



Sing for Her

Author: *Grace Parkes*

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Description: Mia Cortés, an aspiring and charming musician with a voice that can set the stage on fire, is discovered by the influential and enigmatic music agent, Harper Nightingale. Harper signs Mia to her prestigious record label, and the two women quickly find their professional relationship blossoming into something much deeper. As Mia's star rises in the glittering heart of L.A., the lines between love and career blur, causing their romance to strain under the pressures of fame and the need for professional boundaries. Can Mia and Harper navigate the tumultuous world of the music industry and find their way back to each other?

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The air was charged like static with the humming of talk and the jostling of bodies within the Indigo Lounge. Open mic night was usually popular and both the regulars and passers-through liked to get involved with spoken poetry, live music and performance. Once a passing circus even had a couple of the acrobats perform some gravity-defying lifts and stunts that really drew in a crowd.

Mia watched as Esme, the owner of the lounge, pushed her way through the ebbing current of patrons towards her, her wavy hair looking wild as she approached.

“Goodness! That was certainly a workout!” She exhaled when she finally reached Mia. “A good turnout, isn’t it?”

“Good? This is insane, Ez, you’ll make a killing tonight for sure. Do you know whether Indigo was mentioned anywhere online to bring in a crowd like this?”

“Well actually, I do know, and that’s why I wanted to come and speak to you quickly. I wasn’t told this until later this afternoon myself, but one of Deborah’s friends is coming tonight, as well, at the recommendation of Deborah! The crowd has come because she’s spread the word!”

“Oh... Well, that’s amazing, this will hopefully be a real boost to the bar. Although I think it’s probably best that the open mic night sticks to only once a month if it’s going to start getting this busy! What did you want to talk to me about it anyway? You’re the owner, you don’t need my permission!” Mia chuckled, and when Esme didn’t return the laugh, she began to get a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Well, it seems that Deborah requested this woman to attend to see you specifically. I got a call about it earlier, I’m assuming from her PA or something, saying that she would be attending the Mia Cortés intimate live set this evening. When I tried to tell her it was just open mic night, the girl just laughed and told me it wasn’t! Can you imagine the audacity!? Anyway, when I started to see patrons arriving in waves, I decided I should probably change the signage. They call the woman attending tonight the Huntress, I’m not really sure why, but she’s sounds pretty important.” Esme pointed to the black chalkboard behind the stage.

Mia had been so preoccupied with carrying in all her equipment around the crowd and wondering where everyone had come from that she hadn’t seen the elegant cursive writing advertising her name only behind the microphone.

“Wha—Ez, I don’t know if I can do a set in front of this many people by myself! I was hoping to let a few people go ahead of me to psyche myself up.”

“Mia, my dear, look at me. You’re so young and you still don’t seem to know how capable you are! I’ve seen you perform on that little stage more times than I can remember and every time you blow the crowd away. This is LA, Mia, if you don’t take the opportunity when it comes knocking, you’ll end up a washed-up old woman running a bar like me!”

Mia went to protest, her throat already becoming dry and beginning to seize up at the thought of singing to so many.

“I’m only teasing,” said Esme with a wink, “I know I’m a catch.”

Mia laughed a little and felt her throat ease, she was grateful to have Esme be her bastion in this ocean of anticipation.

“You told me before that your abuela gave you a little mental trick to help with the

stage fright, maybe try using that?”

Mia thought of her grandmother’s words all those years ago. All the times when she’d cried into her lap as she said she wanted to be a superstar but got so scared when performing in front of people.

“Cielita, listen to me, you have the strong proud voice of the gitana women who came before you. We used our voices to fight the suppression of our ways, our livelihoods. If you feel threatened by the crowd before you, you must be brave and make the stage your battlefield. If the opponent seems too big or too daunting, single out one person or one part, either the weakest and kindest face or their fiercest of the leader. You either take down the weakest with your voice first and work your way up or take down the leader and watch the rest of them fall at your feet. Remember, amor, your words are your most powerful weapon.”

“I guess I can try,” said Mia, taking in a breath.

“Worst comes to worst, look for my face in the crowd,” said Esme. “Or picture just singing to your grandma.”

Mia liked this idea and smiled. She loved the almost motherly support Esme had given her since arriving in LA eight years before. She gave her a hug and then Esme gave her a quick wink and ran off to the bar where one of the servers was waving her over frantically.

Mia slapped her cheeks to wake herself up a little and carried on setting up her equipment. She began to hum to herself to warm up her voice and looked around the room for a face she could use. She considered the meaning of her abuela’s words and decided that she needed to find either someone friendly who she knew or someone who looked like a challenge to win over and pretend she was only singing to them.

Her eyes scanned the bar first, where Esme was showing one of the newbies how to make a cocktail of some sort. At least she knew where to look if all else failed. Near to the bar was Ruby, her friend who was an aspiring writer, her chaotic fire-red curls tied up in a high-pony to avoid encroaching on other people's drinks. She smiled and mouthed you got this while making a little love heart with her fingers. She was such a dork, but a good friend. When Mia had arrived in LA, she'd searched queer bars and coffee shops in the area and eventually found the Indigo Lounge. A place that became her second home. Having moved to the US from Spain, her English was okay, but not amazing, so she must've looked terrified that first time stepping into the lounge. Within a few minutes, Ruby had plopped herself down beside her and started talking to her like they'd been friends for years. It had helped her to relax and also improve her English over the last eight years to the point of mastery; perhaps she could be the kind face Mia was seeking.

As she set up her laptop to the speakers, she found Deborah's face smiling back at her from the middle of the room. She was another mother-like figure who had been a supporter since day one. She worked in television and was the owner of one of the most successful streaming services in the world. Why she chose to come to this small downtown coffee-shop-bar was a mystery. When she could be spending her time socializing with the greatest that Hollywood had to offer, why she then chose to interact with Mia at all was an even greater mystery.

After one of her first open mic nights, Deborah had come over and introduced herself in a very businesslike manner and ever since has been her guiding beacon of career-related advice to give her the break she dreamed of; it seemed that she was even behind the sudden surge of customers to the lounge. She could be a focal point to focus on, a symbol of her future, a strong woman successful in her field. Mia smiled back and nodded to herself, yes Deborah would be the one to sing to.

She tested the mic with a few quiet "one, twos," and a few members of the crowd turned to look at her like vultures at carrion. She felt her throat tighten a little again

and went to look for Deborah, however someone was blocking her view. A tall, elegant woman in a perfectly fitted suit. She wore a wide-brimmed black hat which made her look like she had stepped off an Italian runway, and as if to enforce her gravity, people parted to let her sit down, offering her smiles and waves as she did. Then suddenly Mia's hair prickled on her neck and she began to sweat; two golden eyes locked with hers under the brim of the hat. The woman slowly took the hat off and a cascade of tightly braided black hair was released over one shoulder. In the hair was a weave of a coppery gold, which stood out against the woman's night-black skin and complemented the gold accents on her dark suit and highlighted the intensity of the blaze in the eyes that still held Mia's.

That's got to be who they call the Huntress, Mia thought to herself, gulping for moisture to return to her mouth.

"You ready Mia? Careful of this Huntress, she looks like she won't be easily impressed," said Esme, out of nowhere. Mia hadn't even noticed her walk over.

"Uh..."

"You'll do great!" Esme gently nudged Mia over to get to the mic, and a dumbfounded Mia stumbled back a little.

"Welcome! Welcome to everyone!" announced Esme, gaining everyone's attention with a light cheer. "Thank you all for coming out tonight to our humble Indigo Lounge. It's so incredible to see so many queer people and allies in one space to support the queer arts community. I want to offer my special thank you to the Huntress herself, Ms. Harper Nightingale, who I'm sure you're all familiar with!"

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Esme extended an arm forward and gestured to the woman with the golden eyes. People murmured at the mention of this name, but Mia had never heard of her until five minutes ago. Harper Nightingale, she thought...she'd maybe heard of her once in passing but didn't know the power she held until faced with it in the same room. Harper's face was softer now, a benevolent smile as the crowd cheered for her, she seemed to almost purr at the attention, a leg crossed over the other, swaying like a tail.

"For the regulars of the Indigo Lounge, tonight's performer will need no introduction, but for those who have come from Harper's social circle to perhaps witness history being made, I present to you all the soulful voice of Mia Cortés!"

The crowd whooped and applauded, making the air flutter with the breeze from the sea of hands. Over the vibrating mass, as if by design, Harper sat in her own spotlight overhead, her eyes locked once more on Mia, a disconcerting smile on her face. She raised her glass of wine in a silent cheers to Mia, a challenge. She was the most beautiful and deadly looking woman Mia had ever seen.

Something about the nerves and the adrenaline always took ahold of Mia when she performed, the whole experience would become somewhat of a blur and she never remembered much of her performances, but one thing she always lived for was the moment of silence as she took in her breath ready to sing. In that moment, the pleasure of the anticipation would spark through the crowd like a current and call to her. She always liked to hold that breath a second longer than necessary to feel that jolt of excitement take over her to be able to throw it back tenfold when she sang.

Mia stepped up to the mic and drew her starting breath.

Harper Nightingale hadn't known what to expect when she pulled up to the Indigo Lounge, but it was underwhelming from outside. It just looked like a large, arty coffee shop that had decided to stay open late for an event. She may have not even thought that much had it not been for the huge amount of people crowding around the door trying to get in, people who were there for her more than whoever this Mia Cortés was. She was only attending at all due to a favor she owed her college friend, Deborah. She had saved her many a time over the last year or so by being able to source people and props in what seemed an instant, which had been immensely helpful with the amount of tours she had been preparing for a wide range of demanding artists.

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised," was Deborah's only comment a few days earlier when Harper had audibly groaned over the phone to her suggestion.

"Why this girl anyway? Do you have a crush on her or something?" she teased.

"On Mia? No! She's like the daughter I wish I had; I don't see her that way. She's beautiful, there's no doubt there, but she's incredibly hard working and kind. She has big dreams and immense talent—I just don't want her getting poached by the wrong person."

"And you think I'm the right person?" Harper chuckled sarcastically.

"Well, you have a reputation of being a hard-ass, but I went to college with you, so I know that's mostly for show."

"Alright, shut it you, these calls could be monitored, wouldn't want it getting out that I'm secretly not a ginormous bitch."

The two friends moved onto matters of business again and that was the end of that.

Now she sat in the back of one of her cars regretting not being a massive bitch, as she should've cancelled.

"If I'm not back in twenty minutes, the girl is good enough to keep me interested," she said to her driver in the front, and he nodded in response.

Harper stepped out into the evening air and then made her way towards the door. She walked with a purpose and this made people turn to look. In her presence, people stepped aside, something she'd loved being able to do since a teenager, now in her mid fifties, her nearly six feet of height was no less intimidating. She'd been one of the biggest names in artist management and representation for the last five years, but she was an industry secret weapon; she rarely made appearances and only those who knew of her would know the name personally, otherwise she was just known colloquially as the Huntress. She heard this name murmured on the wind as she walked into the bar.

The Indigo Lounge was more pleasant inside than she'd expected but she was still really hoping this wasn't all going to be a waste of her time. She liked to test new singers with the unexpected to see if they could handle the industry, the crowd tonight had been part of her test. She had started a rumor that the Huntress was looking to attend a local gig here about a week ago, and it looks as though it had spread nicely, perhaps a little too nicely she thought to herself as the glass of wine just handed to her by a frantic-looking woman in her fifties was nearly knocked to the floor.

"Please be careful!" shouted the woman at the careless youth who had bumped into Harper. "Apologies. I believe you must be our special guest for the evening, Ms. Huntress..."

“Oh please, that’s just a fun little name the industry gives me for being picky. My name is Harper Nightingale.” She gracefully extended her hand and Esme nervously took it.

“Uh, my name is Esme, I’m the owner and a friend of Deborah’s”

“She has told me about you, lovely to meet you at last. Esme darling, can you do me a favor this evening? Tonight, with such a big crowd, I’ve decided that I want everyone here to know who the Huntress is, your singer can be my coronation performance, so to speak. So do please introduce me using my proper name when welcoming her to the stage, I want to amp up the pressure a little for Ms. Cortés.”

A defensive flicker darted across Esme’s eyes, which made Harper smile.

“She means a lot to you it seems.”

“She does; she’s a wonderful girl, Deborah would agree. I don’t know who you are, Ms. Nightingale, but I hope Deborah is right to put Mia’s future in your hands. If she’s wrong and that girl gets hurt, there will be hell to pay.”

Harper smiled a deep genuine smile, which made Esme uneasy.

“I like you, Esme, you are like Deborah—and I trust Deborah’s judgement. If you are both saying I should keep an eye on this one, you have my word she will be taken care of. But first she has to pass my test.”

“Right...” said Esme, unsure of the rollercoaster she was just taken on. “Best see you do, because she will.”

The two women sized each up for a moment before they were interrupted by Deborah at their side.

“Ah, always making such lovely first impressions, aren’t you, Harper?” Deborah smiled apologetically to Esme and then took Harper’s hand to lead her through the crowd to two reserved seats.

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“So good to see you!” said Deborah sitting down after embracing her friend. “What’s with the hat? It’s hard to hug you with all this flamboyance in the way!”

“It’s a good crowd divider, makes you look bigger than you are.”

“It’s always calculations with you, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “Oh, there’s our girl...”

Harper turned and gazed at the young woman setting up, she looked very unassuming, when suddenly they locked eyes and she tensed. There was a challenge in the icy green eyes staring back at her, defiant and powerful.

Oh, I think that I may end up liking this after all, she mused to herself.

Esme took the microphone and welcomed everyone. As she said the name Harper Nightingale, the room became awash with little gasps and she turned to smile and take it all in as the applause started. It was all so delicious to her. She took a sip of wine and licked her lips to savor the flavors, but the end note was made bitter by those eyes when she looked back; not impressed, not intimidated. She smiled at her opponent and raised a glass as she took to the plate. This girl, with her conventionally edgy piercings and tattoos on her petite frame, her dark hair swept into a messy plait over her shoulder showing a buzzed undercut of hair...Who does she think she is?

Mia took a breath in, and the room went silent. Harper looked around briefly and noticed the patrons seem to lean forward. It occurred to her then that there were many people here who had genuinely come to see her perform and their excitement began to circulate through the others around them until a frenzy of anticipation seemed to

make the air tense. Harper watched as the corners of the singer's mouth raised into a smile as she held that moment for just a second more than was comfortable. The world itself seemed to warp to hear her. She's clever, I'll give her that, Harper he thought, putting her glass to her lips as the singing began.

The wine in the glass never made it further than touching her lips, as within a single note, Harper's hair stood on edge and she began to tingle all over. Mia's voice was rich and thick with power and emotion, and as she held that first note, she began to play with scales within it to create a harrowingly beautiful melody which called to her like a siren's chorus.

"I have lived a thousand lifetimes, but this life is the desert in which time forgets me..." sang Mia.

Every syllable was a brush stroke, painting the grains of sand in Harper's mind. She could feel the heat of a beating sun caressing her face, yet right in the middle of that heat, that cool stare held her, unmoving, like prey in a web.

"For when your lips touch mine, the hours pass by, millennia to minutes..."

She really was beautiful now that Harper really looked closely at her. Past her judgements, past the singing itself. Her lips were full and looked soft as peach flesh and at least twice as sweet. Her eyes when she sang lost the harshness of a glacial green and took on a much softer shade of green.

"I am full of you, overflowing oasis, submerge yourself within it..." she sung.

Harper gasped, her body was swaying of its own volition and the pinprick tingling all around her made her begin to salivate. She wanted this girl at any cost and would make her a star.

“Come to me...” As Mia sang this line over the track she had created, she extended a hand and beckoned Harper forward. Harper felt herself lean forward as she mouthed back the same command; she wanted her, not only as an artist, she wanted to get closer. The corners of Mia’s mouth curled upwards in an impish grin as she carried on singing, all the while never breaking eye contact.

“...my hallowed woman, I will carry you, safely to my sanctuary.”

The last note of Mia’s last song resonated in riffs across the room in acappella. By the time the song was finished, beads of perspiration began to tease the lines of Harper’s neck. The roaring applause broke the spell, and it was only then that Harper realized she was on her feet and had walked several steps towards Mia through the crowd, the remnants of her dropped glass being cleaned from somewhere behind her.

I think I may be in trouble with this one...

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“You were phenomenal, just like usual!” said Esme in Mia’s ear above the applause.

“Can we get another big round of applause for the Indigo Lounge’s favorite star, Mia Cortés!”

Another wave of applause and stomping feet ran through the bar and for a brief moment, Mia found herself worried for the neighbors.

“I’ve prepared you a little celebration drink behind the bar as well as a chunk of the proceeds made tonight as my way of thanks.”

“What? Esme, you didn’t have to do that!”

“I know, but please, don’t protest. I’ve only been able to offer you drinks and little bits of the tip jar before, when you should’ve been getting paid to sing all this time in bigger venues. I consider myself very lucky that you have chosen the lounge as your stage.”

“And as my second home, you know that,” said Mia, squeezing Esme’s arm, “Thank you.” She kissed Esme’s cheek and started to squeeze her way towards the bar.

Getting anywhere seemed to take an age as every step she took, she would be taken by the arm and pulled into a group of people. Sometimes it was regulars she’d seen before who were so happy at the turnout and proud to be her original groupies. At other times, it was groups of music journalists or social media influencers who wanted to get the latest scoop on who Mia was and where she was performing next. Several people took photos with her and even Ruby cornered her asking her to sign her chest. Mia knew that Ruby was just doing it as a joke in honor of this rockstar reception, but she still indulged her after a very poignant eye-roll. As she talked with people and jested and joked, she felt a heavy set of feline eyes watching her. Every time she tried to find them, however, they were nowhere to be found.

By the time she finally reached the bar, she needed the drink more than anything and practically inhaled the sweet cocktail in one gulp.

“Being this popular is thirsty work,” spoke a familiar voice from behind her. She turned to be tackled by Deborah in a hug. “You were incredible, Mia! I mean, to me, you sounded as fabulous as ever, but the way you worked the crowd tonight was truly?—”

“Spectacular,” interrupted a rich velvety voice, deep and smoky.

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“I guess by now she needs no introduction, but Mia, this is Harper, my friend from college. I asked her here tonight.”

Up close, the woman who she'd been singing to was a lot more imposing and now that she didn't have the rush from the crowd to bolster her, Mia felt herself beginning to shrink under her pressure. Her unusual golden eyes naturally flicked upwards at the corner in a permanent smile, both a delight and a threat in different lighting.

She raised a slim, elegant hand in greeting, her skin was as smooth as polished onyx. Mia looked at her hand with its few bejeweled rings and didn't know whether to kiss it like royalty or shake it as an equal. Sensing the young woman's uncertainty, Harper stepped forward and took one of Mia's hands in hers.

“Charmed.” She winked. “For once, I'm glad to have listened to Deborah and will admit she did well to recommend you. You have star potential, and I am not the type to say that.”

“She's really not,” added Deborah.

“Alright, shut it, you,” she said poking Deborah's rib and making her squirm. This playful side to the Amazonian beauty before her, made Mia's heart flutter. She liked the smile on Harper's face as she teased her friend, it was real and full of happiness and affection.

“Wait, did you say your friend from college?” said Mia, suddenly recalling the earlier introduction. Harper laughed out loud, a hearty laugh that was sweet as honey and intoxicating, it made Mia blush and wish to hear it again, however Deborah suddenly

took Mia by the shoulders and looked at Mia with mock seriousness.

