



The Duet

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Description: She should have kissed her... The Lady Kings and their singer, Lana Lynch, have been out of the limelight since Lana's partner's sudden death ten years ago. They're ready for an epic comeback tour, but have to take a young and hip support band with them. Cleo Palmer and The Other Women are over the moon when they get booked to support their lifelong idols and share the stage with the iconic Lady Kings—especially queer legend Lana Lynch. But when Lana invites her to sing a sensual duet together every night, Cleo gets way more than she bargained for. Lana and Cleo's on-stage chemistry is off the charts, but the differences in their age and life experience, not to mention some dramatic band politics, prove difficult to overcome. Can Lana and Cleo find their way to each other once the spotlights are switched off?

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Chapter 1

Lana

To do any of this without Joan by my side is like doing it with a limb cut off, or worse, a torn vocal cord. I only feel like half a person. Like the better part of me is still missing. Our new single is called “The Better Part of Me” for a reason.

“I’m so stoked,” Billie says. “Let’s do this.”

The Lady Kings recruited Billie as Joan’s replacement almost a year ago. I should be used to her by now. I am in some ways, but in many others, she will never be Joan. The best guitarist to ever walk this earth, in my ultra-biased opinion, with the nimblest of fingers—and I should know.

What distance remains between Billie and me will soon be obliterated by the tour we’re about to embark on. A two-month cross-country journey will do that to you. All boundaries are about to be shattered. But first, we’re checking out our support band, The Other Women, and the show they’ll be opening with every night. They’d better bring it. I haven’t come to watch a rehearsal. The Lady Kings are here to experience a proper performance.

Our tour manager, Andy, greets us at the entrance of the Hollywood Bowl. The first concert of The Lady Kings reunion tour—if you want to call it that—will be a home game. I can’t even remember how many times we’ve played this venue. For The Other Women, I think it might be the first. I try to remember my first time on this particular stage, but it’s too long ago. Too many years have passed and too many

things have happened since. Like our guitarist dying.

Most of the crew are here. Some have been with us for decades; some I will get better acquainted with soon enough.

We've only settled into our seats when there is movement on the stage. They don't want to keep us waiting. Good. My expectations are high and low at the same time. I wouldn't have picked The Other Women as our opening act myself, but according to everyone at our record company, it makes perfect sense. Truth be told, I don't even know why we need an opening act at all. We're The Lady Kings, for crying out loud. When I come on, the crowd goes from cold to hot in a split second. I've always known how to light up an audience. It's what I do. It's what I'm good at. But times change and The Lady Kings haven't toured for over ten years.

So, here we are. Poised for The Other Women. We're not coming into this cold. We've watched their clips on YouTube. We've had their songs on repeat on Spotify. We've pored over their pictures and bios.

Roy, our manager since we started out in the early nineties, said, "Fact is, you may need them more than they need you."

"We'll see about that," Deb, our drummer, replied.

"I'm feeling my age." Sam, our bass player, is looking at the stage as The Other Women take their places. "How old are these kids again?"

"Twenty-something," Billie says. "With an enormous fan base."

"Evening," the lead singer says into the mic, only to be met with an ear-piercing wave of reverb. She steps back and waits until she gets a thumbs-up from one of the sound techs. "Let's try that again." If she's intimidated by having all current members

of The Lady Kings and their entourage staring at her from the front row of an otherwise empty Hollywood Bowl, she hides it well. “It’s an honor to play for such rock royalty tonight. Thank you for taking us on tour with you. We promise not to let you down.”

“Polite as well,” Sam mumbles in my ear. “I didn’t know they still made young people like that.”

“Certainly politer than we were at their age,” Deb says.

I let them talk and keep my gaze trained on Cleo Palmer, lead singer of The Other Women. We look nothing alike, yet she reminds me of myself many moons ago, when The Lady Kings took the music world by storm. When audiences couldn’t get enough of us. When security guards had to form a human shield around us after every show so we could get from the stage door onto the tour bus without being grabbed by delirious fans. Long bygone days.

Our fans have aged with us and, so I’ve been told, these days, meet and greets with the band are official add-ons when you buy a ticket for the show. I’ll be curious to see how that goes once the tour starts.

“You may know this first song,” Cleo says. “It’s called ‘Like No One Else.’”

“No fucking way,” Sam says.

“The nerve of these kids,” Deb adds.

“They reel you in with their seemingly polite ways,” Billie says.

I have to laugh at their brazenness. “Like No One Else” is only The Lady Kings’ most iconic song. Our biggest hit. And our support act are starting their set with a

cover version. I'm not sure whether to be flattered or offended.

"This better be good," someone from the crew shouts.

The Other Women respond by playing the first chords of our song.

"Are they even all women?" I hear someone say behind me. "That bass player doesn't look like a woman to me. Come to think of it, that drummer..."

A female voice shushes them—even when you're in an all-female band, the men around you still need to be told to shut up sometimes.

I barely notice the bassist or the drummer, or The Other Women's guitarist, who lays down a mean riff Joan would have approved of. My eyes are glued exactly where they're supposed to be. I'm getting confirmation of what I've known since I was introduced to The Other Women. Cleo Palmer was born for the stage. I couldn't look away if I wanted to. Her presence, the way she uses her voice, how her body writhes against the microphone stand, the dramatically held high note at the end of the chorus. It's all there and it commands all my attention.

There's no denying it. Cleo Palmer is a star. Maybe Roy was right. Maybe we're the lucky ones getting to tour with them and not the other way around.

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By the time the song ends, they've already won over every person in tonight's small audience.

"Fuck. They're good," Billie says.

"They are," I confirm, as an idea sprouts in my head. If we're going to be touring with The Other Women, with someone like Cleo Palmer, we might as well make good use of them.

Chapter 2

Cleo

Opening our show with The Lady Kings' biggest hit was a bold move. But I didn't get into this business to be a good girl and only do what is expected of me. On the contrary. And boy, was it a thrill to look into Lana Lynch's face as I sang the hell out of that song. I've had years of practice. When we formed our band, it was the first song we taught ourselves to play—although this is the first time we've played it in front of an audience. I hope Lana was impressed.

I cast her one last glance as I let the final note of our set die in my throat. We're no longer used to playing for such a tiny audience, but they make up for it by giving us a massive applause. Lana holds her hands above her head as she claps for us. Did she just give me a nod of approval? I'm about to find out.

"Thank you. It was such a pleasure. Can't wait to play here again in a few days." I tap two fingers to my forehead in a salute and head off the stage.

Backstage, I'm joined by my bandmates.

"That was so tight," Daphne says. "You smashed it." I exchange a high-five with our guitarist. Tim and Jess follow hot on her heels.

"Do you think we impressed them?" Judging by the smirk on Tim's face, it's not a question.

"Fuck, yeah."

"Cleo?" I turn around. "Lana would like a word," Roy, The Lady Kings' manager, says. "Whenever you have a minute."

"The King wants to see you," Daphne says. "Best not keep her waiting."

"Argh," Jess groans. She's had a crush on Lana Lynch forever.

"Come with me," I offer.

Jess huffs out some air. "We're going on tour with them. I'm sure I'll get my moment with Lana."

"Go," Tim says. "You must have dazzled the fuck out of her."

I follow Roy to the front stage where Lana is surrounded by the other members of her band. This won't be a solo audience then.

"Way to go," The Lady Kings' new guitarist, Billie, says, and gives me a thumbs-up.

"Can I steal you for a minute?" Even when she speaks, Lana's voice is low and gravelly.

