me.” He answers, looking downcast. “It was easier for me.”

I shake my head in incredulity, “I can’t believe you let them believe for years that I walked away because I didn’t want to be a part of this band anymore.”

“You could have told them yourself.” He spits, venom lacing his tone. Typical Rhyit, never taking responsibility for anything.

“I could have.” I nod my head. “I just thought you’d be man enough to tell them yourself, but I see now that a tiger never loses his stripes, once a coward always a coward.”

In a split second, he’s on me, the small table askew from his quick movement. His palm holds my neck as he pushes my body back against the wall with his. The heat from his palm radiates against my windpipe, and if I wasn’t so angry at him, I’d be seriously turned on. With my back against the wall, he molds his body to the front of mine, his eyes hold fire as he breathes heavily through his nose.

“Call me a coward again, I dare you.” He snarls, his jaw locked, and the vein in the side of his neck throbs. And apparently, I have no self preservation left...

“Coward.” I croak, the force of his hand on my throat muffling my voice. His eyes widen as the word resonates.

“Fuck you, Bristol.” He spits. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“No,” I inhale through my nose, “fuck you, Rhyit.” We hold our glares for a second, then two, then three.

“The only coward out of the two of us is you. You got your feelings hurt and tucked your tail and ran to the pussy brigade.” He finally remarks, his face an inch from



mine. He wanted that shot to sink my battleship, but it was a miss.

“Better the pussy brigade than a pussy like you.” I whisper, my throat burning from the pressure. His eyes narrow as anger radiates off of him. I glare back at him, and his body leans harder against mine, pushing me further against the wall of the bus.

“A pussy like me, huh?” He breathes against my face.

“You’re an egotistical, jealous, selfish, pr-“ his mouth attacks mine before I get the rest of my insults out. I kiss him back with so much anger that I wouldn’t be surprised if one of us lost a tooth or a piece of our tongues. I pull his bottom lip into my mouth and bite hard before using the tip of my tongue to soothe the pain. That’s the best and worst part of Rhyit and I, we’re toxic to a fault, if I stabbed him right now, I’d be the one bandaging up the wound. It’s fucked up, but it’s us.

Our lips fight for dominance, and I’m not sure who’s air I’m breathing mine or his, but it doesn’t matter as anger mixes with pleasure.

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“I hate you.” I sigh against his lips.

“No you don’t, you just want to.” He says, he’s right I don’t but saying that I hate him is easier than admitting I missed him.

“That’s okay, I’ve wanted to hate you for years.” He says against my lips. He releases my neck, and I immediately miss the pressure, my body feels like I tapped into a live wire. Using both hands, he palms my ass cheeks before hoisting me up around his waist. I lock my legs around him on instinct. The sundress I’m wearing exposing my bare ass to anyone in the vicinity. Thank god Boston chose to ride with the roadies for a bit. Rhyit walks us back to the back bedroom while I wrap my arms around his neck. Once we’re in the room, he throws me on the bed, and the springs cause me to bounce again on impact before settling against the comforter.

“You’re a shit head you know that, right?” Rhyit asks as he undoes his belt. His comment pisses me off, I’m not the one who didn’t tell the band, I’m not the one who sold a song made specifically for him.

“I’d rather be a shit head than a selfish prick.” I growl.

“I’m selfish? Look at you, our fans love Pistol, and you won’t even allow them to hear it.” He spits, undoing the top button of his jeans.

“They wouldn’t even know about it if it weren’t for you.” I yell, moving to sit up from the bed. His hand meets my shoulder, and he pushes me back down. My back hits the bed and anger bubbles to the surface.

“And what a tragedy that would be. You know people use it as their wedding song? It’s a high school dance anthem? You can yell and stomp your feet about it, but our fans love that song.” He frees his cock from his boxers, and my insides pulse.

“I’m not having sex with you.” I spit, still staring at the hard length. “You’re a sociopath.”

He shrugs, “I prefer creative but whatever you wanna call me.” He smiles. “And yes we are. You want to hate me, baby? Take your anger out on my body. Let’s pretend your thighs hate each other, we should keep them apart right?” He asks, moving my thighs apart to expose the black lace “What about your panties?” He asks, lowering his body to kiss the inside of my knee. He leaves open mouth kisses along the delicate flesh and goosebumps scatter across my skin. I feel a rush of moisture between my legs as he moves his mouth closer. “Your body hates those too,” he says, grabbing the edges of my panties from around my hips.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask breathlessly. My body overheated and chilled at the same time. I’m turned on and pissed off, and the combination is making a mushy mess.

“Your eyes are saying no, but your body is fucking screaming yes. Yell at me, hit me, let it all out, baby. Call me a coward and a pussy and see what I do to your body. Tell me I’m selfish and a prick, I’ll make it so you can’t sit down tomorrow. Push me, baby, I want to see your claws.”

He pulls his shirt over his head exposing his tattoos and chiseled muscles, his defined abs and pecs make my mouth water, and my fingers itch to touch him. But his words resonate with me, the threat easily exposed. He wants my anger, my wrath, my words. My emotions torn between fuck you and I’ll fuck you.

Using all the strength I have, I grab his waist and pull him down on the bed. Once his

body hits the bed with a slight bounce, I throw a leg over the top of him, my knees landing against the lower part of his ribs. I grip the base of his cock and guide the monster to my entrance. I do a small circle around the hole to get the tip somewhat lubed up before I sink lower, my body takes his length inch by inch until I'm fully seated, my clit touching his pubic bone. With a long inhale, I place my palms against his chest and start to move. Up and down, up and down.

“Yes baby, ride me.” He whispers, his pupils blown with need. I move my hips quickly, up and down, my thigh muscles burn as I push harder and harder. His palms find my hips, guiding me. His cock moves in and out of me, the piercing hits the spot inside of me that pushes me closer and closer to the edge. When his thumb finds my clit under my sundress, a low moan leaves me, his rough fingers make small circles against the hardened nub, and my lower stomach pulls deliciously. My finger nails dig into his chest as wave after wave of euphoria hits me. I don't even think I'm moving anymore, he's fucking me from the bottom as my muscles tighten, and my walls grip him.

“My turn?” He asks out of breath as the last of the orgasm wracks my body. I nod, and he flips us, my back hitting the bed softly.

He lifts my leg to his hip and slides back into me easily, my body quakes from the rippling effect his piercing leaves behind and the overstimulation from the orgasm.

“You feel so good.” He moans, both of his arms braced against either side of my head. My dress is bunched up around my waist as my breasts overflow the cups of the dress. Andrew's hips piston in and out of me as we both come closer and closer to falling over the edge. I can tell he's getting close as his body starts to shudder so I tighten my walls around him, the need to watch him fall apart growing with every thrust. I use my stomach muscles to tighten further, and he inhales sharply from the new sensation.

“So fucking tight.” He praises. “Tell me you’re mine. Tell me this pussy is mine.”

“Yes!” I yell, hurdling quickly to another orgasm. “It’s yours. Oh fuck!” I moan loudly, the sound echoing against the walls. My back arches off the mattress as my muscles tense, my entire lower body pulsing.

“Yes, baby, take all of it.” He whispers as his eyes flutter closed, his jaw slack as a guttural moan leaves him. I feel his cock twitch against my walls as heat radiates inside me.

“Jesus!” He sighs, his arms giving out slightly causing him to rest more of his weight on me. “We should have had sex more often, that was hot as fuck.”

“I like when you do that.” I murmur, running my fingers down his spine absentmindedly.

“Do what?” He asks, lifting his head from my shoulder to look at me.

“When you lay on me. It feels like you’re letting me carry some of your weight, letting me hold some of your worries.” I whisper, not meaning to say all of it outloud.

His lips pull into a sweet smile. “Do you want to carry some of my weight? My burdens? Because let me tell you, they’re pretty fucking heavy.” Andrew laughs lightly, but something else hangs in the laughter, sadness or grief, maybe guilt, I’m not sure.

“I used to carry some of them for you.” I smile, memories hitting me closer to the heart than I would like them to.

“What burdens do you carry?” He asks, propping his elbows on either side of my head. Andrew is a big dude, at least 6’2” with stock. I know he’s not giving me his

entire weight, he's holding some of it back, just like I am with the burdens I carry.

“None that I can hand off, none that you would want to carry.” I reply against his lips.

“You sure about that? I'm pretty strong.” To emphasize the point, he flexes his arms which I have to say are marvelous.

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“My burdens are draining more so than they are heavy.” I sigh, hating the direction this conversation is going.

“I get that. If you’d open up to me, I might be able to help. I know you’re holding something back, babe. I just can’t put my finger on it. I hope you’ll tell me sometime soon.” His lips find my forehead, and I hold back the words I want to blurt out with everything I have. He doesn’t need to know, I tell myself, it will only cause more harm than good, I remind myself.

“I’m pretty open right now,” I laugh, squeezing my thighs around his hips.

“Not what I mean.” He says, pulling out of me slowly. His body pulls away from mine as he moves to the end of the bed.

He stands with his back to me at the end of the bed, and I stare at the intricate designs. The roses in the center of his back, the hand grenade with the clip sitting next to it, and the band name sprawled across his shoulders in old English text. I’m lost in a memory of a night not long ago when his back was the only part of him that I could see, the only way I knew it was him. The leather pants were unbuttoned and sitting lower on his hips, his dark hair laying against his back as he stared down. The lines of coke sitting on the small table next to him were a reminder that some people never change. The running, the door opening, the guilt all hit me like a freight train.

“Bristol!” He yells, snapping his fingers in front of my face. The sound breaks the memory like a movie reel running out of film. “Where the hell did you go just now? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“I did,” I whisper, my voice haunted by the memory that keeps me up at night.

## Chapter 23 Rhyit

New Mexico. Another date. Another call sheet. Another strange day with Bristol.

After our hate fuck, she’s been distant. I don’t know if it was the pillow talk or whatever happened to her after I got up from the bed, but she’s placed an iceberg between us the size of Antarctica. I don’t know what she’s going through, and it pisses me off that she won’t tell me. I don’t like secrets that don’t involve me. I don’t like to be the odd man out, and I don’t like that she’s taken to Boston to be her confidant.

Last night, they sat at the small table in the bus for over an hour, they’re voices hushed assuming I was asleep. I wasn’t. I prayed in that moment for supersonic hearing, especially after I heard a strangled sob leave Bristol. I wanted so badly to jump down from my bunk, grab her, hold her in my arms, and let her fall the fuck apart. But I didn’t, I stayed put as I listened to Boston try to calm her down. The only words I could make out were fault and carry.

Whose fault? And what are they carrying? When they finally came to the bunks, I heard them hug. The sound of rustling clothes, the only noise in the bus. I heard her thank him for being there for her, and I wanted to punch the fucking wall, grab an eight ball, and say fuck you very much. But I didn’t.

“What’s going on with Bristol?” I ask Boston as we stand in line at the small coffee shack at the amphitheater.

“She’s going through some shit.” He replies, not looking at me. He keeps his stare steady on the people in front of us.



“I know that, numbnuts. Care to share so we’re all on the same page?” I spit, my level of annoyance with the situation growing every second.

“I’m sure she’d tell you if she wanted you to know.” He replies, and I want to pull my fucking hair out.

“I’ll ask her.” I say, attempting to keep my voice calm.

“Good luck. That girl’s Fort Knox.” He laughs, turning around to face me. “Maybe you should stop worrying about getting into her pants and start noticing when and why she becomes distant. You want to get back together with her, right?” He asks. I nod, that’s all I want at this point. I want her to trust me, I want to get back to where we were before I signed the song away, and she walked away.

“She left because of me.” I confess, needing to at least get that secret out of the way.

“I know,” he nods, his eyes holding mine, “pretty fucked up if you ask me.”

“I had no choice, Larkin wanted it and-“ I start but stop, why am I giving excuses? She called me a coward, and while the word pissed me off, she’s right. I cater to Larkin like he’s the one who’s going to be sucking my dick, but in reality, I’m sucking his, and the thought pisses me off even more. “I gave it to him. I wanted to make a good impression. It was selfish as fuck, and the juice was not worth the squeeze.”

“You did have a choice though, you just chose wrong. Tell her that.” He says as we step forward in line.

“I’ve tried.” I say but immediately regret it. “I’ve tried to tell her how much people love the song, how it’s become a ballad for people.”

“That’s not what she wants to hear, dumbass. She doesn’t want to hear how much the world loves her song, she wants to hear how sorry you are, and how if you ever get her trust back, you’ll never break it again. Jesus, I’m not even in a relationship, and I feel like I’m more invested than you. Take her on a date, tell her the fucking truth, and then wear her thighs as ear muffs. It’s simple, man.”

A date. I haven’t been on a date in years, the women I meet aren’t interested in a nice wine and a candlelit dinner, they want a quick fuck and their bra signed. I don’t even know if I know how to date anymore. The last date I went on was with Bristol, and it ended terribly. It was supposed to be a memorable night, the night I asked her to be my wife, to marry me and live out happily ever after, but instead, it ended with a suitcase and a contract being ripped up.

“I could totally take her on a date.” I nod to myself more than Boston as he steps up to order the coffees.

“We have an extra night in Austin, plan something for her there.” He smiles as he pays for our coffees, the girl behind the counter looks like she might faint as she takes the money from his hand. Her eyes jump comically from Boston to me. “Keep the change, gorgeous.” Boston flirts, he gives her a wink, and I stifle my laugh. He’s too much sometimes, but I love him for it. The girl blushes so hard her forehead is red. I shoot her a smile, and the poor girl almost hyperventilates.

“I’m Rhyit, and this is Boston.” I say as we wait for the cups to be filled.

“I-“ she starts but stops, “I know who you are.”

“Aww you’ve got one up on us then, what’s your name, sweetness?” Boston asks, leaning forward on the Formica counter.

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“Jessie.” She stammers, and please help this poor girl because Boston is about to lay down the charm so thick she’ll think they’re getting married next month.

“You sticking around for the concert?” Boston asks, his voice dropping his voice an octave. He’s selling sex right now, and a laugh bubbles against my chest.

“Yeah,” she says, trying hard not to appear as flustered as she is, “my friends and I got tickets.”

“Awesome, I’ll keep an eye out for you.” Boston says, grabbing the cups that just appeared from the counter. I grab the other one and nod to her. The girls in the stand squeal as we walk away, and I chuckle to myself.

“Why tie yourself down to one woman when you can have anyone you want?” Boston asks as we make our way back to the tent. I spot Bristol sitting with Andy, the tour promoter, talking animatedly and laughing. I don’t have to think too hard about the response to his question, it’s always been her.

“Why would I want anyone else when she exists? She’s it for me, man. No more groupies, no more ‘just for one night’, I don’t want to live in the moment anymore, I want to plan for the future.”

“Happy for ya, man. More for me.” he replies with a smirk and a shrug.

The girls’ laughter carries as we make our way to them, Andy cackles at something Bristol said and makes a circling motion around her head and then laughs harder.

“What’s so funny, ladies?” Boston asks as we approach.

“Oh my god, we were talking about her wedding dress and what a monstrosity it was.” She runs her thumb under her eye to wipe away the tears.

“Oh yeah, what did it look like?” I ask, imagining Bristol in a wedding dress. There’s no way she looked anything less than beautiful, but I want to hear what a complete shit show her wedding was.

“You don’t know?” Andy says, eyeing me like I’m crazy. Like how would I not know what it looked like.

“No. Should I?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“Well she was-” Andy starts, but Bristol cuts her off immediately.

“In a lot of papers and magazine articles. I think we made the cover of the Inquirer.” She laughs nervously. Andy looks at her like she’s grown another head, and I feel like I missed a chapter of this story somewhere. .

“Huh, must have missed it.” I reply, my lips pursing with annoyance. Her wedding has something to do with her secret. I just know it. I feel like Sherlock Holmes right now, trying to put all the pieces together, the worst part is my boy Watson knows the truth and won’t tell me.

“I better go.” Andy says, confusion marring her face. “The Plight is on at one thirty.” She reminds us as she grabs her clipboard from the table.

“Stop by later, I can tell you all about the stupid swan in the middle of the yard.” Bristol yells as Andy walks away. The girls both laugh, and Andy shoots her a thumbs up.

What in the hell is going on?

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Tequila is a truth serum for a lot of people. It can make you happy, or angry, sappy, or horny, but it almost always brings out the truth. Whiskey lies, tequila tells the truth, and vodka varies. I've lied to myself a thousand times with whiskey, I've made mistakes and had the time of my life with vodka, but tequila, I've always been a sap on tequila.

Bristol tilts her head back as she downs her second tequila shot. Yes, I got the tequila, yes, I know what it does to her, no, I don't fucking care. I need answers, and if she needs a little liquid courage to let them out, so be it. Her tongue darts out to lick the lime perched in between her thumb and forefinger. Her face screws up from the taste, but I'm too invested in her tongue right now to laugh at her bitter face.

"Oh god, who let me do another one?" She laughs loudly. Her eyes are bright and her smile is a happy one. Huh, maybe tequila was a great idea.

"You've only had two." Boston reminds her as he takes the glass bottle from the small table in front of us. He pours three shots out into the small plastic cups, hands us each a salt packet and a lime wedge. He knows what I'm doing, he just isn't going to say anything because Boston loves drama and a drunk Bristol.

"Back to back." She cackles, yes cackles. It's like she let a hyena take over her mouth for a moment. I smile at her, and for the first time in days, she smiles back.

"One more, and I'm done. We've gotta play soon." She says suddenly serious, her face stoic as she remembers where she is, but then she breaks out in a laugh, and I cannot help but laugh with her.

I grab the shot glass from the center of the table, and the other two follow, holding the small cup in the center of the table I signal for a cheers. Boston and Bristol hold their cups next to mine as I remember a cheers that Alex used to say.

“Cheers to you fucks, cheers to me, let’s go out there and make them scream.” I call out, hitting the glass against theirs. Everyone hoots and licks the line of salt from the top of their hands. I throw the shot back quickly, not wanting the bitter liquid to hit my tongue as much as possible, and the alcohol burns my throat as I bite into the lime wedge hoping to subdue the taste.