“Now Mia, you’ve just given the performance of a lifetime and I’m very proud of you, but I warn you...choose your next words very carefully.”

Over one of Deborah’s shoulders, Esme and Ruby had appeared nearby having clearly heard the whole interaction and pulling an awkward face. Over her other shoulder, Harper had put her hat back on and her shoulders bobbed lightly from laughing and trying to stay quiet. The corners of Deborah’s mouth were trying to stay straight and not laugh with her friend, and she lightly nodded to urge Mia to continue her earlier train of thought.

“Umm, I meant... Uh, like in the same year?”

At this, Harper couldn’t keep her composure and she howled again, making Ruby and Esme begin laughing as well. Deborah gave up and sputtered a laugh as well. Mia, although very confused, also started laughing.

“You cheeky bitch!” said Deborah, slapping Mia’s arm playfully.

“Yes darling,” said Harper, grabbing Mia’s arm possessively and making her blush more. “We are both the same age. Although my beautiful sorority sister here looks by no means her fifty or so years, I am fortunately blessed with the dewy youthful skin of a thirty-year-old.”

“Yes, and sadly cursed with the biggest ego I’ve ever seen.”

Mia watched as the two women fought like children and the atmosphere lightened. The whole time, Harper didn’t let go of her arm, as though she were afraid that Mia would want to be anywhere else. Up close and in better lighting, Mia realized that Harper wore nothing under her blazer. She wore tape to secure her blazer and

modesty, but the bare skin of her chest shimmered from the glittering bronze powder that lightly dusted it. Mia suddenly realized that she had been staring at Harper's chest and looked away blushing, but something in the smile Harper then gave her suggested she had noticed.

"Anyway!" said Harper loudly to cover up an embarrassing story that Deborah had started, "the real focus of tonight is this woman right here. Where did you learn to sing like that and perform?"

"Well, my abuela was a flamenco dancer and singer in Granada where I was born. She sang during and after the war and she taught my mother. I picked up a lot from the pair of them. They taught me so much about life and performance."

"The strength of women never ceases to amaze me," said Harper. "They are clearly fantastic mentors."

A few people nodded in agreement nearby, their conversation having clearly garnered the attention of the closest people.

"Listen to me, Mia, I'm going to be frank with you. Talent like yours comes along once in a lifetime and I wouldn't be worth the heels I'm standing in as a talent scout if I walked away without signing you. How does that sound to you, would you let me represent you and give you everything you have ever dreamed of?"

It sounded so intimate to Mia, like a personal contract binding her to Harper, but strangely, the idea began to awaken that adrenaline in her again and she felt her confidence rising at the very thought of being bound to her. Harper seemed to blush at the sudden change in the air between them and Mia squeezed her arm.

"Nothing would make me happier."

Then Mia smiled, it was a genuine smile of sheer delight as the realization of what tonight's events meant for her future. After countless demoralizing gigs to empty bars, hecklers, drunk guys, it finally felt like she got the break she always dreamed of. Ruby came over and hugged her, jumping with excitement. The two girls spun each other round laughing as eavesdroppers nearby cheered for her, and over it all she heard Harper's voice saying from somewhere that she would contact her within the week. By the time she'd stopped spinning, giddy from the adrenaline comedown, Harper Nightingale had already left, and Mia could think of nothing else but her.

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Mia had thought she had dreamt the whole thing the day after, mainly due to the throbbing hangover she was nursing. People had bought her drink after drink until unholy hours of the morning when she stumbled into a cab and took herself home. She had woken up to herself face down on her bed. The only thing she remembered was her filthy dream about Harper Nightingale. The thought of Harper dominating her mind and body caused hungry shivers down her spine.

"No, I have to be professional," she said to the empty room, "this could finally be my big break and I don't want to ruin it by messing around with my new agent."

The concept of an agent was dizzying to her, even just saying it out loud. Especially someone with the reputation like Harper. The years spent singing open mic night may finally be behind her and her dream was a little closer. But then a niggling thought crossed her mind, how was Harper going to contact her? She didn't remember giving her number out.

The day passed in an anxious blur. She spent the first half of the day writing some new songs and uploading finished recordings to her blog. She recorded them herself, so she had to make sure her noisy upstairs neighbor was out at work before recording, or the tracks might have the unplanned percussion of elephant footsteps over her

voice. In the early afternoon, she called her family back in Spain.

“Mi amor, como estas? How are you?” said the video of her mother’s chin from over the camera.

“Mamá, lift up the phone, I don’t want to talk to your chin!”

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“Ay! This stupid phone, it never does what I want...”

“Podemos hablar en español, Mamá, es más fácil,” Mia laughed at her mom now showing her her forehead instead.

“No, I have to practice, if I no use, I forget. I have no one else to call that speaks English!”

“Okay, okay!”

“Vale, tell me, how did Mike’s night go?”

“Open-mic night, Mamá, and it was incredible. It wasn’t even an open mic night in the end, just a one-woman show performed by yours truly!”

“Who is Jors Truli? A rapper?”

“No, Mama! Es una expression ingles, it means I was the only performer, the show was mine. I have been scouted by a music agent, called Harper!”

“Ay Dios! My baby is a star! I always knew...you are like your mama, no?”

“Ha! Claro Mamá, you are the biggest star I know.”

“Are you saying I am fat?”

“No!” Mia slapped her forehead in exasperation. “Don’t worry...but yeah, it could be

something really good for me. I think Harper is going to really help me to get where I want to be.”

“I am so happy, amor. Don’t you let this man take advantage of you! I know you like women, but men can be pigs and think they can do what they want.”

“Well, Harper is actually a woman...” Mia felt sheepish saying her name again to her mother, as if she was already introducing her.

“Oh, I understand. She’s pretty, no?”

“Beautiful, but that’s not the point?—”

“Haber, amor...listen to your mamá. This Harper may be beautiful, but don’t let your feelings mess up a chance if she is as good as you say.”

“Sí mamá, lo sé”

“You are a smart girl, got your brains from me. Just don’t waste it by thinking with your heart like your father.”

“But that’s how he met you!”

“I know, he’s very lucky...but he left his job to move to Granada. I adore him, but he never had the same pasión for work after. O sea, just keep your dreams in mind my love.”

“I will Mamá...”

“Ojala que sí. Anyway, when will you sign your contract?”

Mia checked her phone for messages, missed calls and emails and still saw nothing from Harper. She began to get a sinking feeling in her chest and tried to hide it from her mother.

“She said she would send them over later, so once everything is signed and sorted, I’ll let you know.”

“Hmmm. You make sure you get that nice Deborah to check the contrato when you get it, she is smart with these things.”

“It’s okay, Mamá, Harper is Deborah’s friend from college, so she can be trusted.”
Mia almost regretted saying it the moment she did.

“From college! Pero Deborah is older than you, no? She is fifty or something, es nearly the same age as me!”

“Mamá, you are sixty...”

“Ay! No me digas eso! I don’t want to remember...pero she is around fifty? You don’t have that complejo de Edipo, do you?”

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“Mamá! I do not have an Oedipus complex!”

“Well, I don’t know, don’t shout at your mother!”

Mia wanted to crawl into a hole, which was much the same level of embarrassment she usually felt talking about girls with her mom, but she was making it so much worse than usual.

“Mamá, I have to go. I need to go to the lounge; I promised Esme I’d help her with something.”

“Hmmm, okay. Keep safe, mi amor, and don’t let this woman mess with you, or she will mess with me!”

“Okay Mamá, Adios, te quiero mucho!”

“Y tu amor...” and Mia hung up.

She figured she’d likely get lectured about hanging up early the next time they spoke, but for now she didn’t care—that was a future Mia problem. Mia scanned through her emails and messages again and upon seeing nothing again, she decided that going to the lounge might not be a bad idea if only to take her mind off the waiting for a while.

When she arrived, it was like the whole of last night hadn’t happened, which made Mia begin to worry that maybe the whole thing had actually been a dream after all, until a group of people at a nearby table cheered when they saw her and called her over.

“Hey! You survived the night after all those drinks then? Didn’t need your stomach pumped?” said a guy with black hair and eyebrows died pink.

“Uh hey! I don’t really remember anything of last night, but as far as I can recall, I don’t think I had a trip to the hospital.”

“You don’t remember us, do you?” said a handsome black guy with his arm around Mr. Pink Eyebrows.

Mia shook her head apologetically, at which the three guys started laughing.

“Remind me to have whatever cocktail of drinks you had next time I wanna forget an ex...” said the final guy, a skinhead guy with three nose piercings and a t-shirt that read sorry ladies, I suck dick on it.

“I feel like I should remember you guys, you’re quite hard to forget.”

“I know, how rude of you!” said pinky again, “I’m Stefan, this is my boyfriend Taylor, and the walking pin cushion over there is Ricky.”

“Hey! At least call me a glistening jewelry box or something!”

Stefan just laughed as if this was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard and Ricky got up to play fight him.

“Sorry about them,” said Taylor, “we came to you after Harper had left and told you that we are musicians as well, and if you ever want to record something to live music, just let us know.”

Mia did vaguely remember something about that, but it also sparked the memory of gushing to one of them about Harper and how incredible she looked for half the

conversation. As her cheeks began to feel hot again, she felt a strong vibration from her phone and realized she was being called. She saw the unrecognized number and took a deep breath before answering.

“Hello again, Mia,” came the silky voice of Harper like a summer breeze down the phone line. Mia sat down without even registering it, and the three men around her all paused feeling the tension coming from her.

“Uh...Hello Harper.”

5

By the time Harper reached her apartment after the show, she already had an email with Mia’s contact details as well as a link to her music blog—thanks to Deborah, efficient as ever. Harper clicked on the link and started the first song on the website. She cringed at the poor recording quality as it came out loud and tinny from her large speaker system but smiled to herself as she pictured a passionate Mia at a desk somewhere recording this song for her on a phone microphone. The voice was the same powerful voice with the flamenco styled riffs over the notes that made her heart ache, and she let it fill her up as she began to get undressed for bed. She took off her blazer and the tape over her nipples and breasts that had been holding them in place and wandered to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. She let her hair out of its messy bun of braids and prowled through her rooms sipping and enjoying both the flavor of the robust Rioja and the vibrating quiver from Mia’s voice. In no rush, and after four songs had passed and another glass had been topped up, she slinked out of her pants and made her way to her bedroom. She checked herself in the mirror; she had to give her new personal trainer a tip the next time she saw him as she was looking better than she had in her life, her stomach was taut and with her already long legs, the newfound lines of definition along them made her look taller still. In her black laced lingerie panties, she teased the edges of the fabric before slipping out of them entirely.

“It’s too warm for clothes tonight...” she said to herself and laid out on her silk sheets to finish her warming night-cap. “Ha, even my wine is Spanish. What am I getting myself into...” she fell asleep to the soothing lullaby of Mia and the heavy smokiness of the wine.

The following morning, she was up at five as usual and had already begun calling in every favor she could to get together something special for Mia. Something about her grateful smile, that genuine disbelief that this could be happening to her, made Harper’s heart flutter and if she could get a smile like that out of her every time they saw each other, she might be content with just that.

The first thing to arrange was a contract. She did this relatively easily and even made sure to give Mia as good a cut of royalties as she could, cutting her own portion down a little to make it up; Harper had enough as it was and it was clear that Mia could be successful enough that even a smaller portion would make her a healthy income.

The next thing to sort out was the dreadful recordings of her songs, she called their usual studio and booked out the whole day. The final thing to do was to call in her associates. New talent had to be approved by the whole board before a contract could be offered, this was why her agency was so successful—artists weren’t just taken on whims.

Her associates agreed to meet that afternoon at the studio and hear this girl out, but they didn’t sound sure.

“Is this gonna be another Felicity?” asked Jennifer, the senior producer.

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“Cut me some slack, Jen. That was when I was new to the business, this isn’t my first rodeo you know.”

“I know, I know, but it all sounds very similar—young woman, big dreams, small bars and an edgy look—but that girl wasn’t going any further than the bars and you knew it, you just wanted to get in her pants.”

“And you did, if I remember correctly,” added Paulina.

“That’s beside the point?—”

“So do you or do you not want to get into this girl’s pants as well?” teased Jennifer. The line went silent for a moment and the three other women started laughing.

“For fuck’s sake, Harper, this is another Felicity, isn’t it?” chimed in Lilian with a huff of a laugh.

“Look, just trust me on this one. I’m not the top talent scout in LA for no reason.”

The women teased her more, but nonetheless agreed to meet her. Flustered and annoyed, she composed herself and looked down at her phone now with Mia’s number dialed in. She smiled at the image of how she would react and wished she could be wherever Mia was just to watch. The phone rang a moment and then a slightly breathy voice picked up.

“Hello again, Mia,” she said, purring out her name.

“Uh...Hello, Harper.”

“Did you have a good night after I left?”

“I don’t know, to be honest, it was all a bit of a blur, but my new musician friends who I only remembered a moment ago tell me that I had fun...”

Harper laughed, Oh to be so young and carefree.

“Tell me, Mia. Are you free this afternoon?”

She heard Mia’s breath catch a little; it was a noise she wouldn’t mind hearing again.

“Well, why don’t you meet me down at our studio and we can start re-recording your songs to start getting some hype around your music?”

Harper could hear a shuffling sound coming from Mia’s end of the call, making her picture that Mia was probably jumping or dancing in excitement, and when she next spoke, she sounded even more out of breath.

“Uh... That sounds awesome! I mean... Yeah, that sounds good—no wait! Ummm... Thank you, Harper, that sounds very suitable, I will be happy to attend.”

Harper raised an eyebrow and heard the tiny whisper of a curse from the other end of the line.

“I see,” teased Harper with a smirk. “Well if everything is suitable for you, I shall meet you there in an hour or so. I’ll message you the address in a moment.”

Mia laughed nervously, “Yes, I shall see you there, thank you again, Harper.”

“Bye, Mia.” Harper made sure to emphasize her name, drawing it out like bait, at which Mia responded like a lamb to the slaughter with another caught breath before Harper hung up.

She held her phone to her chest and chuckled lightly.

Outside the studio, Harper found a pacing Mia looking both nervous and excited.

“I see you found the place okay then.”

“Oh! Hi, Harper, yeah, I just arrived myself.” Mia’s hair looked a little disheveled and was loosley coming out of the low ponytail she had fashioned it into. An iced coffee cup from the cafe next door was in her hand as the ice rattled around in her shaky, nervous grip.

“I see, well, you must’ve been very thirsty then,” said Harper, indicating the cup with her a nod of her head and a smile teasing the edge of her lips. Mia looked down and laughed.

“Well, maybe not just arrived.”

“Don’t worry, eagerness is endearing on you and excitement usually lends to more energy in a performance—they aren’t bad qualities to have. Besides, you may need those exact qualities on hand today. My executive team will be joining us shortly to give the final okay on your contract, and if you impress them like you did me, I have the contract ready to go in my bag.”

Mia’s eyes widened a little, “Oh okay, this is all for real then, like for real, for real...”

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“It’s really really real,” joked Harper. “Once you impress them, there will be no more small-town bars unless we are hosting exclusive intimate gigs for premium ticket holders. Your life could be about to change dramatically. Do you think you’re ready for it?”

Mia’s face changed a little, that confident cheeky Mia from when she was on stage glinted in her eyes and her mouth became bold, a dazzling smile flashing Harper’s way. Harper caught herself from staring and tried to smile naturally back, despite the somersaults her stomach had started doing upon seeing it.

“Let’s get started!”

Inside the studio, a technician introduced himself and showed Mia where everything was and explained how the performance set would work. By the time she was brought back into the observation area where her audience would be, the judges in question had arrived. All the women looked very different from Harper, but no less imposing. Jennifer was a blonde bombshell drawn out of a Beverly Hills housewives show—with a small handbag dog included—but she had the dark brown eyes and piercing gaze of a deeply intelligent woman who was putting on an act.

Paulina looked much like Mia, petite in frame, tanned olive skin with European features and dark hair and eyes. Her face was the kindest of the four women, even that of Harper, but she was a little older perhaps, and something about that age added a wisdom and gravity to her voice when she introduced herself. Lilian was a tomboy with her hair in tight braids to her head and looked as though she could have been a distant relation of Harper’s in their facial features. She was the shortest, but what she lacked in height, she made up for in muscle. Mia was fairly certain that she could

pick her up and throw her a good few feet, but she didn't want to annoy her and find out. After brief introductions, Harper walked Mia into the studio.

"You handled yourself well in there," Harper said, her hand gently on the small of Mia's back leading her to the mic. "Not many people keep their composure as well as you did when meeting the big four of the LA music scene."

"In all fairness, I didn't know they were...I'm glad now that I didn't"

Harper laughed. This young woman was somehow so honest and awkward, yet so confident and powerful, the enigma of the opposites was alluring to Harper. At the mic, Mia turned to face Harper and Harper rested her arms on Mia's shoulders in a conspiratorial brace.

"Just do what you did yesterday and you will have absolutely nothing to worry about. I'll be on the other side of the glass," she whispered. Harper paused and gently bit her lip. "If it makes it easier, you could just sing as though it's only me watching."

Harper watched Mia gulp. Had it not been for the audience clearly analyzing every move both women made, she would have liked to maybe lean closer and see if Mia did the same. Mia nodded and the confidence came back. Harper groaned a little internally and resisted the temptation to pull Mia in, instead she offered a wink and then made her way back in the observation room to join the other women.

"How was Felicity?" mocked Lilian.

"Oh, fuck off, Lil..." sighed Harper, all of them giggling like schoolgirls.

"Whenever you're ready, just give us a thumbs up, Mia, and I'll start the track," said the technician to the earphones now over Mia's head. She nodded, closed her eyes and began to take a few deep breaths. Harper moved aside a messy jumble of audio

wires atop a speaker and hopped on top to smugly sit back and watch history be made; she really wanted the other women to eat their words on this one. When Mia opened her eyes again, they were the eyes of the predator Harper saw the night before. The creature who fed on the devotion of her fans and who drew on their adoring worship to further her power, she was a catalyst just waiting for the right elements to allow her to explode into life. Mia raised her hand and held her thumb out in an elegant defiance of the silence that had fallen on the studio, the track began.

The song she was recording had no introduction, so the countdown of beats to start was signaled by a metronome ticking, at eight clicks, the track would start. Harper settled herself in for the show and watched as like the night before, the assembled party felt themselves drawn into Mia's pull. With each tick, the three other women and the technician leaned closer to the glass. Tick-Tick-Tick. As the countdown neared its end, both Harper and Mia began to smile at each other, a secret of what was yet to come that only they knew. On the second to last tick, Mia took in her breath and held it, her eyes closing once more. Harper watched her features soften in the moment before release: mouth open, eyes closed, head back and her lower lip quivering slightly; Harper leaned forward now too, but for a different reason, she decided she wouldn't mind seeing that exact face beneath her, a different kind of tension in the air between them.

Mia unleashed her voice through the mic and everyone, bar the technician, almost jumped back in surprise at the power. Harper jumped for a different reason, the speaker on which she was sitting was connected to Mia's voice and her low powerful voice vibrated from beneath her. She looked from the speaker to Mia and the corners of her mouth curled into a smile as she sang. Does she know how much I really love this? asked Harper to herself. As if in answer to her question and in answer to the seductive beat of the song being recorded, Mia began to sway her hips slightly, allowing her hands to flow in the air around her in the strong deliberate moves of a Spanish dancer. As she did, Harper felt herself being wrapped in the invisible threads that Mia was weaving, pulling at different parts of her body—her chin, her wrist, her

lips, her collar bone, her breasts, her thighs. Mia held a low note, longer than she had the night before, and Harper felt the tremor caress her body like a wave. One wire in particular was caught under her leg and quivered like a violin string being played. She couldn't believe how this girl could make her feel. She couldn't believe how attracted she was to her.