“Of course.”

“How daring.” We walk up a few steps. “To kick off with ‘Like No One Else.’”

“It’s a tribute, of course.” When I’m talking to Lana Lynch, I don’t care if I sound like the ultimate fangirl—all of us in the band would cite The Lady Kings as one of our defining influences.

“You did it justice, and it gave me an idea.” Lana leans against a bench.

“Thanks.” It’s still surreal that we’ll be touring with our idols. We were gearing up for a headline tour with our own support act, but we happily gave up on that for a chance to tour with the Kings. All four of us, unanimously, in a heartbeat.

“You might have heard of this duet I’ve done with Isabel Adler,” Lana says.

“Your long-awaited comeback single.” I’m trying to keep my cool. I’ve only had ‘I Should Have Kissed You’ on repeat since it was released—not something I would ever have expected of a song featuring Isabel Adler. “I love it.”

“Yeah, so... on the tour, how about you and I sing it together?” Lana fixes her dark gaze on me.

“For real?”

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“Yeah.” She bats her lashes once.

“Sure, I mean, if you think that I’m up to that.” There’s not a lot left of my earlier bravado.

“Good.” She plunges her hands into her pockets. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t think you were up to it.”

“Okay. Thanks. Yes, let’s do it.”

“We should get some serious rehearsal time in. The tour kicks off in three days. I need to talk to the band, but I was thinking we could add it as the last encore. Send people home with some good vibes.”

Some good lesbian vibes, I almost say, but catch myself. Although I don’t know why. Surely, I could say something like that to Lana. But I don’t know her all that well—yet.

“Sure,” I say, instead of all the things I’m thinking. I can hardly blame myself for this starstruck moment. Lana Lynch and The Lady Kings are rock legends and my band are not only going to be opening the show for them; I’m actually going to be on stage with Lana.

“Can you come to my house tomorrow?” If Lana’s excited by this at all, she’s not letting on. Then again, she’s known for being cool as a cucumber under the hottest circumstances. “We’ll do a few run-throughs without the band first. See how our voices match.” Sounds as though Lana’s got this all figured out without talking to the

other members of The Lady Kings.

“Of course. Just let me know when and I’ll be there.” Never mind that I have a million little things to take care of before we leave town for two months. I’ll just do them in less time. Even if I didn’t want to get off on the best possible foot with Lana, I’d still cancel everything for a chance to spend a few hours singing with her.

“Roy will give you all the details. Thanks, kid.”

Kid. Jesus. So much for me beginning to think of us as equals.

“You’ve got the right stuff. Any fool can see that.”

Oh, fuck. There’s the blush. Damn you, pale Irish skin. The last thing I wanted was to blush in front of Lana Lynch. Luckily, it’s completely dark, and where we’re standing is not well lit.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

Lana just nods, then walks off.

Even though I take a few deep breaths, I’m still beside myself when I join my bandmates. I tell them what Lana asked.

“No freaking way,” Jess says. “Why can’t I sing like you, darn it.” Jess has always refused to swear with us.

“Fuck. You’re going to be on stage with them.” Tim is practically jumping up and down.

“It’s not a done deal yet,” I say. “Going over to Lana’s tomorrow is more like an

audition than anything else.”

“Give yourself a break, Cleo,” Daphne says. “Lana knows what you can do with your voice. You must have impressed her tonight. That’s why she asked you. Besides, they’d be crazy not to put that song on their set list. It’s been at the top of the charts for months. It’s probably the reason they’re touring again.”

“We’ll see.” Heat glows within me. I can’t wait for tomorrow. “Drinks are on me tonight. Come on.”

We head to our favorite Silver Lake hangout spot, where I try to calm my nerves with way too many shots.

Chapter 3

Lana

“I’m only fifty-four,” I say to Roy on the phone. “I’m only halfway through my second act.” With the life I’ve lived, and the knowledge of how fleeting it can be after Joan’s sudden death, I’m exaggerating, but that’s what you have to do when you want to get a point across to your manager.

“Even so,” Roy replies. In the distance, the doorbell chimes. “Music biopics are all the rage these days. And Faye Fleming has expressed interest in playing you. It could be amazing.”

“I really don’t think the time is right for this.”

“I’m sending you the script regardless. It’s fantastic, Lana. I wouldn’t be trying to persuade you if it was crap.”

There's a knock at the door. "Yes," I say.

"Great," Roy says in my ear.

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“I wasn’t talking to you, Roy. Someone’s here. I have to go.”

The door opens, and my assistant, Logan, appears. I hold up a finger to signal that my phone conversation will be over in a minute.

“Take the script on tour with you. Read it to relax before you go to bed.”

“I prefer to read fiction.” My life is not fiction to me, nor will reading some Hollywood version of it calm me down after a show.

“We’ll talk later.” Without further ado, Roy ends the call.

“Cleo Palmer’s here.” Logan’s voice is much more high-pitched than usual.

“Great.” I wave them in. A bit of singing will set me right—will take my mind off this movie, which is the quintessential Hollywood way of capitalizing on my grief. But I won’t let anyone turn Joan’s death into a spectacle, into just another way to make a buck. All the Faye Flemings in the world won’t be able to change my mind about that—although, admittedly, the thought of someone like Faye playing me is rather flattering.

“Hey.” Cleo gives me a shy wave. “Thank you so much for inviting me into your lovely home.”

Is this the same woman who rocked the stage so hard last night, every person watching was bowled over?

“Are you all right, Cleo?” I examine her face. Her eyes are a little red with dark half-moons underneath them—a look I know well from my reflection in the mirror throughout the nineties. “Rough night?”

“We went on an unexpected bender last night, but I’m perfectly fine.”

“Logan,” I say to my assistant, who is still lingering, “Can you get us a large quantity of water, please?”

“Coming right up.”

“To say Logan’s a fan of *The Other Women* would be an understatement.” I shoot Cleo a smile as he hurries away. “Thanks for coming, by the way. I appreciate it can be a little intimidating to turn up at my house alone.”

“And try to sing that song with you.” Cleo giggles like a nervous schoolgirl. If she’s anything like me, her nerves will melt like ice under the sun as soon as she has a microphone in her hands.

“Shall we get to it then?” The tour starts in two days. There’s not much time left for fooling about. “I’m not expecting perfection, okay? Not by a long shot. We’ll get better as the tour progresses.” Isabel Adler’s part in the song is not a vocal tour de force—she can no longer sing like she used to. It’s all about the intention, the tone, and the breath. The pure musicality of less is more. The way she doesn’t strain to match the power of my voice. The contrast between the two of us. If anything, Cleo’s going to have to tone it down considerably.

“I was surprised you asked me. My voice is nothing like Isabel Adler’s.”

“Hm.” I nod. Joan would have been perfect to sing Isabel’s part. But Joan’s not here. “Don’t even try to sound like her. You’re right. Your voice is different from hers. But

it's also very different from mine, which is why I think this might work beautifully." I walk her to the corner of the room where a bunch of instruments are set up, although we won't be needing those today.

Logan returns with five bottles of water. "This should do the trick. If you need anything else, let me know. I'm here for you," he says to Cleo.

Cleo grins at him, already showing more of her stage persona than a few minutes before. "Thanks, Logan. I appreciate it."

"I think we're good." With a wink, I send Logan away. "I have the lyrics printed here." I hand her a sheet of paper and a bottle of water.

"I know them by heart, but it's always good to have a reminder."