“Fuck that’s terrible,” Boston says with a grimace. His face is turned up as he takes another bite of the lime.

“Really?” Bristol smiles. “I like it. A lot.” Her eyes find mine across the table, and I can’t help but notice the flames she’s throwing me. They aren’t the burn in hell flames that I normally get, these are ‘I’m going to suck your dick like I’m mad at it’ flames, and I am one thousand percent on board for that heat. Drunk frisky Bristol is one of my favorite personalities of hers.

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“I like tequila, but it isn’t my favorite.” I say, holding her stare. Her tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip, and I watch with rapture. Fuck, why is that so sexy?

“Ugh, could you guys stop with the fuck me eyes please? I’m trying to get a little drunk over here.” Boston sighs, breaking the connection between Bristol and I. Her eyes dart away from mine as she turns to Boston.

“What did you guys do while I was gone?” she asks, her voice sweet as the alcohol runs through her.

“Couple tours, couple albums, lots of groupies and a whole lot of partying.” Boston laughs loudly.

“Partying huh?” she asks, leaning forward like he’s fucking Shakespeare ready to wax eloquently about the blow and bottles.

“Yup,” Boston nods, “all over the world. Your chick band doesn’t party?”

“We do, but not like you guys. Julie’s married so she doesn’t do anything without her husband, Maggie is a horndog and leaves with someone as soon as the shows are done, and Blake doesn’t drink,” she sighs. “Our parties aren’t anything to make headlines.” Her eyes narrow at Boston before they turn to me.

“We should party tonight!” Boston exclaims. “We don’t leave until tomorrow morning, the bus is staying here, lets fucking do it!”

Remember what I said about tequila and truths? Well for Boston, tequila turns him up

to eleven every single time. Once while we were in Mexico, he drank a whole bottle and the worm, shut down a club, and ended up in jail for having sex in the street.

“Oh god, can we? I’m sure, there’s going to be something going on here tonight. I can ask Alder what they’re doing.” Bristol says excitedly. At the mention of the asshole from LA’s name, I perk up.

“Oh shit, are they here?” Boston says, looking around like they might be behind him.

“Yeah, I saw the top hat guy earlier.” Bristol nods.

“I’m sure we can find something to do without them.” I say, grabbing the bottle from the table. I’m going to need something a lot stronger than tequila if I’m going to have to deal with her puppy tonight.

“Oh, but it would be so fun,” Bristol yelps, “they were fun in LA.” She nods her head exaggeratedly. Drunk Bristol is apparently down for anything.

I pour each of us one more shot, repeating the process with the lime and the salt. Bristol takes hers like a champ, Boston gags and grimaces again, and I muster through the taste.

“Plight, 5 minutes.” A guy with a baseball hat and a clipboard says at the edge of the tent, he eyes me and then the almost empty tequila bottle in the middle of the table. He rolls his eyes and says something that sounds eerily like ‘fucking rockstars’.

“Oooo let’s do this!” Bristol says, hopping up from the stool she was sitting on. Now one of the worst parts about getting drunk while you’re sitting is when you go to stand up, your body has a tendency to not cooperate. Case in point: Bristol’s feet hit the ground and so does her back. That quickly, boom boom.



She laughs hysterically from her spot on the ground, and I lean down to help her back up.

“You okay, Pistol?” I ask with an outstretched hand. She takes my hand and allows me to pull her back upright.

“Did anyone see that?” She cackles as she wipes the excess gravel from her leather skirt.

“I did!” Boston hoots, raising his hand like a jackass.

“Of course you did, you’re right here.” I quip, as I dust off Bristol’s backside. She has little pieces of gravel stuck to the backs of her thighs so I lean down to pick them out of her sweat drenched skin. I run my fingers across her thighs and goosebumps scatter in their wake. I look up at her, acutely aware of where we are and how close to her ass I am.

“While you’re down there.” She cocks her head and wags her eyebrows at me suggestively. A low laugh leaves her, but I don’t move. If I didn’t think the whole world would know I was on my knees at a music festival ravishing my bandmate, I would throw her skirt up and let her use my face as a stool, but as it is, not the right time or the right place.

“We gotta go, babe, or you know I would.” I growl. The thought of her taste on my tongue while I sing to thousands of people has my dick twitching in my leather pants.

“Well, lead the way,” she says, dramatically throwing her arms in the direction of the theater.

“I gotta take a piss.” Boston says as we stand backstage, the amps and large speakers surround us as we wait our turn.

“Hurry.” I snap.

“Yeah yeah.” he says, waving me off as he takes off towards the men’s room. A roadie walks past me and hands me the mic I’ll be using for tonight.

“Thanks, man.” I nod, rolling the device between my palms.

Bristol stands next to a large speaker with her back braced against it, the noise from the band currently on stage is deafening back here. I watch her as the bass from the speakers pounds, a slight shiver leaves her as the vibration travels through her. Her eyes darken slightly as the heady mix of alcohol and pulsing bass turn her into a needy mess. I take a step towards her and then another, the proximity of my body against hers effectively pushing her body closer to the speaker.

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She moans softly as the guitarist hammers out another riff, her nipples pucker against the blue cut off T-shirt, and I realize she's not wearing a bra. I lean into her so my mouth is next to the shell of her ear. Lord knows she wouldn't be able to hear me if I wasn't this close.

"Braless today?" I ask as my hand reaches up to her rib cage. I trail my thumb against the underside of her breast, affirming my assumptions.

"It's too hot for a bra." She whimpers. I place my knee in between her legs, bracing it against the speaker. My thigh nudges against her center, and a low exhale leaves her.

"You're a scoundrel," I laugh against her ear. "Panties?" I ask, my hand trailing down the front of her reaching the bottom of her skirt.

"Find out for yourself." She exhales heavily, her tongue making contact with my neck. She licks up the side of my neck before settling against my earlobe. I feel her teeth before I notice the sting of her bite. My dick thickens in my leather pants, and I'm thankful they have strings and not a zipper, this would be painful as fuck with a zipper and no underwear.

My hands creep under the bottom of her skirt, a thin layer of fabric separates my fingers from her wet pussy. I push the fabric to the side, and I'm going to give whoever the lead singer of this band is all the money in my bank account right now, as long as he keeps singing. His deep rumble causes the speaker to vibrate, and Bristol to lose her ever loving shit. Two of my fingers run through her folds before I set up camp against her clit. With the microphone the roadie gave me in my other hand and while making small circles against her sweet spot, I place the head of the

mic against her wet channel. The band playing is wrapping up, and the entire band is playing at the same time, each instrument causing the bass from the speaker to vibrate harder. I push the microphone against her with more force, her body welcoming the large head like it welcomes me. With slow in and out motions and my fingers against her clit, Bristol comes apart, the sounds of her orgasm almost louder than the band on stage. Once the last of her post orgasm quakes have left her body, I pull the mic head away from her along with my fingers. She whimpers slightly, the overstimulation causing her to shiver again. I take a step back from her and inspect the microphone, her juices coat almost the entire windscreen, and the moisture gleams against the lights.

Bristol reaches for the drenched windscreen, but I pull the mic back.

“At least let me clean it off.” She sighs.

“Nuh uh, I want to be able to taste you all night.” I smirk, feeling pretty damn satisfied with myself. My dick throbs in my leathers, but he can wait. She needed this. Now not only is she tequila drunk, she’s post orgasm high.

“You assholes ready?” Boston says as he approaches. “This place needs a better layout, I thought I was going to piss my pants.” He laughs. Boston has never been one to read the room, but right now, I wish he was.

“I’m ready.” Bristol says, her voice thick from her arousal.

“Damn, ready for what?” Boston laughs harder. “That sounded a lot like a girl in a porno, you trying out new voices, Pistol?”

She clears her throat, obviously embarrassed by her voice giving away how hot she just was.

“Ready, and no I’m not trying out new voices, but be careful Bos, I might try your mom’s.” She laughs, and all is right with her world again.

Our names are called by the announcer, and I grab my guitar from the stand, Boston grabs his bass and throws the strap across his chest, Bristol grabs her sticks from the little pack and twirls them in her fingers.

“Ready?” I ask, more to Bristol than Boston.

“Let’s do it!” Boston says, again not reading the room.

“Yupp!” Bristol answers with a nod.

I take the steps to the center of the stage, waving at the fans and reveling in their excited screams.

“Hello New Mexico!” I yell into the mic, her scent hitting me as soon as the mic gets close to my face. Fuck, this is going to be harder than I thought, pun intended.

“You guys ready to party?” I ask, and they as usual lose their minds. I turn to Boston, and he nods, plugging his bass into the amp. I look at Bristol as I hold the mic close to my mouth, she nods, and I give her a wink before I let my tongue meet the head of the mic. Her taste hitting me hard, honey and something that is exquisitely her. Her cheeks blush, but she smiles. The crowd roars as I turn around, no doubt they just saw me lick the microphone.

Bristol claps her sticks together, counting us in to Riot Act. I start singing and playing the guitar, doing both proving more and more difficult with each show, but I refuse to have someone stand next to me that isn’t Alex.

The girls in the front row try to garner my attention, throwing panties, bras, and

phone numbers, but I don't pay too much attention to them. I smile and shoot a few of them winks, but the woman I want is sitting behind me, and I can taste her anytime I want right now.

Two songs later and I'm pouring sweat, my fingers move quickly against the neck of the guitar, and I'm trying to perform for the crowd too. At the last notes of Nightmare, I let out a long exhale. My heart pounds against my chest from exertion.

"Pistol, pistol, pistol!" The crowd screams as I take a deep breath and turn towards the girl in question, and she smiles brightly. Her face is drenched in sweat too, and like me, she pants but the smile holds.

"Damn, I need to up my cardio." I laugh into the mic. A few women offer to help, and I suppress a laugh when Pistol shoots them a glare.

"Alex's song, Alex's song!" Comes from somewhere in the back of the crowd. Panic rises up as I look across the audience to see who's saying it. I use my hand to block out the sun that's shining directly in my face. I search for the voices, but the people are being too loud to pinpoint the exact location. I squint into the sun and scan as many rows as I can see. The amphitheater we're playing at is tiered so I can really only see the front and some of the second row.

"Rhyit, look." Boston says into his mic, pointing to a group of people several rows back. I follow his hand to their location as they continue to chant. More people have joined in on the request, and the theater is booming in unison asking for Alex's song. If I didn't think I'd be mauled to death, I would hop down from this stage and seek them out. An audible gasp leaves Bristol as she spots the group too. I continue searching for a moment and then I spot them. My jaw hangs as I find them. There's at least ten people in the back wearing Alex's promo shirt with his face on it, and a low rumble leaves my chest as I stare at them. When I get to the last one, I notice his hands are in the air so I follow them up and and up. Alex's smiling face sits on a

cardboard cut out, standing at least five feet in the air. I feel like someone has punched me in the gut as all the wind is knocked out of me. I stare at my friend for a moment, is this what Larkin meant when he said the fans wanted to mourn with us?

“I miss him too, guys.” I sigh into the mic and pull my bottom lip in between my teeth as I feel the familiar burn at the back of my throat. A collective aww sounds throughout the theater, and I try to fight back the tsunami wave of grief that floods me. “Alex’s song isn’t done yet, I’m sorry.” My chin wobbles as the apology leaves my lips. “You’ll get it, I promise, I just don’t-” I stop, clearing my throat from the ball that sits in the back, “know when.” Tears burn against my eyelids, and I look away from the crowd, not wanting them to see me breakdown. I miss him so much, we’ve tried to carry on as usual but none of this is business as usual. None of this is normal. He would love to see all these people out here to support him, but instead he’s gone and all we can do is mourn him. My heart cracks audibly against my chest at the thought. I stand in the middle of the stage, my back turned towards the audience and stare at the spot he would be. The same place he always stood, with a happy smile and totally random guitar riffs.

“How about Pistol?” Pistol says into the mic near her drum kit, her voice soft as she tries to keep her emotions at bay. My eyes widen, tears stinging at my lower lids, she just offered to play a song that hurts her to hear, for me. At the mention of Pistol, the audience cheers, and I mouth a ‘thank you’ to her. She nods, acknowledging my appreciation for her, for saving me from the emotional onslaught that comes with Alex’s song. I know this song is just as hard for her, and the fact that she so selflessly offered it up means more to me than she will ever know.

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I turn around slowly, the fans cheer loudly as I wipe the last of the moisture from my eyes with the sleeve of my leather jacket. I place the mic in the stand and pull the sleeves of the jacket, allowing it to fall from my body. Women hoot and holler, catcalling me from their places in the front row.

“I know how much you guys love Pistol,” I say into the microphone, “so how about you guys sing it too?” I ask. I hope that hearing her lyrics sung back to her will help her heal. If she can see how much the world loves this song, she might be okay with it, okay with me.

Bristol taps her cymbals with the tips of her sticks, a twinkling sound playing through the speakers. Boston gives one long thrum against the soundboard of his bass, and I step up to the mic. The opening chords of Pistol are my favorite, it was a promise to her that I would always be waiting for her. One of the few promises I was able to keep.

The crowd sings them back to me, and I smile against the windscreen, my heart heavy and weightless at the same time. Alex isn't here, but in his absence, we got Bristol back. What I wouldn't give to have him here with us today, but sometimes in tragedy comes rebirth. I continue to sing the song that caused heartache and destruction in my love life but also caused an entire fanbase to fall in love all over again. I chance a look at Bristol behind me as the crowd sings the chorus of our love song, her eyes are huge and her chin wobbles as the people in the front rows sway with lighters in the air.

I start on the next verse, but a soft voice behind me beats me to it. Her voice carries through the entire theater, and the fans lose their minds at the sound of her voice not



mine. They're screaming the lyrics back to her, and I turn around fully to see tears spilling down her cheeks as she sings about a love of a lifetime. She closes her eyes for an extended amount of time, the tears that were dammed against her lashes breaking free to pool at her chin. The jumbotron on the other side of us zooms in on her gorgeous face as I turn back to the crowd. She's still singing, her sweet voice like a salve to an open wound. I can feel like large cracks in my chest slowly start to mend like fresh cement. The cracks and crevices filling with every word she sings.

Her voice stops just in time for the chorus, and I put the mic back to my lips and belt out the chorus to the song that used to put me in a tailspin of destruction every night. The fans sing the words back to me, and I've never been more thankful to be living this life than I am right now.

"That was in-fucking-credible." Andy says as we exit the stage. Her face is lit up like a Christmas tree. "Holy shit!" she bounces on the balls of her feet, excitement racing through her.

"Thanks!" Bristol says as we make our way back to the tent. I want to grab her, and hug her, and ask her what she thought of the song, but Andy is talking a mile a minute about how incredible we were and how Pistol is one of her favorite songs, and she watched us play it in Seattle.

"You do realize that Steve is going to make you guys do that every night now, right?" She says, and at the mention of Steve, my entire body alerts.

"What does Larkin have to do with any of this?" I ask, my tone calm but agitation courses through me.

"My dad will absolutely want the fans to see that every night, it was a definite crowd pleaser. I had no idea you had pipes like that. Kudos, Pistol." She smiles sweetly. Her dad? Steve Larkin is her dad? Motherfucker.

“Steve is your dad?” Bristol asks, disgust marring her face.

“Yup, as soon as I get a tour under my belt I get to go work in the office.” She nods like it’s no big deal. “I just graduated from Berkley.”

“Snake in the grass.” Boston mumbles just loud enough for me to hear. I nod my head agreeing with him.

“We won’t be doing that every night, it was agreed before I even came on tour that Pistol was off the setlist.” Bristol spits.

“Yeah,” Andy starts, her mouth twisting in mischief, “you already broke that agreement by performing it.”

“Fuck that.” I groan. “We’re not performing it every night. That’s not happening.”

“He won’t like that,” she spits. “This performance is going to be front page news, it wouldn’t be fair to the other fans if you didn’t do it again.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to me if I had to do it every night.” Bristol spews as venom laces her tone.

“If we have to do Pistol every night of this tour, I will not finish Alex’s song. I can promise you that.” I reply angrily. Her face tightens, and her lips purse as she processes what I just said.

“Then don’t.” She shrugs. “It’s not me you’ll disappoint, it’s the fans.” She pushes out her lip in mock sadness before she flounces away, off to ruin someone else’s day no doubt.

“Fuck.” Bristol exclaims, kicking the pavement with her boot.

“We don’t have to do it, ‘Tol.” I try to calm her down. “What are they going to do? Kick us off the tour, I doubt it. They’d lose hundreds of thousands of dollars if our names aren’t on the playbill.”

“I can’t do it every night. This was a one-off.” She sighs, her head falling back to look at the sky above us.

“We won’t.” Boston says, “it was a damn good show, but like you said, it was a one-off.”

We all nod our heads in agreement as we make our way back to the tent.

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“Hey, so,” I start, my hand finding the back of my neck as nervousness courses through me, “would you, I mean, if you don’t have anything else going on...”

“Spit it out,” she smiles from her seat on the couch in the bus.

I blow out a breath, “want to go out on a date with me?” I cringe. Why am I so flustered? It’s just dinner and drinks. I sound like a fifteen year old kid trying to get a date for spring formal.

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“I’d love to.” she answers, a full smile on her face.

“Really?” I ask, disbelief apparent. She nods, the smile holding on her face.

“Cool, we have an extra night in Austin so we’re getting a hotel room. Or rooms I should say, you’ll have your own.” I’m rambling. Why am I rambling?

“Perfect,” she replies.

“I also wanted to thank you for what you did for me earlier. You didn’t have to do that, but I appreciate it more than you know.” Sincerity laces my tone, as I hold her stare.

“You would have done the same for me,” she says. “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“How you can go days or hours without thinking about the weight of the grief and then all of a sudden you’re drowning? And it doesn’t have to be some big thing like their face right in front of you, it could be something small, like finding a guitar pick or an old sweatshirt that throws you out to sea.” Her eyes hold mine, and I nod my head agreeing with her. The door to the bus opens, breaking the moment as Boston appears at the top step with a cheesy smile on his face.