"She really is incredible," said Jennifer suddenly, looking to the back of the room where Harper sat. "I take it all back, Harper."

Harper tried to compose herself and nod, a Herculean task against the waves of sound that threatened her façade. As soon as Jennifer looked back, she slumped a little and locked eyes again with Mia. Her lips fluttered as she sang a trail of beautiful notes. Harper began to picture those lips running down her neck, opening and closing, leaving a trail of heat in her wake. Mia began to caress the curves of the mic's body and the length of the stand lightly like the bends and valleys of her own body's landscape. She has to know what she's doing to me, look at that smug smirk...she huffed out as a wave crashed over and inside her and incredulous laugh on her lips...the audacity.

"Harper, I will let you slap me if I ever doubt you again..." said Lilian, her mouth still hanging open in disbelief as it had from the moment Mia had started.

"Never in my forty years in the industry have I seen a person start their journey with such potential. She really was born to sing," said Paulina in her whisper-soft voice. Her approval was the hardest to win by far and she was visibly starstruck.

Jennifer came up and patted her on the back, and noticing the bumps along Harper's arms, laughed.

"I totally get it, Harper, I have goosebumps too. If I wasn't already happily married, I may be trying to win her favor as well." She then winked at her before adding, "But

she couldn't keep her eyes off you, so I think she already has a conquest in mind. Stay professional though. She's young enough to be your daughter."

When Mia rejoined them all in the viewing room, the other women and the technician surrounded her immediately with praise and questions. With the skill of a celebrity many years ahead of Mia, she navigated the conversation beautifully, and within a few minutes everyone was satisfied she was the real deal.

"You can absolutely go ahead and offer her the contract, Harper, she'll be in good hands with you," said Paulina as the three headed for the door. "She is your project to promote as you see fit, we trust your judgement on this. Keep us updated and congrats, Mia."

"Thank you, ladies, I'll see you in the office."

"I'm also going to get started right away on the desk to get the best out of Mia's voice and the track," twittered in the technician as he was already heading into a different part of the building. He popped his head around the door quickly with a wave to Mia and added, "You have a key to get out already, don't you, Harper? Can you lock me in after you leave? I may be here a little while."

Harper nodded with a smile, she was already a big fan of how efficient people wanted to be for Mia; it certainly made her work easier. Once the mouse-like technician had scampered away, laptop in hand, the two women were left alone.

"I need to watch myself around you it seems," said Harper with a smirk.

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Mia, a teasing note in her voice.

"Uh-huh, I'm sure... the eye contact, the gestures. Are you trying your best to tease me?" Harper began to stalk around her in a little circle, like a predator uncertain

whether she should pounce.

“Well, I can’t deny it actually. But, did you, uh, like my music though?” Mia coughed a laugh a little on the word like, which made Harper close in.

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“You know acutely how much I enjoyed it, it’s about as much as you’re enjoying this little powerplay you’re on.” She tugged a strand of Mia’s hair loose and began to twirl it around her finger. She leaned in close enough to just let her perfume mist the air between them; she saw Mia’s nostrils flare to breathe in deeply and her eyes rolled back slightly.

“You know, Mia? All of your eye contact and gestures don’t go unnoticed. That kinda behavior could get you into trouble, you need to watch your timing. You may get me in trouble.”

Mia began to lean into the scent of the perfume, like a trail to Harper’s neck and lips. Harper stopped her with one of her fingers to her lips.

“My dear, what did I just say? You need to pick your timing.”

“I-I don’t think I understand,” said Mia looking confused at the empty room and their proximity to one another.

“You see, you just did something that was reckless and I may have to make a bit of an example of you so that it doesn’t happen again.” She tugged lightly at the hair and Mia gasped a little, then smiled.

“Oh...”

“Do you understand now? When you behave, maybe I’ll reward you for it.” She leaned forward, enough for the electrons between their lips to fizz with excitement and static, but not close enough for the sensation to land. Mia sighed in frustration

and laughed.

“Okay, I’ll play... What do I need to do to make it up to you?”

“Hmm, let’s see...” Harper began to pace around her again, like a proud feline, playing with her food before indulging. “Well, you nearly caused a scene. The other’s noticed how you look at me. How you are around me. So, let’s see if you can restrain from doing that first.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“Does it now? Well this task should be no problem then.”

“I have more restraint than you think,” said Mia, puffing out her chest slightly. Harper thought she was adorable. She had the confidence inside her to act with boldness, but she was still new to these power plays, and Harper certainly wasn’t.

“You’ll see on our next meeting...” Mia went over to pick up her jacket she’d hung up by the door when Harper stopped her.

“Good! As that is right now.”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t think an artist’s work stops at the studio, did you? Firstly, we must celebrate your achievement, secondly you have to thank your wonderful agent for this opportunity and thirdly, you must surround yourself with other art and music to immerse yourself in inspiration.”

“Oh! Well, yeah, I guess when you put it like that...” Mia turned away and took out her purse and looked inside quickly at the empty pockets.

“Don’t worry, this first one is on me. Besides, you may find another way to thank me.”

6

Mia was crowded into the back of a cab with Harper. As Harper leaned forward to tell the driver their destination, she struggled to keep her hands to herself. When she had followed Harper out of the studio, she’d noticed that Harper’s hair, when down, flowed between her shoulder blades and all the way down her back, however the way she was leaning now, it cascaded off the sides of her hips, highlighting the shape of her body beneath the tightened fabric of her jumpsuit. Mia hadn’t noticed before, but the back of the jumpsuit was also a deep plunging backless garment, which from beneath the mass of hair, she could see Harper’s satin-sheened skin moving as she laughed with the driver. Mia had talked a big game in the studio, but perhaps her restraint wasn’t as strong as she thought...

As Harper sat back, the waft of perfume settled around her again and she had to stifle a moan. Harper saw the difficulty she was having and rested her head on Mia’s shoulder.

“Patience, Mia, what happened to your restraint?”

Within five minutes of general chit-chat with the cab driver, which with Harper so close felt like an eternity to Mia, they pulled up outside the door of what Mia assumed was a club of some kind. All she could see was the door and the bouncer, there were no flashing lights or crowds of smokers outside like normal clubs, but there was a bouncer, so it had to be something.

Harper paid the cab and waved at the bouncer as she walked past, the man didn’t say a word as Mia walked in behind her and the stupidly rational part of her brain thought that he was either a very irresponsible bouncer or in greater likelihood, that Harper

was important enough to not need an invite anywhere. They descended wooden stairs to a basement, not to the rhythm of a thumping drum like Mia expected, but to the fluttering notes of flute and piano over the somber wail of a double bass. Mia reached the bottom of the staircase and stepped into the past. Around them was wood paneling everywhere and the kind of low light you might expect from a vintage theatre. In a single spotlight, manned by a ginormous bear of a man, was a tiny stage, no bigger than the one she was used to in the Indigo Lounge, but upon it were five musicians, all balancing around the sides of the piano which took up the majority of the space, pouring their hearts out in crotchets and quavers.

“What is this place?”

“I suppose you could call it the Indigo Lounge before the Indigo Lounge. This is the Bass Clef, a jazz bar from way back when...or at least that’s how they want it to feel.”

Mia looked around the darkened room. It was made up of crescent-shaped bays all facing the stage at the front. Within each bay was a table with a single light on it, which scarcely illuminated the shadows of patrons attending, although by evidence of the smoke in the air and the gentle chatter under the notes of the band, were most definitely there.

“They let you smoke in here?”

“They want it to feel authentic. This is a secret gem of LA, it’s where some of the biggest deals in Hollywood have been made, bodies conspiring together in the shadows of the Bass Clef.

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“That’s very poetic...”

“It’s true. Conspiring is half the fun, and the other half is the mystery of it all. You’re even served food and drinks in the darkness of the low glowing lanterns. A semi-hidden delight of the senses, so to speak.”

“You’re loving this, aren’t you?”

“I will be.”

A gentleman showed them to a booth at the back and asked Harper if she would have her usual.

“Yes please, Percival, but make it for two this time. I’m with company.”

The man nodded and disappeared into the curtains and smoke.

“Did you just order for me?”

“I did, is that a problem?”

Mia reminded herself that Harper was buying this meal and thought she should be quiet, but the notion ticked her off a little.

“What if I don’t like what you’ve ordered?”

“You will.”

“What if I’m allergic to something?”

“Then you’ll have the best medics money can buy. Have you quite finished?” Harper smiled at her. Mia could feel that she was losing the confidence she’d had earlier and didn’t like it. She wasn’t normally a confident person unless she was performing, but Harper was like this all the time, she couldn’t compete.

“Don’t look so downtrodden, Mia, this is your first day in showbiz, this is my thirtieth year. Once you learn that everything in LA is a performance, that confidence will come as a second nature, but for now, stop pouting and let me treat you to an exciting mystery dinner.”

Mia conceded and sat down. Harper slid into the booth behind her, sliding her arm around pulling her close. Mia went a little rigid, forgetting for a moment the proximity of which Harper was getting dangerously accustomed to assuming with her. The booth had a thick luxurious curtain for complete privacy, and it looked down towards the stage.

“See, it’s not so bad to let someone else take the lead every now and then, is it?”

She leaned forward and kissed Mia on the cheek, her cheek still tingling moments after she pulled away. Mia looked nervously at Harper, their faces inches from one another.

“What was that for?”

“I told you, if you behave, I’ll give you a treat.”

Mia huffed a small laugh, her heart beating a mile a minute. She couldn’t believe where she was and where she had been two days earlier in her life. Two days ago, she was picking up odd shifts in every retail job she couldn’t find or at the Indigo Lounge

just to eat and pay her minuscule rent to Esme for letting her sleep in the vacant room above the Lounge. Today she was sitting with the biggest name in music representation in a private bay of a secret club whilst her finger traced circles on her thigh to the blues.

“This is the interlude music between the main performances,” said Harper. “A good time to talk before the food arrives, so tell me about yourself, Mia...Who are you? What kind of person have I just signed on to my label?”

“Well, technically I haven’t signed anything yet...”

“Oh shush, you know what I mean.”

“Well, I grew up in Spain, raised by my mother and grandmother as my grandfather died before I was born and my father isn’t talked about. I started singing when I was about six and fell in love with how it made me feel. I felt invincible. I still do when I sing...I guess that’s why I get so confident when I’m up there. If you want to know more specifics, I’m a Gemini, my favorite color is red, and I love old horror films.”

Harper laughed.

“A Gemini certainly suits you, you’re like two different people when you’re performing and when you aren’t. I haven’t quite decided which I like more yet. When you’re not performing, you have this sunniness to you that draws people in, makes them feel welcome and warm. I’ll be honest, at first I saw it as naïvety when you were first setting up, you looked too sweet to be this powerhouse Deborah had told me about...but I did like how kind you looked.”

Mia sat back, she didn’t think Harper could be so tender with her words, she hadn’t been up until now, and this softer side made her chest ache. She strikes me as a Gemini too then, if that’s her logic.

“And then you have your performing side. I don’t think I can put it into words, Mia, but you are like lightning incarnate. You’re both dazzling and terrifying, powerful and beautiful, ethereal and primordial...I’ve never seen anything like it. And your vocals are so...unique.”

Harper squeezed Mia’s arm slightly then, the urge to be closer to her made Mia push herself towards her in the bay.

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“What about you, Harper? Tell me something about you.”

“Well now, do you want the answer I give interviewers or the real me?”

Mia gave her a look.

“Alright, alright...but don’t go blabbing to the press. What can I say? I was raised by my mother and step-dad. The biological father ran off when he learned my mom was pregnant, the sweetheart, and my mom thought she was going to have to raise me herself. Luckily for her, a man in her team at the gallery she worked for had been crazy about her for years and they were already great friends, so a love blossomed between them naturally. On my birth certificate, I had my birth fathers name for all of a week before my mother had it scrapped and had my now step-father’s name added instead. His name was Lee Nightingale. My mother called me Harper after Harper Lee—she saw it as a sign that my step-dad was meant to be in my life because like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a white man proved he could be an ally to a black person and support them through everything. She also loved the idea of my surname being Nightingale as it made her think of Florence Nightingale and Maya Angelou, one a fierce woman pioneering her industry with her skill in a world dominated by men and the other who wrote about a caged bird and made people realize it had a voice.”

“Your family is deep.”

“We’re a family of artists, of course we are.”

The two women laughed again, and the lights dimmed further. A second spotlight clicked on from somewhere and showed a man next to the bar with a saxophone. The

band didn't stop, but their sound quietened to a sizzle of percussion and strings. Over the top of the gentle hissing of the snare, the saxophone weaved a solemn tune, one that told a story of loss but also the strength of the player's heart and devotion to what he lost. Harper leaned forward throughout, barely aware of Mia for that short moment. The spotlights reflected in her eyes with a twinkle. This wasn't just a job for Harper, Mia realized, music was love to her. She was one of the lucky few who got paid to be a part of what they loved and seeing this in her eyes made Mia start to wonder if Harper would let herself be loved in the same way.

Mia turned to the saxophonist now and tried to hear what Harper heard. She felt the pull of each note and heard the moments his breath strained over a breathy note, she saw the beads of water run down his cheek as he played, some rolled into the creases at his eyes, making Mia uncertain which were sweat and which might be tears. Her own eyes began to sting, uncertain whether from the smoke or the music, but as she held back tears of her own, she felt she understood what Harper was hearing.

"You know, your music could have the same power on people."

"You think so?"

"It's actually the reason I brought you here. If I wanted to take you on a swanky date, I could have gotten us a seat anywhere in Hollywood, but the blues is where most of modern music comes from and that soul seems to live in your voice...You could do great things with that ability."

Mia took Harper's hand in hers and brought it up to kiss the back of it.

"What was that for?"

"Because I wanted to. It's hard to stay professional around you when you look at me that way."

“Well, is it a problem if I like it when you’re not professional either?”

Mia laughed, “No, not a problem at all.”

The two women paused for a moment as the lights came back on a little and talk commenced properly again.

“God, I’m gonna need a drink or two if we are getting deep this early!”

Mia slapped her wrist but found the show of bravado endearing.

The food started arriving at the table and the lights turned up a fraction more. Mia could make out the plates now at the very least, but anything in a sauce just looked dark and mysterious. The smells that her nosed picked out seemingly easier in the dark were deep ginger notes and warm chili. She smelled mint from somewhere and the gamey juiciness of lamb along with the zest of lime and the air of something floral.

With the lights a little higher, a couple of people walked by the booth as the curtains were still open, all seemingly knowing Harper. She expertly briefly introduced Mia and gave a few pleasantries before signaling ever so politely that they should leave. As each one left, she would whisper who they were and a tiny secret about them all.

“He’s the owner of a big oil field in Texas; his hair is a toupee. She is trying to start a makeup brand from money she got from an accidental ginormous jackpot in Vegas, however she has had most of her makeup tattooed permanently on.”

Mia liked these quirky tidbits and felt as if Hollywood was finally accepting her and inviting her in. Suddenly an overly campy guy came over, talking louder than all the tables combined. Mia shrank in her seat in embarrassment.

“Oh my Goodness, Harper Nightingale! How are you? Where have you been hiding!”

“No way, I can’t believe it!” replied Harper, in a much more muted version of his excitement. She stood up and kissed him on both cheeks as he drew closer. “You know, the jetsetter life of Hollywood and all... How about you, what are you doing these days?”

“Urgh, I hate you, you bitch!” They both laughed and Harper slapped his arm. “You know, same old, same old—being everyone’s little runner between sets even though I’m meant to be a producer... Honestly Har, if I’d have known what a pain in the ass being a producer would be, I would’ve stuck to directing pornos.”

“Well, that job only sounded fun for the first few weeks.”

“You’re not wrong there, once you’ve seen one schlong, you’ve seen them all!”

Mia wanted to die at how loud this guy spoke, several shadows looked as though they turned their heads at the shouting of the word schlong... Who even called them that?

“I wouldn’t know,” joked Harper, and they both laughed again.

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Suddenly the man noticed Mia and a coy grin crawled over his lips.

“Oh now, Harper, you haven’t been keeping this one secret from me have you? Has the almighty Harper Nightingale finally decided she’s human after all? You must be pretty special, Miss...?”

“Mia,” replied Mia, wishing she could be as hard to see as the other patrons.

“Caleb. Me and Harper go way back. If you want to get in with her for the long haul, you’ll have to get through me!”

The three laughed then, Mia’s more out of nerves than anything else.

“Anyway, Caleb, my darling, it was so lovely bumping into you. We need to plan a brunch soon, just us girls and have a proper catch up.”

“Of course, I can tell when I’m being a third wheel!”

Can you? thought Mia with an eyebrow raised.

“I’ll get my people to call your people and blah, blah, blah, brunch!”

The canned laughter came again and the two hugged and kissed each other as he strutted off up the stairs and out of the club, much to what Mia assumed was the appreciation of the whole club.

“Well...” started Mia, pushing her now luke-warm food around with a fork, “He

seemed...nice. How do you know him?"

"Oh, I don't," said Harper, the sides of her mouth already beginning to curl upwards.

"What?" Mia put down her fork in disbelief.

"Never met him before in my life."

The two held eye contact for a moment before both bursting into fits of laughter. Even a couple of the tables nearby seemed to laugh, likely having heard the whole thing. The jazz started to pick up then as if to shut up the naughty kids in the crowd and they tried to get serious about the food in front of them.

"This one is my favorite; it is a Thai recipe of a curried lamb dish. Are you okay with spice?"

"Oh, now you think to ask if I'm okay with an order?"

Harper nudged her shoulder with her own. "Just open your mouth, will you?"

She forked a piece of the rich-smelling meat onto a fork and gently placed it in Mia's mouth, her lip trembled a little at the welcomed and yet intimate intrusion of the fork.

"Wow!" Mia exclaimed. It was really delicious. Slightly sweet and sticky, yet fragrant and balanced. The fattiness of the meat melted the sharp notes into a warmth that lingered on her tongue.

"Now try a sip of your drink."

Mia complied and her mouth fizzed with what felt like a condensed mojito. The strong flavors of mint and lime, but with a touch of ginger and the sweetness of pure

sugar cane juice. It washed away the warmth of the lamb and blended with the flavors, leaving a sparkling dew of a Thai vacation dancing on her lips.

The lights dimmed again and this time, a glamorous woman stepped to the plate and began to ad-lib over the top, scatting riffs and sounds to accompany the music.

“You have behaved yourself very well this evening so far, Mia,” said Harper, dabbing the edges of her mouth with a handkerchief. “But let’s see how this woman’s performance gets you.”

Mia nestled herself into her seat, preparing for a true show of this singer’s range, which already sounded incredible, when Harper turned her face and kissed her lips.

The sensation of her lips was even softer on hers than it had felt on her cheek; she wanted to melt into them, to taste the lime cocktail that teased the edges endlessly. Harper grabbed Mia’s chin and forced it away to look at the stage again, exposing her neck. Harper’s lips began to trail along the line of her neck and down to her collarbone. It took Mia a moment to notice in the confusion of the transpiring heat, but Harper was playing the scales along her body. As the singer’s pitch raised, so did Harper’s mouth, but the deeper the woman sang, the lower her lips trailed.