Cleo's wearing a pair of denim dungarees that I could swear went out of fashion decades ago. It must be one of those things that came back in style without me noticing. Underneath, she's wearing a light pink top that, oddly, doesn't clash with the color of her hair, which is somewhere between blond and ginger. Head tilted back, throat exposed, she drinks greedily from the bottle of water, and she couldn't look less like a rock star—more like one of those pop starlets whose image and music is completely manufactured by a record company hoping to score big by combining the right kind of person with a catchy, over-produced tune.

"You were great last night. I look forward to going on the road with your band." I perch on a stool next to one of the microphone stands.

"Thank you. That means so much coming from you." Cleo's cheeks flush the tiniest bit, as though her blush is contained to a small circle just beneath her cheekbones. It gives her that wholesome look again. Maybe that's how rock bands portray themselves these days, full of virtue and good vibes. Times sure are different than in

our heyday. Audiences value different things these days.

“Are you okay with doing a few a cappella run throughs? Just to get each other’s vibe a little?”

“Anything you want.” There it is. The glint in her eyes piercing through the shy-girl facade. Another glimpse of the woman on stage last night. Cleo’s also here without her band, without her back-up. “Can I ask you something?” She slants her head.

“Of course.”

“Were you nervous about recording this song with Isabel Adler?”

“Nervous?” I blurt out. “No.” When it comes to singing, to performing, nerves have never been a part of it for me. I’ve encountered many a performer sick with anxiety before a gig, but I’m not one of them. “Not about the singing bit, anyway,” I correct myself. “I was apprehensive about meeting her, though. With all she’s been through.”

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“You’ve been through a lot as well.”

Way to pierce through my armor of cool. I glance away at the opposite wall, where Joan’s favorite guitar—a Gibson Les Paul—hangs like the most valuable piece of art in a museum, unsure how to answer her.

“You can hear it in your voice, especially in this song,” Cleo continues. “Maybe that’s because it’s a duet.”

“Maybe.” A grin on my lips, I look at Cleo, who has made herself comfortable on the stool next to me. I quite like her. Maybe I can be her mentor or something like that, not that she needs one. “I take it you know the melody?”

“I know this song as if I wrote it myself.” Ostentatiously, Cleo lets the sheet of paper with the lyrics flutter to the floor. “Shall we?” She turns to me and looks deep into my eyes.

For the first time in a long while, I feel my own cheeks flush with unexpected heat.

Chapter 4

Cleo

I’m singing the hell out of this song, and I know it. It’s the one thing I do best and it’s the most delicious treat to do so with Lana Lynch by my side. I can’t believe I was so nervous before coming here. Thousands of people pay good money to see me do exactly this. But in this room, it’s just Lana and me. And Lana knows a thing or two

about singing as well. Her voice is so sultry and low, like a melodious bass note that hits you in the right spot over and over again—a sound I became addicted to a long time ago.

“Maybe we should sing it a cappella on tour as well,” I blurt out after we’ve sung “I Should Have Kissed You” a couple of times and we’ve already found an unmistakable groove—as though we were meant for nothing else but to sing this song together.

“I’m not sure about that,” Lana says, taking what I just said very seriously. “I was thinking about making it the final song of the night and I’m not sure I should do that without the band.”

“Oh no, of course not. I was just babbling. Speaking without thinking. I do that sometimes.”

“I value your input. And you’re right. It sounds good without musical accompaniment, but we should at least try it with the band as well, because we’re definitely doing this. If you’re up for it. You can’t go off partying with your bandmates as soon as your set ends.”

“And miss even a minute of your show? Not a chance.” Lana probably doesn’t have a clue how much her band means to me. Clearly, she’s not one for chitchat, what with the way she shoved a mic into my hands when I’d barely walked in the door. She behaves like a woman who is quickly running out of time. Hm, that sounds like a good song lyric, but I can hardly write it down now. Not when I’m bantering with Lana Lynch.

“It’s pretty much the same show every night.”

“But still.” I flash her a stage smile.

“We’ll talk again in a few weeks.”

“Seriously, Lana, it’s such an honor for me to sing with you. I’ve been a fan of The Lady Kings for as long as I’ve been aware that music exists. I’ve been listening to your songs for as long as I can remember. The Lady Kings are one of the main reasons The Other Women even exist. The Lady Kings are what we aspire to be when we grow up, if you know what I mean.” I don’t add that we could have gone on our own headline tour instead of reducing our status to their opening act. It doesn’t matter. As far as dreams go, it doesn’t get much bigger than to open for The Lady Kings.

“Thank you.” Lana barely smiles—even at her age, she’s still too cool for that. “That’s sweet of you to say.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Given the amount of bullshit spouted in this business, I appreciate it,” Lana says.

“We’re looking forward to the tour so much.”

“So are we, even though we’re a bit rusty. It’s been a while and two months is a long time to be away from home.”

“That’s not how I think about it. This tour is one big gift for us. But I get that it’s different for you.”

“Hm.” Lana seems to have had enough of the small talk already.

“Is it okay if we snap a quick pic for Insta? Our manager insisted.” And Jess will go crazy, although she might also be jealous. But she’ll get plenty of chances for selfies with Lana Lynch—in that respect, two months is a long time.

“It’s part of the deal these days, I guess,” Lana says on a sigh. “Billie’s into all that social media stuff. Someone at the record company manages my accounts.” She gives a dismissive wave of the hand. “Personally, I fail to see the point.”

I barely stop myself from saying, “You’re not that old.” I know Lana’s fifty-four. My mother, who turned sixty recently, is all over social media. Then again, my mother isn’t an iconic rock star with millions of followers.

I pull my phone from my back pocket. “Ready?”

Lana nods.

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I huddle close to her. She's a little taller than me. So far, we've used two microphones to sing our duet, but as I hold up my phone to snap the picture, maybe, for the last chorus, when things get a little heated in the song, we should share the mic.

I inspect the picture I've just taken. "You look amazing," I say. "Me, much less so. Can we do another?"

"Show me." Lana holds out her hand and, with a meekness quite foreign to me, I give it to her. "What are you talking about? You look fabulous. What do you think is wrong with you in this picture?"

"Um, my eyes are only half open. I have a wisp of hair in front of my cheek." And, maybe, compared to Lana, I'm just not as photogenic. Maybe, with her glossy dark hair and blistering brown eyes, the camera just loves her more.

"Nonsense." She gives me back my phone. "If it's that important to you, we can take another. But just for the record, I think you look wonderful." She follows up with a warm smile.

"Maybe for this one, we can pretend to be singing into the same microphone," I suggest.

"Whatever you say." She grins indulgently at me as though she's only going to do me a silly courtesy like this once.

"This tour is going to be all over socials. You do know that?"

“Sure.” Lana looks as though she couldn’t care less about what lengths new bands will go to in order to maximize visibility these days. She doesn’t have to. She already has a mansion in Laurel Canyon. She’s had numerous number one records. The Lady Kings’ fanbase might have decreased while they were on hiatus, but many fans have remained loyal to their idols, because The Lady Kings aren’t just any old band.

Even though I was only a toddler when they made it big, I realize how hard it was for an all-female band to be taken seriously in the nineties. The Lady Kings paved the way for bands like The Other Women. They put up with a lot of shit that would be inconceivable these days.

I pull the microphone stand close and we take up our positions. Instead of pretending, Lana sings the chorus of “I Should Have Kissed You” and I sing along. The resulting picture is perfect, even if I say so myself.