“You guys wanna come out and play a bit?” He asks, holding the almost empty bottle of tequila and his bass.

I look to Bristol as she nods, “hell yeah.” She hops up from the couch and takes the open bottle from Boston’s hand. The glass rim hits her lips, and as she takes a long pull, I watch her, mesmerized. She pulls the bottle away from her mouth and ticks and shivers from the taste. She hands the bottle to me, and I follow suit, taking a long drink of the clear liquid.

“Let’s go!” Boston says as he exits the bus, his massive form disappearing as I try to swallow the saliva that pooled in my mouth from the shot.

Hours later, we’re all sitting in a circle with some of the best rock bands in the world. Bristol is making conversation with a drummer from another band who only has one arm; they’re talking shop about the struggles and sound differences of each type of kit. The guys we met in LA are playing a Led Zeppelin song, pretty ballsy considering the guys who actually perform the song are sitting about fifteen feet away. Every band has played a song that has meant something to them through this journey, and I was humbled as hell to have two of our songs played.

“Rhyit, will you play something for us?” The guy with the top hat we met in LA asks. He has a strange stage name, Stab or something like that. I nod, grabbing the electric guitar from his grasp. Everyone in the circle stops their conversation when they see the guitar in my hand, the amount of respect they’re showing me right now means more than they’ll ever know.

“This one isn’t out yet, it’s one I’m working on, so don’t be judgy bitches, okay?” I laugh as my fingers find the right chords.

“Goodbyes aren’t supposed to be easy,

I know this much is true.

I didn’t think it would be so damn hard saying goodbye to you.

I know they say it'll get easier as the time passes by,

but I'd kill for one more day with you by my side." I sigh, as the crowd goes completely silent.

"I know you're in a better place, I know there were a lot of things that you couldn't take,

but please know that down here, there isn't a soul who could fill this space" I strum lightly on the guitar as the chorus plays out in my head.

"So this is my last goodbye, I won't say that this is the last time I'm going to cry.

I'm sorry I didn't see the writing on the wall right in front of me," I stop, the words clogging in my throat.

"I wanted you to grow old, I wanted you to thrive, I wanted to see you at the altar with your someday wife. I wanted you to see just how much you meant to me." Bristol sings lowly, her voice carrying so much sadness that several members of the group sigh loudly. Those aren't the words I wrote, they're hers. I look over to her, and she smiles sadly at me.

"Without you, this life doesn't seem as vibrant, the lusters almost gone.

This isn't my last goodbye, this is just my longest I'll see you at home." Boston sings, surprising all of us, his voice a deep rumble compared to Bristol's softness. Sniffling brings me back to the moment, I look up from the guitar to see almost every member of the circle in various stages of crying.

"That's fucking beautiful, man," one of the guys across from me says, his voice choked up. The rest of the group nods their heads, and the tone of the evening just

became somber. That wasn't my intention so when someone else reaches for the guitar, I let it go willingly. The blonde haired man sighs loudly as he starts in about roses and thorns and a lost love. The song reminds me of Pistol with heartbreak instead of love. As he sings, I find Bristol, her eyes already trained on mine, the glassiness of them showing how much she's had to drink, but there's sadness there too. What are you hiding? What's all the secrecy for? The lyrics that she sang point towards a form of guilt, but guilt for what?

## Chapter 24 Bristol

The walk back to the bus from the group is silent, all three of us lost in our thoughts as the sun starts to break through the horizon. I think about the song, and how we each brought something different to it, the stunned silence of the group and the emotion that it holds.

"I think we should add those lyrics to the song," I say as we approach the bus, "it added so much to it, I can record it with you if you want."

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“I have to agree.” Boston says as he reaches for the door handle to the bus. “It was kick ass.”

Rhyit nods his head, not looking at either of us as he stares at the sun coming up.

“Well goodnight, or I guess good morning.” Boston announces with a laugh as he takes the stairs, the bus sways from side to side as he walks to the bunks in the rear.

“You good?” I ask once we’re alone, he’s been quiet since the song, and that was hours ago.

“Yeah,” he sighs, moving towards the bus. “Your lyrics were damn good,” he compliments me.

“Thank you,” I say, tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

“But, there’s something I can’t figure out.” He stops at the base of the steps to look at me. “How did you know that he wanted to settle down? That he was hoping to find someone?”

I try to keep my face neutral, but inside I’m panicking, red alerts are going off in my brain and if he could read my thoughts he would see a giant LIE stamp imprinted against my skull.

“Isn’t that what everyone wants?” I reply, going with the safest route possible.

“Yeah,” he says, pursing his lips in confusion, “I guess that’s true.” He nods, and I



lower my guard a little bit. “You never told me what the last thing he said to you was.” Rhyit states, and my guard comes all the way back up and around me like the Berlin Wall.

“I’d have to think about it,” I say noncommittally. “I’m sure it was something along the lines of be good.” I smile, but the lie tastes worse than before. What was ash on my tongue has become hot tar, and I feel the need to swallow it down before I spit out the truth.

“Think about it,” he says. “It might be good for the song. We could try and add it in there.” He starts up the stairs to the bus, and I mentally kick myself. I should have told him the truth weeks ago, but now the lie has become its own organism, breathing and feeding on everything in sight. I scrub a hand down my face and let out an exasperated sigh.

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I love Texas, always have and probably always will. The people here have southern charm and manners, they treat you with respect, and once I even had a nice older woman at the grocery store ask me if I’d eaten that day. You don’t get that kind of charm anywhere else but the south.

I stand in front of the mirror in my hotel room, the dark blue dress I’m wearing hits mid thigh and makes my eyes look even more blue. I stare at my reflection, my blonde hair is blown out and sits perfectly teased against my scalp, my signature red lipstick coats my lips but not my teeth, and my eyes are rimmed with thick black eyeliner. I look like myself, but today, I don’t feel like myself. Andrew should be here any minute to pick me up for our date, and the need to blurt out the truth hangs around my neck like a noose. I know he knows that I’m hiding something, I know he was awake when I confided in Boston a few nights ago about it, and I know he’s going to figure it out soon. I should just tell him, get it over with, and move on, but

the truth now is almost more difficult than keeping up the lie. He's not going to take it well, he's not going to look at me the same, and I want him to look at me the way he does now. My mind travels back to the last date we had, the strange way he acted, the nervousness he exuded with every conversation... and then the blow up. The song, the fight, and the aftermath all play in my head on repeat. Knocking on the door of the hotel room stops my internal panic, and I take one last look at myself in the mirror and blow out a breath. Let's hope this date goes better than the last one.

When the door opens, a large bouquet of roses is the first thing I see. They're beautiful and fully bloomed. I stare at the petals and reach my hand out slowly to touch them. The silkiness of the petal between my fingertips reminds me of the single red rose I placed on Alex's casket at the funeral. The rose was falling apart by the time I set it down because of the amount of times I ran my anxious fingers across the petals.

"You look beautiful." Andrew says as he hands the bouquet to me. He's dressed in a suit, yes a suit, with a black jacket, white button down shirt underneath, no tie, and a watch on his wrist. Andrew is dreamy in his leather pants and jacket with cuff bracelets and a wallet chain, but Andrew in a suit is something to behold. The white shirt underneath has the top two buttons undone, showing off the top of his pistol tattoo. His long hair is tied back, and he smells delicious.

"You look really handsome yourself." I reply, a shy smile playing on my lips. He smiles back, and we stare at each other for a moment.

"You ready to go?" he asks, clearing his throat.

"Yeah, let me grab my purse." I spin around and grab the handbag from the entry table, placing the roses on the same table for later. Setting the strap on my shoulder, I follow him as he backs away from the door. We take the elevator down to the lobby in silence, neither of us knowing how to handle this situation.

“Do you remember our last date?” I ask, looking over at him as the steel car stops at the lobby.

“Yeah,” he smiles, “I fucked that one up royally.” He laughs lightly. “I had a ring, ya know? I was going to ask you when we got back to the house. I had the whole thing planned out.” Hold. The. Phone. What?

“Are you serious?” I hiss. “How did I not know that?” I’m flabbergasted, I had no idea. He was nervous all night, but I thought he had too much in his system to sit still, much like every other night around that time period.

“Well,” he says, pushing the hotel lobby door open for me, “the night kind of blew up as soon as we got in the car. I guess it worked out the way it was supposed to.” He nods to the valet, and the suited man throws him a set of keys to a car that is worth more than my parents’ house. A black ‘69 Chevelle sits against the curb, my eyes dance across the classic muscle car before they land on Andrew, he’s holding the passenger door open for me.

“You coming?” He asks, excitement lighting up his face.

“Not yet I’m not.” I mumble to myself as I step towards the car.

“Watch your head.” He says as I lean into the seat, the leather feels like a cloud under my thighs, and I take a second to admire the beauty of the vehicle before Andrew opens the driver’s door.

“Grab that lever there, would you?” he asks as he sits down. I look up to see a lever behind the sunshade, I pull the silver wand and the top breaks free. He uses his arm to push the top of the car into the compartment and behind the back seat.

“Okay, who’s car is this?” I look around.

“It’s a friend’s, but don’t worry he knows I have it.” Andrew smiles as he puts the stick in first gear, he punches the gas and lets the clutch out, and the tires squeal loudly as we haul ass out of the parking lot.

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My hair flies all over my face, and the carefully applied eye makeup is running as the wind causes my eyes to tear up, but none of that matters, I hold my hands above my head letting the breeze run through my fingers. I haven't felt this alive in years. The car slows as we reach what I assume to be our destination, and Andrew pulls into the deserted parking lot as another man in a suit rushes outside to greet us. This place is fancy with a capital F, the black exterior of the building with low lighting and palm trees surrounding the entrance remind me that we aren't broke kids with nothing to our names anymore.

"Where is everyone?" I ask as he drives into the circular driveway for valet. My head whips around to see if anyone else is here, but there isn't a single car in the parking lot.

"I- uh, rented it out," he smiles sheepishly.

"This whole place?" I guffaw. "That must have cost a fortune."

"You're worth it." Insert swoony heart eyes here. "And you haven't been out in public with me in a long time, babe, people are ruthless. I didn't want us to be interrupted." My chest tightens with how sweet he's being, the amount of thought he must have put into this night.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice sincere.

"Mr. Denson, Ms. Graham, thank you for joining us this evening, we have set up a wonderful table for the two of you overlooking the lake. Juliet will be your server, and she will take exceptional care of you." The man in the suit says as he greets us at

the doors.

“How does he know my name?” I whisper to Andrew as we walk into the restaurant.

“You’ll see.” he winks, and I blush, moving my tangled mess of hair to one side of my head.

“Hello Mr. Denson, we’re excited you’re here,” the brunette waitress practically purrs. Her eyes rake over Andrew like he’s a full size meal, ready to be devoured. She’s pretty but young. “Follow me,” she commands, our menus grasped within her palms. We walk through the empty restaurant hand in hand. The way his hand feels in mine just feels right, I can’t explain it, it’s like coming home after being away for too long. The table is in the middle of what looks to be a small greenhouse overlooking Lake Austin, I love it as soon as I see it. Flowers and plants grow around the windows, and the fresh air off the lake makes the whole room feel serene. I stop just before we walk through the opening to the room, taking in the entire view, cataloging this into my memories forever. I spot a title above the door in bold gold lettering ‘Graham’s Garden,’ how cool that he thought of this, to take me somewhere that has my name in it.

“Look, it has my name in it.” I exclaim, pointing up to the words above the door. The waitress clears her throat, and Andrew smiles politely at her.

“So it does,” he says with a rueful smile. Once we reach the table, he pulls out my chair for me, I take a seat and the waitress places the hardback menus on either side of the table.

“Can I get you both anything to drink?” she asks, her hands clasped in front of her.

“What would you recommend?” I ask. I love signature drinks that you can only get at certain restaurants.

“The Poisoned Petals is delicious if you like vodka,” she smiles. The name might be my new favorite thing.

“I’d love that.” I reply cheerfully.

“I’ll have a whiskey neat, please.” Andrew says, smiling at me.

“This place is so cool.” I say, turning around to look at everything. “Oh look at the bar.” I gasp, taking in the old school mafia feel to it. There’s two tommy guns crossed above the beer taps, and the entire back wall is covered in most wanted pictures from the twenties and thirties.

“Yeah, Boston went a little nuts with that one.” Andrew laughs.

“Oh my gosh, he’s been here too? Do you guys come here a lot when you’re not on tour?” I ask, hope in my tone. I would love to come back here sometime.

“Yeah, we come here fairly often.” Andrew says, clearing his throat. He picks up the menu and starts inspecting it. The black hardback menu has a rose pattern across the front, and I recognize it immediately. ‘Pistol in the Petals’ is written across the front of the menu in red cursive, and the picture ingrained behind it is the same one he has on his chest. Graham’s Garden is the room we’re sitting in, I just ordered a Poisoned Petals drink, and the gentleman at the front knew my name....

“Do you own this place?” I narrow my eyes at him even though he can’t see me over the menu.

“Boston and I do, yeah.” He says, not putting the menu down to look at me. I grab the top of the menu with force, ripping it out of his hands. His eyes meet mine, and I can tell he’s fighting a smile.

“You could have told me, I just looked like an idiot getting excited over my last name on the outside of this room.” I spit as embarrassment floods me. He probably thinks I’m a slow learner.

“But your face was so cute, I thought you would get it once you saw the menus, but you didn’t, and then you ordered a drink with your band's name in it. I’m sorry, it was adorable.”

“I don’t like looking like a fool.” I pout.

“You didn’t. Seriously, it was really sweet.” His large hand covers mine on the table, and the anger I was feeling slowly starts to dissipate. I pick up the menu and scan the options for dinner.

“Speaking of not looking like a fool, are you ever going to tell me what secrets you're hiding?” He says, nonchalantly.

“It wouldn’t be a secret if we both knew, now would it?” I quip, a sweet smile placed on my face.

“True. I will find out though, you know that, right?” he says, pulling my menu down so he can look at me. I nod slowly, I know he will, but I would like to stay in this little happy bubble for a little while longer.



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“I’m not that mad about Pistol anymore.” I sigh, putting the menu down. I’ve put a lot of thought over these past few days into this topic, and I can’t be mad anymore when it makes so many other people happy.

“Really?” Andrew quirks an eyebrow up at me.

“Really. I saw the way the fans reacted to it. The love they felt through it. It wasn’t just yours to give to them, but I can’t hold onto this hurt anymore.” I answer honestly.

“So you forgive me?” He asks, hope laces his tone.

“Not entirely, but yeah, for the most part.” I nod. “There was a lot of hurt that happened all at once in that time frame.”

“I know,” he agrees, and for the first time in I don’t know how long, it feels like we’re finally on the same page. Hope blooms in my chest, for us, for the future.

The waitress returns with our drinks and takes our food orders before scurrying away again.

Past

The waitress drops the food off and we both dig into our plates silently. He’s fidgety as he sits across from me, sweat beads at the back of his neck as he cuts into the massive steak on his plate. His eyes dart from me to the door and then back to me. What the hell did he take?

“Are you okay?” I ask after I finish my first bite. The shrimp scampi is delicious, but the company is making it turn sour.

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine. Are you okay?” he replies quickly. His pupils aren’t saucers so I know it wasn’t coke but pills maybe. He’s a hot nervous mess across from me.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. We continue to eat in silence, and when the waiter comes with our check, he hands her the card and practically follows her to watch her finish the task. I watch him incredulously as he signs the receipt and tugs my arm to take me back to the car.

“What’s the rush?” I ask. “It’s not like our parents are going to be pissed if we miss curfew.” I joke. We’ve lived in our own apartment, the four of us, for a few years now.

“No rush,” he replies as his hand finds my thigh. I revel in his touch and sit back against the seat. The radio announcer tells us that a brand new song has just landed in his lap, and we’re going to want to hear this one.

“Turn it up.” I tell him, waiting impatiently for whatever new song just came out. He turns the small knob on the radio up as the first sounds of the new song play over the speakers. I watch through the side window as the storefronts of LA pass us by when his voice surrounds us through the speakers. The opening lines of the song we recorded last month blast through the speakers, my sigh can be heard over the sound of the drums, and I feel my heart crack open. I slowly turn my head, not wanting to believe it, not wanting the betrayal to lay bare between us. His face is stone as the radio continues to play our song, the one we said would never be for anyone else. The one we were going to get married to, the only thing in our whole lives that would be private. He promised.

“Please tell me this is a joke.” I scream over the sound of his singing. “Please tell me

this is a cassette.” My voice breaks and bone crushing hurt washes through me.  
“Please Andrew!!”

“I’m sorry,” are the first words out of his mouth as a broken, strangled sob wracks through my body. I feel like my lungs are caving in as my stomach bottoms out.

“I love you, Pistol,” plays through the radio, and it feels like my entire soul is being ripped apart, the frayed edges giving way as I hear my sticks my drop in the background of the song.

“Pull over!” I shout as saliva fills my mouth, my stomach turns as the song continues to play. The car sways to the side of the road before coming to a stop. I wrench open the door and get out as quickly as possible, the seatbelt holding me back from exiting. I click the stupid button and it releases. Once I’m out of the car, I vomit my entire dinner all over the sidewalk as sobs wrack my body. I can feel the hot tears against my cheeks as I let the pain envelope me. A warm hand lands on my shoulder, and I spin around quickly, ready to eviscerate the person the hand belongs to.

“You promised.” I say, eerily calm for the torrent of emotions running through me.

“I know, but you have to-” He starts, but I cut him off before he can give me an excuse.

“You promised!” I yell, my voice echoing against the deserted storefronts.

“Larkin-” he starts again, and if I could I would punch him so that he could feel even half the pain I’m feeling right now, I would, but I won’t.

“No. This was a choice that you made. You did this. You fucking ruined this!” I scream, wet tears coating my cheeks again. “I could deal with the drugs, I could deal with the women.” I take a deep breath.