“Did you know,” whispered Harper as she came up once more, “that Zadia here has one of the largest vocal ranges of any woman in history...aren’t you lucky?”

Mia gripped the edge of the chair as Harper’s lips descended again, this time below the collarbone, Harper having to pull Mia’s top to the side to remain on skin. On the next time the pitch peaked, Harper bit Mia’s ear gently.

“She also has one of the loudest voices around...although I’d say yours is very powerful too. Shall we see who is louder?”

The next time Zadia's voice tumbled into a deeper range, Harper's hand traced slowly downwards. Down, discreetly under the table, under the ruffle of Mia's punk-inspired skirt and finally under the thin fabric of her underwear to the warmth beneath. Mia gasped.

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“Harper! Wh-wha—oh fuck!”

“You’re not doing a very good job of restraining yourself so far, Mia. You’ll have to try a little harder than that or people might notice.”

Mia shot her a look. So this was Harper’s plan. The game was afoot, and like a performance, Mia’s confidence grew, as did her stubbornness. She bit her lip and as Harper rubbed her clit and kissed her neck, she clenched her fists as she began to rock into the rhythm of both Harper’s hand and the notes Zadia sang. Suddenly the performers voice grew to a peak and held a note, it was a reprise of an earlier melody, but it didn’t feel like she was finished, and neither was Mia. Before Harper had her way entirely, before that wave crashed over her and she came, she slid herself off of Harper’s fingers and pushed her back into the booth seat. The shock of the switch didn’t give Harper enough time to react before the front of her jumpsuit was open and her nipples were in Mia’s mouth, stinging with the rock-hard pressure that built within them.

“Mia! This...this isn’t good behave—uh...” It sounded as though she lost her train of thought. Mia nibbled her swollen nipple gently and Harper let out a moan. A couple at a nearby table looked over to their booth, but it was too dark for anyone to clearly see what was happening. Harper pulled Mia’s face to hers.

“Right now, I think I like this version of Mia more...” she whispered before bringing her in for another kiss. Mia laid her back slightly, allowing her to be able to slide her own hand in the front of Harper’s open jumpsuit. Mia found her hot wetness before she found anything else and with a swift maneuvering of her lacy-feeling underwear, Mia slid her fingers inside her.

“Holy fuck, Harper, you’re so so wet.”

“Just shut up and fuck me.”

Harper pushed Mia’s head back to her breasts and Mia groaned into them. The music loud around them, dampening the noise of their heavy breaths.

Harper’s legs began to shake as Mia thrust her fingers faster and deeper into her. With each held note, Mia paused to rub and tease Harper’s clit, the depth of the rising groan from Harper’s lips began to mount. The reprise was starting again from Zadia’s set, this time louder and more energetic. This is the finale, thought Mia to herself. She took her nipple between her teeth again and nibbled.

“Oh fuck, Mia.”

At this, Mia slid her fingers in once more and used her thumb to rub around her swollen clit and labia in a soothing circle, Harper now the star, began to sing. Low groans at first and then louder and louder. A couple of tables were definitely looking now, but still, their secret was safe in the shadows. Zadia reached her final note, and it was loud, even without the microphone, and the power was incredible, but Harper seemed to try to match it as she came, clamping down on Mia’s fingers and trembling all over.

Harper ran her fingers through Mia’s hair and tugged her up again to kiss her. She draped her arms over her shoulders and locked her there, kissing her between breaths until her lungs were at rest again. The crowd applauded, and Harper quickly pushed Mia off her, doing up her jumpsuit just in time for the lights to come on. Instead of looking embarrassed, she stood up and clapped a standing ovation to Zadia. A spotlight swung around to Harper and upon seeing who applauded the woman, people began murmuring and clapping more. Within a few moments, the whole bar was on their feet applauding the singer, and the lights came up allowing even the staff to stop

and applaud her. Zadia was awestruck and began to weep, she was clearly older than Harper, but she knew who she was when she saw her, everyone had heard about Harper's coming out of hiding the day before and it was already all over the web. Harper blew the woman a kiss and the spotlight attempted to follow the kiss back to Zadia where she caught it and bowed.

"Now is our chance," whispered Harper in Mia's ear. The two women snuck out behind the applauding crowd and out into the warm night air, laughing.

"Always have an escape route prepared, the first rule of Hollywood," chuckled Harper. A car pulled up beside her as if called there by magic.

"What the...?"

"My driver knows that after 8pm, I am likely to need either picking up or saving from whatever potentially awful event I'm in, so he will ask around the driver network until he finds where I am and then will wait for me."

"Just how rich are you?"

"Nowhere near how rich you're likely to be once I'm done with you...fancy a ride?"

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"You know, we will need to keep this professional to a degree," said Harper between kisses as the pair crashed through her front door laughing.

"And how do you suggest we do that?" replied Mia.

Harper pulled away and gestured to the sofa as she said, "Please make yourself at home, I'm going to get us some champagne and a fountain pen, let's get your contract

signed and then we can really celebrate. We can talk professional logistics tomorrow.”

Harper padded into her bedroom and slipped out of her jumpsuit and underwear, throwing a lace, satin night dress over her body which hugged her curves and the hem played just below her butt when stood straight. She reapplied some lipstick and then padded back into the kitchen where she got a bottle of champagne out and two glasses.

“Need help popping the cork? Uh—I mean...”

They both laughed from different rooms.

“God Mia, keep your head out of the gutter!”

Harper turned the corner back into her living room and Mia’s jaw dropped and she whispered something that sounded like a prayer in Spanish.

“I know, champagne has the same effect on me.”

Mia picked up a small throw pillow and mocked throwing it at her. She eased down on the sofa next to her, and Mia instinctively pulled Harper’s legs around to rest over her lap.

“You are incredibly beautiful, Harper, do we really have to keep this so professional?” Mia began gently stroking Harper’s legs, the hunger eased down, now full of genuine affection. Harper leaned in and kissed her slowly before resting her forehead against hers.

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“Here, take your drink. For now, let’s get to know each other a little, then we will hold back while we get your contract signed, re-record all your songs and work on promoting you for tours and live shows. Once you have that steady flow of work coming in, we can see about turning the amp up a little bit again.”

“But aren’t we signing the contract now? Doesn’t that mean we’d have to slow down now too?”

Harper thought on this a moment and then looked down at the girl before her.

“We’ll sign now, take a couple of days and then we both learn the true meaning of restraint.”

Mia took a slow sip of her drink, maintaining eye contact. She seemed to understand that the Harper she was getting to know was not the Huntress who they whispered about in the boardroom meetings. She just had a reputation to keep intact. Still, wasn’t she allowed to have a little fun?

“Shall we do the deed?” Harper said playfully, leaning over to the coffee table and grabbing a shiny black fountain pen. The hem of her night dress lifted in a way that framed her soft thighs, and Mia felt a hunger pool in the pit of her stomach.

Back fully seated next to Mia, Harper fixed her with a smile and handed over the pen, swapping it for Mia’s glass and setting it against her lower lip. She watched Mia’s face intently, studying the lips whose words had enchanted her that first night they met. Prey in a web—that was how she had felt. That feeling had never left, only intensified.

“It really is an honor to be here with you,” Harper said. “To see this happen. This will be a big turning point for you and your career, I just know it.”

“Is that the champagne talking?” Mia joked, leaning over Harper to grab the contract. Harper took the opportunity to rest her hand on the nape of Mia’s neck.

“Maybe it is,” said Harper, crossing her legs as Mia straightened up.

“Wouldn’t you love to know what else it has to say?”

“Maybe I would...” Mia mused, leaning over to kiss her briefly. Harper’s perfume, rose, iris and oud, lingered in the air between them. Mia took a breath.

“I kinda wish Deborah was here to see this.”

Harper raised an eyebrow at that, gesturing to the two of them seated on the sofa.

“Okay, so maybe not this,” Mia conceded, gently sliding one hand against Harper’s thigh. “I do wish she could be here to celebrate signing the contract. She’s probably told you, but she’s the one who’s guided me through all of this. The Indigo Lounge is my home, and that’s all due to her and Esme.”

Harper nodded, understanding in her eyes. Suddenly her smile turned wide and she spoke.

“I should probably thank her too, then. I wouldn’t have met you unless I agreed to do her that favor, and then where would we be? You can call her tomorrow and thank her. For now...” She put the champagne glasses on the coffee table and leaned over to put her hand on Mia’s waist.

“...We can do a little celebrating of our own.”

Mia laughed, before biting her lip. Balancing the contract on Harper's legs, Mia gave it a quick read before signing the dotted line at the very bottom. She exhaled.

"That's it! Congratulations on your first big contract, sweetheart," Harper said while moving off of the sofa to grab the bottle of champagne from the kitchen. She still managed to catch Mia's blush at the pet name, smiling to herself as she refilled their glasses. In the light of the doorway, the gold in her hair sparkled.

"You have been incredibly generous with me, Harper, I don't know how I'll be able to thank you."

"Thank me? Why would you need to thank me? You are the talent and the wonder. You deserve this!"

Harper hoped that she wasn't the only one still thinking back to Mia burying herself in Harper in the back of that smoky jazz club. As she came back in with their newly refilled glasses, Harper settled herself, straddling Mia's lap.

"Oh! Oh, you're very eager," Mia said, taking her glass from Harper as she made herself comfortable. With a sly smile, Harper placed her hand under Mia's chin.

"You really have no idea, do you?"

Face hot, Mia shook her head, allowing herself to be taken in by Harper's golden gaze.

"I have a very specific reputation. I'm the best of the best at what I do. I have been for nearly thirty years, and I can be one cut-throated bitch."

"Don't I know it," Mia said dreamily, going to take a sip of her champagne. Harper gently moved her hand from Mia's chin to her wrist, stopping her.

“In a room full of people who would do anything, and I do mean anything, to get my attention, you had me in the palm of your hand. Let me be clear.” Harper leaned in close to continue.

“I am still the one in charge. If I didn’t want you there, or if I didn’t want you here, I would have said so. You have a... power here. Not just here, but in your music. That version of you onstage?”

Mia nodded, enraptured.

“She’s going to need to become more and more common if you turn out to be as successful as, no doubt, we both hope you will. This industry does not deal well with any level of sensitivity. You use that power and it will become your greatest weapon. I, on the other hand...” Harper paused to take a sip of champagne. Mia watched her lips as she swallowed.

“I am looking forward to a repeat performance. Cheers.” At that, Mia raised her glass to Harper’s. The room was so quiet that the clink felt like a pin drop. Both women were flushed, tension crackling in the air between them as they sipped their champagne in silence for a moment.

“Do you know how hypnotizing you are on stage?”

“I try to do that on purpose,” admitted Mia, taking a sip.

Harper nodded, urging her to go on.

“There have been some... nasty stereotypes about women like me, and the women who raised me. Spain hasn’t been very kind to gitanos, historically. We have been seen as hypersexual, untrustworthy, or prizes to lust after.”

She took another sip of her drink.

“When I first began learning flamenco, I felt that power that you described. Here I was, learning an art form that once-upon-a-time women wouldn’t have been

considered for at all.”

“Really?” Asked Harper. “Any time I’ve been to Spain, the flamenco dancers I’ve seen are almost always women.”

“That’s a pretty recent development, actually. Some of the more complicated or fast dance moves just weren’t taught to women at all for decades. Times have changed, of course, but I try to channel that in the way I perform. I’m lucky to be where I am, and I’m grateful to be able to take that bit of my heritage with me.”

Harper was listening intently, golden eyes locked onto Mia’s own.

“It’s not just cultural, either. When I perform my music, my songs, I’m rejecting any power that those stereotypes might have over me. It’s like, look at me, I’m sexy and free and you can’t do a damn thing about it. It doesn’t hurt that I couldn’t be a maneater if I tried, either.”

Harper laughed, smiling fondly.

Before long they had both drained their glasses, and Mia was circling her thumbs on Harper’s thighs, leaning in to kiss her neck. Short, ragged breaths came from Harper as she remembered the events of a few hours prior, and she started to grind in Mia’s lap, her hands scratching at her undercut. Mia hummed against her neck, kissing her way up to Harper’s jawline and finally meeting her open mouth. Moving her hands as they kissed, Mia began to draw her fingers over Harper’s nipples, remembering their sensitivity. Harper gasped into Mia’s mouth and went to pull the skirt of her night dress up?—

Bzzt bzzzt. Bzzt bzzzt.

Mia suddenly snapped up.

“Oh shit, what time is it?” Checking her phone, Mia’s eyes went wide.

“I’m so sorry but I actually have to go, I agreed to video call with my family in Spain in about an hour.”

Harper nodded understandingly, moving off of Mia and going to grab her own phone. As Mia grabbed her things and went to leave, Harper reappeared from her bedroom in a flowing satin robe that matched her night dress.

“I’ve texted my driver, he’ll be able to give you a ride home. Are you going to tell them about the contract?”

“I was actually going to update them on how the recording session went today,” said Mia. “This is one of the biggest moments of my career, and since they taught me everything I know I feel like it would be a disservice not to. I’m not totally sure.”

“This is a big moment. You’re going to need to be ready for a very busy schedule over the coming months, Mia.”

“My name sounds so sexy when you say it,” Mia said, crowding Harper by the door for the start of what they both hoped would be a very long goodbye. To their disappointment, as they kissed there was a beep from a car outside. Harper nodded, recognizing it.

“That’s your ride, Mia.” Harper looped her arms around Mia’s waist and kissed her sweetly.

“I’ll reach out once I have a basic idea of what your schedule will be, and we can go over it in person.”

“Perfect. I’ll be looking forward to it, Harper.”

Harper rolled her eyes at that, taking the opportunity to smack Mia's butt. Mia laughed and walked down the hallway, and Harper moved to close the door and turn in for the night when she heard Mia say, "Harper!"

Harper poked her head out.

"What is it?"

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“Thank you!” Mia was about halfway down the hallway and waved back at her with a smile that could power a block’s worth of streetlights, laughing.

Yeah, thought Harper, I’m in trouble with this one.

She shut the door and dimmed the lights in the living room, thinking that one last glass of champagne wouldn’t hurt. Mia wouldn’t be the only one with a full schedule in the coming weeks, and Harper didn’t know when her next chance to celebrate would be.

And this was a moment worthy of celebration. Harper’s honed radar for talent meant that she could smell success from several miles off, and Mia would do incredibly well, she could already tell. That meant that she would also do incredibly well, sure, but as she leaned back on to the sofa where Mia was a moment before, she realized that doing well for herself had not been her first instinct here.

Making Mia happy. That was her first instinct. Her delight in the studio, her wonder at the jazz club, the champagne at her own home—none of that was actually a necessary step when working towards signing a contract. Typically, the procedure was several board meetings followed by a no-frills signing, a brief celebration for the act and then recording demos. That’s not what happened here, Harper realized, and that’s not what she wanted to happen here. She had wanted to woo Mia. From that very first moment she had laid eyes on her. She had wanted to seduce her. She wanted to feel every part of her body, mind and soul.

The thought startled Harper. Despite what her friends at the label had said, this wasn’t like what had happened with Felicity. Sure, there was a strong sense of lust there, and

an intense connection, but it had never been anything more than that. It had just been sex. This connection with Mia, though, that was different. There was a spark of genuine affection. If Mia's career didn't get off the ground Harper knew that she would be devastated. She wanted to make sure Mia was looked after.

She leaned back on the sofa, closing her eyes for a moment. This would involve calling in a lot of favors. Tomorrow would be filled with phone calls, emails and many instances of assuring organizers that yes, Mia won't flake and yes, she is the real deal.

She was the real deal, Harper knew, a true artist who deserved her place in the spotlight. Her lyrics highlighted her life as a lesbian and her cultural background, and her stage presence was magnetic in a way many of those organizers could only dream of. That blend of unique traits and talent only came once in a lifetime.

Harper finished her glass and was about to walk to her kitchen to clean it when a ping came from her phone. Unlocking the screen, she found it was an email from the studio.

"That was quick," Harper muttered, reading through the email before seeing the files attached at the bottom. Turning the volume up on her phone, Harper tapped play on the first of the files, knowing the rest would play in due time.

She allowed Mia's presence to fill the apartment. As she went from the kitchen to her bathroom to her bedroom, she imagined Mia there with her. Her music filled every corner and crevice, filling Harper's mind with the image of her in the studio, dancing and concentrating her power.

Undressing in her room and turning the lights off, Harper turned down the volume on her phone, lowering the demo to a murmur. Slipping between the sheets, she felt comforted by Mia's presence.

“I might be in too deep,” she said to the empty room. She didn’t move to turn the music off, though. As her mind calmed down from the events of the day, she allowed Mia’s voice to lull her to a deep, satisfying sleep.

When her alarm woke her at 5am the next morning, Harper didn’t waste a moment. Dressing and walking to her kitchen, she brewed herself a cup of coffee while her laptop booted up in her office. Mentally, she made a list of nearly every contact she had locally. Photographers, club promoters, event organizers—she would have to contact a PR agency, get roadies together for shows, see if she could get Mia a slot on local television...

None of this work was new to Harper, but as she finished her first coffee and went to sit at her desk, a fire was lit within her. She wanted this to work. With steely determination, she began typing emails to people she knew, timing them to send at 8am. A lot of these organizers didn’t have to be up at 5am to work this hard, so she made sure that when they sat down to work, her email would be one of the first they saw. She hadn’t gotten into her current position by accident. Hard work, determination and a certain amount of thick skin had made Harper Nightingale into the Huntress in the eyes of the music industry.

Still, her determination was being fueled by something else. She thought about Mia’s situation and compared it to her level of confidence on stage. She seemed comfortable, more comfortable on stage than someone who had never been signed really should be, but that confidence faltered once she was offstage again.

Whatever caused it, Harper wanted to give Mia enough experience to allow her to keep that confidence with her wherever she went. She genuinely had no idea how someone with that much talent was living in a room above a bar, working sparse shifts, when she had a gift worth sharing with the world.

It seemed like a question worth asking, she thought. She wouldn’t pry, but as Mia’s

agent, she thought they needed to be able to trust each other. They had both been very frank about their situations and upbringings, and Harper reasoned that they were close enough to justify Mia answering one or two questions.

Still, that wasn't a problem for right now. Once 8:30am hit, Harper received several replies from people she had contacted.

Yes, we would love to have her for an interview, let us know when her schedule is free.

Of course we would be willing to sponsor an event. Your reputation precedes you.

By 10am, she was filling out an online calendar with interviews, recording and mixing sessions, meet-and-greets for later when Mia developed a fan base, and press days. She would need to check with Mia about contacting Stefan, Taylor and Ricky for recording, if they needed any extra session musicians, and if she wanted to use a specific concept for the album, but by the time the afternoon came around Harper was confident that Mia would be very happy with the schedule.

Restraint would be needed, of course. A level of professionalism would be required, especially in public or when working with industry professionals. Rumors were quick to start and even quicker to catch on, and Harper knew that despite her track record, she couldn't risk a scandal like this. Still, once Mia was happy, she could be happy.

Before she could take a break for lunch, she had one last big favor to call in. She began typing, making sure the wording was as convincing as possible. Harper knew she couldn't afford to mess this up.