We look great together and I can’t wait to get on the stage with her to perform it at the end of the show. Me and Lana on stage together at the very moment when the crowd is at fever pitch, singing this particular song. It’s slow and sensual and full of innuendo. It will drive quite a few people in the audience crazy—both our bands have quite the queer following. It will be the perfect concert ending, Lana’s right about that. It will also bring some attention back to the opening act, which is a win-win for The Other Women.

“Are you free tomorrow morning to practice this with the band?” Lana asks.

Not really, but I can hardly say no to her. “Sure.”

“It’s going to be dynamite, you know,” she says, a tinge of excitement in her voice. “You’re good, kid. Very good.”

Bursting with pride, I belt out a few more run-throughs.

Chapter 5

Lana

On the first night of the tour, I'm more nervous than I expected. When I look at Billie, it's easy enough to understand why. Billie is a wonderful woman and a kick-ass guitarist, but she's not Joan.

Because I'm the singer, I've always been considered the cool front lady of our band, but if I'm cool, then Joan was made of the coldest polar ice. Nothing seemed to faze her. If I got worked up about something, all I had to do was look at her. She'd return my glance with the utmost calm, and I knew everything would be okay. It worked like a charm until the day she collapsed on the floor and never got up again. Just like that, Joan Miller's physical body ceased to function. She was gone in less than a minute.

Billie is the opposite of Joan. She's the opposite of calm. While I get it because this is her first big gig with The Lady Kings, it also makes me jump out of my skin.

From our dressing room backstage, we can hear The Other Women's show. I wonder how Cleo's feeling. Earlier, their drummer, Jess, couldn't stop staring at me. As though she was looking to me to find some calm, the way I did with Joan.

"I'm going to see how they're doing," I announce to my bandmates. "I'm curious."

"I'm coming," Sam says, and follows me. "How are you feeling?" She bumps her shoulder lightly into mine. "Coming back after all these years, without Joan, is no small thing. We're all aware of that."

"Tonight, we play for her." I don't mean to sound as dramatic as I do.

Sam holds out her fist and I bump mine against it. As we approach the side of the stage we fall silent, the music too loud for us to comfortably exchange any more words.

Immediately, my gaze is drawn to Cleo. The song they're playing is reaching its climax. Cleo is completely lost in the music and seems to hold on to her microphone stand for dear life. When their drummer ends the song with a couple of cymbal crashes, Cleo snaps out of it instantly. I can barely see her face from the side, but I know she's sporting a huge smile.

"You guys are amazing," she shouts to the audience.

She's right. The crowd is hot tonight. The Other Women are hardly still an up-and-coming band. When I scan the first few rows of the audience, I think it's a safe bet that quite a few of those people came here to see The Other Women rather than The Lady Kings. Our fans aren't as young and wild any longer. It reminds me of the good old days when it amazed me every single night what rock music could do to people, the frenzy it could get them into. The things fans are willing to offer. I'm sure someone with Cleo's charisma gets lots of offers—decent as well as indecent.

"It's such an honor to play here, for you and for the one and only Kings," Cleo shouts. She turns toward the wings and winks at me. Wow. She's in the zone, that's for sure. She's riding the upper crest of a performance-induced peak of self-esteem—a feeling I know all too well. I wink back because I won't be responsible for pulling a performer out of their flow. Cleo Palmer is the real deal, that much I know.

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“Fuck me,” Sam says. “That Cleo is something else.”

“Hm.” It’s my standard reply to many an obvious statement.

The drummer kicks off the next song and even though our set will start soon and I should begin my pre-show ritual, I’m glued to the spot. I’m entranced by Cleo and her band. Fuck me, indeed, because they will be a damn hard act to follow. But one thing I will not allow, no matter how talented and phenomenal The Other Women are, is for The Lady Kings to be outplayed by our opening act. Especially on our very first night back. If anything, though, The Other Women being so outstanding spurs me on to match them, to continue the night with the amazing energy they’ve created for us. I also get the feeling the audience will be delighted when I bring Cleo back on stage at the end of the show.

I take a few deep breaths and conjure up the image of Joan when she played the intro to “Like No One Else”, all bravado and rock-goddess swagger.

“Come on,” I say to Sam. “Time for a pre-show pep talk.”

I needn’t have worried. Billie’s playing like the spirit of Joan has settled somewhere deep within her. Sam’s bass is as percussively seductive as ever. And Deb’s drums thump as though in sync with my own heart. And me, I do what I’ve always done. I let myself be carried by the warmth of the audience, by the way they scream my name as though I’m much more than just a woman who can rock the hell out of a pair of leather pants while belting out a tune. I sing my heart out while I strut across the stage as though it was a catwalk constructed only for me. I play the crowd like puppets on a string. I give them all I have, and they give me back so much more.

By the time we get to “Like No One Else”, I’m confident not many people in the audience remember The Other Women’s version. I also wonder why we stopped playing live for such a long time. Although I’ll be reminded of that soon enough, when I go home to an empty house. Losing Joan so abruptly wasn’t only a shock to our systems. Her sudden absence changed our lives and our perspective on everything. It floored us as people and as a band. For me, personally, it killed my love of music for years. It muted everything, as though life was suddenly in black and white instead of all the colors of the rainbow. I didn’t lose my voice, but, for the longest time, I felt like I no longer had any right to use it—not the way I had before, with Joan always by my side. Like Isabel Adler, I had to find my voice all over again. In that way, it’s fitting that the duet we recorded meant the comeback of The Lady Kings without Joan.

After the raucous applause for our biggest hit has subsided, I pause. I stand still and look at the crowd. I let my gaze sweep over all those people who’ve come to see us play tonight.

“The next song is called “The Better Part of Me”.” My voice does something it never does on stage. It trembles. “And it’s for Joan Miller.” I don’t like this trembling one little bit, so I cover it up the only way I know how. I add some theatrics. I hold up two fingers, kiss the tips, and blow the kiss toward the sky—as though Joan is up there watching us. If I’ve learned one thing in my long music career, it’s that the audience loves a big, emotional gesture. They respond with a loud but surprisingly serene round of applause.

“We miss you, Joan,” someone screams from the crowd.

You and me both, I think.

Deb counts us down and despite the supreme flow of our gig so far, despite the enthusiasm of the crowd, despite my bandmates playing as though their life depends

on it, as I start the first verse, everything suddenly feels off-kilter. Not quite right. Billie sidles up to me and I play along, but I don't feel it. I know I can't hold it against her that she's not Joan, and I don't, but it's not the same without her. Joan and I knew each other so well, I could anticipate every last one of her moves.

I try to do better because I'm singing this song for her, but it reminds me too much of that place in my heart that was hers and that will forever be cold without her.

When I look away, my glance skittering to the side, I spot Cleo and her bandmates. Cleo's smile is accompanied by the slightest of nods, as though we have some secret understanding between us. Instead of letting it tick me off, I let it fill me with a little warmth. Just like, after years without the band and without making music, I knew that, if I wanted to have the life that Joan would have wished for me, I had to let it all back in. I did, and now here I am. My rendition of this song for Joan is far from perfect, but it will get better as time passes—just like the pain of losing her has gotten softer around the edges.

After the song ends, we are rewarded with the biggest round of applause of the night so far, and it's as though I can feel every single clap of the audience's hands reverberate deep in my soul.

Chapter 6

Cleo

All I can think when I see how Lana plays the crowd, how she effortlessly delivers an unforgettable show, is that I'm witnessing the one and only master giving a master class.