“What wo-” he starts again, but I don’t want to hear his voice right now.

“But this, this just pushed me to the end. They say that when life tells you it’s time to let someone go and you don’t, life will allow them to hurt you to the point that you have to let go. So that’s what I’m doing, I’m letting you go.” I cry, my voice breaking as a long sob cracks against my chest.

“Bristol, wait. Let’s talk about this, it wasn’t my choice.” He cries, tears coating his cheeks.

“You always have a choice, Rhyit. You just chose wrong.” I reply, moving away from him. He grabs my arm to spin me back around.

“Don’t fucking touch me.” I spit, anger racing through me at lightspeed. He removes his hand from my arm as his face falls. “If I did this to you, you would hate me.” I seethe, my teeth chattering with anger. He bows his head as the ramifications of his actions hit him with full force.

“I’ve gotta go.” I say, moving further away from him. “I can’t look at you right now.”

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“Bristol, wait!” He yells as I continue walking. I chance one last look at him before I turn the corner, but he’s not watching me. He’s looking at his palm, his face marred with pure agony.

### Chapter 25 Bristol Present

The town car comes to a stop outside the Austin outdoor arena. I’m sandwiched in between Boston and Rhyit in the back seat, and my thighs are already sweating from being so close together. Why men can’t sit with their legs partially closed, I’ll never understand.

The driver gets out of the car and rounds the front of the car to open the back door. Once the door is open, I practically crawl over Rhyit to get out. The drive over here was silent, all of us lost in our thoughts. Rhyit got the call this morning that Larkin would like us to play Pistol for the remainder of the tour. The New Mexico show was a huge hit with the paparazzi, and the news outlets have been playing the clips nonstop. Rhyit attempted to tell him no, but Larkin wasn’t having it. He threatened to pull the next album and instead release a greatest hits album, which in this industry is a knife to your career. If you aren’t releasing new material, you can become irrelevant. Not that they actually would, they’re fan base is massive, and they would wait for new material, buying up the greatest hits album by the hoards. Rhyit pleaded with Steve, but he still held tight on the reins. At the end of the conversation, Rhyit asked me if I would be okay with it, and while I wasn’t, I nodded anyway. I was lying naked in his bed, with nothing but a sheet on, what was I supposed to say? No.

“Plight, sound check in 15,” Andy says from the side of the pavilion we’re sitting under. Her cheery smile pisses me off. She called daddy dearest and told him about

the show, I guarantee it. She wanted to make a good impression and probably raced back to her hotel room to go over every detail with him. I have to remind myself that she doesn't know the story behind the song, the reason I'm so hesitant to play it. Very few people do. The breeze blows my hair as I stare out at the sea of small pavilions. These are normally picnic shelters, but today they are housing some of the most legendary rock bands of the last decade. I look around, seeing all the men and women who graced my walls as a teenager and fan girl for a moment. It's amazing that we're here, that these people respect us and the music we make enough to congratulate us when we get off stage, to offer a joint or a beer when we're walking by.

"Hey, Pistol." A woman with long black hair says as she walks past me, her band just coming off stage. I look at her and goosebumps ride against my skin. Holy shit, she knows my name. She knows who I am. This woman is famous in her own right, but her and her band are the stuff legends are made of.

"Hey!" I say back, feeling my eyes widen.

"Knock 'em dead out there. Can't wait to hear Pistol again." She says with a smile, and my seventeen year old self squeals and does a dance inside my head.

"Will do." I say timidly.

"God, I love that song." She says to her bandmates as she walks away, they all nod their heads, agreeing with her. Cue internal screaming.

Rhyit passes her on his way back to the pavilion and gives her a smile before making his way over to me.

"Do you know who that was?" I squeal.

"Yeah," he nods, "do you?" He smiles at me, of course I know who it is, but he's

teasing me. The stupid smile on my face must give it away.

“She said she can’t wait to hear Pistol, and then she turned to the guys and said how much she loves the song.” I repeat the entire exchange for him.

“I told you, people love it.”

“I know you did, I just didn’t believe you, or didn’t want to believe you.” My hand slaps my bare thigh, and I lean back in the fold up chair.

Boston ambles up to us from who knows where, his face a picture of happiness.

“Guys over there have some stuff if you want.” He says, kicking Rhyit’s chair. I look over at him, I don’t know if he’s still using. I haven’t seen him do anything since that night in LA, but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been doing it behind closed doors. I would be none the wiser.

“Nah, I’m good.” He answers, I notice a slight tensing of his jaw. Boston looks at him like he just said he was Peter Pan, and he’s not going back to Neverland.

“For real?” Boston asks with wide eyes. Rhyit’s eyes snap to Boston, and his mouth draws tight. “Alright, you guys ready for sound check?”

“Yup.” Rhyit answers quickly, hopping up from his chair and walking towards the backstage area. My eyes find Boston’s, and we both have the same what the fuck expression. I stand from my chair and follow after Rhyit, his black T-shirt disappears into the sea of people working behind the scenes. Once we reach the side stage area, I spot him leaned up against a speaker with a cigarette against his mouth and a pissed off scowl. He takes a long drag of the cigarette in his hand as he sees us approach.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask, taking the cigarette from between his two fingers. I don’t

smoke very often, but I like it sometimes, the calming effect of the nicotine helps with stress. I put the filter up to my lips and inhale. The taste of the tobacco fills my mouth as I exhale the smoke into the air.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He replies, grabbing the smoke back from me. He places the tan filter against his lips, and I can’t help but appreciate how sexy he looks right now. Tight black jeans, a white T-shirt, and a fuck around and find out scowl on his lips around the end of a Marlboro. This is rockstar porn. His dark hair falls in front of one of his green eyes, and I have to physically stop myself from pushing the strands away from his face to see both of his eyes. He watches me as he takes another drag, the cherry at the end of the cigarette glowing red against the dark lighting. He exhales heavily, the smoke rising between us as he passes the cigarette back to me. The familiarity in this moment brings a small smile to my lips. We’ve been here before, doing this exact same dance.

“What’s the smile for?” He asks as I take a drag.

“Some things never change.” I smile wider.

“And others never stop.” He sighs but smiles anyway. “You sure you’re good with this? Pistol I mean.”

I think for a moment, the word no sitting at the tip of my tongue, but I nod instead, exhaling the smoke into the air between us. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.” I say with more confidence than I feel. He nods his head at me as I flick the cigarette to the ground, squishing it beneath my black boot.

We walk out to the stage, the arena is empty right now, but in a few hours it will be flooded with people, this show along with the next four shows are completely sold out.



“I think we should try Alex’s song.” Rhyit says as soon as we’re all ready to go.

“Is it ready?” Boston croaks, his voice holding disbelief. “We’ve never played that one together.” He looks to me, and I shrug as I twirl my sticks.

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Rhyit shrugs and lifts his hand, giving it a wobble in a kinda motion.

“I don’t think that’s a song we should do half-cocked.” Boston says.

“Well...let’s practice it real quick and see what we think.” Rhyit says, looking from me to Boston.

“What do you want for music?” I ask as he turns around.

“Whatever you feel like. You wanna jump into a power band? Go for it.” He nods to Boston. “You wanna beat the shit out of your drums, go for it.” He nods to me. “Let’s let it all out, guys. Everything you’re feeling, let it out. If you feel like singing along, jump in. This song won’t be the same every single time and I think..” he stops, his head tilting up to the scaffolding above us, and he lets out a long exhale, “I think that’s how he would have wanted it.”

I nod my head, so does Boston. “I’ll follow your lead.” Rhyit says into the mic. My head swivels to Boston, and he shrugs giving me an ‘I don’t fucking know’ look.

I count us in, my sticks clacking aggressively before dropping into a combination that echoes loudly across the empty arena.

“Goodbyes aren’t supposed to be easy.” Rhyit starts as Boston gives a low bass strum.”I know this much is true.” Doom doom, Boston gives a quick down beat as I tap against my heads with minimal force. The three of us fall into a rhythm as Rhyit belts the lyrics out into the microphone. I pound on my drums, letting every ounce of hurt and grief and guilt out of my body. Sweat pours down my face as I close my

eyes and imagine Alex's face the last time I saw him. The anguish he held in his eyes causes me to push myself harder, my arms moving so quickly there's no way in hell I'd be able to duplicate this combination. I hear Rhyit's guitar and Boston's bass, but they feel far away, like I'm underwater, and I can hear the music at the surface, but I can't get there. I let the emotion pull me under, sinking further and further into my own pain that I don't realize the guys have stopped until my drums are the only sound I hear. A low cry rings out, and I don't realize it's me crying until I stop. My eyes flutter open, wet tears sit on my cheeks as I lift my head. My arms stop moving, a muscle cramps in my neck, and as I look up I find both boys staring at me with mixed concern. A small crowd has formed in front of the stage, other musicians coming to see what all the commotion was, no doubt.

My chest heaves from exertion, I gulp the air that I deprived from my body.

"That was amazing." Rhyit says, his eyes wide. The crowd in front of us claps and whistles their approval, and I blush, embarrassment creeping through me. I got lost in the music, in the emotion.

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"You need to tell him." Boston says as we sit under the pavilion. His blue eyes hold mine, compelling me to spill the truth to Rhyit.

"I know," I whisper, "I just don't know how."

"Words are a good place to start. You could write him a letter, or a song, maybe? Hey Rhyit, I know you missed me, I'm so sorry I let Alex-" I clamp a hand over his big dumb mouth before he blurts out more information.

"Shut the hell up." I hiss, I feel his tongue hit my palm as his eyes narrow at me. Gross. I pull my hand away from his mouth and wipe the spit on his T-shirt.

“Why are you perpetually eleven years old?” I roll my eyes, Boston has been the goofball of this group for as long as I can remember. He and Alex would come up with the worst practical jokes.

“Listen, I’m going to be twelve next week.” He smiles and winks. I rub my temples, exhausted from his theatrics and the weight of the truth I know I need to spill.

“What if I never tell him?” I say perking up.

“What if he finds out in ten years and hates you for it after you have wombmates and a white picket fence?” Boston quips, cocking his head to the side. “Just fucking tell him, he’s probably not going to be that mad, I mean there’s nothing you can do about it now. He’s probably only going to be mad that you didn’t tell him sooner.” He nods, agreeing with himself.

I push my hair to one side and rub my sweaty palms together. I scan the pavilions looking for Rhyit, there’s so many damn people here that I stretch my neck hoping to at least see the top of his head somewhere. I hop off the chair and stand on it to get a better look around. You would think it would be easy to find a tall guy with long black hair and a red bandana tied around it, but that seems to be the fashion choice of the day. I scan the crowd looking left and right but don’t spot him anywhere. I shuffle my feet on the canvas chair to turn around to scan the other side, but as I cross my ankles to spin around, my boot catches the part of the chair you normally use for back support. I wobble once and then twice, my balance faltering. I grasp the air hoping to grab on to something to balance myself. My stomach lurches as I start to fall towards the pavement, my body tenses, bracing for impact, but...it never comes. A low oof leaves the person whose arms I’m wrapped in.

“We gotta stop meeting like this, babe.” Whispers a familiar voice. I open my eyes, realizing I’m not dead or broken. Bright gray blue eyes meet mine, Alder smiles at me as he holds my body bridal style with one arm under my head and the other

holding up my knees. I stare up at him, thankful he saved me from hitting the ground.

“Thank you.” I whimper. “You can put me down now.” I giggle. Why am I giggling?

“I kinda like you like this.” He twirls me around once before placing me back on my feet slowly. I feel a smile pull at the corners of my mouth when he sets me back down.

“I was just coming over to say hi when I saw you start to fall. I hope I didn’t scare you.” He says softly, pushing his blonde hair out of his face.

“No, you’re fine. Thank you for catching me. That would have hurt.” I laugh, nervousness bubbling in me.

“I saw you at sound check earlier, you fucking killed it.” His voice raises an octave. “I’ve never seen anyone play like that, it was incredible.” Heat flushes my cheeks at his compliment.

“Thanks, I kind of got lost in the beat.” I bite the dead skin on my bottom lip.

“I could tell, you looked like you were in the zone.” He smiles at me, and butterflies flurry in my stomach.

“Yeah.” I agree, pushing my hair to one shoulder.

“Alder, right?” Boston says coming out of nowhere. I forgot he was here, wait, why didn’t that asshole catch me? He holds his hand out for Alder to shake, and the look on Alder’s face is comical. It’s a combination of adoration and respect.

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“I’m a huge fan.” He blurts taking Boston’s hand. Young musicians are my favorite people, I think to myself, they haven’t been jaded by the industry yet, and everyone they meet is someone they’ve looked up to. We were like that once, meeting our idols and crawling up the chain, link by link, but somewhere along the lines, we became oblivious to the people surrounding us and the knowledge they hold.

“I guess I don’t need to introduce myself,” Boston chuckles, releasing Alder’s hand. The boys fall into familiar conversation, Alder stays next to me as they talk. His shoulder touching mine has goosebumps rising against my skin. SHUT IT DOWN, Graham! This boy is not yours, he is too young, too whole, and way too nice.

My forte is apparently bad boys who play with my heart and do terribly delicious things to my body. I imagine sex with Alder, sure he’s cute, he looks like he’d be attentive, but I need more than that. I need the guy who’s going to push me past my breaking point, the guy whose hand around my neck makes my knees weak, and the guy who has no problem fucking me like I mean nothing to him. Rhyit’s face flashes in front of my face, his cocky smirk and quick head tilt when he knows he’s got me—hook line and sinker.

As if my thoughts conjure his appearance, Rhyit steps through the swarm of people and enters the pavilion. I watch for a moment as he steps under the shade and lifts his black Raybans. His eyes are zeroed in on Alder, me, and the place where our arms are touching. His lips purse, and I can see the muscle in his jaw tick as he takes a step forward announcing his presence without saying a word. Boston looks away from Alder to Rhyit, who’s still staring holes into Alder’s arm. Feeling the tension in the room, I side step, attempting to create some space between Alder and I.

Alder notices my movement and then the fact that Boston is no longer looking at him but behind him. Alder turns slowly to see who joined the party.

“Rhyit, hey man! How’s it going?” Alder welcomes him.

“Good, you?” Rhyit answers, his jaw never unlocking.

“Pretty good man, caught your drummer here before she hit the ground.” Alder pulls me into his side, and I want to warn him that my...Rhyit is a possessive asshole and will knock his two front teeth into his face.

“Really?” he asks, his focus jumping to me as I wiggle my way out of Alder’s hold. He isn’t asking Alder though, he’s asking me.

“I was looking for you.” I say. “I was standing on the chair and my foot got caught. Alder caught me before I hit the ground.”

“Well I guess it was a good thing he was here.” He smiles, his white teeth on display. “Come here.” He says lightly, it’s a request not a demand, but I kind of wish it was a demand. I extricate myself from Alder and take the two steps to Rhyit. When I’m within grabbing range, he pulls me into him, my chest hitting his stomach with a resounding oof, and his arms wrap tight around me.

“I’m glad you’re safe.” He murmurs, and the guys go back to their conversation, but I don’t miss the jealousy that passes over Alder’s face. Once they’re distracted, Rhyit leans down to my ear, I can feel his hot breath against the thin shell of my ear.

“It makes me murderous to see someone else touch you,” he hisses. “You’re mine, baby, always have been, always will be. You’re going to have to let your puppy go to a new family.” His teeth graze my earlobe, and my knees go a little weak. The puppy comment reminds me of the night in LA where I threatened to let Alder...nevermind.

“But what if I wanted a puppy?” I mock pout against his chest; he smells divine, and I inhale deeply.

“Puppies need training, baby, they have a tendency to stray and run away. I’m all trained up, best in fucking show.” I can feel his smile against my ear.

“Yeah, your chewing shit up and ending up at the neighbor’s days are all behind ya, right?” I laugh.

“For you? Absofuckinglutely.”

## Chapter 26 Rhyit

Bristol’s naked body molds to mine as she sleeps with her head on my chest. Her steady breaths are helping to lull me into sleep, but I’m still amped from a hell of a show. Once we were done with the show, Bristol and I ran back to the bus and immediately got down to business. I didn’t even have my belt off before she was pulling me out of my jeans. I forgot what it was like, what she was like, after the adrenaline spike of a show. I probably won’t get to go shirtless for a little while, the claw marks making themselves known even as we lie here. Actually fuck it, I don’t care if the whole world knows I get to have dirty hot sex with one of the hottest women on the planet. Leaning slightly, I grab the cigarette pack and the lighter from the side table. My hands shake as I try to pull the cigarette from the pack, and it pisses me off.

I’ve been clean from everything except alcohol since LA. 18 days ago, I took a line not realizing it would be my last. I took a pill, not realizing it would be my last. I think it might be better that way though, when you don’t realize it’s going to be the last time you do something you don’t put nearly as much pressure on yourself. The first few days were rough. I didn’t realize how often I was using, until she pointed it out to me; I didn’t realize how much I actually needed it, until she pointed it out to



me. Bristol.

The disgusted expression on her face when I took that line in LA was a start. I never want her to look at me like I'm less.

The downside to not using everyday:

I.feel.everything.

Every emotion I've locked away for years, and yes, I do mean years, is front and center. The hurt from my parent's divorce. Oh hello, childhood trauma. The hurt that I caused Bristol. Is that a knife in my heart? The one night stands. The people I didn't care enough about because I was using. Stab. Stab. Stab. Losing Alex was like putting a bullet through me, but I used so much at that time that all the memories are murky. I wasn't lying when I told Bristol I don't remember the last conversation I had with him. I don't. And that's something I have to live with.

I thought I needed to be loaded to function, that getting high or drunk was the only way I could be creative or social.

Bristol's hand moves across my stomach as I light the cigarette. I inhale deeply as her palm settles against my heart. I'm afraid I may have exchanged one addiction for another. I've been in a committed relationship with drugs for a while now but watching her sleep against my chest, her hand pressed firmly against my heart, beats any high I've ever felt. There's not a damn thing that compares to this. I could have every inch of her body touching mine, and I'd still want more, still try to pull her closer to me. I'll always want more of her.