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Coming down the stairs at the Indigo Lounge a few days later, Mia felt like she was

on cloud nine. Harper had been keeping her tided over with occasional updates but had saved any major details for when they would be meeting in person. Deborah had been overjoyed when Mia told her about the contract, smugly telling her that she'd known about her potential all along. Reaching the main floor of the lounge, Mia looked out fondly at the patrons of the lounge. There were a few women sitting close to the bar, laughing over a pot of tea. Ruby, still working on her manuscript, was sitting in the corner sipping a cup of coffee and intermittently sighing to herself. Mia gave her a wave and, when she waved back, scanned the room and locked eyes with Deborah.

“It's like this place has some sort of creative ley-line or something,” Deborah said once she'd come over, sitting at a booth and gesturing to the seat across from her. “Everybody's working on a novel, or music, or sketching people passing by...”

“It's a really encouraging environment, honestly. Made even better by having supportive people like you around.”

“Ah, don't be silly, Mia, that's what I do. You're an absolute credit to the community here, you should be very proud of yourself.”

Mia shrugged.

“We look after each other.”

“We certainly do,” said a voice from the front door.

Turning, Mia saw Harper striding towards them, shoulders set back in a way that oozed confidence. Her braids were tied back behind her head, allowing Mia to see her face fully. Her eyes weren’t any less piercing, but in daylight they shone.

Reaching the booth, Harper stayed standing, pulling an iPad out of a satchel and pulling up an online calendar full of appointments.

“Are you ready to be busy?” joked Harper, passing the iPad to Mia. “You will have to add your email to the contact list at the top, and then you’ll have full access to your schedule for the next two months. Do you hear me, Mia?”

Mia was scrolling through the calendar, eyes wide with shock and delight. Harper laughed to herself and looked over at Deborah, who was smiling fondly. Mia gently put the iPad down before suddenly launching herself into Harper’s arms, squeezing her tightly. Harper froze for a moment before squeezing her back.

This seemed to embarrass Mia, who jumped back, sat down and began hastily apologizing.

“Oh my goodness, that was so unprofessional, I’m so sorry?—”

She was interrupted when Harper slid into the booth next to her and lay a hand on her thigh.

“Mia,” she said with a laugh, “You’re fine. I’m glad you’re so happy with it, I really am.” Harper leaned in, giving Mia a soft kiss on the cheek. Mia looked at Deborah for a moment, horrified, but she only rolled her eyes.

“I know. Of course I know! What, did you think I was completely oblivious?” she said, taking mock offence. Mia turned red, pursing her lips together and looking over at Harper.

“Oh, you poor baby,” said Harper, dripping with sarcasm, squeezing Mia’s waist.

“Can you blame me?” asked Mia. “I really thought you would have come to your senses after you’d sobered up. For a while there I honestly thought I’d dreamed it...” Mia squeezed Harper’s thigh and looked up at her with a soft smile.

“Why on earth would you think that, sweetheart? I meant everything that I said. I’m here to make sure you’re looked after.”

“Yeah, I mean you two are so sappy already I didn’t think there would be any doubt,” Deborah quipped, laughing when Mia looked at her in shock.

“You two have been about as subtle as a brick through a window, honestly, you think my gaydar isn’t strong enough to pick up on you?”

A beat passed and they all burst out laughing, any tension dissolving as Mia realized that not only was this real it would stay that way.

“I guess I owe you an explanation. You’re not my first agent?—”

Harper faux-gasped, but Deborah reached out and swatted her on the arm, nodding at Mia to continue. She hadn’t just heard this story before; she had been there when everything happened.

“A few years ago, I was meant to headline the local Thanksgiving festival’s after-party. I had my set picked out, we had done soundcheck, and an hour before showtime they told me they had decided on another artist. When I went to call my agent at the time he wouldn’t answer my messages.”

Mia could tell that Harper was appalled at this lack of professionalism, but she had to finish the story, so she continued.

“When I finally got through to him, he told me that he didn’t think my music was “the right fit” for the festival and had the set changed himself. The artist they had replaced me with was another band he represented. This wasn’t the first time it had happened, actually, but it was definitely the final straw. I dropped him as my agent and tried to stay independent, but the scene isn’t easy to break into unless you have representation. I’m very lucky that you came along and found me.”

Mia smiled but Harper was deathly quiet, arm around Mia’s waist, visibly trying to wrap her head around what she was hearing. She took a deep breath.

“I’m so fucking sorry that happened, Mia.”

Mia shrugged, but it seemed like Harper was having none of it and shook her head.

“As an agent, you have a responsibility to be upfront and open to communication with your artists. You’re not just representation, you’re pretty much one of the only ways they can get anything done. I’m so sorry he treated you like that, Mia, you really deserved better.”

“I have better,” Mia said in as assuring a voice as she could. “You are so much better.”

“I promise you, Mia, genuinely, I won’t do anything of the sort. If I have a problem,

I'll come straight to you."

"You're too sweet," Mia said, leaning in for a kiss. Deborah fake-gagged, and Harper flipped her the bird while kissing Mia back.

"Alright, now that that's been dealt with, lets take a look at the actual schedule," said Harper, drawing the group's attention back to the iPad.

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“You have three recording sessions next week; we’re hoping to have that song you recorded out as a single as soon as possible. The week after that, you’ll have a photoshoot for MusicLife magazine, and I’ve asked them to assign a stylist who... fits your personal fashion sense, shall we say.”

“So you’re not going to stick me in a sundress with a headscarf?” Mia said, looking relieved.

“Absolutely not!” said Harper. “You’re going to have input into what you wear for the shoot, and I know you’re fond of a more alternative style, so I’ll make sure we find someone to work with who understands that.”

Mia beamed, barely able to believe what she was hearing.

“It doesn’t end there,” said Deborah. “Harper called me a few days ago to ask for a minor favor. Two days after the photoshoot, the day before you’ll be featured in MusicLife, you’ll be the musical guest on Late Night Friday with Warren Murrey. The network has been looking for fresh talent to bring onstage, and Harper and I managed to convince them that you’d be a perfect fit.”

“Which you would be!” said Harper, squeezing Mia again.

Deborah continued.

“You’ll be doing a show at The Orchid immediately after, and we’ll have an after-party to celebrate once that’s done.”

Mia felt like she was floating. The Orchid was one of the most exclusive nightclubs in LA, with a waiting list for reservations a mile long and a VIP list that was nearly impossible to get on. The best of the best got to perform on its stage, and Mia was going to be one of them.

“This feels a little insane. It’s so much so soon, I really didn’t think I would ever get one of these opportunities, let alone all of them!” Mia was giddy, so obviously excited that when Esme came over with drinks for them she said,

“What’s gotten you so excited? Please don’t tell me you two are U-Hauling already, I can only handle so much.”

“They may as well be,” said Deborah. “These lovebirds are all excited for Mia’s big fixture on Late Night Friday.”

“Wait, how do you know?” Harper asked Esme suspiciously.

“I could tell from a mile off,” Esme said, shrugging. “Wait, Mia’s going to be on Late Night Friday?!”

“Like I said, subtle as a brick through a window,” joked Deborah. “Yeah, she is.”

“But honey, what are you going to wear?” asked Esme. “Showing up in a tartan skirt and fishnet top is all good here, but for national television?”

“I actually don’t know,” admitted Mia, looking to Harper. “Could you help me figure something out?”

“I’ll put you in contact with the stylist from MusicLife, they’re an absolute darling. They’ll help you put something together.”

“Thank you so much.” Mia felt like a golden light had planted itself in her chest. She was radiating excitement and began chatting to Esme about her options for styling.

“I can’t go out on national television looking basic, but if we’ll be travelling to The Orchid after I’ll need something pretty comfortable...”

“You’re playing The Orchid?!”

Harper seemed content to sit back and watch the two women excitedly discuss costuming options and looked over to Deborah, who was smiling to herself. Gently, Harper raised Mia’s hand to her mouth and kissed it. Turning to her, Mia mouthed, Thank you.

Harper, seemingly happy to drink in Mia’s overflowing joy, didn’t say anything at all.

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“...That’s about all the time we have for tonight’s show, folks. Next week we’ll have Leon Addison in-studio talking about his recent Oscar win—yes, ladies, I’m excited too! We’ll also have Leah Braxton discussing her new novel, *Death to the Wayside*. Thank you so much to tonight’s incredible guests, our wonderful studio audience and thank you all so much for tuning in at home. No, really! To play us out this evening, Late Night Friday is proud to present the incredible Miss Mia Cortés!”

Standing off to the side of the stage, Harper mentally timed it. It only took thirty seconds of Mia’s voice being broadcast (taking the thirty-second delay into account) for her phone to start ringing.

Leaning out of an open fire escape, Harper took some deep breaths. She wasn’t going to lie, *per se*. Just drum up a little demand.

“Ah Mr. Johnson! How have you been, Stephen, how’s Anita doing? Well, we really appreciate the enthusiasm, but I’m afraid she’s fully booked for the next week. Yes, we would be available on the eighteenth but we would need a few days to make sure we could get all the resources for a show like that together...”

“Marie Andrews, as I live and breathe! Yes, it has been a while, how are—well, I’m sure she would be delighted to sing at the gala, but we would need at least a month’s notice. Yes, really, she already has a packed schedule, but I can talk to her about it, see if we can squeeze it in...”

“...Mr. Carpenter I’ve already told you, she’s fully booked. No, I’m afraid no amount of money will add extra days to the week—good day, Mr. Carpenter, talk to me like that again and I’ll put you in the kind of legal debt that requires selling a beach house. No, I am not ‘fucking with you’—who the hell do you think you’re talking to?”

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Harper felt that, rather than being made about rockstars, movies should be made about their agents. This is where the action really happens, she thought as she negotiated, and a small part of her felt guilty. She knew Mia would kill for some of these opportunities, but Harper couldn't help but want a little time for them, too. She was the one who had brought up "restraint" and "taking time for us" so she knew feeling bad didn't change anything, but it was beginning to take a toll. Having to balance what she could now see was a budding romance with business interests was becoming challenging.

She briefly looked out onto the set, where a stage had been set up with Stefan, Taylor and Ricky, as well as some new faces. Mia was dressed in a studded black leather jacket that glittered under the studio lights, as well as a black maxi skirt with some very high thigh slits, showing off a pair of flower-patterned fishnets hiding underneath. I need to find some way of giving that stylist a tip, she thought, as Mia wove her invisible web for what was now an audience of millions. Her hips slowly moved as she sang, drawing circles in the air around her. Harper felt spellbound.

She made what she would later call a "strategic business decision," and turned her phone off. If the club promoters and executives wanted a glimpse of her Mia, they would just have to turn on their televisions like everybody else.

Her Mia. That was a new thought. In the last minute of Mia's song, Harper tried her best to reflect on the events of the week prior. Photoshoots, interviews, recording sessions. In between, quiet moments with Mia, some quick, dirty and breathless, yeah, but others had been quieter. More intimate.

The roar of the studio audience brought her back to reality. Mia had gone down a

storm and was now waving to the cameras as the credits of the show rolled. Harper tucked some braids behind her ear and signaled to the security team that they would most likely need help getting her into the limo that was waiting for them downstairs.

When they arrived at The Orchid, Harper wished they had security of their own. Even through the tinted windows of the limousine, she could see a crowd of people, phones in the air, ready to take photos.

“Stay behind me,” Harper said, turning to Mia. Mia smiled nervously, breathing deeply, and gave Harper’s hand a quick squeeze. Harper squeezed back and suddenly looked to the driver, worried he might say something. He only laughed.

“Ma'am, I didn’t see a thing.”

With a nod from Mia, Harper opened the door of the limo. Immediately, there were people yelling both of their names, camera flashes from all around, but there was red rope between the crowds and the walkway to the main door of the club. Mia was an absolute professional, smiling and waving to the crowd like she had been born for it, and Harper felt a swell of pride. They both looked stunning, Harper knew it, her blazer secured just below her chest with fashion tape and her heels steady as she walked. Gold jewelry and a light dusting of highlighter meant that she shimmered in the flashing lights. Mia had the look of a rock star already, with those stunning cheekbones and enchanting green eyes. Her hair had been styled backstage, and the hairspray used by the stylists had clearly been made of superglue. There wasn’t a single hair out of place. They were picture-perfect.

They reached the door of the club, and the security guard on the door nodded to her. She nodded back. She wasn’t Harper tonight. She was the Huntress.

Getting to the green room was difficult. The crowd inside wasn’t made up of fans but of businesspeople, vying for Mia’s attention. Harper was able to tune out the yelling

and shoving of the crowd, but as they walked through the club, she could see Mia getting more and more uncomfortable, fidgeting with the sleeves of her jacket and flinching away. Harper made a decision. In the dim, flashing light of the club she stood in front of Mia, her back to most of the crowd. Grabbing her by the elbow so it didn't look overly intimate, she made a breathe in, breathe out motion with her other hand. They took a minute together. For a moment, it could have just been the two of them on that club floor, Harper thought. Once Mia was calm, she tried to guide her through the crowd. Soon though people began looking for Harper's attention, so she just pointed to the door leading to the green room. Mia nodded and slipped away, leaving Harper with a sour feeling in her stomach.

These people couldn't possibly want what's best for Mia, she thought, they only want to make money off of her. Not in the way that I'm making money off of her, of course, that's different...

A shady promotional deal is not the same as having representation in the industry. That's what she told herself as she pushed through the crowd to get side-stage. She was here to support Mia, first and foremost, and she wanted to make sure Mia was happy.

The green room door was crowded with people eager to get photos and autographs with Mia, but they parted in awe when Harper walked over. She heard the whispers. She always heard the whispers.

Huntress, Huntress, Huntress.

"Oh thank God, the crowd didn't crush you," Mia said as Harper shut the door behind her. A makeup artist was using a fluffy brush to freshly powder her face, and a stage-hand called from a door on the other side of the room.

"Five-minute call, Miss Cortés."

Harper went over to hold the door for Mia, smiling as she mock-curtsied. All this attention and she still hasn't lost her sense of humor.

Side-stage, Harper could tell that Mia was going through her usual mantra. As Mia rubbed her hands on the side of her legs, Harper imagined how the fishnets would feel under her fingers. She hoped she would be able to find out once they got to the after-party. They would find an empty room somewhere.

"Ladies and gentlemen, The Orchid is proud to present..."

"You're on, sweetheart, best of luck." Pet names were safe. Nobody would be able to hear them over the cheers of the crowd. Professionalism and privacy was important to Harper, especially when protecting her own reputation.

Mia looked at her, putting a hand on the side of Harper's face.

"I don't need luck. I have you!"

"... Mia Cortés!"

In a move that blindsided Harper, Mia stepped in and kissed her sweetly, lingering for a moment before turning and walking on stage without looking back.

Getting to see Mia perform twice in one night, especially this close up, was a treat for Harper. She allowed herself to indulge in fantasy, feeling fishnet and skin and leather underneath her fingers, Mia's lilting voice onstage reminding her of breathy sighs and quiet noises in moments nobody else would ever see. That was her Mia out there. She became more comfortable with the thought.

When the set finished, the door to the green room was once again thronged. Crowds of people begging for Mia's attention and businesspeople looking to meet with

Harper. They got a few seconds of muffled quiet in the green room, just enough time for Harper to congratulate Mia, before they were pulled apart into their separate roles. The Superstar and the Huntress, consummate professionals. As they stood on opposite sides of the small club, Mia taking selfies and Harper getting ready to draft emails, Harper managed to get a brief moment of eye contact with Mia and mouthed, Sorry. Mia laughed, shrugged, and then pointed to a corner of the club with a gasp. Harper couldn't quite hear her, but she could lip-read something along the lines of, "Is that Leon Addison?!"

Laughing to herself, Harper turned back towards her business associates and talked them through Mia's schedule for the coming months, not giving too many details away. She didn't have to lie about being busy anymore. Mia's stellar performance on Late Night Friday had given her the attention and demand, but the intimate slot at The Orchid had given her the opportunities she needed.

After securing several interviews, more late-night show guest slots, fan-exclusive sets and a documentary crew for the making of her debut album, Harper thought she deserved a little fun at the afterparty.

Standing outside The Orchid, the twilight of the evening turning Los Angeles purple, Harper unlocked her phone and texted Mia.

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Waiting outside The Orchid, let me know when you want to head to the afterparty. I'm so proud of you xx

Half an hour passed. Harper didn't see or hear from Mia. Instead of getting annoyed, Harper decided to go back inside and look around for her. She was probably still there. Surely she wouldn't have left without saying goodbye.

"Have any of you seen Mia Cortés?" she asked a group of socialites, a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice between them.

"Oh, she left a while ago with some other people. They said there was an afterparty happening somewhere and they were going to that. Do you know her?" asked one of the women, champagne flute delicately held up.

Harper thanked them for their time and left, calling her driver. Mia leaving without letting her know where she was going was irresponsible, but Harper tried to not let it get to her. She was young and tasting stardom for the first time, and that kind of attention could be irresistible. Harper thought back to when she first started getting real attention in the industry, the kind of attention that means VIP access, having a private driver and getting opportunities simply because you were in the right place at the right time. It could feel overwhelming but addictive. You could lose yourself to it.

Harper tried to quiet her mind on the drive home, but as her driver pulled up to the block of apartments, she couldn't help but worry. It didn't help when he said, "Mia not back from the party yet, Ma'am?"

"I think she'll be out late. You head on home for the night, Michael, I think she'll be

alright without a ride home.”

“Thank you, Ma’am, will do. Have a nice night.”

Harper had similar conversations with the doorman and the receptionist. She really hadn’t considered how much Mia had slot neatly into her life, how much she had become involved in Mia’s life too. When she arrived home, she texted Mia, letting her know she had gotten home safely, and noticed that Mia had read the message she sent at The Orchid without replying.

She thought about it more as she got ready for bed. Taking the supplements her personal trainer recommended to her, Harper thought about how close and involved they had become in such a short amount of time. While washing her face, she worried about how Mia would deal with the amount of attention she would be getting and made a note to make sure she got some media training the following week.

She didn’t really settle into bed, instead climbing under the sheets in an old college sweatshirt, tossing and turning. She had gotten into the habit of listening to Mia’s demos as she fell asleep—the old ones, from her website. Her disdain at the quality had faded a little, being replaced by easy enjoyment. She couldn’t bring herself to listen to them now. She was too worried about Mia and, in a way that she thought was selfish, worried about herself.

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Aweek. It had been a week since Harper had even heard from Mia and she was beginning to lose her mind. She continued to fill out the online calendar with bookings, communicate with the recording studio. She also realized that her focus on Mia had made her neglect some of her other clients, so she got into contact with a handful of other artists she represented. Some of them had managed to land big opportunities while she was working with Mia, and while she was happy for all of

them, she was mentally kicking herself for not being more involved. Things really came to a head when she called Mia that evening.

“Mia!” she had opened, trying to stay as calm as possible. “You doing alright, sweetheart? Anything career-ending I should know about?”

She heard Mia laugh down the phone, that sweet, magnetic laugh.

“Hi Harper! I’m doing really good, I’m here with Rebecca and Landon, but I don’t think you know them—Oh, Stefan and Taylor are here too!”

“Hey, Harper!” the two men chimed in. Their voices slurred. They were partying, that much was obvious. Just as Harper was about to ask where she was, a voice chimed in from somewhere and the line cut out.

“Whatever happened to professionalism!” she asked Deborah, nursing a negroni at a booth in the Indigo Lounge an hour later. “I give that girl the opportunity of a lifetime, hell, several opportunities of a few lifetimes in the space of about a month, and she doesn’t have the fucking decorum to text me back?”

“Harp, you’ve gotta give her a minute to settle in,” Deborah said after a sip of her pineapple mojito. “Though I’ll admit, this isn’t like her at all.”