The Lady Kings are in their second round of encores. I'm about to go on. I feel more thrilled than nervous. I'm about to sing at the master's side in front of eighteen

thousand people, in front of a crowd so warm, they're about to melt, that's how expertly Lana has played them.

The floor beneath me shakes as the audience stamps their feet, demanding more. I fully support their wish. I want more of Lana too. I want this night to never end. But first, time to do my part.

"Break a leg," Jess whispers next to me.

"Can't wait to see this," Tim says. My own band haven't seen me do this, haven't seen me sing alongside Lana Lynch.

As we agreed, Lana will go back on stage first, without her band members. She walks past me without looking at me. She must still be high on the buzz of performing, that ecstatic feeling you can't compare to anything else.

With her hand on her heart, Lana thanks the crowd. "We have one last song for you tonight," she says.

"I Should Have Kissed You," someone shouts, because it's a dead giveaway.

"Correct," Lana responds. "But I'm going to need some help singing it."

The audience shrieks. Oh, great. Only now does it dawn on me they're probably expecting a surprise guest appearance by Isabel Adler.

"While Isabel Adler could not be here tonight, I have found someone very special to sing our song with."

Someone very special? For a split second, I wonder if Lana has enlisted someone other than me to duet with, but then she turns to me, our eyes lock, and all my doubts

fade away.

“Please welcome Cleo Palmer back to the stage.”

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The audience doesn't sound too disappointed that it's only me.

I wave to the crowd as I join Lana. Although still the epitome of cool, her demeanor is much more gregarious on stage. She opens her arms to me as though we are long-lost friends. It's all part of the act. Of making the audience feel as many emotions as possible. I step into Lana's embrace, which is a typical showbiz one, all lightness and vast amounts of air between our bodies.

I take my spot behind the second microphone. The roar of the crowd is more than enough to get me going again. I find Lana's eyes, those smoldering dark beads, and she gives me a nod, and then we launch into our duet.

With no musical accompaniment, Lana sings the first verse, and I can't keep my eyes off her. When Lana sings, something in the air changes. The vibrations around us shift. I know her voice so well and I'm about to blend mine with it. It starts with us singing the last line of the first verse in harmony. Our gazes still locked, we pause before launching into the chorus together. Even though there's no instrumental back-up, our version is much more powerful than the original. Not better, just different because of the circumstances in which we're singing it. In the chorus, our voices flirt with each other, toppling over each other, finding each other again at the right moments.

As I sing the first few words of the second verse, it hits me that this is by far the best moment of my life. To sing this song at the Hollywood Bowl with my lifelong idol, Lana Lynch. I close my eyes for a moment, and I put all my emotion into the words. The crowd is quiet, almost solemn. Is this as special a moment for them as it is for me?

Lana joins me again for the next chorus. We sing all the lyrics together this time around, slowly working up to the grand finale of the song. When I open my eyes again, in between the thousands of faces staring up at me, I also see thousands of phones aimed at us. This will be all over the internet tonight. I wonder what Isabel Adler will make of this. I wonder if I will ever know.

In the last verse, we alternate lines, and the mood of the song becomes more sensual but also more regretful. We sing about something that should have happened, could have happened, but never did. “I Should Have Kissed You” is a song about two women who were crazy about each other but could never be together. It became the ultimate sapphic anthem the minute it was released. Another reason it means so much to me.

In the pause between the final verse and chorus, Lana swaggers over to me. The look she gives me makes something in my belly swirl, although the dizzying feeling I get could just as easily be ascribed to the mind-blowing situation I find myself in. Not only am I singing this sapphic anthem alongside Lana Lynch, but she also took on board my suggestion about performing it a cappella while sharing a mic for the last chorus, for increased drama and stage magic.

Singing into the same mic is an intimate business. Lana’s shoulder rubs against mine. Her body heat is off the charts. Her face is shiny from standing under the spotlights all night and I can see drops of sweat trickling down her forehead. Lana’s face has never been symmetrical enough for her to be considered a classic beauty yet, right now, as I have done for most of my life, I think she is the most beautiful woman in the world.

She has character and grit—and the lines to show for it crinkling around her eyes. She’s so cool and warm at the same time, it’s maddening.

When we approach the final note of the final song of this first evening of our tour

together, that tingle in my belly explodes. Lana gazes into my eyes, as though we're not singing for a crowd of thousands, but only for ourselves—only to each other. And I know it's an act, just another way to give the audience what they want, yet it feels very real to me. Then there are the words we just sang: Even though I never did, I should have kissed you long ago. If she kissed me now—

The roar of the crowd snaps me out of the foolishness my intoxicated brain was lost in. Lana curls an arm around my shoulders and waves goodbye to the crowd. I do the same. I lean into her a little, because I can, but also because my body seems to be that way inclined. Whatever I had imagined this moment would feel like, whatever emotion I had expected to course through me, it's nothing compared to what I actually feel. Exactly how it's supposed to be when your biggest dream comes true. Sharing a stage—and a song and microphone—with Lana Lynch was never going to be a disappointment.

Lana and I bow to the crowd, then, to my surprise, she slides her arm down and takes my hand in hers to walk off. She drops it as soon as we're out of the audience's sight. She turns to me.

“Told you, kid. Pure dynamite.” She waggles her eyebrows and disappears into the small group of people that has formed around her.

My bandmates surround me. Jess's eyes look watery.

“You killed it. Again,” Tim says. “That was out of this world.”

Was it? All I can remember is Lana staring into my eyes with such intensity, I was glad I had a microphone stand to hold onto. But it was always going to overwhelm me the first time. I let the exhilaration wash over me, the rush of going out there and singing a duet with my idol.

“That was a special moment,” Daphne says. “I swear you could have heard a pin drop. The crowd was totally into that.”

“So was I,” Jess whispers, as though she’s been hypnotized.

Someone from The Lady Kings’ entourage joins us. “After-party at Lana’s later. We’ll have a car waiting for you outside.”

“Damn,” Tim says. “This is our life now. Can you believe it?”

I can’t believe any of it. And the night’s far from over yet.

Chapter 7

Lana

I didn’t necessarily want to have this party after our first show, but from experience, I know it will take a few hours for the adrenaline rush of performing to die down. I won’t be able to sleep until deep into the night. And this tour is cause for celebration. The show was amazing. The first night is always special because it’s the beginning of something and everyone’s raring to go. Everyone is buzzed and chilling out together is exactly what we need.

When I arrive at my house, the lights are on and there are people in my living room. Congratulations are exchanged. The vibe is friendly and full of hope because the tour is only beginning and camaraderie is required if you’re going to spend so much time together on buses and in hotel rooms.

I shoot the breeze for an hour or so while making my way from the living room to the kitchen. I hope someone has briefed my guests that the three original members of The Lady Kings are in their fifties now and that, therefore, the raucousness of previous

tours' after-parties will no longer be tolerated. But who am I kidding? The tension in my muscles isn't fading. The excitement in my flesh doesn't feel as though it's going to subside soon. I'm as gleeful as anyone else here tonight and we're united in that feeling of being on the cusp of something extraordinary. Because this tour is special. It might very well never have happened, but it is. We said yes to life again, to the life we once knew. We made a new record. We poured our hearts—and the loss of Joan—into our new songs, and now we're taking them on the road.

“Sup,” one of The Other Women nods at me, playing it very cool.

“Tim, right?”

“The one and only Other Woman who identifies as a man.” He smiles at me. “I was just raiding your fridge. Getting more beers.”

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“Excellent gig, Tim. Really great.”