We haven't really talked about it, but I want to tell her that I regret letting her leave, that I missed her, and that it's been her all along. I wouldn't say that I waited for her but had all of this not happened the way it did, and she called me up out of the blue, I

would have dropped everything for her.

The past still hangs above us, but it's less like a storm cloud and more of an annoying mosquito. You can swat it away, but it's still hanging there, buzzing annoyingly in the background.

And then there's whatever secret she's holding with both hands. She has a death grip on a truth, and I don't want to pry any harder than I have, but I wish she would open up to me about it.

Bristol sighs in her sleep and contentment washes over her face, and I can't keep this inside any longer. The words burn on the tip of my tongue, the need to express them, to tell her how I feel, how I've always felt, sits on my chest like a weight balloon.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“I love you, I’ve loved you all along.” I whisper into the darkness. A thin sliver of moonlight peaks through the curtains of the bus.

“I love you too, Alex.” She mumbles in her sleep, and a serrated knife plows through my chest.

### Chapter 27 Bristol

The sun peeks through the slice of curtains on the bus, the light hitting my face directly. I roll over in bed, hoping to get away from the light. When I throw an arm out searching for Andrew, I find the other side of the bed empty. I lift my head up from the pillow, and with one eye open, I search the room, but it’s empty too. I grab the oversized T-shirt from the floor and a pair of sleep shorts, pulling them up my thighs. I grab the ties for the drawstring as I make my way out of the bedroom. Rhyit and Boston sit at the small table with coffee cups and the ever present notebook between them. I raise my arms over my head and yawn, letting the sleep leave my body.

“Is there coffee?” I ask, startling both of them. Boston motions to the coffee pot with his mug, and I grab a cup from the cupboard before filling it with the liquid gold. Once the cup is full, I take a seat on the couch directly across from the small table, tucking my legs under my body as I stare out the window. The landscape of the south zooms past us, and the deep green foliage of Louisiana slowly creeps in with every mile.

“Sleep well?” Rhyit asks, not looking up from the notepad. I nod, but he can’t see me.

“I had the strangest dream.” I announce, still looking out the window. The dream playing on repeat in my head; it’s not my normal dream or nightmare, whatever it would be described as.

“Oh yeah?” Rhyit asks, leaning back in the seat, his attention now solely on me. “What about?”

“I was running down a hallway, but I couldn’t get to the exit door.” I say, turning to look at him. “I kept running, but the door kept getting further away.” It felt like I was running through a maze I couldn’t get out of.

“Was anyone with you in the dream?” Rhyit asks, narrowing his eyes at me. Jeez, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

“Yeah.” I reply, keeping my answer as vague as possible. I don’t want to tell him who was at the exit, who was waiting for me there.

“Who?” He spits, his fist hitting the table.

“Settle down, man.” Boston chastises, finally entering the conversation.

Rhyit clears his throat, shooting a glare to his friend. His attention returns to me, and I feel like I’m on trial for something, but I haven’t the vaguest idea what I’ve done.

“Who was in the dream with you?” Rhyit asks, his voice calmer than before.

“You were there.” I reply, giving a brief pause, but Rhyit’s eyes narrow again. “So was Alex.”

“What was Alex doing there?” Boston asks over his coffee cup.

“I don’t know he was just there, he’s been in my dreams a lot lately.” I confess, but Rhyit isn’t having it. He looks furious, his features stoic as his jaw tics.

“I bet he has.” Rhyit sneers. “Was something going on with you two? Before he died.”

I purse my lips but say nothing. I hold his stare as he cocks his head to the side waiting for an answer.

“I can’t believe you would even ask me that.” I hiss. “You of all people.”

“Well, you can’t tell me what the last thing he said to you, you said some weird shit to him at the funeral,” he lets out an angry exhale, “and you said you loved him last night in your fucking sleep. I’m not a genius, Bristol, but something isn’t adding up.”

I said I loved him? I don’t remember that. I panic and look to Boston, who gives me a ‘just tell him’ look. The bus rolls to a stop, and I breathe a quick sigh of relief. I want to bolt out the door and run as quickly as I can away from this conversation. The door opens just as I’m planning how I’m going to live my life on the run, but I grimace when I realize I don’t even have shoes on. Andy’s blonde head pops into the front of the bus.

“Hey guys, mind if I come in? I have some super exciting news.”

“Sure.” I say just as Rhyit tells her we’re busy. She looks between us, not sure who to listen to, but she must decide it’s safe because she bounces further up the stairs to the bus and parks her ass on the couch next to me. Rhyit stands near the table and eyes her like a piece of moldy bread.

“Sooo....” She starts, letting the vowel sit stagnant for a moment, and I assume the pause is to build anticipation, but it’s only building annoyance. “I talked to Steve last

night,” she pauses again, it’s weird she calls her dad by his first name, “the last stop on your tour will be Seattle.”

You could hear a pin drop, it’s so silent in the room. No one says a word as we stare at her, the reasoning behind us playing in Seattle is clear, but I don’t believe Paperweight realizes the ramifications of what us playing in Seattle will have.

“Fuck no.” Rhyit says, his tone holding no room for question.

“It wasn’t a question.” She snaps, her voice like a razorblade against glass.

“Then it was a suggestion, and I suggest you run back and tell daddy dearest that it’s a hard fucking no for us.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“Why are you being so difficult?” She stands from the couch and takes a step closer to Rhyit. My hackles rise, she shouldn’t be that close to him and should she touch him, I’m going to jail.

“I’m not being difficult. You’re offering suggestions, and I’m telling you where to shove them.” He replies, leaning back against the table, giving her a cocky smirk.

“It wasn’t a suggestion or a request. You will play in Seattle in two weeks.” She spits.

“Then it was a threat.” Boston sneers. “We don’t take too kindly to threats.”

“Yeah, we don’t negotiate with terrorists.” Rhyit quips, and I have to run my tongue against my teeth to keep from smiling.

“I don’t understand what the big goddamn deal is,” Andy huffs, “you were all there together a few weeks ago.”

“The Plight was there almost a month ago. With Alex. I’m not performing there. I will not show up. You can fine me or pull my contract, I don’t fucking care, but it’s not happening.” He yells the last part, his voice holding so much anger I cringe.

“The fans are going to be really disappointed.” She says, twisting her lips. “With Bristol being in Seattle that night too, it would have been amazing to see all four of you together.” She turns to me, her expression malicious. Like father, like daughter.

“Bristol wasn’t there.” Rhyit says, his focus moving from her to me. “She was at her wedding in LA.” He shakes his head, looking back to Andy like she’s an idiot.

“Nope.” She pops the p. “I saw her with my own two eyes, standing on the side stage, mouthing the words to Pistol in her wedding dress. It was seriously so romantic.” She clutches her chest theatrically, but I can’t focus on her. My head tilts up to find Rhyit staring at me, his mouth opening and closing multiple times, like he wants to say something but can’t form the words.

“Andy, you need to leave.” Boston commands. Andy’s head rushes back and forth between us as we stare at each other, me biting the skin at my bottom lip, searching for the words, and Rhyit who’s searching for something, anything to say, and his face wracked with hurt and something that looks a lot like anger.

“Oh shit, you didn’t know?” Andy says, her eyes widening at the realization.

“Fuck, leave Andy!” I yell as I try to keep the tears at bay.

“Sorry.” She murmurs as she walks to the front of the bus to leave. Once the door closes behind her, Rhyit takes a deep breath, and I follow his motion.

“This whole time...” he whispers like he can’t believe it. “This whole time you’ve preached about the fucked up things that I’ve done, making me feel like a piece of shit for hurting you years ago, when you had this up your sleeve. You’re a fucking hypocrite. I’ve owned up to my mistake, I’ve never pretended to be something I’m not, but you; you’ve pretended this whole time that you are the victim, when you just might be the fucking villain.”

His words hit me like a semi truck, knocking me back against the cushion of the couch. “You don’t know why I was there.” I whisper, not recognizing my own voice right now. Maybe I am the villain in this, maybe I was never the good guy.

“But you were there! You saw Alex before he died, I KNOW YOU DID!” He screams, his voice rattling the windows of the bus, and I recoil, not in fear but in self



preservation. I did. I saw him. I spoke with him. I want to crawl into a hole and not come out. I push my lips together almost painfully as my chin wobbles.

“Rhy, don’t talk to her like that.” Boston says. He’s attempted to stay out of this altercation, but Rhyit screaming at me has apparently pushed him.

“You knew too, so fuck you, Boston. I asked you, I asked you in New Mexico, and you told me she’d tell me in time. When?” He snaps back to me. “When were you going to tell me? Next week? Next year?” He stops, realization dawning on him before I can say anything. His eyes close, and I can feel the pain radiating off of him. “Never. You were never going to tell me.” His eyes flood, and I want so badly to get up and hold him, but I can’t. He’s too angry with me.

“Let’s talk about this, Andrew, please.” I say.

“You had a choice, you made the wrong one.” He says, his eyes cold and unforgiving. “You would hate me if I did this to you.” He’s using my own words against me, the same words I said to him years ago on a deserted street. I stand from the couch, the consequences of this secret exploding horrendously in front of me. I used to hope that one day Rhyit would feel even an ounce of the pain I felt from his betrayal, but looking at him now, I can tell he got more than his fair share. Guilt floods me as I stare at him, guilt for not telling him sooner, guilt for the last words I said to Alex, and guilt for betraying Rhyit’s trust worse than he did mine.

“I’m so sorry.” I sob, voice cracking. “I should have told you I was there.” My chest caves, and my throat burns as I try to tell him.

“You asked me the last conversation I had with him, and I was honest with you. Fuck, I’ve been nothing but honest with you.” His hand finds his hair, and he runs his fingers through his scalp aggressively. “What was the last thing he said to you?”

## Chapter 28 Bristol Past

The plane descends through the gray clouds towards the runway. SeaTac has one of the scariest runways I've ever seen, water and a cliff on one side and I-90 on the other. I close my eyes as the landing gear clicks open below my feet, the falling feeling makes my stomach twist, and I wish I wasn't still in this stupid dress. When I boarded the plane in LA after figuring out where they were playing tonight, I didn't have a bag or any extra clothes so I've been dealing with people's stares and hushed whispers for the past two hours. This isn't normal attire, I know that, but damn, give a girl a break.

Tires screech as the plane brakes. I sigh when both sets of wheels hit the tarmac, and the plane decreases the speed. When we finally reach the gate, I practically tackle the other patrons on the flight to get to the door. It doesn't help that the skirt to my dress could hide small children inside it, and it hits everyone with an aisle seat on my way through. The stewardess' eyes widen when she sees me barreling down the center aisle, and she quickly unlatches the door to the plane and lets me out.

"Thank you." I mumble, wondering for the thousandth time what the hell I'm doing here. I shouldn't be here, I know that. I shouldn't have run away from my own wedding, I know that too, but sometimes you do crazy things for...love.

When the song came on earlier, I knew it was fate. It hurt like a mother fucker to hear those lyrics, my lyrics, but I couldn't stop the torrent of different emotions than hit me. Longing being the one that held tight, the one that outshined all the others. Not betrayal or embarrassment, not the pain that was inflicted; no, it was missing him, needing him like a damn limb. I need to hear him tell me we're over. That there's no coming back from what had already happened, that he's over me. I need to feel that pain slice through me so I can close that chapter of my life. That's the trouble with the unfinished parts of your life, you don't know what could have been, what could still be or what will never be. It's easy to say you're over somebody if you can't see

them, but it's hard to tell someone 'you're not what I want anymore' when they're right in front of you.

I trudge through the airport, catching strange looks all the way through before making it outside. The loading and unloading lanes are packed with cars, and I internally groan. I don't have time for this. I walk to the end, searching for a cab but coming up empty. A guy in a purple windbreaker suit stands at the very end, leaning against a yellow cab. The color combination is striking, but I walk over anyway.

"Can you take me to the Kingdome, please?" I ask. He looks up from the comic book he's reading and has to do a double-take.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“That’s a fancy dress.” He smiles, his yellow teeth on full display.

“It is.” I reply, looking down at the gown. “Can you take me please? I’m in a hurry.”

“Sure, hop in.” He says, closing the comic book and rounding the front of the car. I open the back door of the cab and lift my dress to shove it inside first.

Traffic in Seattle on a Saturday night is its own version of hell, but we finally make it to the entrance doors of the Kingdome. I throw a few bills at the driver and rush to the front gates.

“Ticket please.” The young girl asks, popping her bright pink bubble gum. She’s reading some gossip magazine and doesn’t even bother looking up at me.

“I’m with the band.” I say. I’m not, but I was.

“Yeah, right, come back when you’ve got a-“ she stops, her head finally lifting up from the article. “Holy shit!” She yells. “You’re Pistol!” she screams, drawing even more attention to me than this dress already does.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “I really need to get in there,” I plead. She pushes a little button on the desk and the rotating bars in front of my unlock.

“Go! Hurry!” She yells, knocking me out of my thoughts. I push through the bars and enter the massive building

I run through the halls towards the arena opening, the music is so loud I can’t hear

myself think, which is probably a good thing right now.

I run towards the doors, opening them with every ounce of strength I have. They slam open, and I take the side stairs leading down to the main stage.

Rhyit stands on stage, his eyes trained on the front row as he sings the last verse of the song. I watch him shoot someone a wink, and my heart sinks a little. He walks across the stage, Alex and Boston get further into the music as they all dance around with their instruments. Memories of us doing this exact same show, night after night, hit me. I watch as Rhyit grabs a bottle of Jack Daniels from the bottom of the mic stand and takes a long drink, the audience cheers uproariously as he finishes the shot. He hands the bottle off to Alex as he exits the stage. Not wanting to waste anymore time, I take the remaining steps towards the backstage area. Three burly men guard the door leading backstage, all of them in black with security written in yellow across their breast pocket. I step up to them, not recognizing any of their faces.

“You know the rules, sweetcheeks, no one backstage until after the concert.” One of the guys says, looking over my head towards the crowd.

“I know but-“ I start, but the guys sighs heavily.

“The guys will be done soon, and you can go back if they pick you. Although, I think with that get up, they might run for the hills.” He laughs and elbows one of the other guards. The other guard looks me up and down and then laughs loudly.

“Yeah, I would have gone with something a little less desperate.” He says through his chuckling.

Something inside me snaps, and I take a step closer to him. This asshole is making fun of me for no reason other than what I’m wearing.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” I ask, my voice calm, but the venom is there just below the surface.

“Should I?” He raises an eyebrow, his laughter dying out.

“Pistol Graham.” I enunciate, saying my name slowly so the meatheads understand.

“Holy shit, like the ‘Pistol’?” Guy number three asks, using air quotes like it’s not a real name.

“Yes, the ‘Pistol’,” I use his air quotes back to him. “Where’s Marv?” I ask, and three faces blanch at my request.

“He’s here.” Guy number three says, nodding vigorously. This guy isn’t super smart, but at least he’s helpful.

“Call him please.” I ask, sweetly.

“You can just go on back.” Guy number one says, he’s trying to save face right now.

“Nah, I’d like him to escort me.” I reply. I’m not normally a diva but today, today I’m going to pull out the rockstar card.

“Marv, can we get you to the floor entrance please?” The guard says into the radio connected to his chest.

“Thank you Seattle! It’s been so fucking real! See you in ‘86!” Rhyit’s voice booms around me, and I start to panic. He’s leaving..if I don’t get backstage soon, I’ll miss him, and this whole charade will all be for not.

Seconds later the door opens and Marv exits, and from the pissed off scowl on his

face, he's not happy that he had to be called down here. His face softens when he spots me, and a full grin appears on his face.

"Bristol, my god!" He exclaims, taking a few steps forward before pulling me into a hug. His large arms wrap around me, and I have to fight back the tears. Marv was with us for our first tour and has been with the band ever since. "It's so good to see you." He says against my hair, my face is plastered against his chest.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“It’s good to see you too.” I say, my mouth smothered by the black button down.

“What’re you doing here?” He asks, his thick Boston accent coming out harsher than I know he meant it to.

“I need to see him, Marv.” I plead. “I have to.”

“Are you sure?” Marv asks. “I don’t just mean for you but for him too. He’s spiralin, darlin’.”

I nod against his chest. “I have to,” I whisper.

“Okay.” He sighs, letting me go, but his eyes widen when he takes in the dress and the stupid headpiece I’m still wearing.

“What’re you wearing?” He asks with a chuckle.

“It’s a really long story.” I tell him as we pass the guards and head into the corridor that leads backstage.

“Boys give you trouble?” he asks, referring to the guards out front.

“They teased me about the dress, but they weren’t too bad.” I reply honestly. “They didn’t know who I was.”

“It’s been a long time, Bristol.” He says sadly. I forget sometimes that I didn’t just leave Rhyit, I left everyone. The friends I made, the crew, and the rest of the band



were left in the dust when I left.

“I know,” I say guiltily. “I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye.”

“It’s okay, darlin,” he nods as we take the hallway, “but it’s so good to have you back.”

“I’m not back.” I say, defensiveness rising in my tone, “I just need to talk to him.”

“You know what I mean.” We stop walking just before the door that leads to the side stage. “Go through there. You can see him on stage for the encore, and then you’ll be able to get the green room, okay?” He asks.

“I’ll be fine.” I say, placing a hand on his large shoulder.

“It’s not just you I’m worried about.” He exhales as he takes a step back from me. “Be good, kid.” He says with a wink. It’s the same thing he always said to me, and the familiar response brings a small smile to my face.

I step through the open door and walk through the dark towards the stage. I spot Rhyit on the other side of the stage talking to Garrett. He takes the water bottle from him and takes a long drink, the muscles of his neck protruding as he drinks. He pulls the bottle away from his mouth and dumps the last of its contents on his head. Water droplets hang on his dark hair as he takes a long breath, and his body sags tiredly as he grabs the head of the Fender.