“We’ve talked about professionalism! She knows from experience what a lack of communication can do to a professional partnership!”

“Easy, tiger, you’ve also had her tongue in your mouth. I think your worries extend slightly past the professional.”

Harper felt she couldn’t really say anything to that. Deborah was right, as per usual. Sipping her drink, Harper remembered why she had come to Deborah in the first

place. She, like Harper, was a powerful woman who would say it like it was, and right now Harper needed somebody else who understood the situation and would be honest with her. That meant that she had to be honest with Deborah, too.

“I think she’s losing herself in all of this.”

Deborah nodded, urging her to go on.

“She’s spending hours at a time with people she barely knows! She’s become completely swept up in the attention, but if anything, and I mean anything goes wrong, it will become an instant scandal, and she’ll have to start fresh.”

Deborah pursed her lips together, and something clicked in Harper’s head.

“Oh God, this is all my fault. I’ve encouraged her to tap into her stage persona more, but what if that’s overshadowing her actual personality? She such a sweet person, I can’t have her lose that because of assholes who might take advantage.”

“Harper, I feel like you can’t be the only person to blame for this, she’s a grown adult.”

“But she’s barely in contact with me because of it, and I encouraged her to act that way! I said it would make her powerful, oh my God.” She dropped her face into her hands, genuinely exasperated. She didn’t want to look at Deborah. Here she was, a grown woman, with her face in her hands because her crush wouldn’t text her back. She was surprised at herself more than anything else.

Deborah gently reached out and touched her wrist. Harper looked up, realized what she had to say, what she had known the entire time but couldn’t bring herself to admit to another person until then. Still not looking Deborah in the eyes, instead focusing on an old k.d. lang poster across the room, Harper sighed.

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“I think I might be in too deep. With Mia, I mean.”

Her eyes dropped to the table. Deborah gave her a sideways look, and began speaking.

“Harper, if you’re about to do what I think you might do?—”

She was cut off by Harper’s phone ringing. She quickly got up from the booth, faced the other direction and checked who it was. It was a photographer with NME who was over from the UK.

“Hello, Harper! I wanted to thank you again for having Mia do the shoot with us today. She’s been an absolute treat to work with, a real professional, and she’d be welcome to do a shoot with me back home any time if she’s on tour.”

Harper made a mm-hmm noise but didn’t say anything.

Mia’s still doing photoshoots?

“I’ll have the edited versions sent straight to you once they’re finished, though fair warning, it might be a few weeks because I have other shoots to do while I’m here. Thank you again!”

“Thank you too, Damien, a pleasure as always.”

Harper hung up the phone and sat back into the booth, fishing her iPad out of her bag and loading Mia’s schedule.

“What is it? Is she alright?” asked Deborah.

“She’s... she’s been attending all of her scheduled interviews, photoshoots, recording sessions, shows...”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? She’s still doing the work, evidently she isn’t showing up drunk, and both of your professional reputations are still intact!”

“If she’s still doing the work, and I’m still being kept in the loop, why won’t she talk to me? We had a real fun time on a personal level... I know nothing is official, but what is the matter with her?”

Deborah fumbled for something to say, but Harper had already loaded up Mia’s schedule for that day.

“She’s doing a show nearby in about an hour. I’m going to go, try to talk to her, see what’s going on.”

“Harper, are you sure now is a good time? Harper! Harper!”

But Harper was already halfway to the door, sending the price of her drink to Deborah so she wasn’t stuck for the bill. Esme, hippy as she was, would’ve probably given the drinks to them for nothing if given the opportunity, but neither woman was in a position where money was a problem.

The venue was a short walk from the Indigo Lounge, so Harper didn’t end up calling Michael for a ride, instead walking the few blocks. Pure adrenaline fueled her, her goal clear in her mind; she needed answers.

Heading in through the stage door around the back of the building, Harper barely noticed that not a single person stopped her, not even the security guards backstage.

Still, she introduced herself to the stage manager for the evening, just to make sure everybody knew exactly who was here.

“Hi, there, I’m Harper Nightingale, so nice to meet you, can I speak to Mia for a moment?”

“If you can find her, Ma’am, she’s running late,” the stage manager said. “Any other time I’ve worked with her she’s been very punctual; I really don’t know what could have happened.”

As if it was timed, Mia came through the door, clearly having sobered up from her earlier partying.

“Harper! Hi, I can’t believe you came!”

She wrapped Harper up in a hug, but Harper was stiff and dead-set on talking. She didn’t move, instead stepping back when Mia moved away.

“Hello, Mia.” She decided to allow Mia to speak for herself.

“The last few weeks have been super busy; I’ve made all kinds of connections. Taylor, Stefan and Ricky have introduced me to so many people, thank you so much for setting us up! I’ve been networking, don’t worry, I’m not just having fun, although I’ve been having a lot of fun.”

She took her phone from out of her pocket, opening her gallery.

“I got a photo with Leon Addison at the afterparty last week! I’ve been meeting loads of people, too, and people want my autograph! Can you believe it?”

The stage manager butted in.

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“Mia, we need you side stage now. You’re on in five.”

“Alright, that’s alright, I’ve just got to show Harper?—”

“No, seriously, you need to be side stage right now, this second.”

Harper’s worst fears had been confirmed. They were both in too deep, for different reasons, but it was having a negative effect on both of their careers. The stage manager took Mia gently but insistently by the elbow. As Mia was dragged side stage, Harper decided she had heard all she needed to hear for now.

“You go kill it out there. I’ll keep updating the schedule but I think I get the message.” Harper nodded at her, as she slowly moved away.

She knew she needed to take a step back from this. Harper was getting upset, frustrated that Mia couldn’t see how hurtful it was that she had been left in the dark. She didn’t even attempt to apologize or explain herself. This is not a feeling she liked, wanted or needed. Harper Nightingale is renowned for being in control of everything, including her emotions. She couldn’t let this take over her anymore.

If this is the way she wants things to work, then that’s the way they’ll work. That’s what Harper decided. She heard Mia calling for her as she was dragged side stage.

“Harper! Harper, please stay!”

Hopefully she would figure it out. She turned around and left.

Ten days. It had been ten days since Mia had any contact with Harper at all. In fact, she had walked out on her at a show and hadn't seen her since.

At another photoshoot—god, she was sick to death of photoshoots—she tried to look as though she wasn't always looking around for somebody she knew. She had been posed in a stylish but screaming-tight PVC ensemble, and she learned quickly that not every stylist was as receptive to requests as Eli from MusicLife had been, so smiling and shutting her mouth was the order of the day.

She had been busy, and as much as she loved her new friends, she missed the cozy, welcoming atmosphere of the Indigo Lounge. She missed Esme and her fantastical drinks specials. She missed Ruby, her presence in the corner a welcome constant. She missed her room upstairs; she had been sleeping in hotels more often than her own bed and it was really getting to her. She missed having somewhere she could go and just exist in privacy. She missed Deborah, her infinite wisdom and wise-cracking and support. She missed real people.

She missed Harper.

She really missed Harper. The sense of safety she felt around her. The experience she knew Harper had served as a compass in situations where Mia didn't know what to do. Her guide and her companion in it all. She didn't know whoever this Huntress was, she only knew her Harper, who squeezed her hand and kissed her and smelled of roses and irises, oud lingering on her collarbones as the base note of her new signature perfume. Her Harper, who was quick to annoy but even quicker to melt and always, always had time for Mia.

The photographer asked her to make a “moody face” while hunched over in the chair they had sat her in, and as camera flashes went off in a halo around her head she

knew one thing.

This was her fault. It really was. She had gotten too caught up in the parties and the networking and the 70 new contacts in her phone and, sure, she had 70 new contacts in her phone, but she hadn't texted Harper once. Harper had kept on organizing new things for her, and Mia had kept showing up, but the only time she saw her she didn't speak a word. The rising fame and stardom were taking over her soul. Something she always dreamed of so quickly became toxic.

A few days later, during a break in a slot on local radio, she briefly wondered why she had expected Harper to come to everything she was doing. Harper had other clients who she had been working with for a decade, one client in particular who she had known for twenty years. She was not new to this game at all.

A horrible thought crossed her mind: Did Harper do this with all of her clients?

Was the wining and dining, the affection, the promises of power in the industry all a ploy to keep her cut of whatever money Mia made? She dismissed the worry nearly as soon as she thought of it. Whatever was happening, however Harper was feeling, Mia knew that the connection that they had was real. However it ended (and this thought upset her further, because she didn't want it to end at all) she knew that it was genuine.

At a break in a recording session with her band, who she had nicknamed los cuates because they called each other "my guy" all the time, she couldn't get her mind off of Harper at all. The worst part of the whole situation, she thought, was that Harper was officially out of office.

At the end of every email update Mia got, there was a message attached at the end that stated that she was out of the country until the end of the month. If Mia was just able to talk to Harper, to apologize, maybe the distance between them wouldn't feel

as cold. She knew things wouldn't be the same as they were, and the thought killed her, but she supposed she would rather have Harper in her life in only one way than not have her at all.

Instead of Harper, Mia had to get anything she would normally need from Carson, one of the assistants at the label. Carson was... fine, Mia supposed. He was always asking her for details about the bookings she had, even though he was the one giving her the information on Harper's behalf. She had absolutely worked with worse people. She really had no right to complain, but she was surprised at his complete lack of tact. Worst of all, he would ask her for gossip about people she had only bumped into once or twice. That seemed really unprofessional, and it was absolutely the kind of thing she would warn Harper about, if she could get in contact with her.

As the days went on and Mia was shuffled from interview to the studio to a photoshoot back to the studio, she began feeling completely helpless. She had no control over her own schedule, and any time she mentioned she might need to take time off to Carson he just laughed down the phone at her and told her Harper had filled out the schedule completely. She was able to call her family back home in Spain less and less, and while they had told her they were watching her interviews they still wanted to hear about any good news Mia had from her. She really missed speaking to her mom, too. She'd say something wise about the situation and then call a carousel a horse tornado or make a bad sex joke and Mia would be able to laugh and laugh.

She wouldn't say horse tornado, actually. Her mom had sent Mia a video where a fellow Spanish-speaking lesbian said that was something her mom would say. Sheltering in a bathroom stall for a moment of quiet in the middle of a press day, Mia pulled the video up and allowed herself to laugh in order to keep from crying. Then, she scrolled down and saw a post from Harper.

She was in Florence. She had flown all the way to Italy without so much as a

goodbye, and now Mia was crying in a bathroom stall in a TV studio.

How could she do this to me?

This was exactly what she had asked Harper not to do. This was exactly what Harper had promised not to do.

She needed to speak to her.

Right now, fuck the time difference.

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She went into her contacts and called Harper. She noticed the foreign dial tone, another sign that they were far apart. It rang out for a minute, and Mia was about to hang up when Harper picked up.

“Hello?”

Mia didn't say anything.

“Hello, Mia? Can you hear me?”

She let out a single sob, realizing she had no idea what to say. She could hear music and shouting in the background. Harper was at a party.

Somebody on the other line called Harper's name, and she said, “Mia, I'm needed right now but call me back if it's urgent.”

Was it urgent? When you haven't spoken to someone for over two weeks but you're not even sure if they'll want to talk to you, is “I miss you” urgent?

Somebody was knocking on the door.

“Miss Cortés? Is everything alright?”

She wiped her eyes.

I can't afford to cry anymore.

Harper was her representation. She was her agent. She was a foot in the door to opportunity, someone who coordinated events, nothing more, nothing less.

It was easy, at first. Mia had a lot to keep herself occupied. Sure, the shine had worn off. Interviews felt less like a novelty and more invasive than they used to. Photoshoots had become her least favorite part of press days. She wanted input, control over her image and how she presented herself. None of that mattered right now. They could ask her to pose naked behind a giant cactus and she would agree because it meant that she was busy.

Busy was good. Busy kept her occupied. If she had questions, she could direct them to Carson, and after answering several more she would get an answer. It dawned on her from the tone he used while talking to her that he didn't like Mia all that much. That was alright. Mia had become very good at keeping things professional.

At least, she was very good at keeping things professional until one night in a strange hotel in Joshua Tree National Park. Sleeping naked under nothing but a sheet, the night was dense with desert heat and Mia just couldn't settle down. She hadn't been allowed to think about anything but work, hadn't been allowed to think of anything period. Now that she wasn't distracted, or being yelled at by paparazzi, or recording a third line of backing vocals, her once-quiet brain had become loud.

Harper was in Italy, partying with her rich friends, and Mia was alone in a strange town surrounded by people she didn't really know. She wanted to go home, wanted to figure out where on Earth home was. She was far from the Indigo Lounge, further from Spain, and even further from Harper.

That was too much for her to handle. Knowing she was alone, knowing nobody but the wildlife could hear her, Mia allowed herself to cry. This was her first moment of real privacy in a while, and all she could bring herself to do was cry. She wanted Harper back in her orbit. She felt like a child, selfish and upset, but she couldn't help

it.

Time passed slowly that night. Mia would sob in bursts, then sit up in bed in silence. The screens on the windows kept bugs out, so she got up and allowed the desert wind to fill the room. She knew she didn't have the heart to sleep, so she allowed herself to think clearly. She was being honest with herself for the first time in weeks. The truth was simple, and had been looking her in the face for a while.

The truth was that she wasn't happy. She wasn't. She could fool her co-workers, she could lie to her friends and family, but she couldn't lie to herself anymore.

She rolled over and grabbed her phone from the bedside locker, looking for something to listen to so she could pass the time. She had spent so much intense time in the trenches of the industry that her own love for music had subsided, but she knew it would make her feel...not better, exactly; it wouldn't make her feel better, but it would make her feel less alone.

As she was scrolling through her phone, she saw that she had an email from the label with a schedule update. She was tempted not to read it at all, to save it until the morning, but the temptation passed. She opened it. She had a small, intimate show the following week, followed by a questions-and-answers session. She smiled. Though sometimes they would be invasive, Mia had attracted a fanbase of understanding, kind people, made up particularly of other lesbians. Suddenly, a detail at the bottom of the email stopped her in her tracks.

It had been sent from Harper's email address, and her out-of-office message wasn't attached to the email.

She must be back in the country.

And then, the unavoidable.

I need to speak to her.

12

Harper would normally have somebody else do the unpacking for her. Especially after a long work trip like this, she would like nothing more than to curl up on the sofa with a glass of wine and rewatch something comforting like *Bound*.

She needed to think, and that meant having something to do with her hands. Italy was wonderful, but travelling for business was never the same as a vacation. Harper couldn't afford to walk around the Milan airport in sweatpants and a t-shirt when two hours later she would be guiding a press group to a boardroom in Verona. She was always put together, always on high alert and always in control, at least, until Mia had called her while she was in Verona.

A few months earlier, before Harper had even met Mia, she had gotten incredible news; one of her artists, a New Jersey-based singer-actress-dancer, had gotten a role in a new film version of *Romeo and Juliet*. She already had a huge following and experience on Broadway, but this would be her film debut. Now that filming had wrapped and the news had been made public, the press tour had spanned the length and breadth of Northern Italy and taken her far away from Mia. She hadn't stepped back completely, instead handing off most of the work to Carson. He was a hard-working kid, always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, and very eager to learn. He would treat Mia well.

So, she had been able to focus on the logistics of a bilingual, multimedia press tour without worrying too much about what was going on at home. It was lucky that they had translators, otherwise she would have been completely out of her depth. Italy had been just as beautiful as when she had last visited, and her brief stopover in Verona had been nothing short of magical—cobble streets and starry night skies straight out of a fantasy.

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Still, now that she was back, she couldn't distract herself. Alone for the first time in weeks, she had only one person on her mind. She had missed Mia more intensely on the trip than she had when she was at home, and in quiet moments on empty streets she would wish for Mia beside her.

She was dressed down, in a pair of sweatpants and a white t-shirt, and it made her feel less like Huntress and more like... a person. That character was useful, certainly, but it wasn't her. Huntress was power suits and hats that split a crowd like the Red Sea. Harper... Harper wasn't totally sure what she was. She was lucky. She was headstrong and had learned to be that way because otherwise women like her weren't listened to. She had risen to the top of her profession and had more money than she honestly knew what to do with. She was alone on the top of the world and had nobody to share the satisfaction with.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Oh, good, the dry cleaning. "You can leave it in the hallway, thank you!" she called. The knocking continued. The concierge staff normally have keys, she thought as she walked down the hall, grabbing her satin robe and putting it on as she went. Reaching for the doorknob, she started with "Thank you, you can leave the bags out here?—"

It wasn't a member of staff with her laundry at the door. It was Mia, in a leather jacket and ripped jeans... and a shirt with her face on it.

"Hello, Harper," she said, stepping through the doorway before Harper could invite her in. Her voice was airy. Detached.

“Hello, Mia,” she replied, matching her tone. If this is how we’re doing things, then fine. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here... How have you been?”

“I’ve been busy. Playing shows, getting my photo taken, going to interviews. It’s been fun.”

“Has it really?” Harper asked coldly. “You’ve made lots of new friends?—”

“Most of them were introduced to me by you.”

Shit.

A beat passed where neither woman said anything, standing in the hallway, the door open. Mia, sporting her own merchandise, evidence of her success and power. Harper, dressed down in a way that was comfortable moments before. Now she felt naked.

Mia reached past Harper, grabbing the door and gently swinging it shut. Then, she walked down the hallway into the living room.

This girl... who does she think she is? Harper took a deep breath and followed her. If there was a conversation that needed to happen, it needed to happen then and there. Mia was on the sofa, sitting in the same spot she had sat in that first night when the contract was signed, her jacket over the arm of the chair. Harper stayed standing, looking down at Mia, cat-like and faux-calm. It was faux calm, too, because Harper saw Mia’s freshly-done nails scratching at the fabric of the sofa like morse code, saying more with the sound than she had so far with words. She was obviously and hopelessly scared, masking it with the sensuality and devil-may-care attitude she normally had on stage. This, more than anything else, snapped Harper out of her own fake neutrality.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Harper said, shaking her head slowly, arms crossed. Mia’s breath turned shaky, and her eyes didn’t quite meet Harper’s when she replied.

“You did, Harper. You changed my life.”

“This isn’t your life.”

“Yes, it is, it’s what you have done to me!”

“It’s what you’ve been doing, it’s what you’ve chosen, you’ve worked hard for it and now it’s yours!”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Harper registered that this was upsetting Mia, but she needed to get through to her. She had made a mistake, she knew that now, but she wasn’t the only one at fault here.

“This isn’t what I wanted! I wanted my music to mean something, I wanted to be able to live while doing what I love without having to worry about picking up shifts at strange bars because I want to live somewhere that isn’t an attic. Harper, I’m living out of hotel rooms instead.”

Mia stood so she could look Harper in the eyes, and Harper had never seen her so frustrated.

Harper started slowly. “Mia, you were fully absorbed into that life of partying. I didn’t think I would be able to get you out.”

“One word from you would have convinced me to stop!”

“Except you didn’t respond when I tried, did you? I saw you once, one time, and all

you could talk about was yourself and how much fun you were having.”

Harper was trying not to yell, but her facade was slipping and she didn’t care. She needed Mia to know.

“I barely thought of anything but you, I didn’t see you for a fucking week. I was scared, Mia, I was so scared?—”

She took Mia by the shoulders, looking straight into her eyes.

“I was worried something had happened to you.”

Mia’s eyes went wide. This wasn’t something she had considered, Harper thought. Here she had been, anxiously waiting by the phone while Mia was out having fun, Harper not even considering it because she had heard too many horror stories of bright new industry talents being damaged beyond repair at parties exactly like that.