“Thanks.” He opens the fridge and, without qualms, gets out four bottles of premium IPA. “Thanks for these. And for the party. We’re all so stoked. We might get a little tipsy tonight.”

“Enjoy.” It’s a trip down memory lane to tour with a much younger band. To be that young again. To have it all in front of you still.

“Hey, um, Jess, our drummer, has like this huge crush on you and she’s basically too nervous to talk to you. Like, at all. Would you mind making her day and joining us for a few minutes? She won’t know what to do with herself and it will be so cute.”

“Sure.” I take two of the beers from Tim’s hands. “How about I join you now?”

“Oh, yes.” Tim leads the way to the corner of the living room taken over by The Other Women and some of their crew. As I approach, the atmosphere stiffens a bit.

“For you.” I give Jess one of the beers.

“Oh, uh. Thank you so much, Miss Lynch. I mean, um, Lana.”

Poor thing. Tim was right. I hope her crush blows over soon. Two months of this is no fun for anyone. I give the other beer to Daphne, who played the guitar tonight in a way Joan would have approved of.

“I’d toast to a wonderful opening night with a first-rate opening act, but I find myself

empty-handed,” I say.

Jess shoots up. “I’ll go get you one.” She rushes off.

“Told you,” Tim says.

“Maybe I should remove myself from this scene,” I offer, “so as not to perturb your drummer too much. You need her.”

“Oh no, no,” Daphne says, “Please. Stay.” She scoots over on the ottoman she’s occupying and pats the spot next to her. “Jess will be fine.”

“She’s only had a mad crush on you since she was twelve,” Tim says. “Believe me. I know all about it.”

I glance at Cleo, who is silent. She just sits there, nursing her beer with a blissful expression on her face. She’s still coming down from the show.

“Here you go, Lana.” Jess has returned and nearly curtsies as she presents me with a fresh beer.

“Thank you.” I send her a warm smile while trying to remember when I last had a crush on someone. Joan and I were together forever, and while we weren’t always monogamous, I can’t seem to remember anyone else but her. When she died, my capacity to have feelings for another woman died along with her. Maybe that’s something that will come alive again as we resume our old lives as The Lady Kings. It’s not something I’ve been hoping, nor waiting for.

I hold up the bottle for a toast with The Other Women. “To a great tour.”

“What’s it like being back on stage after all this time?” Tim, clearly the least

intimidated of the bunch, asks.

“Fucking great,” I reply, as though it was always a foregone conclusion that The Lady Kings would come back. Being on stage was exhilarating. To slip back into my old skin, to know that it still fits, maybe not as perfectly as before, but life will do that to you.

“The encore with Cleo was amazing,” Jess murmurs quietly.

The mention of her name makes Cleo look up. She finds my gaze. I return her look and throw in the merest hint of a smile.

“Thanks. Cleo’s very talented.”

“My bandmates haven’t always agreed with me on this, to put it mildly,” Daphne says, “but I grew up on a steady diet of Isabel Adler songs courtesy of my mom being a huge fan. The original with Isabel is so good, I was pretty nervous about hearing this new version, but you nailed it. The audience was completely enthralled by it.”

“It’s different because Cleo’s not Isabel. Their voices are night and day.”

“What was it like?” Daphne asks. “Recording this song with Isabel Adler? What is she like?”

Cleo remains silent while I chat to Daphne about Isabel Adler, whose comeback story is one of the greatest in music history. If anything, Isabel reemerging as a singer after she lost her voice—all described in gruesome detail in her biography—inspired The Lady Kings to give it another go. Because just like Isabel, for me, a life off the stage, a life without performing, a life without my bandmates beside me, is not much of a life at all.

“When we’re in New York, I’ll introduce you to her,” I say to Daphne.

“No way!” She brings her hands in front of her mouth. “I’ll need to fly my mom over. Give her the best day of her life.”

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“Did you get any celebrity backstage visitors after the show?” Tim asks. “This being LA and all.”

“Not on opening night.” It used to flatter the hell out of us to have some movie star visit us in our dressing room and blow smoke up our asses for a few minutes. There were certainly times when we ended up partying with the odd celeb. But those days are long behind us now.

Jess shows us her phone screen. “According to #TheLadyKingsInHollywood on Insta, there were quite a few celebrities in the audience tonight.”

Daphne grabs Jess’s phone and pores over it. I understand why it’s a big deal for them. When we were in our twenties, we used to be just like The Other Women, although Instagram hadn’t been invented yet.

“What was it like for you tonight?” I try to find Cleo’s eyes, but she’s staring at the wall. I’m beginning to think she’s on something. She wouldn’t be the only one under the influence tonight, and I’d be a major hypocrite to not allow any controlled substances at this party. The Lady Kings were fervent fans of a little pick me up in the late nineties, but that too is long behind us. It does make it easier to see how these cycles always repeat themselves with every new band that takes off, and The Other Women are very much taking off.

Cleo can do whatever she wants, but worry stirs in me. Maybe because I’m old enough to be her mother. Yet The Other Women are far more wholesome than we ever were at their age. They look like they would get much more of a kick out of a well-branded post on social media than they would out of a top-notch line of coke.

Without saying anything, Cleo gets up and exits the room.

“Is she all right?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah,” Jess’s voice sounds normal for the first time tonight. “Don’t mind Cleo. She’s always like that after a gig. It takes her a while to get back to her full self.”

“Okay.” I get that. To put yourself out there like that, to hold the attention of thousands for song after song, can take a lot out of a person. Some feed off it, like I do. I always got way more from any audience than I could ever give. But some performers need to retreat inside themselves before they feel like they’re part of the rest of the world again. Cleo’s a performer as well as a singer in a band, I could easily tell when I sidled up to her for the last chorus of “I Should Have Kissed You” and she played along as though reacting to me on stage was all she’s ever done in her life.

“Lanaaaaaa!” Someone’s shouting from another room. “Lana, where are you?”

My mind still half on Cleo, and how I am the perfect person to give her some tips on how to handle the post-show blues, I get up. “I’d best deal with this. See you later.” Because I can’t help myself, I shoot a quick wink in Jess’s direction, just so she has something to dream of tonight.

Chapter 8

Cleo

I take off my shoes, roll up my jeans, and dangle my feet in Lana’s pool. I need something to snap me out of this funk that has settled over me. I was perfectly fine after we finished our set. We delivered a great show, didn’t disappoint the majority of the audience who were waiting for their long-lost idols The Lady Kings, and maybe even converted some unsuspecting people into new fans. Seeing The Lady Kings

perform got me right into the zone again and when it was time for me to go out there with Lana, I was all amped up and more than ready to go.

But while Lana and I were singing, something happened to me. Yes, it was an honor, and it made all my musical dreams come true, but ever since I walked off that stage—since she so abruptly dropped my hand from hers—some kind of sorrow settled inside me, like a vise clamped on my insides, that I can't seem to shake.

I want to be inside partying with the band. Tim will start busting out some moves soon because he's always the first. Daphne will soon follow. Jess will nod along to the beat until she can't stand it anymore, get over herself, and join Tim and Daphne on the makeshift dance floor.

Instead, I lean backward onto my hands and look up at the sky. I think of Lana sitting here alone at night and taking in the same view. Lana. Lana. Lana. She's all I've been able to think of since she looked into my eyes and sang to me—at least it felt like she was singing the words to me—that she should have kissed me. So much so that, earlier, when she joined me and my bandmates in the living room, I had to remove myself from the situation.