When he turns around from facing Garrett, all the air in my body feels like it’s been sucked out. He stands in front of me, but luckily, he can’t see me behind the black curtain. He’s beautiful. I forgot, okay maybe I pushed it out of my memory, how stunningly handsome he is in person. His dark hair and bright green eyes, chiseled jaw and sharp cheekbones. He’s a work of art. I also see the effects the drugs have

had on him. He's not nearly as bulky as he once was, while still being a big guy, he used to have a lot more muscle. The thought makes me angry and sad in equal proportion. I feel my knees go a little weak when he smiles at the crowd, his Fender clasped in one hand. I watch as he walks to the center of the stage and takes a long deep breath, the exhale can be heard against the windscreen of the mic, echoing loudly across the crowd.

"I know you guys know this one." He says into the microphone, I can't see the crowd, but I can hear them. They cheer loudly and start to chant the title of the song, my stage name, over and over again.

Alex runs a pick against the strings of his guitar as their drummer counts them in. "This one is for the girl who got away," I take a step forward, hoping to see more of him as he starts the opening verse to Pistol. I peek my head further around the black curtain, and the people in the front row spot me. I hear their loud screams as Rhyit continues to sing. I take a step back out of sight and watch them—watch him. He sings this song with so much sadness it feels like a bullet piercing my chest. That was not the intention for this song, for these lyrics; they were supposed to be happy, like happily ever after level happy, but instead, they sound like a breakup song, full of regret and pain. I mouth the lines of the chorus from memory, the words might as well be imprinted on the back of my eyelids, they're the only words I see constantly. Boston and Alex play, and Rhyit walks around the front of the crowd, grabbing the fans hands as they try to touch him. He stops in front of a girl with a tube top and shorts, her blonde hair spilling over her shoulders and red lips pulled high in a smile. He's singing to her. HE'S SINGING OUR SONG TO MY LOOK-ALIKE.

I take a step back, my ears ringing, my heart in my throat and my stomach swirling.

What did you think he was going to do? Stand in front of thousands of people with an I LOVE Pistol shirt on. No, you idiot, he's moved on. He's one of the most famous rock stars on the planet, you think he isn't out getting his dick wet every night. Jesus.

My thoughts race as I walk backstage. I don't want to hear the rest of the song; I don't want to watch him swoon over another girl.

The large hallway leads me in the direction of their green room, the band name taped to the door as I approach. My feet feel like they weigh a hundred pounds each, and I could easily sleep for a week. I turn the knob to the door, and I close my eyes after I take in the room. A plate sits in the middle of the room completely filled with cocaine, lines are chalked up on either side, ready and waiting for them to do when they're done. A small bowl sits on the side table next to the couch filled with pills of every shape and color. Liquor bottles are scattered across the room in varying stages of full.

Bile burns up the back of my throat as my mouth fills with saliva, this is the life they're living without me, this is what they do now that I'm not here. I take a few steps back, pulling the heavy door with me, and as I click the door shut, I sprint to the bathroom. I swallow the saliva pooling in my mouth continuously, praying to whoever is listening that I don't puke on this dress.

When I spot the woman in a dress symbol, I push the door open as quickly as possible. I see an open stall as the door closes behind me and heave the contents of my stomach, or lack thereof.

Once I'm finished, I sit down on the floor of dirty backstage bathroom in a designer wedding dress, veil still firmly placed in my stupid updo. My butt stings against the cracked tiles and the tulle, but I don't feel the pain there as much as I do against my chest. I've been playing the 'what if' game with myself for years, the result always ending in me leaving anyway. What if I stayed and they only got worse? What if I stayed, and they all resented me because they weren't living their best rockstar lives? But there is a major difference between the what ifs and seeing it in person, the life they're living is different than the one they lived with me. We drank and we used drugs, but never to an extreme. The scene I just witnessed was over the top.

I stand up from the ground, my legs wobbly underneath the dress, and I brush myself off and move to the mirror near the door. Once my hands are washed and I've cleaned the eyeliner runs from under my eyes, I take a deep breath. You can do this. Just go talk to him. With a new resolve, I step out of the bathroom and into the hallway as roadies move equipment and people mill around in the hallway paying me no mind even though I'm dressed like bridal Barbie.

A tattoo I've seen a thousand times catches my eye towards the end of the hallway, dark hair covers some of the letters, but I would know it anywhere. Tiny pieces of hope fill me, he's here, I can talk to him, I can tell him everything I need to say. When I reach the door he disappeared behind, I can hear a woman giggling on the other side, but I pay her no mind, she's probably with her girlfriends enjoying the after party with the band. I knock lightly, praying I don't walk in on someone shooting up or worse. I don't think I could handle it right now. When there's no answer, I grip the knob of the door and push. The door gives way, and the familiar tattoo sits only mere feet away from me. He's so close I could touch him. His leather pants hang low on his hips and long tanned legs are wrapped around him at the waist. Her giggle carries around the room as he leans forward and says something in her ear, the muscles in his back tighten as he leans further forward. His pants fall further down his hips, and I can't breathe. A small whimper leaves from somewhere deep inside my chest, and they both stop and start to turn around. I'm pretty sure the whimper was the sound of my heart breaking further, but I can't be sure. I back away from the scene before they both turn around, praying neither one of them spotted me spying on their obvious private moment.

Once I'm back through the door, safely away from them, I lean against the side of the wall in the hallway. I place my hands above my head, hoping the motion will open the airways in my throat that closed at the sight. I gulp the air, waiting for the burn in my chest to subside but it doesn't, the feeling intensifies to the point that I'm not sure I'll ever breathe normally again. Hot tears coat my cheeks as my chest continues to collapse into itself. Such a freaking idiot, I think to myself.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Defeat hits me like a brick. I came all the way here to talk to him, and I didn't even speak up. Embarrassment—defeat's less-pretty cousin—floods me. I shouldn't be here, I should have just internalized my panic attack, and I'd be sitting at my reception right now. Instead, I'm standing in a dirty wedding dress at a rock show with tear stained cheeks and a wheeze in my lungs from lack of oxygen.

People pass me, none of them paying too much attention to me, but they eye the dress and continue walking. I push myself off the wall finally, not wanting to be here when they get done like some desperate woman. I walk with my head down towards the exit; I feel like a kicked puppy, my emotions ranging from anger, to embarrassment and...finality. This feels final in a way I never thought possible. I may never see him again. I stare at the floor as I walk through the hallway, praying no one recognizes me, being social right now feels akin to pulling my eyelashes out one by one. Life's funny in a way that one moment you think you're all put back together and over everything that's ever hurt you, and the next, you're crying down a crowded hallway because the person you thought had broken you beyond repair came back for seconds.

I try to remind myself that he didn't know I was here, he has no loyalty to me other than some promises we made years ago, and I was about to get married to someone else. But it still fucking hurts. Staring at the cracked cement below my feet, I don't notice someone coming out of the open door next to me, and my face makes contact with a broad chest. A gasp of surprise leaves my lips at the fact that I didn't make a face imprint on their white shirt. I take a step back and start to apologize for being so damn clumsy, but a pair of striking blue eyes meet mine, and the apology I held on my tongue feels like it needs to come out for an entirely different reason. Alex stands in the doorway looking at me like he's seen a ghost. His blonde hair is damp like he took a shower or his sweat has drenched the strands. His eyes hold mine for a

moment before a slow smile pulls at his lips.

“Bristol?” He asks rhetorically. “Holy shit! What are you doing here? What are you wearing?” His head bounces from my face to the gown and then back up to me. His smile stays in place though, at least someone is happy to see me.

“I don’t know.” I say sadly, my shoulders dropping suddenly. The weight of everything that’s happened today hitting me all at once.

“Well, you’re wearing a wedding dress, it looks like.” He smiles. “You look beautiful, so that’s an answer to one of the questions.”

“I came...” I start, but I can’t say the words; I can’t tell him I left my wedding to chase after a crazy promise that may or may not still stand. I can’t tell him that I lost my mind and got on a plane to see Rhyit and found him balls deep in another girl. “To see Rhyit, but he’s otherwise preoccupied.” I look towards the floor, not wanting him to see how pathetic I feel.

Alex winces, his facial expression relaying he knows what I mean. I take a deep breath and pull my bottom lip in between my teeth, biting at the skin there.

“He’s never going to change, is he?” I ask finally. “I thought after all this time, he’d be different, but he’s worse.” I croak, my cheeks flame as I say the words. Without hesitation, Alex grabs my arm and pulls me into the green room he just walked out of, shutting the door behind him. He pulls me into his arms, hugging me like I might disappear. I rest my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart. His palm runs up and down my spine, the motion calming me more than it should. Alex has had a crush on me for years, and I’ve always tried to keep him at arm's length, never wanting to lead him on.

“I missed you.” He murmurs against my hair.

“I missed you too.” I reply against his chest, my tears leaving a black spot against the white T-shirt. I pull my head back from his chest and try to run my thumb along the smudge, but it doesn’t do anything but smear more.

“Sorry.” I cringe, looking away from the shirt to look up at him.

“Don’t worry about it, you can use my shirt as a tissue anytime.” He laughs lightly, but it’s then that I notice his pupils are pinpoints.

“Are you okay?” I ask, inspecting his appearance further. He looks like he normally does, but his face is a little thinner than the last time I saw him.

“Never better.” He smiles, and I don’t push further. Alex has always had an affinity for substances. He knows his limits, I remind myself. This isn’t his first rodeo.

“You want to explain why you’re in a wedding dress at a rock concert? If you were looking to make a scene, you definitely got one.”

“It’s my wedding day, but I pulled a runaway bride and ended up here. I needed to see him, Alex.” I reply honestly.

“One lucky guy and one very unlucky guy.” He exclaims.

“Something like that, neither one of them feels very lucky today though.” I sigh loudly. “I really thought he’d be happy to see me, that we could talk and maybe get the ending to this chapter. I just needed to know.” I confess. “I guess people never change.”

“I’d change for you.” He states matter-of-factly. “I’d give everything up for you. Hell, if you wanted me to get a real job and stay home with the kids on a Saturday night so you could go to book club with your friends, I would. I’d give you the world

on a platter if you'd let me."

I close my eyes, letting his words seep in deeper.

"I love you, Bristol. I've loved you all along." He professes his face holding so much hope that I can feel my heart physically break further in two.

"I love you too, Alex. But I gave my heart away a long time ago, and even if he doesn't want it, it wouldn't be fair to love you with only half of my heart. You deserve someone who could love you fully, the way you deserve to be loved." Tears sit just below my eyes as I tell him I'm not worth his love right now.

"Don't change for me, don't change for anyone, stay exactly the way you are right now and let love find you." I whisper, my voice breaking. I stare up at him as I say the words, hopeful that my words will resonate with him. He's perfect the way he is, just not perfect for me. Hurt mars his handsome face as he pulls his plump bottom lip between his teeth and nods slowly. His eyes swim with emotion that he won't let go.

"Can I ask one favor?" He says, his voice a low croak. God dammit, I didn't want to hurt him, I didn't want him to feel this pain along with me.

"Anything." I say, because outside of my heart, I can give him whatever he wants right now.

"Can I kiss you?" He whispers like he's nervous, and his eyes hold mine as I weigh the pros and the cons of a single kiss. It can't hurt him anymore than I already have at this point so I nod.

He steps forward into my space, and his hand lifts up to cup the side of my face. I rest my face further into his palm, and my chest quakes slightly. The warmth of his palm, and the sad smile on his face is almost too much for my already tattered emotions.



His other palm caresses my bare cheek as his lips descend on mine. I close my eyes, and the tears I didn't realize had collected there spill over onto my cheeks. I feel his thumb brush away a single tear, and the movement makes more form beneath my closed eyes. My chin wobbles slightly, and I try to squelch the burn at the back of my throat. This feels like goodbye, like when I see him again it will be with a passing nod not a full blown embrace. He has to let me go after this, he knows it, I know it, but it feels so damn final.

A thousand memories burst between us when his lips finally touch mine, long nights in his grandma's garage, inside jokes from the tour bus, late nights talking about anything and everything. Every late night and long laugh blankets me as tears continue to cascade down my cheeks. I feel the tip of his tongue against my lips, and my first instinct is to pull back, but if this is the last thing I'm going to give him from our friendship, I might as well make it one he will remember. I open my lips to his tongue, and he enters my mouth with what I would call a slow knock, he isn't breaking down the door he's knocking, requesting entry, and the whole motion is so very Alex. I meet his tongue as he slowly slides it into my mouth, a low moan leaning him at the contact. He still holds both of my cheeks in his palms as he kisses me with every ounce of passion I've lacked for the past three years. After a few moments, I pull back knowing that it wouldn't be fair to either of us to keep going.

"Thank you," he says when his eyes open again. "I've always wondered." A small sad smile hits his lips.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“Wondered what?” I ask, the same smile sits on my face.

“What it would be like to kiss you. I could die a happy man now.” He laughs, and I can’t help but laugh lightly as well.

“Hey Bristol,” he says, still holding my face in his palms, “we won’t forget each other, right?” He stares into my eyes, waiting for my answer.

“Never,” I promise as a lump forms in my throat. This is an ending for us, we’re both aware enough to realize that.

“If sometime in the near future you do get a chance to talk to him, go easy on him, babe. He’s missed you more than you’ll ever know. We all have.” With that parting line, he releases my face and pain lances through me. I miss his touch immediately, but not in a sexual way, it’s a comfortable, easy way.

“I’ve missed you guys too.” I swipe a thumb under my eyes to clean up the mascara that has run.

“I know, you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.” He nods, and I have to wonder when this goofball of a boy I used to know turned into a man who’s wise beyond his years.

“Good Luck, Pistol. I’ll be rooting for you to win, always.” He walks to the door and stands there for a moment before opening it. He turns to say something else but thinks better of it and instead gives me a wink, just like he always did. I smile back at him, and he exits the room, the door closing behind him with a loud click.

I want to sink down to the floor, to wallow there for a moment after everything that has happened in the past twelve hours, but I remind myself that no one is going to save me, and I'll have to stand up on my own two feet to get out of here, so I do. I walk out of the room a few moments later, and I survive just like I've always done.

## Chapter 29 Bristol Present

I've lost him again. After our blow up in the bus this morning, Rhyit has been missing in action for most of the day. He's missed sound check, he missed an interview with some local newspaper, and thankfully, he missed me breaking the fuck down in the bathroom of the bus. I should have told him, I should still tell him the whole truth, but he hasn't been around all day for me to talk to, so I sit under the tent in New Orleans and consistently push my blonde hair from one shoulder to the other while I scour the crowd looking for him.

"Plight, 5 minutes." One of the tour guys with a clipboard says as he walks by.

"Fuck, where is he?" Boston groans, leaning back in the chair.

"He'll be here." I say. I'm not sure who I'm reassuring, me or Boston, but it doesn't work. I tap my sticks against the inside seam of my boot and wait anxiously.

Two minutes before we're supposed to be backstage, Rhyit appears out of nowhere on the side of the tent. He's swaying and has his black sunglasses on. He doesn't say anything to me as he grabs a bottle of water from the table in the middle of the tent.

"Ready?" Boston asks, jumping up from his seat.

"Fuck yeah, let's do this." Rhyit yells excitedly, and I lock eyes with Boston from behind Rhyit. We both know he's not in good shape, but there's no way we can stop this shit show of a train from rolling through the station now. I follow the boys as

they talk animatedly in front of me. I don't know what Rhyit is on, and I pray it's just alcohol, but who knows at this point. Once we reach backstage, I stand next to them awkwardly as we wait for our name to be called.

"You and I are going to have a fucking chat when this is over." Rhyit says, leaning over to whisper in my ear. I nod once, but his face doesn't leave the side of mine. He reeks of whiskey, but I don't dare move, I need him to talk to me. I need to explain myself. Warmth slides against the side of my face, and I realize he just licked me as the breeze hits the now wet area.

"Did you lick me?" I ask, running my palm against the side of my face to remove the spit.

"Yupp." Rhyit says through a burp. "I licked you, so you're mine. Those are the rules."

A tight smile leaves me. "Are we going back to playground rules now?"

"It's always been playground rules, baby. Finders keepers." He laughs and removes his glasses from his face, and while his eyes are bloodshot to hell, his pupils are normal and his jaw isn't moving at a speed that would turn rocks into cement. I sigh my relief at the sight. Drunk Rhyit, I can deal with, drunk and coked out Rhyit, I cannot.

"You're a tornado, you know that?" He hiccups. "You have pretty eyes and a pulse, but you're destructive as fuck to everything around you, myself included."

"Is that a compliment? Are you flirting with me?" I narrow my eyes at him teasingly.

"We need to talk after this. I'm still really fucking pissed at you," he says as the announcer calls our name. We walk on stage together, and I take a seat behind my

drum kit. Boston takes his spot up front with his bass, and Rhyit walks to his spot center stage. The crowd loses their minds when he smiles and grabs the mic off the stand.

“Hello New Orleans!” He shouts into the mic. “Who’s ready to fucking party?”

The audience shouts back at him with beers and drinks held high above their heads.

“Now you guys all know my boy Boston,” Rhyit turns towards Boston, and Boston gives a low down beat on his bass. “But can we give a warm fucking welcome to Pistol Graham back on the drums?” I smile broadly and give a quick combo on my drums before twirling my sticks above my head. They all cheer, and I smile harder.

“My god, isn’t she beautiful? No offense to Boston, but she has to be the best looking person on this stage today.” He laughs into the mic, and a blush creeps up my cheeks as the crowd whistles at me.

“I resent that.” Boston says, his voice barely picking up on the mic.

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“You’ll get over it, let’s fucking gooooo!” He carries the vowel in a deep growl. Rhyit is in his element today, this is who he is without me here, who he’s been for the past few years while I’ve been gone. Straddling the line between belligerent and drunk so hard, it makes me wonder if I’m holding them back. If they aren’t going as hard because I’m here.

I clap my sticks above my head, counting us in to Riot Act, and we all play like this is our last show. By the third song of our setlist, sweat coats my arms and face, but I keep moving, keep the beat going.