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“You think I would be able to live like that, thinking I had thrown you to the wolves?”

Mia, so slowly you would think she had frozen, brought her hands to her shoulders, gently bringing Harper’s hands down and holding them softly.

“I’m sorry. I really am—no, don’t look at me like that, I am. Still, it’s difficult talking about this when I haven’t heard from you in weeks.”

Harper’s face crumpled, her breath hitching briefly. A pit formed in her stomach.

“That was the one thing I promised to never do... and I did it.”

Mia nodded as Harper drew her hands away, knotting the tie of her robe and toying with the end of the satin belt.

“I can’t lie to you, Harper, that really fucked me up. It did. I had no idea what was going on with you, and I barely knew anybody else I was working with. It’s a little easier now that I know some people, but the support would have been nice,” Mia finished.

“What about your family back home?” asked Harper, feeling desperate and a little sick.

“The time difference is pretty significant. Any time I’m around for a call they’re all in bed, or the reverse. I haven’t had many gaps in my schedule, either.”

Harper couldn't bear the thought of Mia alone with these feelings and having nobody to turn to. She thought back to when she was at a rooftop bar in Verona with the new cast of Romeo and Juliet and got a sudden call from Mia. The way she had thought the silence on the other line was because she had lost signal. The way she had heard what she thought was a hiccup at the end of the line.

Mia had been crying, alone, and the only person she had thought to call was Harper. Harper had said to only call back if it was important when called away by the movie's director, and Mia never did. Had she not felt important enough to justify taking up Harper's time? Apparently not. Weeks ago, Harper was here, overcome with the romantic idea that the only thing that could make her content was seeing Mia happy, and here she was, realizing she had failed.

"Oh... Oh God, Mia, how can I make it up to you?"

Mia was quiet, and Harper's chest felt cavernous. There was a space there where Mia was normally, but the resignation in her eyes was telling Harper that she wanted nothing to do with it, with the love she had for Mia. Because that's what this was, Harper couldn't deny it any more. All she could do was watch it slip away.

"These shirts are so fucking ugly, anything you can do about that?" Mia joked, pulling Harper out of her thoughts. She got a good look at the t-shirt for the first time. It was a black shirt with a black-and-white print of Mia's face taken from the side, with her name framing the image in a ransom-note-style magazine cutout font. It was, as Mia had put it, so fucking ugly. Harper giggled, which made Mia laugh, and before they knew it, they were both on the sofa, sitting side-by-side and laughing together. This felt better. This almost felt like it had felt before.

"I'll see about taking on a new graphic designer for the merchandise, we can't be putting out this phony Sex Pistols shit," Harper declared, and Mia lit up, smiling from ear to ear. "As for your schedule, you let me know what times you need to be free and

I'll make it happen."

The difficult part was coming next, but the moment was too sweet to let go just yet. Mia didn't seem to be on the same page, though, and she shifted towards Harper with an unreadable expression on her face. Harper drew breath.

"If you'll have me, I'd like to stay representing you. I'll keep in contact with you, we'll collaborate on a schedule instead of having me block-booking everybody I can find. I'll be here to support you..."

Harper felt like a coward. She couldn't even bring herself to say it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Mia was now on the same page.

"You will be here to support me professionally."

Harper nodded, noticing that Mia immediately stiffened up, moving away from her on the sofa.

Fuck. She had already started; there was no use in turning back now.

"I will still be around to support you, I promise. Reach out whenever you need me, even for the stupid stuff, especially for the stupid stuff because I know how confusing this can be and I want to help you." Harper thought she was making a strong case. She almost believed herself as she went on. "I'll be there at your big shows, festival sets, arenas in a few months time with any luck, and I'll be cheering you on from side stage."

Mia nodded, breathing heavily and avoiding eye contact. Harper leaned over to take her hand, but Mia stood and grabbed her jacket, smiling as if Harper couldn't see tears welling up in her eyes.

“This isn’t the end,” Harper said, trying her best to sound reassuring. “I will still be here.” I will still be here to love you at arm’s length.

“I’m sure it’s for the b-best, really,” said Mia, stumbling over her words and visibly trying to keep her smile intact. “Your support means more to me than you will ever know, Harper, and I can’t thank you enough.” Mia reached out her hand for a handshake.

How very businesslike. Harper took it, both women squeezing tightly and holding on for a little longer than needed.

“I can let you out, I’m sure you have places to be?—”

“No, no, I can show myself out, don’t worry, you must be tired from travelling. It was good to see you again.”

“You too,” said Harper, sitting up on the sofa so she could watch Mia leave. She most likely wouldn’t be seeing her again for another while. Harper would miss her while she was gone. Harper would miss her while she was three feet away.

Harper would miss her for the rest of her life. But she knew this was for the best. It couldn’t go on so complicated.

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Mia turned back at the door, smiling at Harper in a way that didn't quite reach her eyes. She wasn't crying yet.

"Thank you again, Harper," she called, before walking through the doorway.

As the door clicked shut behind Mia, Harper paused for breath, making sure Mia was far enough down the hall to not hear it when she started crying. She wept into her hands, curling into a ball on the sofa and shuddering. She felt hollow, like she had seen a part of herself slip away. She didn't get to sleep until hours later, and still, she lay in the middle of her queen-sized bed so she couldn't feel an empty space beside her while she cried. Seeing Mia would be torture, sure, but as Harper drifted off to sleep one thought reassured her.

Not seeing her at all would have been so much worse.

13

A month passed. The world hadn't ended, and both Mia and Harper's lives and careers had continued. They were in contact, not as intense as those first few weeks, but they were keeping in touch about big news. Big news rolled around in force when Harper was in NYC signing a new group, a Manhattan-based art pop band made up of talented NYU dropouts. She was in a meeting with them, negotiating the finer details of a contract in a smokey cafe-come-wine bar covered in cute little houseplants. She was only a little distracted by this.

Should I get some climbing plants for the apartment back in LA? The walls are too tall for anything else to look nice. I could hire someone to water them for me when

I'm away—or I guess I could just call Deb, she's loaded and doesn't need the extra income so much as a hobby. She's probably been hanging around for long enough with that Esme woman to know more about plants than me, I should ask her...

She thought about houseplant logistics more while going over her usual points with the band members, who to their credit looked equally distracted. She left the meeting with a sense that it had gone well, considering they had said they would sign once they finished their contract as house band at a local bar. When she went to check her phone after the meeting she didn't think much when she saw the missed call from Mia. Mia had been updating her every few days on how the album was coming along, if the documentary crew needed to be paid for overtime etc, so a missed call wasn't much of a shock.

She called Mia, standing in the bitter wind of a New York spring. The snow had melted before she got there, but still, she missed the West Coast.

"Harper, hi! Thank fuck you picked up, it's an absolute mess," Mia said in greeting. Harper could hear people arguing in the background, aggressive typing and paper being thrown around.

"Hi Mia, Jesus, what's happening?"

"You remember Carson?"

"Carson, yeah, smart kid. Did something happen, is he okay?"

"The execs have fired him."

"Sorry, what?"

"You remember those merchandise shortages from a few weeks ago?"

“Yeah? What’s that got to do with him?”

“Well, the stolen shirts were put up on Ebay yesterday evening. Turns out he’s been stealing merchandise and selling it under a few profiles to make a quick few bucks.”

Harper couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Why the hell would he do something like that?!”

“Money, Harper. That kid saw a way to make some extra money and took it, but he used his real email on the profile from yesterday evening so he was caught really fast.”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t that smart.

“Okay, but you’ve caught him and he’s been dealt with. What are you calling me for?”

“That’s the issue, he hasn’t been dealt with. He still had his company login for a few hours after he was fired, and he’s fucked with things and wiped my entire schedule for the next two months.”

Okay, this was bad. Very bad. This was a level of fuckery that Harper was not used to at all. It was something that could be dealt with remotely, sure, but it was going to be a pain in the ass.

“I’ll get on that as soon as I can. I still have contact details for most of those people, and I’m sure if I explain the situation they’ll be understanding.”

They would have to be understanding, Harper thought to herself, or they would have to deal with her. The Huntress thing was useful every so often, she had to admit.

“Is there anything else I should know?” she asked, hoping to whatever higher power was out there that there wasn’t.

“There is, actually.”

Shit. “Shit. What is it?”

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“The team isn’t one hundred percent sure yet—oh yeah, Aiden, I’m on the phone with her right now. Right, I’ll tell her. Aiden says hi!”

“Tell him I said hi, Mia. What else do you have to tell me?”

“She says hi! Anyway, they’re not positive, but the team think that he’s been using sockpuppet accounts online?—”

“What? Sock puppets?”

“Basically he’s been using social media profiles under fake names to slander us. Not just me, both of us.”

“Well. That’s not very nice of him, Mia.”

“No, it is not!” Mia agreed, and Harper could hear a door close on the other end of the line. She knew her phone volume was low enough for whatever followed to not be overheard, if confidentiality was needed.

Mia’s voice was low when she spoke, as if she was worried somebody might overhear her. “He looked at some of our earlier emails and saw the pet names and affection there. He was constantly asking about you, who else you were working with, and I didn’t tell him much so he must have gone digging for dirt.”

Harper was shaking. To think that somebody she had trusted had gone looking for... compromising information like that so he could slander her. She felt blindsided.

“What on earth is happening?” Harper asked both Mia and the sky, looking up to the cloudy space above her for answers and only finding gray clouds. “Why would he do something like this?”

“Money? Attention? Revenge? I have no idea, Harper, I really do not. What kind of guy gets so mad he was fired for stealing he starts slandering his ex-boss online? Honestly, I’m worried he might not be the only one.”

That seems like a bit of a long shot. Still, as Harper thought about it more, she realized that if she couldn’t trust one of her own assistants, who else could she not trust?

Mia seemed to be on the same page. “You’re pretty much the only person I fully trust at the moment, Harper. I know the guys at the label want the best for all of us, I do, but if one person was tempted to do it, who knows what else could happen?”

Harper did her best to avoid the implications of that. Professionalism. “Is the legal team on it?”

“They’re trying to track him down as we speak, and we have the press team on standby to do damage control in case he does anything. I mean, what else is he gonna say, tell people I’m a lesbian? As if they’ll be surprised?”

Gallows humor at its finest, there’s my—nope, there’s the Mia I know. My work friend Mia. Nothing else.

“Mia, I mean this in as nice a way as possible, you pretty much only write about being a lesbian and wanting to have sex with women. I love it, but it’s your thing, and I would guess there are only a handful of confused straight people out there who don’t understand.”

Mia laughed brightly, and despite herself, Harper wished she could bottle it for the bad days.

“Like I said, I trust you,” Mia said to Harper. “Honestly, I know your current signing is a big deal, but I really wish you were here. Communicating about this in person as things develop would be super useful, especially if... Oh my goodness, what if the offices are bugged!”

Harper felt bad for laughing, she really did, but it was so funny. “What are they gonna call it, t-shirtgate? Mia, I know you’re worried. Maybe you should go home for the day, get away from the stress. The team know what they’re doing. Look, I’m going to be back in town in another few weeks, can you hold out for me?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “I guess I can, Harper. It would be easier for me if you were here, but I understand, really, I do. I’ll see you the next time you’re in town and I’ll text you with any updates.”

I wish I could go, Harper thought suddenly, feeling a magnetic pull through the phone as she said goodbye to Mia. She wasn’t alone out in LA, not anymore, but it made sense that she had wanted Harper around when things got tough. As her representation, she had information that was useful, and as her... friend, it would be comforting to have somebody around she could trust.

She was completely torn. She would have the opportunity to head back to LA early, but she was unsure about taking it. She needed a level head. She needed someone who would tell it to her straight, no pun intended.

Scrolling through her contacts, Harper called Deborah. She knew she would pick up.

“Harp! How you doing? How’s New York?”

“I’m in pieces and New York is still cold, Deb. I need some help.”

“You know, we can never just go for coffee anymore, you’re always needing help. You have enough money to get a decent therapist, you know!”

“Yeah, but a therapist can’t give me updates on how Mia’s doing... though I suppose if they could that’d be concerning. Besides, what would we talk about?”

“We could talk about anything else! Anything at all!”

“Deb, please. I can’t talk about it but shit’s going down at the label and I need to know how she is. I’m worried about her.”

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“You’re always worried about her, Harp,” Deborah laughed. Still, Harper knew she would come through for her; she always did.

“She’s backed off the partying, you’ll be happy to hear,” Deborah said, a proud smile in her voice. “She’s been coming back to Indigo Lounge nearly every night, not just to sleep, but she’ll hang out downstairs in the lounge. She’ll sit and talk with Ruby, ya know, sometimes they’ll write together but it’s mostly chatting—I still think that chef’s got the hots for Ruby, but that’s none of my business. Anyways, when she’s not writing she’s behind the bar. Esme’s been training her in mixology, she’s getting really good at making those fancy little drinks you like, as well as the good stuff.”

As Deborah paused for breath, Harper reflected on how much of a change this was.

“Has she been getting much attention there?”

“Oh, heavens no. She’s been very dressed down, rushing upstairs when she gets home to change into plain clothes and wash off her makeup so people don’t recognize her. She’s been able to have a good time without worrying about any attention at all. She’s gotten some normalcy now her new fame has died down, which I suppose is healthy. Although...”

“Although what?” Harper pressed.

“She did a small set at the open mic on Tuesday. She didn’t want me to tell you, so keep your mouth shut, but she wanted to feel normal again. It was wonderful to have her back, but something was off. Me and Esme, we could see she just wasn’t comfortable anymore. The crowd loved her, and she sounded beautiful but, you know

that usual persona she has on stage?”

“Yeah?”

“It just seems like she couldn’t tap into that. I don’t think anybody noticed, of course, but she seemed far less confident than she has been. You’re not the only one worried about the kid, I promise you that. Can I tell you something?”

“Go for it,” Harper said, figuring she already knew.

“She misses you; she really does. I know you two made the decision to end it and remain on a professional level, and far be it from me to intrude on other people’s business, but I really think the two of you could have made it work. She’s only really come back to herself since you decided to call it quits, so kudos, but you two were so sweet together. Your connection was so real.”

It was as if Deborah had made up Harper’s mind for her. She had made a mistake, and she was going to fix it. For real, this time, not some band-aid faux-professionalism that only made them hate each other. She just had to work out some logistics first...

“I’ll be back in town at the end of the month anyway, once my work here is done. Keep in touch, Deb, and tell Esme I said hello.”

14

When the shows, interviews, and yes, even the photoshoots started showing up in Mia’s schedule diary again, it was a relief. She knew that the label had a good team working on the libel case (Carson had been controlling the accounts, they had found out for certain, and they were building a case against him) and Mia knew she was in safe hands. Still, in a selfish way, she wished Harper was with her to celebrate.

Getting back into contact with Harper had been nice, despite the bittersweet nature of it all. She hadn't seen Harper since she had gotten back from New York, but Mia knew she was in town, and they were exchanging updates constantly. Still, it felt like a cruel joke when she walked into the Lounge after a long day at work only to be hit with a smell that reminded her of what had become Harper's favorite perfume. Looking around, she made eye contact with Esme, who waved and gestured upward. Looking above the bar, Mia saw a shelf suspended from the ceiling holding a breathtaking display of fresh flowers. The main features? Roses and irises.

"What do you think? Aren't they gorgeous?" Esme called, a smile lighting up her face.

I can't ruin this for her, this must have cost so much... and it is very pretty.

"It's beautiful, Esme, it really is. What's the occasion?"

"Spring has sprung, Mia! I'm changing the menus too. Would you like to give me a hand coming up with some new specials tonight? I just got some edible lavender in, and I would love to see what we can cook up with that."

Mia smiled fondly. Esme was the real secret to this place's success, she thought, and her passion was contagious. She spotted a few handfuls of loose flowers on the bartop that weren't a part of the display above the bar.

"I would love to, Esme, thank you for the offer! If it isn't any trouble, could I take a handful of flowers upstairs with me? They smell so wonderful."

"Of course, honey! Take as many as you'd like. We'll be scattering the rest around the lounge so that gorgeous smell spreads everywhere, and there are more due every week as the months roll on."

Thanking Esme, Mia grabbed a small fistful of irises and rose petals, scattering them on the coffee table in her room upstairs. She sat down that evening to write, and the scent of the fresh buds had filled the room completely. Notebook balanced on her lap, pen in hand, Mia brainstormed an idea for a new song. At least, she tried to. It wasn't enough that she missed Harper terribly, no, now she had to go and distract her from her writing when she wasn't even in the room!

After a few futile minutes of trying to come up with a catchy hook, Mia sighed, setting the notebook down on the table. She had to clear her head. She took deep breaths, and while it calmed her down, it also forced her to inhale the fresh smell of the flowers. She decided that distraction wasn't worth it; If she was going to think about Harper, fine, but it would be on her own terms. Not for the first time, she thought back to the night they had first met, when she had only ever heard of the Huntress. That big reputation seemed like a far cry from the Harper she had gotten to know in the following weeks. Sweet, generous, whip-smart Harper who had taken her to an underground lesbian bar in order to convince her to sign a contract. Harper had told her later that she was trying to seduce her, and Mia had joked that it worked. After that day in the studio, the air had been thick with tension.

Mia thought back to it, back to when she had seen Harper in complete control in the monitoring area of the recording booth. She fondly remembered when she had surrendered that control in the dark of the club, demanding that Mia fuck her there and then.

Harper's perfume had lingered on her collarbones as Mia buried her fingers inside her, sharp gasps and moans timed to the music, payback for her earlier teasing. Now, Mia was getting invested in the memory. Double-checking she was alone upstairs, she began feeling her chest, remembering the soft insistence of Harper's hands squeezing her. Harper's voice in her ear, warm and dominant and experienced, knowing exactly what she wanted and how she was going to get it. Mia became more and more sensitive as she played back the memories, turned on in a way she hadn't

been since the night they had first met. The embarrassment of waking up hungover with her vibrator between her legs had been replaced with open lust once she knew Harper had felt that same attraction.

She recalled an intense quickie in a walk-in closet backstage, grinding her pussy against Harper's open mouth while she licked at her clit, one hand down her suit trousers. Now, she reached down, hitched up her plaid skirt and pulled her panties to the side.

She remembered the softness of Harper's skin in bed, how it felt between her teeth as she left love-bites only the two of them would ever see. She thought of the way Harper had tasted the first time Mia had tasted her, perfume mingling with the smell of her as Harper groaned above her. Mia reached over and grabbed a handful of petals with her non-occupied hand and held them to her face, inhaling the sweet smell as she rubbed her clit. It was missing something, the earthiness that the perfume usually carried, but memory filled in the blanks.

Mia's thighs began to shake as she imagined Harper there with her, whispering into her ear. She rolled the flower petals over her neck and chest, marking herself with Harper's scent. She knew it now more than ever. She was Harper's and Harper's alone. She could almost feel Harper there with her as heat pooled in her stomach, each movement drawing quiet noises out of her.

Fuck, Harper...

What would Mia want, if Harper was here now? She would want Harper straddling her lap again, chest bare so Mia could tease her to her heart's content. She could almost see Harper there when she closed her eyes, hair out of her face, cheeks flushed as she made sweeter music than Mia ever could on a stage. Another wave of the flowers' scent washed over Mia as she pictured Harper, so close she could reach out and touch her. She needed her, in more than one way, in every way she could imagine. She pulled her shirt up to roll the petals on her bare chest, edging closer to her orgasm as her fantasy grew more intense. She wanted Harper in control, choosing to punish or reward her for good behavior, powerful and mean, but she also wanted the Harper that bucked in Mia's lap while getting fucked, that said her name oh-so-sweetly as she came, and kissed her like she was water and Harper was dying of thirst.