It's like Lana Lynch, up close and personal like that, all of it amplified by the magic of being on stage with her, is too much for me to take, too much for my brain to process. I can only hope I will get over this soon because we have two more months of being on stage together. Is she going to look into my eyes like that every night? Is she going to throw her arm around my shoulders? Is she going to take my hand when we walk off stage, only to drop it as though I'm a mere prop as soon as the audience can no longer see us?

She might as well. This is show business. This is what we do. I know that, but—

“Hey, kid.” Speak of the devil. Why does she keep calling me kid? I'll be thirty next

year. It's not like I just graduated from high school. "How's it going?" She crouches next to me. "Just a word of warning, I get a feeling this party's about to move outside and your peaceful moment by the pool is about to be rudely interrupted."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

"Your bandmates told me not to worry about you. That it can take you a while to come down, but you can talk to me, okay? If you want to." Lana almost loses her balance and she puts a hand on my shoulder to steady herself.

"Thanks." I glance at her hand resting on my shoulder. Her fingers are holding on tight. "I'm good." I can't talk to Lana about what I'm feeling right now. I don't even know what I'm feeling. Why my post-show high turned into post-show blues. Or maybe I do know. Maybe I do have an inkling of what performing with Lana has done to me. But in that case, it can never be discussed. It can never be said out loud to anyone, because it's simply too ludicrous.

"Last I saw of Daphne, she was stripping off her clothes." Lana pushes herself up. She holds out her hand to me. "Come with me."

I stare at her hand—again. Where does she want me to go with her? I really shouldn't. But when Lana Lynch asks you to do something, it's impossible to say no.

I pull my legs from the water and let myself be hoisted up by Lana. I pick up my shoes and, feet dripping wet, follow her.

She guides me behind the pool house to a path leading into a small copse of trees. We walk for another few yards, my bare feet picking up all sorts of debris, until we reach a small clearing with two Adirondack chairs facing the Hollywood Hills.

"Joan's favorite spot in the whole wide world," Lana says.

“Wow.” I lean against the railing. “I can see why.” I hear loud splashing sounds coming from behind the pool house. Lana rescued me from what’s probably turning into a wild pool party in the nick of time. “You don’t mind? All these people in your house?”

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“It’s tradition. Joan and I always had a party on the first night of a tour. It would be foolish to break with tradition now.”

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I stare at the lights in the distance. Despite the party noise, the vibe in this secluded spot is peaceful.

“Sure. Are you?” Lana stands next to me. As long as she doesn’t stare into my eyes the way she did on stage earlier, I should be good. It was all an act, I remind myself. Lana’s very good at giving the crowd what they want.

“I just had the night of my life, so yeah.”

“You’re about to have many more of those.”

I nod. “Tonight’s been overwhelming. That’s all.”

“What’s it like for you when you’re up there? What does it feel like?” Lana seems genuinely interested.

“Like...” I glance away from her. “The most outrageous drug in the world. Like I’m outside myself. Like none of the stuff that bothers me in real life matters anymore. Like I know, for a fact, even though it’s impossible to know something like that, that if I give everything I have in me, the audience will get it and they will have the time of their life. But if I give anything less, if I doubt myself too much, or if I get into my head and think, even for a second, that I’m being a pretentious ass, it will all fall apart. That everyone will see through me.”

“Damn, kid. That’s a lot. No wonder you’re exhausted.”

“Please, Lana, could you...” I turn to look at her.

“What?” She has a grin plastered across her lips.

“Could you please stop calling me kid? It makes me feel like... I don’t know. Like I have no clue what I’m doing.”

“Right. Sorry. That wasn’t my intention. It’s just something I say without thinking.” She brings her hand to my arm and gives me a little pat. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.” She retracts her hand. “Maybe it’s because you and your band make me feel my age.”

“Oh, god, Lana, if only you could see yourself on stage.” I reach for my phone in my jeans pocket, but think better of it. I don’t need to show Lana what she’s like on stage.

“Thanks, k—” She catches herself. “Sorry. I can see how that is awfully condescending. Like I don’t take you seriously just because you were born a few decades after me.”

“Your experience does entitle you to—”

“To be an ass? I don’t think so.” She grins at me again.

Loud whoops come from the pool area, followed by a gut-wrenching cry of pain.

“Here we go,” Lana says matter-of-factly. “I’d best go see which idiot is going to miss this tour.”

“Call an ambulance,” someone yells while Lana and I make our way back from our private spot overlooking the hills to the debauchery by the side of the pool.

“I don’t need an ambulance.” A man belonging to The Lady Kings’ entourage is lying on his back, clutching his ankle.

“Rick missed his jump,” Andy, The Lady Kings’ tour manager, says to Lana.

“Get him to a hospital, no matter how much he protests.”

“Will do, Lana.”

“Stupidity is of all ages and genders.” Lana puts a hand on my shoulder again. “You just got a prime example of that.” She gives my shoulder a little squeeze and, without saying anything else, disappears inside the house.

I find my bandmates and happily accept the beer Tim hands me. I’m sure Lana and I will get plenty of time to finish our conversation. I also get the feeling that, broken bones or not, this party is far from over.

Chapter 9

Lana

Maybe because it’s our last show in LA, or maybe because Cleo appeared so totally in the moment when we held the very last note together, I’m more emotional than usual when I walk off stage.

“Elisa Fox is here,” Andy says as someone hands me a towel. “And she brought Nora Levine!”

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“Wonderful.” I make sure to sound a little sarcastic. All Andy had to say before he started spouting movie star names was that our set was great. “What did you think of the show?”

“A-game, as usual, Lana. You rocked. The crowd was ecstatic. Black market tickets for the rest of the tour are going for thousands of dollars.” We round the corner. Logan is waiting for me and hands me a bottle of water.

“Elisa’s here without her dreamboat of a husband,” Andy says, as though Elisa flying solo tonight magically gives him a chance with her. “Her people got in touch. She’s dying to meet you. Permission to bring her and Nora backstage after you’ve showered?”

“Don’t we have a meet and greet with some fans who paid a ludicrous amount of money to shake our hands?”

“They can wait. Their night’s made already, anyway. Meeting Elisa and Nora won’t take very long.”

Elisa Fox’s TV show, *Underground*, has made a sleeper hit out of one of The Lady Kings’ more obscure songs by using it as the theme tune, so I guess we owe her something—although she personally had nothing to do with our song being picked for the show she stars in. But of course I’ll play ball. In this world we live in, this parallel universe where fame is important and notions like A-list and B-list are actual things, this is what you do. You play the game, hoping for some reward at the end. But ever since Joan died and I received a crash course on what is important in life—being alive—I see through it all so easily.

“I do like Underground a lot,” I say to Andy. It’s a kick-ass show full of the hottest lesbian spies. Maybe I should rewatch it on this tour. “And like most people on this planet, I’ve binged Nora’s show about a dozen times.”

“Great. I’ll make it happen. Thanks, Lana.”

“Did you check with the rest of the band?” I shout after Andy, but he’s already disappeared around the next corner. I get a feeling it won’t just be The Lady Kings and Elisa and Nora in the room later.

Shaking Elisa Fox’s elegant hand sends a jolt of pure electricity into my system. The woman oozes confident elegance from every single pore. We exchange the usual pleasantries and express our mutual admiration—mine for her increasing with every second I stand close to her. As I stare into her beguiling brown eyes, I consider throwing an impromptu after-party, but we hit the road tomorrow and I’m no longer in my twenties—nor in my thirties or forties, for that matter. And Elisa Fox is happily married to a man.

“The opening act was amazing,” Nora says. “That last song you did together. Wow.” I can tell she means it.