I look down at my setlist knowing what’s coming but checking anyway. Pistol sits in bright red ink on the paper taped to my mic stand. I take a deep breath exhaling slowly, and I hope that one day I won’t have such a visceral reaction to this song, but today isn’t that day. I keep my head down as I tap lightly on the cymbals, the crowd cheering loudly knowing what’s coming.

“Let’s try something a little different, huh?” Rhyit says into the mic. “Pistol, can you come up here?” He asks, and I would love nothing more than to shove myself underneath my kit and not come out until this song is over.

“Sure,” I say, hopping up from my seat. I gingerly step down from the platform my drums sit on, praying I don’t roll my ankle and flash this whole crowd the hood under my skirt. I approach center stage, and Rhyit pulls me into his side as soon as I’m within grabbing distance. I want to push away from him, to run back to the safety of my drum kit, but the fans don’t need to see the animosity between us right now

“I was kind of hoping we could do Pistol together. Will you sing with me?” He asks,

his smile may look innocent to everyone else, but I know that smile and there's malice behind it. I plaster the fakest smile I can muster and nod my head. A roadie runs on stage and hands me another mic, I mouth a quick 'thank you' to him and turn back to Rhyit.

"Alright, you guys know this one..." he says into the mic, and I feel my heart free fall to my butt.

He starts the first verses of the song, and I feel like I could throw up. My skin prickles with awareness, and I cannot believe I did this to myself.

I hold the mic up to my lips as he ends the first part of the song, and when I open my mouth to sing my verse, no words come out. Rhyit notices my distress and continues strumming the guitar waiting for me, his eyes bounce from me to the crowd, and I chance a look at the crowd. Even in this heat, they're holding lighters above their heads, swaying to the music, a few of them mouthing the words they know are coming.

"I hope you know, I hope you see." I start, my voice cracking slightly as emotion overtakes me. The love all of these people have for this song hits me like a tsunami, wave after wave crashing against the ivory tower of selfishness I've built myself into. There's a couple a few rows back that are holding each other, swaying to the music. We've performed this song before but not like this. I've never seen it from this vantage point. I continue singing my verse, and I look at Rhyit; I don't think he expected me to do this. He probably thought I would say no and walk back to my drums, but I didn't. His voice joins mine for the chorus, and we sing our love song, even with all the scattered pieces of our story laying between us, it's still ours.

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"I need you to tell me the whole story." Rhyit says as I take a seat at the small table in

the bus. “I truly cannot believe you kept this from me for this long.” Hurt flashes across his face as I twist my lips across my teeth.

“You’re not going to like it.” I look down at the table, inspecting the tiny rivets like my life depends on it. I can’t look at him and tell the story.

“I know I won’t. You were there, and I had no fucking clue. Were you at the after party? In the hotel? Jesus, what did you see?” Guilt lulls in his voice. I wasn’t at the after party, or the hotel.

“So, I flew in directly from LA after running away from the wedding. I was still in my wedding dress,” I laugh lightly, but his face remains the same, his green eyes showing impatience. “I got to Tacoma, got backstage in time for Pistol, watched you sing the song to some blonde in the front row, went to the green room, saw the drugs, threw up, and then I saw you walk down the hall to a different room.” I take a deep breath, I’m telling this story at Mach speed to get it off my chest. It’s been eating me alive for weeks now, and I think I’m vomiting words at this point. “I followed you into the different room where you had a girl below you, her legs wrapped around your waist, so I walked out, cried some more, ran into Alex, talked to him, shared a brief kiss, and then I left-“ I stop when his eyes flare.

“Back up, you saw me with a girl, and then you kissed Alex?” He asks incredulously, his head drawn back like he can’t believe it.

“Yes, I was sad, Rhyit. He told me he loved me, and then I-“ I stop, that moment in time flashing before my eyes. “I hurt him. I told him I gave you my heart a long time ago, and he didn’t deserve to have someone love him with only half of a heart.” I run my fingers through my hair exasperated. I’ve held this memory for a while now, alone, that bringing it up brings up all the emotions that come with it. Guilt being the top contender.



“And then?” He asks. “And then what? You just smashed your lips to his, and his heart broke enough with you walking away from him that he went out and overdosed? Trust me, I know that pain, I’ve been numbing it for years.” His tone is biting.

“There’s is absolutely no reason for you to be so fucking crude right now. I’m telling you the story. You wanted to hear it, I told you you wouldn’t like it and voila.” I wave my hands in front of him proving my point. “You’re getting mad.”

“I’m not mad, I’m trying to understand.” He sighs. “What was the last thing he said to you?”

“The last thing he said to me was...that he would be rooting for me, always.” I bite at my bottom lip. “He stopped at the door before he walked out and started to say something but didn’t. Now I’ll never know.”

We both sit in silence for a long moment, memories of that night swirl around me, they’re close enough I feel like I could pluck one and replay it over and over again. Rhyit’s head is bowed as he stares at his palms where they sit in his lap.

“He said something else before that, he asked if we’d ever forget each other,” My nose burns as I remember the look on his face, the pain and unrequited feelings that swam in his eyes. I blink several times, willing the tears away. I clear my throat, hoping my voice doesn’t sound as raw as my throat feels. “I promised him I wouldn’t.”

Rhyit’s head is still bowed, but it moves slightly in a nodding motion. He heard me, he just can’t look at me right now.

“I’m sorry I kept it from you.” I whisper. “I’m sorry I didn’t share my grief with you, and I’m sorry I didn’t let you shoulder some of this guilt.”

“Guilt?” He says, his eyes meeting mine as he finally lifts his head. His green eyes are blanketed with moisture, but the tears aren’t falling down his cheeks. He runs his palms across the front of his jeans, and I notice tiny wet spots where his palms were. He was crying, and instead of looking at me and letting the tears fall down his cheeks, he was collecting them in his palms so I wouldn’t see. My insides crack, he didn’t want to break down in front of me, he doesn’t trust me right now and that hurts.

“I knew he was high.” I sigh. “I asked if he was okay, he told me he was, but I didn’t know he was into hard shit, Andrew. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, neither did I.” He exhales loudly as his head tilts back to the ceiling. He scrubs a hand down his face and wipes the last of the moisture away from his eyes.

“You can’t blame yourself, I saw him every single day, you saw him for twenty minutes. If anyone should shoulder the guilt, it’s me. He was my best friend, and I had no fucking clue.” He throws his hands up in annoyance.

“Maybe neither of us should carry the guilt.” I say with a small shrug. “He was obviously damn good at hiding it. He didn’t want you to know, and if he did, he would have asked for help.”

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“I should have been there to help him. I should have seen the signs, but I didn’t because I’m selfish.”

I don’t know what to say to that so I don’t reply. Rockstars by breed are selfish individuals, they have to be to get to the top. He exhales loudly and scoots out of the bench seat of the tiny table. He stands and walks to the back of the bus, I assume he wants to be alone so I don’t move. He comes back moments later with a shoebox and a notepad. The box is tattered, the cardboard fibers exposed in the corners, and the lid looks like it’s been smooshed about a hundred times.

Andrew grabs a pen from the little cup on the table and flips the page on the notepad. The blank page sits in front of us, and he uses the pen to write the title of the song above the first line.

“The Last Goodbye” is written in his bold scratchy handwriting.

“Let’s finish it.” He hands me the pen and grabs the shoebox sitting next to us. He holds it against his chest like it’s sacred, and I immediately know whatever is in the box is going to crush me.

### Chapter 30 Rhyit

I hold the shoebox against my chest like a toddler with a security blanket. I don’t want to let it go, but if we’re going to finish the song, she needs to see them, needs to feel the way I’m feeling right now. My chest tightens as I pull the box away from me, setting it down in between the two of us. Bristol looks at me skeptically, she’s probably wondering if I’ve lost my mind. I haven’t, but it feels like I’ve lost a limb.

Her confession hit harder than I thought it would. She was there to see me, on her wedding day, because of a promise and a song. I want to tell her that I didn't actually have sex with that girl, we fooled around, but I left the condoms on the bus so we didn't make it all the way to home plate. That's a confession for another time though. Right now, we need to write this song while our hearts are still bleeding, emotions raked over the coals.

"I'm going to write my verses, and then I want you to write yours, okay?" I say, my hand firmly on the lid of the box sitting on the table in front of us.

"Okay." She answers, her eyes firmly trained on the box.

"Okay." I say with a deep exhale as I lift the lid of the box and dump the contents on the table in front of us. A loud gasp leaves her as picture after picture hits the table. The box full, almost to the brim, now sits empty and almost a decade's worth of memories sits between us. Bristol's hand trembles as she picks up a Polaroid of the four of us standing outside Paperweight Records the day we signed our first contract. She inspects the picture and pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. She sets the picture down next to her and grabs another one from the pile, this one of Alex and I playing our guitars. We stand close together, our knuckles almost brushing, and my head is tilted back in a laugh. A choked laugh leaves Bristol as she runs her thumb across the shiny paper. I need her to remember, and I unfortunately need her to hurt to get this song on paper with me. She sets the picture down beside her on top of the other and grabs another from the enormous pile sitting in front of us.

"Okay, give me the pad." She says. I have no idea what picture she has in her hand, but from the sadness on her face, I can tell it has to be one that cut her deep. I slide the pad over to her, and she scribbles furiously. She grabs picture after picture, setting them in the pile beside her. Tears coat her cheeks as her hand moves across the paper. We said it would go verse by verse, but I'm not going to interrupt her now. She's bleeding into the paper, all the emotions we've kept bottled up for weeks, and I wait

anxiously to see what she's written. She cries a little harder with every picture she picks up as more memories flood her. I've looked at these pictures a thousand times, and I can almost tell which one she grabs just by looking at the back of it.

"I lied." She says out of nowhere, her voice breaking the silence between us outside of the scribbling and the movement of pictures.

"About what?" I ask. I know she lied about her history with Alex, but I rack my brain for anything else she could have lied about, and I come up empty.

Fresh tears fill her eyes, and her face screws up in agony, and it takes everything I have not to reach over the table and pull her into me. She holds a picture in her hand as her bottom teeth bite against her top lip. She pulls her lip in between her teeth, and the tears spill over again against her cheeks

"That night in the treehouse." She finally says. "I lied about not loving you anymore."

"I know." I whisper, my voice choked. "I know you did."

"I really thought I didn't. Love you anymore, I mean, but love isn't a light switch you get to turn off and on, it's there, like a lighthouse, always showing you the way home. You're home to me Andrew, and I didn't realize that someone could be your home until you were already gone. I thought home was a place, but for me, it's a person. I'm so fucking sorry it took me so long to come home, babe." She sniffles, and her teeth chatter as a broken cry leaves her chest. I stand from the small table, reaching down and pulling her out of her seat. Her face hits my chest as a low sob breaks free, and I hold her against me, my arms wrapped around her tightly.

"I'll always be your lighthouse, baby." I croak as a wall of emotion hits me too. "I'll be your safe haven, forever."

“Promise?” She asks, her voice muffled against my chest.

“I promise, babe.” I whisper into her hair; I kiss her crown and keep her body flush against mine. The picture in her hand comes into view when she goes to wrap her arms around me. The Polaroid is beat up from the amount of time I’ve looked at it, but the picture is still visible. It’s a snapshot of her playing the drums, her hair flying over her face like an action shot, and I stand in front of her with my guitar, but I’m not playing, I’m watching her, and the love and adoration you see on my face can be felt through the picture. It’s funny that out of the hundreds of pictures on the table, she picked this one. The one I looked at more times than I can count, when I missed her the most.

Her face tilts up when both of her arms settle behind my neck, and she looks at me the way she used to, the way she did before...everything. Her arms pull my neck forward, and I allow her to pull my face into hers. Her lips meet mine halfway, and while she wasn’t my first kiss, she was the only kiss that ever mattered. Her lips move against mine slowly, like she is savoring every second. I realize in that moment that as long as she would let me, her lips would be the only ones mine would ever touch. She pulled away first, her mouth pulling away from mine hesitantly, like she didn’t want to leave but had to.

“Let’s finish the song, then we can finish this.” She murmurs against my lips. My dick outright refuses. With her tits pressed against my abdomen and her tight warm body wrapped in my arms, my dick pouts as she pulls away.

“You’re right,” I sighed, adjusting myself as inconspicuously as possible. We sit back down at the table, both of our faces flushed from the kiss and the emotional onslaught.

“Here’s what I’ve got.” Bristol turns the pad around to me, her handwriting much better than mine. Her lyrics are heartfelt, and they take in mine and Boston’s too. I

read through them again, and then once more, the music coming to me with each read through.

“These are incredible.” I finally say after most of the music comes to me.

“Yeah?” She asks, her face lighting up from the praise.

“Brilliant.” I say, hopping up from the table to grab a guitar. All the instruments are stored on the roadies bus, but I like to keep mine and Boston’s here in the event inspiration strikes. I grab my Fender from the case on the bottom bunk and rip the curtain open to the top bunk. Boston’s eyes are open when the curtain is pulled all the way back. He stares at me with a smirk, and I jump back.

“I’ll be your lighthouse, baby.” He laughs, and I punch him in the arm. He laughs harder as his palm rubs over the shoulder I just clocked.

“You’re a dick.” I laugh. “Come on, we’ve got a song to write.” I start to walk away, but Boston stops me as he hops down from the top bunk.

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“I’m just fucking with you, I’m happy for you guys. Feels like it’s been a long road, but I’m happy for you, man.” He says as he grabs his bass out of the bottom bunk.

“Thanks man,” I say with a nod. “She’s it for me, ya know?”

“Yeah, I know,” he replies with a smile. We both take our instruments to the table where Bristol is sitting. Her hands are moving in rhythm when we sit down, and she’s rereading the lyrics again.

“Ready?” I ask, and they both nod. I take the couch, and Boston takes the seat across from her. Boston spins the pad of paper around for him to read, and I sit back and watch as he reads the lyrics over and over again. His eyes get a little more misty with each pass, and I know the feeling. The lyrics are like a punch to the heart, with a side ass whooping of memories. He exhales loudly, clearly frustrated that he’s getting emotional. Boston isn’t really one to show much emotion, especially in front of other people, but the lyrics hit home in a way that it’s impossible not to feel them in your soul.

“Okay.” He says finally. “I’m ready if you are.”

### Chapter 31 Bristol

It’s well after three in the morning by the time we wrap up the song, I’m exhausted and emotionally drained from singing the heart shattering lyrics over and over trying to perfect them. Andrew holds my hand as we walk down the small hallway leading to the back bedroom of the bus, and even though my mind is exhausted, my body is on fire. I’ve watched him sing for the past few hours, and every drop in voice has sent



a zing to my insides. I'm surprised there wasn't a wet spot where I was sitting after he basically growled the last part of the song. Watching him perform has always been a turn on for me, but tonight, I'm a needy mess, a soup sandwich of want.

"I've got my earplugs, don't forget the condoms, kids." Boston laughs as we make it to the small door.

"Worry about your earplugs," Andrew says with a wink as he pushes us through the door. He closes the door behind him, and I can hear Boston's laugh from the other side. As soon as the door clicks shut, I throw my shirt over my head, the nnnnn comes next, and within seconds, I'm completely naked standing in front of him.

"Someone's anxious[1]." He smirks, taking his time to remove his belt. My patience is running thin enough right now that I could scream when he finally undoes the top button of his jeans. He reaches behind his head and pulls his shirt from his back, and my god, why is that so sexy? He could easily take it off like a normal person, but instead, he reaches behind him, and I bite my lip as another small gush of wetness hits my folds.

"Tell me what you want," he says from the other side of the bed. He stands in a pair of black boxer briefs, and his body is on full display. I can see the outline of his hard cock against the fabric and moisture pools in my mouth. A line of dark hair sits below his navel, guiding my eyes to where they should be headed. His tattoos cover most of his upper body, and I can't wait to inspect the ones he's gotten since I've been gone, but right now, I need him inside me more than I need my next breath. Which sounds dramatic, I know, but I'm panting as I watch him run his thumb across the waistband of his briefs.

"Tell me what you want, baby." He growls, his focus shifting from my body to my face and then back to my exposed body.

I lift my knee and climb up onto the bed, the height of the bed helping the height difference between us. I walk on my knees towards him with a seductive smile on my lips. I know what I want, but I want to hear what he wants because right now he could ask for anything he wanted, and I'd give it to him. When I get close enough to touch him, I run my hand up his chest to the side of his neck. My touch causes goosebumps to scatter across his skin, and I love that I have such a visceral effect on him. With my palm on his neck, I pull him forward and press my cheek to his, his skin is warm against mine, and I revel in the contact for a moment.

"Tell me what you want. Anything you want." I whisper into the shell of his ear, and a shiver runs down his spine.

"I want to wear your thighs as earmuffs while I eat your pussy until you don't even know your name." He whispers back, and this time, I shiver from his words. "And then, I want to push my cock into your tight wet slit so deep that you'll feel me in your lungs, baby. I swear to god I won't stop until your whole body is a shaking, quivering mess. You're probably going to cry, but that's okay, I'll lick your tears." His words send another pool of wetness between my legs, and I can feel my juices coating my thighs.

I move to the center of the bed, and my head hits the pillow behind me as I lay back. I place my arms behind my head and watch as Andrew stalks towards me like a lion getting ready to devour a gazelle. His eyes are fixed on me as he lays down like a sniper. He grabs both my thighs and rests them on his shoulders. He inhales through his nose as his face hovers over my center, and I want to cover my eyes as self consciousness riddles through me.

"You smell fucking delicious." He rasps, his breath hitting my exposed sex causes a shiver to run through me.

"My breath made you quiver, can you imagine what my tongue is going to do?" He

asks as he places open mouth kisses along my inner thighs. I move my arm over my face as the anticipation creeps up. He bites my thigh lightly, and I move my arm away from my face.