She imagined Harper there as she tipped over the edge, groaning her name right into her ear, the heat of her breath on Mia's neck so real she could reach out and touch her. This was her breaking point, and Mia cried out as she came, playing with herself as she rode the waves of her orgasm, hips reaching for stimulation that wasn't there. Once she was too sensitive for anything more, she lay on the sofa, half-dressed and panting, nipples hard against the cold air and the smell of the flowers thick and heady. She could only hope her face wouldn't be too red when she headed back downstairs in a little while.

Pulling her shirt back down, Mia got up to grab a clean pair of underwear to replace the ones she had soaked through. Walking back to the table once she had changed, she realized her mind was much clearer, and as she sat down to write a line came to

her out of nowhere.

Your fragrance stains me.

It was only one line, but Mia knew from experience that one line was all it took to begin building a song. She flicked back through the notebook to a tune she had written a few weeks ago, and she began piecing a new song together.

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If pressed, Harper would admit that she had grown fond of the Indigo Lounge since her first visit. She could see why it attracted the clientele it did, and, most importantly, she could see why Mia was so fond of the place. It didn't hurt that it smelled absolutely gorgeous, either.

She tried not to look nervous as she walked through the front door. Harper had spent hours putting this plan together, trying to keep it away from anybody who might compromise it, including Deborah. She loved Deb, but the woman couldn't keep a secret to save her life when it came to her friends, and it was important that everything went off without a hitch. This would be her one chance to prove herself to Mia, once and for all.

To her credit, Mia was easy to find. She was sitting at a booth in the corner, sipping one of the new seasonal specials, a Lavender Mule. Her notebook was open on the table in front of her, and she was scribbling quickly, hunched over. Harper's heels clicked as she walked over but Mia was focused, not making a move. Harper slid into the booth next to her and she didn't even look up, instead muttering, "Hi, Esme." Harper gave her a nudge, trying not to smile. Mia's face when she looked up was a picture of confusion followed by panic.

"Oh, uh, hello Harper! Sorry for not saying hi sooner, how have you been?" Mia

didn't pause for breath, rushing to stand, but Harper gently laid a hand on her shoulder and she sat down.

"I've been okay, Mia. How about you?"

"Not too bad, can't complain, you know?"

Harper took a second. Here goes nothing. "I feel like I should apologize to you again."

"What? No, Harper, we've already had this conversation, it's okay?—"

"No, really, I should. I was hurt by the way you acted but that didn't give me the right to hurt you, either. I should have talked to you about it properly. I'm sorry. I may be a good communicator in the industry but sometimes when it comes to my personal feelings, I freeze up."

Mia visibly grew more comfortable.

"Thank you for apologizing, it's appreciated, trust me."

"There's just... one other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Mia's head cocked to the side. It was something Harper noticed she did whenever she was confused, and Harper didn't want to point it out in case it embarrassed Mia and she stopped. It was unbearably cute.

"The team is working really hard to deal with everything Carson did, and I want to assure you that anything brought up in that mess won't have to be dealt with again. Both of our reputations will recover. Once we're both back to where we were, which I think will be soon enough, I don't think it would be a good idea for us to work

together anymore.”

Mia didn't even say anything. Is this what she's grown to expect? Harper asked herself as she watched Mia slowly nod. As if it was planned, Harper's phone suddenly started ringing, and she checked the Caller ID before excusing herself. Mia said nothing, just nodded again as Harper got up and walked out the door to take the call. It was from

Aiden at the label.

“Hey Harper, just wanted to check in. Is Mia still coming today?”

“Hi Aiden. Yep, she is, we'll be leaving in a minute, so I'd say we'll be there in about half an hour. Is everybody there good to go?” Harper gulped.

“Absolutely! Everyone is really excited. See you in a while.”

Harper took a second to admire Mia before making her way back over to the booth. She was stirring her drink, looking defeated and a little upset. If Harper didn't know better, she would offer to get her a second drink to cheer her up. Instead, she put on the most convincing panicked face she could muster and made a show of rushing over.

“Mia! Oh my God, I can't believe this has happened, but I forgot to put one of your shows back on the calendar. That was the organizer, he just called wondering where you were. Could you go upstairs and grab a jacket? I've texted Michael, he'll be here with the car in a few minutes. Hurry!”

Mia couldn't get a word in edge-ways, instead nodding, downing the rest of her drink and running upstairs to get changed.

The car ride to the mysterious venue was quiet, with Mia applying messy black eyeliner. Trying to do any type of eyeliner in the back of a car will make it messy, but since that was what Mia usually went for Harper figured she wouldn't mind too much. Michael had been briefed and made pretty convincing small talk with Harper on the ride over.

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“So, a smaller show today, Ma’am?”

“Yeah, pretty niche crowd. Influential though, so this wasn’t one we could miss.”

“Well, I’m glad I could get you both here on time,” Michael said as they pulled up to the building.

“Thank you again, Michael, you’re a star.”

“I’ll be here when you need a ride home. Break a leg, Mia.”

Mia confusedly thanked him as she was bundled out of the car. “You know, I’ve never understood that phrase. Does he want me to hurt myself? Is it a joke?”

“I don’t know where it comes from other than saying ‘good luck’ is actually considered to be bad luck.”

“We have a similar phrase in Spanish, we say mucha mierda instead of good luck.”

Harper had been trying to learn Spanish in her spare time, so she had an idea of what it might mean, but she wanted to ask anyway. “What does that mean in English?”

Mia smiled, letting out a little laugh. “‘Lots of shit!’ I don’t know why we say it, but I don’t know why you would say ‘break a leg’ either.”

They laughed together, walking up the path to the main entrance of the steel-gray building Michael had dropped them off outside. Mia was, understandably, confused.

Harper felt like she was glowing. All of a sudden, things felt normal again.

“Is this a hotel or something? Is there a stage? It looks more like an office building.”

“That’s because it is an office building, sweetheart. There’s a group up here who wanted to meet you, have you do a private set. I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything more than that right now.”

The elevator ride was quiet, and Mia stared into space so she couldn’t look Harper in the eyes and blush at the return of the beloved pet name. They reached their floor and Harper led Mia to a corner office.

Inside, they were greeted by several people in colorful office wear, some of whom were sporting piercings or dyed hair, as well as Ricky, Taylor, Stefan and several other members of the band. Harper noticed that one of the workers, a masculine woman in a gray pinstripe suit, had a heart-shaped carabiner with her keys hanging from it at the same time Mia did, and they made knowing eye contact.

“Our guest has arrived!” She announced, holding her hand out to Harper and then Mia for a very professional handshake. She gestured to Harper to introduce Mia, guiding the two of them to the top of the room. Harper quickly turned to Mia, taking her by the elbow once again.

“You have something you can sing acapella, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” Mia confirmed, nodding as Harper stepped in towards her.

Harper smiled cheekily as she leaned down towards Mia’s ear, whispering “Mucha mierda.” Mia laughed, and Harper was sure she had made the right choice as she turned to address the crowd.

“Hello everybody! Hi! Yes, I have had the incredible privilege of representing this rising star over the last few months and, although there have been some challenges along the way, I know that standing here with us today is one of the great musical talents of our time. It is an honor and a delight for me to present to you all the incredible Mia Cortés!”

The small crowd whooped and cheered, and as Harper walked to the back of the room, she felt a shiver run down her back. They had no idea what was about to hit them.

Mia, at the top of the room, drew her first crucial breath. The entire room was on a knife’s edge, the unsuspecting industry higher-ups visibly blown away when Mia began singing. This wasn’t a song Harper had heard before, not even in the demos the studio had been sending her, but she found herself unable to focus on that.

She found herself, once again, tangled in the web being weaved by Mia’s voice, her hands moving slowly through the air as she danced. She hadn’t been sure if it was possible for Mia have a more powerful stage presence, but without a backing track or music, Mia’s voice cut through the air like a hot knife through butter. She had an intensity that could pin you right where you were standing, Harper thought. This time when Mia made eye contact with her and Harper’s heart beat fast against her ribcage, she smiled.

As caught up as Harper was in the physicality of it all, she couldn’t help but notice some... interesting lyrics. She hadn’t been paying much attention at first, to be totally honest, swept up in Mia’s presence, but as the song continued, she grew unable to ignore the implications.

“...your turn to be the hunted...your fragrance stains me...cling to me, songbird...

songbird...

songbird...”

A warmth bloomed in Harper’s chest. She should have known from the start, really. The song was about her. She wasn’t the only one to notice, either, catching Stefan giving her a look. She rolled her eyes but smiled. It seemed she was smiling more and more often these days.

Mia’s new song ended, and it hung in the room for a moment before those assembled burst into applause. Harper cleared her throat, and the room turned to face her.

“So, what do we think? Will you accept my offer?”

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“Are you sure this is an offer you want to make?” the butch in the gray suit asked. “We would be absolutely delighted to represent her, but is this something you really want to give up?”

“I’m certain, in fact I don’t think I’ve ever been more certain in my entire life.” Harper walked across the room, standing next to Mia and taking her hand. Mia seemed like she wanted to keep a hold of Harper’s hand but wouldn’t stop looking around the room, worried about what the onlookers might say.

“Alright then, Miss Cortés, my name is Isabel Hart, but you can call me Izz.” The butch woman—Izz—strode through the crowd, reaching to shake Mia’s free hand. “I’m one of the agents here, and Ms. Nightingale here has offered us a joint contract to represent you. Now, I won’t bore you with the details, all it means is that we’ll be taking over the lion’s share of your scheduling. With your consent, of course, you’ll finish recording your first album here and we will distribute it. Now, don’t go worrying about your income, I assure you we won’t be taking any more of a cut than Harper did. In fact,” Izz said, leaning into Mia, “Harper took a pay cut in order to get you this deal. You have a very good woman there, Mia, I suggest you keep her.”

Harper tugged on Mia’s hand, attracting her attention. “I meant what I said earlier today. If you choose to accept this contract, I won’t be representing you... most of the time anyway. I’ll still be around to organize local shows, and my team will be at your disposal if you need anything. The majority of things surrounding press and distribution of your music will be passed to Izz and her team...”

Mia’s eyes were wide. Harper grabbed her other hand, facing her, and for a second it felt like they were the only two people in the room.

“... so that, if you’ll have me, I can serve you full time as your girlfriend instead.”

Harper barely breathed. If she had misjudged the situation, she would lose Mia completely and have to rebuild her reputation from the ground up.

Mia went to speak. You could hear a pin drop in the room before she began. “Why on earth would you agree to something like this? I’m a client of yours, and you’ll lose money from the deal if I take it. Do you...”

Harper didn’t rush her. This was a lot to take in at once, she knew.

“... Will you be happy to be with me if you’re not getting a share?”

“Sweetheart, the reason things got so mixed up in the first place is because I was far, far too invested in what I thought you would want out of the contract. Parties, exclusive shows... But you told me, you said that none of that mattered. You told me that it was the music that mattered the most, and by taking this deal, you’ll be able to focus on the music and I won’t have to worry about another rogue assistant going AWOL.”

The room laughed at that, including Mia. Harper continued.

“This puts us on equal footing. I’m not your boss, I’m just your girlfriend.”

Another moment on the knife’s edge, until Mia yelled, “Just my girlfriend?! Mi corazón, do you hear yourself? Of course I would be happy with that! I can’t get you out of my mind day or night. You mean so much more to me than you’ll ever understand.”

Mia swept Harper into a bear hug, squeezing tightly. Harper laughed and buried her face in Mia’s shoulder, squeezing back. Wolf whistles and cheers rang out around

them as they both realized that they could finally, finally just be together.

EPILOGUE

Six months passed. Mia's debut album hit number three on the charts in the USA, while it hit number one in her native Spain, helped by two Spanish-language singles and a feature on a popular flamenco musician's album one month before the release. When the album hit the charts, her family opened bottles of wine to celebrate, only to drop one of them on the kitchen floor when Mia came bounding through the front door with Harper in tow, about to get some use out of her newly-learned Spanish.

A world tour was planned, kicking off with Mia headlining the Greenpeace stage at that year's Glastonbury Music Festival in the UK. Now, she was sitting in a dressing room running through vocal warmups with half an hour to go until her set. To tell the truth, she was terrified. Sitting in an ornate but surprisingly comfortable outfit, she ran through her scales until her voice was prepared for the stage. She had never performed for this many people before, and it would be the largest audience of the tour. Now, more than ever, she needed that mantra her grandmother had given her.

Your words are your weapon. Your words are your weapon. Your words are?—

"Hello, sweetheart, anybody home?" yelled an enthusiastic Harper through the door. Rolling her eyes, Mia stood and opened the door to let her in. Harper's shoes were caked in mud and she was flushed from walking.

"Whose idea was it to host a music festival in a goddamned field, there's nothing but grass and mud for miles around and my boots are in shit. We've only been here for two days!" Harper shed her windbreaker and left it in the corner of the room.

"Baby, they don't exactly have deserts to hold festivals like in the US," Mia said as Harper snaked her arms around her waist. "You've come to England and not expected

mud, that's like going to the Arctic and not expecting ice. Are you even listening to me?"

Harper was not listening, that was clear. She was taking in the details of Mia's costume, checking her out in a way that felt more than thorough. A hungry smile played on her lips.

"You know I love it when you call me baby," Harper crooned, pulling Mia close and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"There's so many people out there, the energy is incredible," Mia said, smiling as Harper held her.

"It is. You're gonna kill it out there, I know you are."

"Thank you, baby."

Harper hummed contently at that before swooping down to kiss Mia on the lips. Mia felt like the luckiest woman in the world. Here she was, about to perform the biggest show of her life, and the only problem she had was her handsy girlfriend yelling about mud. Life was good.

The kiss deepened, and Harper walked forward, walking Mia back towards a makeup mirror with a counter. Mia sat up on the counter while Harper slotted herself between Mia's legs, taking the opportunity to grab Mia's waist. Mia groaned into her mouth, Harper's body flush to hers in a way that turned her on terribly. After months of having very little alone time, who could really blame them for being this eager?

She wrapped her legs around Harper's waist, making desperate, quiet noises against her. Harper laughed cruelly, taking Mia's chin in one of her hands.

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“You getting antsy, sweetheart? It’ll have to be quick if you really want it, you’ve gotta be side stage in about twenty-five minutes.”

Mia nodded, looking up at Harper in a way she knew would drive her crazy when she said,

“I’m sure. You want to fuck me right here, yeah? Want me to look all fucked-out when I go on stage, so they know who was back here?”

Harper groaned and mouthed at Mia’s neck, sucking and licking in a way that wasn’t going to leave any marks but felt incredible, her hands wandering down to squeeze at Mia’s thighs. Slowly, Harper made her way down Mia’s chest, mouthing at her breasts, pulling them out of her shirt so she could tease them with her tongue until Mia started bucking her hips and begging because she knew Harper ate that right up.

“Te suplico, mi corazón, baby, please, I need your mouth on me, fuck?—”

Harper had come up to kiss her, open-mouthed and sloppy as she worked her hands up Mia’s legs, hiking her skirt up and snaking a hand between her thighs. Mia was pliant, widening her legs and groaning as Harper felt her up through her lace panties. She was on fire. She was in heaven.

“You’re gonna wear these out on stage?”

Mia nodded, her breathing growing ragged as Harper teased her. She was a little mean, yes, and Mia loved it. She nodded again, grinding against Harper’s hand.

“I’m gonna be thinking about your head between my legs the entire time, Harper. I’m all yours.” It seemed like that was the final straw for Harper. She dropped to her knees and, pulling Mia’s panties aside, began lapping into her hot wetness like she was her last meal on death row, and Mia couldn’t help but feel smug about it. Using her hands to push Harper’s braids out of her face, Mia bucked her hips involuntarily and groaned.

She was trying to be quiet, she really was, but when Harper took an opportunity to slowly circle her tongue around Mia’s clit, she couldn’t help but let out a moan. Things only got worse from there, with Harper taking every opportunity to coax more noise out of Mia. She was unbearably turned on, with Harper’s enthusiasm spurring her on and the extra risk of being overheard giving her an adrenaline boost.

Eventually, after a particularly talented twist of the tongue on Harper’s part, a roadie knocked at the door and they both froze. Harper, emerging from beneath the layers of Mia’s skirt asked, “Who is it?”

“Sorry, Miss Nightingale, the crew heard yelling and thought something was wrong. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, everything is alright, thank you for checking in, I’m assisting Miss Cortés with her... vocal warmups.”

Mia stifled a laugh, and Harper moved one of her hands so she could circle Mia’s clit, slick with spit, with her thumb. Mia dropped her head onto Harper’s shoulder, breath hitching, and she continued.

“It’s a serious matter, you understand, and she would appreciate it if the crew avoided this area for another while. I assure you she will be out for her ten-minute call, it’s just that making noises in a room on your own can be embarrassing so she invited me to join her, but she’d still rather not be overheard.”

A moment passed.

“Understood, Ma’am, we’ll see you two side stage.”

Harper waited for a while, teasing Mia until she was sure the crew member had left, before saying, “You’re gonna have to be a lot quieter than that, sweetheart, come here.”

They kissed languidly as Harper pushed her fingers deeply into Mia, groaning quietly into each other’s mouths. Mia would never get tired of being this close to Harper. As her fingers continued to fuck her through motions of deeply, slowly, fast, and hard, she felt her body tense. Mia’s hands grabbing at Harper once more. “You’re making me cum already,” she whined before letting out a deep exhale and cumming intensely. Tightening around Harper’s fingers. She could do it all day with her.

When she had finished, Harper kissed her sweetly and helped her to pull her outfit back together, hugging her tightly when the time came to leave.

Harper always said it first.

“I love you, I’m so proud of you.”

Mia always said it back.

“I love you too. Thank you for being here.”

They left the dressing room looking flushed but not too suspicious, making their way up the stairs to the side of the stage. The band were there, with Stefan and Taylor having their traditional pre-show good-luck kiss and Ricky doing his pre-show ritual of pretending to barf at them kissing. The four of them had formed a little unit, attracting a fanbase that had assembled en-masse for the festival. This was their first time playing anywhere in the UK, and it was at the country’s biggest music festival.

Harper, standing a few feet away from the four as they wished each other luck, felt like the luckiest woman on the planet. She had managed to meet the person she was convinced was the great love of her life, and she had not only returned those feelings but she had also found a way of slotting her into a globe-trotting world tour so she never had to miss a moment. Their partnership was one of equals, and in that way they were incredibly lucky.

Mia turned to Harper before she walked on stage. The boys always went on first, and they got a big cheer, but they always played a little musical overture before Mia went out, to build up anticipation. So, the two of them had developed a little ritual of their own own—resting their foreheads against each other, they would take five deep breaths. This would give Mia enough time to say her mantra, while also steeling Harper for the roar of the crowd.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

They straightened up, looking deeply into each other's eyes.

“Best of luck,” Harper yelled over the noise.

“I don't need luck!” replied Mia, laughing before turning around and making her way onto the stage. The crowd roared for her, clapping and cheering, but when she raised her hands and brought them down again, the entire crowd went quiet. It was like magic. She looked around at the band, and side stage at Harper, and knew she was

ready to start. She knew this was truly the life she had always dreamed of.