“Eyes on me, baby, always on me.” I nod because, what else am I supposed to do? “Good girl.” He says and runs his tongue along my folds. Using his index finger and thumb, he spreads my lips and swirls his tongue against my clit, over and over again. My breathing hitches as he continues his assault against the bundle of nerves. My nipples tighten almost painfully, and my lower stomach muscles start to tighten as I get closer to the edge. My hands find my breasts as I try to calm some of the sensation. It’s too much, feeling what he’s doing to me and watching what he’s doing to me is a heady combination. His tongue changes course and is now making wave-like motions against me. It feels so good I have no idea how long I’ll be able to hang on.

Two of his fingers find my entrance and with his palm up, he moves them inside me in a come here motion. He strokes my inner walls with his fingers while his tongue does devious things to my clit, and I have to watch him do it. My thighs start to shake, an indicator of my impending orgasm, and my entire body tightens as euphoria rolls through me from my head to my toes. My thighs close around his head on their own accord, I can’t stop them. Wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me as Andrew continues to move his tongue and fingers in tandem, pulling me further into the abyss.

Three orgasms later, I’m a wet noodle against the bed, my body is covered in sweat, and my poor lady bits are overstimulated to the point that I had to push Andrew’s face away. I’ve been trying to catch my breath for over a minute, and my body shakes uncontrollably as the aftershocks wreck me.

“Told you.” He smirks from above me, his chin and cheeks are covered in my arousal, and the visual is absolutely stunning. I want to snap a picture of him like this,

aroused and needy with proof of my satisfaction smeared across his face. “Ready?” He asks as his fist works his hard cock, a small bead of precum forms against the ball at the tip as his hand moves up and down. I nod because words are hard right now. My inability to talk makes him chuckle under his breath as runs the tip through my folds. The piercing grazes my clit and sends an jolt through my already sensitive sex. Without warning, he thrusts all the way into me, my channel burns from the stretch as he bottoms out.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” He hisses through his teeth. His eyes close briefly as he gives my body a moment to acclimate to his size. When he pulls almost all the way out with only the tip still inside me, he looks down at where our bodies meet before he thrusts forward again, filling me completely.

“Ooooooh shit.” I moan, the sound loud enough to echo off the thin walls of the bedroom. He leans forward and takes my nipple into his mouth. His tongue swirls around the hardened peak, and when his teeth bite down softly, I’m a goner. His thrusts become quicker, his hips pistoning in and out of me, and I climb higher and higher towards release.

“Right there! Don’t stop.” I shout as he throws my leg over his shoulder. The change in position allows him to push deeper inside of me, and with one last delicious scrape of his piercing, I fall apart. My entire body tenses, and my body pulses with more shakes.

“Jesus,” he says as his thrusts become erratic. He’s chasing his own orgasm now, and I welcome the show. Andrew’s orgasm face is easily the hottest expression I’ve ever seen, so when his mouth opens and his eyes flutter closed, I tense my muscles effectively tightening my walls around him. Bliss takes over his face as his cock twitches inside me. Taking his face with both of my hands, I pull him into my lips. I kiss him hard as his orgasm pulls him further into euphoria.

When we finally break the kiss and a long shiver leaves his body, I smile up at him.

“I love you.” I say, the words leaving me before I even had a moment to think about it, but I mean it. I love him with everything I have.

His face softens, and an almost shocked look crosses his face. I’m sure he’s shocked that I said it first.

“I love you too.” He says, his lips meeting mine again, and I smile against them. “Forever, babe.”

### Chapter 32 Rhyit

The phone rings on the nightstand of our hotel room in Seattle, the obnoxious noise pulling me away from watching Bristol shower. When the bus rolled into town late last night after another two weeks of our grueling tour schedule, the first thing I wanted was a bed and a normal sized shower. Bristol and I rented a hotel room, not the same hotel we stayed at the last time I was here, but in the same area. I hate being here, the whole city makes me itchy, and the memories cloak me like a starless night. I don't want to play this show, I don't want to go back to the last place I saw Alex alive, and I don't want to play without him tonight.

I stalk over to the phone from the doorway of the bathroom and rip the receiver off the base.

"Hello." I say, annoyed.

"Rhyit?" The voice says on the other side of the phone, it's feminine, but I can't place it.

"Yeah." I say annoyed, Bristol is singing in the shower, and I'm fucking missing it.

"It's Andy." She says, and I pull the phone away from my face ready to hang up. She's the reason we're here, she's the reason I'm not balls deep inside Bristol in the shower right now. She's kind of fucking up my plans.

"Don't hang up." She says rushed.

“What do you want, Andy?” I sigh, already exasperated with this conversation.

“My dad wants to talk to you before the show tonight.” She states, her voice bored.

“And he didn’t call me instead of you because...” I bite.

“Because he’s not here yet. He told me to tell you to meet him at the hotel bar at 3:30.”

I look at the clock, that’s only a half an hour from now. Fuck. The water to the shower turns off, and I could punch Steve in his smug face for making me miss that.

“How long have you known this?” I ask, my tone biting.

I can almost see her cringe through the phone. “Since...yesterday.” She confesses.

“You’re really annoying, I hope you know that.” And I set the receiver back in its holster with a resounding click.

“I thought you were going to join me, who was on the phone?” Bristol asks as she comes out of the bathroom stark naked with a towel in her hand to dry her hair.

“Andy. Larkin wants to see me.” I cringe.

“Ew. Why?” She grimaces, and her disgusted face makes me laugh.

“Beats me.” I shrug. “Wanna come?”

“Pass. The less time I spend with him, the less I look at flinging myself into oncoming traffic.” She giggles and grabs her overnight bag to start getting ready.

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The hotel bar is deserted when I finally walk in, the older bartender stands behind the bar drying a glass.

“What can I get ya?” He asks, setting a napkin down on the bar top.

“Seven and Seven please.” I say. “Is there a dark-haired guy here? About this tall?” I hold my hand up to show how tall Larkin is. “And skinny.”

“Looks like a Bond villain?” He asks with a smile.

“That’s it.” I smack the bar top and laugh hard at the imagery.

“He’s in the back. Do you need back up? Is he holding someone hostage? Blink twice if you’re in danger.” He says in mock-seriousness, making me laugh even harder.. Jesus this guy’s a riot.

“You a Plight fan?” I ask, my laughter slowly dying out.

“Hell yeah.” He says, nodding his head.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“You got tickets for tonight?” I ask.

“Nah, they were sold out before I could get em.” His mouth turns down.

“I got you, man. Go to the back gate, ask for Marv, tell him Andrew sent ya.” I say.

“For real?” He says, his eyes widening in shock.

“Yeah, man. Have a great time.” I say as I grab the drink he set down for and head off to see Goldfinger.

“Andrew, good to see you.” He smiles, and my insides recoil.

“Steve, what can I do for you?” I ask, setting the drink on the booth table in the back of the restaurant.

“Are you going to have Alex’s song done before you guys get back into the studio?” He asks, sitting forward and placing his elbows on the table.

“Probably,” I shrug; I’m not giving this guy an inch or he will take a mile.

“See that it does. I want it on the next album. People love a good heartbreak song.” He takes a sip of his gin and leans back against the booth. His words piss me off, and for the first time in my career, I actually do something about it.

“No.” I say, shaking my head. “Alex’s song will only be performed live.” His face rears back like I slapped him. His tongue runs across his teeth under his lip, and I can

tell I've pissed him off.

"You aren't going to tell me-" he spits, but I cut him off.

"You're goddamn right I am going to tell you what will and will not be on my album. I let you push me over a fucking barrel with Pistol, but I won't let that happen again. I have creative rights to Alex's song until it's recorded. It's fucking mine." I spit, anger coursing through me. The song isn't just mine, but that's semantics at this point.

"When will it be recorded?" He asks, not at all perturbed that I just told him to shove it.

"Never." I say with finality in my tone.

His eyes narrow, and he takes another drink of his gin. "Okay, we will push Pistol then. The original recording." He smiles over the top of his drink. We re-recorded Pistol after everything went down with Bristol and I. I couldn't listen to it on playback and hear her say she loves me without putting my fist or guitar through the wall.

"That's fine." Comes from behind me. I turn around to find Bristol standing in the opening of the bar, a black leather mini skirt, fishnets, and a hot pink Plight T-shirt cut off at the waist. She holds a drink in her hand as she leans her shoulder against the wall. She swirls her drink around in the glass before downing the entire thing in two gulps....and I'm hard. She steps further into the room, and Steve's eyes widen.

"You know the deal with the original recording. You play it, and every single dime it earns goes to the Los Angeles women's center. You want to make zero pennies and spend thousands of dollars to push a song that has been already recorded, be my fucking guest."

Steve's mouth twists at her words, and I am flabbergasted. I had no idea that was the deal they made, but it makes sense now. They pushed so hard for me to re-record Pistol because they weren't making a dime off of it.

"Checkmate?" She says, a sweet smile on her cherry red lips.

"Waste of fucking time." Steve grumbles as he downs the rest of the drink. "See you both this evening." With that, he drops a bill onto the table and leaves the bar.

"I had no idea." I say, pulling her body into mine.

"That was one of the conditions of the contract. You'd never know." She says.

"You're amazing." I smile, planting my lips against hers.

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The Kingdome is full to the absolute brim with fans. They're already yelling for us, and we don't go on for another fifteen minutes. I pace backstage with a bottle of whiskey and anxiety. I didn't ever want to come back here. There's too many memories and too few memories at the same time. The last time I was here, Alex was next to me, Denny and Boston too. This time there's no Alex and no Denny.

"Babe, have a seat. You're fine. Everything is okay." Bristol says to my left, her hand finds my back, and she makes small circles there with her palm. Her hand against me doesn't calm me though, it makes me want to rip my skin off. I take a step away from her and hurt flashes across her face.

"I can't do this." I say, the anxiety and frustration creeping further up my body. It feels like I have a barbed wire noose around my neck. I feel like I can't breathe.

“Andrew!” Bristol yells, and I don’t realize my feet have carried me further out of the room, closer to the exit door. The bright green Exit sign sits above the door like a beacon of hope, a sign that escaping is within reach.

I just need air, that’s it. I’ll be fine once I have a little fresh air. My boots clunk against the cement flooring as I make my way towards the door. I push the crash bar, and the door opens loosening the noose around my neck somewhat. I grab a smoke from the pack in my pocket and have a seat on one of the parking stall barriers on the ground. I inhale deeply as the nicotine hits my lungs, this is what I needed. I feel myself start to let go, the panic still there but less than it was.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

“I’m sorry, buddy.” I say out loud, taking a drag of the cigarette. The door to the stadium opens, and Bristol stands there waiting for me.

“You’ve gotta see this.” She says, her face stoic and a little ashen. I stand up from the barrier and stub the cigarette out on the ground. I make my way towards her, and she points down the hallway leading to backstage. I walk the hallway, and a roadie hands me the microphone while another one hands me my Fender. Boston is waiting sidestage, and his expression is the same as Bristol’s.

“What’s going on?” I ask. Neither one of them say a word, but they both point out to the crowd at the same time. Curiosity getting the better of me, I walk out onto the stage. We aren’t supposed to go on for another few minutes, and I’m sure the sound techs are pissed, but I had to see what had my bandmates so spooked. When I get to the center of the stage, the crowd loses their minds, cheering and crying, screaming my name, and.... pointing behind me.

I turn slowly expecting to find a large picture of Alex or something since this is a tribute to him, but instead, an older woman stands with Alex’s first guitar strung around her neck. The black Fender is a striking difference against her alabaster skin, but her black dress and eyeliner help her look the part. Walking over to her in a daze, I open my arms up wide and welcome the hug I know is coming. Margie cries softly against my shoulder when her little body hits mine. Our guitars clank together, and the sound echoes through the stadium.

“Margie, what are you doing up here?” I ask as soon as we pull away from each other. Her hand comes up to touch my cheek, and her eyes shine brightly against the backlighting of the stage.

“Who do you think taught him to play?” She says, a sad smile sits on her lips. “These fingers aren’t as fast as they once were, but we’ll make do.” She pats my cheek lovingly and emotion swells up inside me. I feel the tears hit my cheeks before I can stop them.

I look over to Bristol who is no longer white as a ghost, she’s a crying mess. Boston wipes a tear away from his eye too. I motion for them to join me on stage and they follow. Bristol hugs Margie, and Boston nearly throws Margie through the roof when he picks her up. The crowd loses it again, crying and cheering for us. Boston takes his spot to my left, and Margie takes the spot to my right—Alex’s spot. I look back at Bristol, who is sobbing at this point. Seeing her cry like that does nothing to stop the tears from rolling down my face.

“Hello Seattle!” I say into the microphone. “You’re probably all wondering who this gorgeous woman to my right is? This woman is the reason we’re here tonight, without her, there would be no Plight. This is Alex’s grandma, Margie, and she’s going to be filling in for our brother this evening.” I check myself quickly, not wanting to sob in front of sixty thousand people, but Jesus, Margie’s here.

“We have a new one for you tonight. This song started as a goodbye—“ I stop when the crowd screams bloody murder back at me. “It’s morphed into something a little more than goodbye. I hope you like it, it’s called ‘The Last Goodbye’.” I nod to Bristol, who holds her sticks over her head, ready to start.

“It’s a G.” I say to Margie, and she immediately corrects her fingers to follow mine. I put my lips up to the microphone and exhale as I stare up at the ceiling.

“This one’s for you, brother.” A deep breath rattles my chest as I steel myself to lay all of my emotions out on the line. The crowd grows eerily silent as Bristol quietly counts us in.

Goodbyes aren't supposed to be easy,

I know this much is true.

I didn't think it would be so damn hard saying goodbye to you.

I know they say it'll get easier as the time passes by,

but I'd kill for one more day

with you by my side.

I know you're in a better place, I know there were a lot of things that you couldn't take,

but please know that down here, there isn't a soul who could fill this space."

So this is my last goodbye, I won't say that this is the last time I'm going to cry.

I'm sorry I didn't see

the writing on the wall in front of me.

I wanted you to grow old, I wanted you to thrive, I wanted to see you at the altar with your someday wife. My god I just wanted you to see

how much you meant to me.

Without you, this life doesn't seem as vibrant, the lusters almost gone.

This isn't my last goodbye, this is just my longest I'll see you at home.

I promised I wouldn't forget you, but if I could have just one more plea, I'd do anything to have you here with me.

This isn't my last goodbye, this is just a reminder of where you should be.

The crowd sways in front of me with their lighters in the air, tears streaming down their faces as well as ours. I look back to Bristol at her drumset, and while her cheeks are tear stained and her makeup is ruined, she's never been more beautiful. She mouths 'I love you' to me, and I put the mic up to my lips and smile.

"I love you too, Pistol." I announce, and her cheeks go crimson. The audience cheers with whistles and catcalls.



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Margie cries softly from her spot next to me, and I smile at her. Her fingers move across the strings of the guitar slowly, and I know where she's going with this.

"Who wants to hear Pistol?" I yell into the mic. A resounding yes is heard throughout, and Bristol counts us in.

We play our hearts out for the rest of the night, leaving every scar, hurt and emotion on the stage. For Alex. For us. While he might not be here with us, he's here with us—you can feel it.

The End.

### Epilogue

White lace falls over my eyes, and the view in front of me becomes hazy. My shoulders feel bare without my leather jacket, and the missing weight makes me itchy. My reflection in the mirror in front of me makes my heart drop. The sleeveless gown shows off the tattoos I paid good money for, and the black combat boots adorning my feet remind me that this is my wedding. The one I always wanted. There are no swans in the yard, there aren't any famous people here other than the ones we know personally, and it probably won't make every news outlet in the country, but that's exactly what we wanted.

"Are you ready, Tol?" My dad asks from the doorway, his black button down and tie suiting him much better than the last time we did this. I spin from my spot in the middle of the room, the slim-fitted dress following my movement. "You look absolutely beautiful."

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I smile, I can practically feel the happiness radiating off of me today. I step over to the window and look down at the chairs lined up in small rows and the hanging twinkling lights adorning the trees. I spot the groomsmen on the other side of the small yard. Their black suits give them away instantly, and I search the group until I spot him. Andrew stands in the middle of the small group. He smiles proudly, and I watch as he throws his head back laughing.

“Should I have worn my Nikes?” My dad asks as he steps up beside me. His elbow nudges my arm in teasing.

“Nope. I got it right this time, Dad.” I smile, and as if Andrew can feel my eyes on him, he looks up towards the top window. I take a step back, not wanting him to see me yet. Andrew’s sisters appear in the doorway of the room too, followed by Maggie, Blake, and Julie; they’re dressed in black bridesmaid dresses, and as soon as they see me in my gown, they all file into the room to gush about how pretty I look.

“It’s time.” Marv says from the doorway, and the girls grab their bouquets from the side table.

We all line up accordingly and my hand finds my dad’s. The photographer clicks picture after picture of us as we stand by the stairs.

“Okay, let’s go!” I yell, anxious to get this show on the road. The girls laugh as they take the stairs down to the lower level.

I watch from my spot as the girls walk down the aisle, each of them holding the arm to one of the groomsmen.

When the last one has gone and the flower girls start to walk, a little voice clears their throat over the PA system.

I look over to the stage as I make my way towards the aisle. Our little boy stands on

the stage in his tux, and at five, he's just as handsome as Andrew is and just as mischievous.

I look at Andrew, who's smiling at me, his eyes holding so much love it's palpable. He nods to Alex and my heart catapults to my throat as my little boy starts to sing into the microphone in his hand.

"This one's for you, Mommy." He says, his little voice carrying throughout the lawn of Pistol in the Petals. The lake behind us carries the sound further down the water.

The days bleed into night

I know I'll be fine with you right by my side

The city lights don't hold a candle to your smile

Don't worry baby, I'll be waiting at the end of the aisle.

My eyes well as I walk toward the man of my dreams, while the little boy who made me a mom, sings our love song. He continues singing like the tiny rockstar in the making he is, and everyone in the crowd swoons from his soft voice.

When I make it to the end of the aisle, the tears I tried to keep behind my mascara break free as Andrew pulls me into his arms and sings the last verse into my ear.

"I'm cashing in on forever, babe." He says as he lets me go.

"Promise?" I ask with a smile.

"I swear." He smiles back.