“The Other Women are a class act. Cleo Palmer’s got that thing, you know. I think they call it the X factor these days.”

“She’s a star,” Nora says.

“Would you like to meet The Other Women?” Andy offers. “They’re next door and I’m sure they’re dying to be in this room right now.”

Elisa and Nora agree and some hustle and bustle ensues. I hang back a bit and drink some more water. Roy hired me a personal trainer so I could get in shape for this

tour, but I still feel shattered and as though all of my muscles could do with a minimum of two weeks rest, as though my body completely lost the hang of what it used to do on stage so effortlessly.

As is often the case, my gaze is drawn to Cleo. She seems to get a massive kick out of meeting Nora Levine. Elisa is being hogged by Andy.

Fifteen minutes pass before we say goodbye to each other as though we are now best friends and we'll do brunch together every other Sunday from now on.

"Fuck me." Cleo sinks into the couch, looking a little dazed. "Someone please pinch me."

"When Cleo and I met, she still had posters of Nora Levine on her dorm wall," Tim says.

"Why wouldn't I?" Cleo asks. Tim crashes down next to Cleo and puts an arm around her. "Oh my god. I can't believe I just met Nora Levine." She holds up one hand and strokes the fingers of her other hand over it gingerly. "She shook my hand."

"Jesus, Cleo," Daphne seats herself on the other side of her. It's like watching a fun, impromptu little play. Clearly, they've forgotten they're in my dressing room. The Lady Kings' shine has washed off already. "You've got it bad."

"Well, yes, but, I mean... It's not every day Nora Levine tells us she loved our show."

"Someone will have extra sweet dreams tonight," Sam says.

Meanwhile, Jess has sidled up to me. "Hey, um, Lana, can we talk about something? When you have a second?"

“Sure, Jess. What’s on your mind?”

“Can we, um...” She looks around the room. “Can we go in there for a minute?”

It doesn’t take a master’s degree in the science of deduction to conclude what she wants to talk to me about. Maybe she just wants to get it off her chest before we go on the road. Perhaps it’s the smart thing to do. “Sure.” I follow her into the adjoining shower room, where the sweaty outfit I wore on stage still hangs from the back of the door.

“This is kind of embarrassing,” Jess starts as soon as I close the door behind us. “But I figured if Cleo can be starstruck like that, so can I.” Her glance skitters from here to there. “The way Cleo feels about Nora Levine, that’s, um, how I feel about you. I’m just... Half the time, I don’t know what to do with myself around you, which is becoming a bit of a nuisance if I’m being perfectly honest. Seeing you perform every night isn’t helping. And that song you do with Cleo.” She huffs out some air. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault. I’m not asking you to do anything about it.” A nervous chuckle escapes her throat. “I’m not that silly, I’m just... I just wanted to tell you, because we’ll be in close quarters for the next two months and I wanted to reassure you I will always be respectful toward you, but, um, in case you ever wonder why I’m acting so strangely, that’s why. I have such a huge fucking crush on you, Lana.”

I’ve had countless people, women and men alike, profess various degrees of infatuation with me, simply because I’m a singer in a rock band. But this is different. Jess is sort of my co-worker now. She’s young and vulnerable and pouring her heart out to me and I wish I had a clue how to deal with this. I knew this was coming. I should have given it some thought ahead of time—instead of shooting her naughty winks just because I can.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Jess. I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough there’s

nothing special about me at all.” This used to be easier. I used to care a whole lot less. When Joan was alive, having her around all the time was a natural barrier against spontaneous confessions like this. “It was very brave of you to tell me. I can’t reciprocate. Not because you aren’t a great person. Getting to know you and your bandmates is great and I think we’ll have a blast on tour, but I don’t... I’m still grieving Joan, really.” Way to go, Lana. But maybe this is good. At least now she’ll know once and for all that ultra-cool Lana is just part of my stage persona and it will help with taking the edge off her celebrity crush.

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“Oh no, of course. I wasn’t implying any of that. Sorry if I gave you that impression. I know you’re light-years out of my league. I just rather selfishly wanted to get this off my chest. Thank you for listening to me and for taking me seriously. It only makes you go up in my esteem.”

“My pleasure, kid,” I say, realizing how patronizing I sound again. But I never promised anyone exemplary behavior on this tour. It’s a big deal for The Other Women, but it’s a huge thing for me and my band as well. We lost our guitarist, just like that. One minute she was there; the next, she was gone forever. No one saw it coming. Because of that, The Lady Kings were out of the limelight for ten years. It takes some getting used to being back, no matter how thrilling it is.

As if suddenly in a rush, Jess hurries out of the room. I stay behind for a few minutes and ponder what just happened. Maybe if certain stars aligned in the sky and the circumstances were just so, I could develop a mad crush of my own on, say, someone like Elisa Fox, but because of my age, my experience, and all the things I’ve gone through, I would never in a million years tell her, or anyone else about it.

My muscles might be sore and I may be out of breath more often than I care to admit, but getting older does have its advantages. By no means can I speak for all rock stars, let alone for most of my male counterparts, but age has at the very least brought me some wisdom.

Chapter 10

Cleo

The next day we're on the road up north. It's the first day on the bus, which still smells fresh, and everyone's abuzz with energy.

I somehow missed this but, apparently, Jess had a little heart-to-heart with Lana last night about her crush on her. Now, she can't shut up about it. Even more than before, when she was trying to be at least a little stealthy about it, it's all Lana-this and Lana-that. As though they had much more than a brief chat about Jess's one-way infatuation.

"I know it sounds crazy," Jess says. "But you just never know what might happen on a tour like this. All this time spent together. It's just a pity we're not on the same bus. But we can't have it all, I guess. We already have so much."

We're bandmates, but more than that, the four of us have always been friends first. I'm no stranger to what it's like to suffer from an unrequited crush. That maddening but intoxicating feeling. I may know a little too well exactly how Jess is feeling. But I can't give in to it. I need to be strong, resist it at all costs, and hope it blows over. Last night, after our encore duet, when Lana callously dropped my hand from hers again, I thought I was pretty damn close to being completely over it. Maybe I am.

The only problem is that I have to go back out there every night and sing with her. I have to let her make eyes at me again and pretend that it's me she wants to kiss—and boy, can Lana put all her feelings into those lyrics. When I'm on stage, I have no defense. As soon as I have a mic in front of me, it's all me out there, all my emotions on display. I haven't learned to do what Lana does so effortlessly. I haven't learned to pretend like her, although it's not quite pretending. If it were, every singer would also be the best actor in the world and that has proven not to be the case many times.

Daphne's head pops up in front of us. "Aren't you sometimes inclined to believe the rumors that Nora Levine is gay?"

“Inclined? Sure,” Jess says. “But that doesn’t make it true.”

“Did you get any vibe off her last night?” Daphne stares at me.

“No,” I say truthfully, not that it would make any difference.

“You were too busy mooning over her to get a vibe.” Daphne sticks out her tongue as though we’re school children on a day trip. That’s what touring feels like sometimes. “Apart from Jess falling apart over Lana, do we see any promising prospects for some on-tour romance the coming months?”

“I don’t know, Daph, do we?” Daphne wouldn’t ask if she didn’t already have an answer at the ready.

“The Lady Kings’ hair stylist has captured my eye,” Daphne says. “I might get my hair done by her instead of Gill.”

“I heard that,” Gill shouts from a few rows back. “I can allow that shit once in the name of love or whatever you want to call it, but that’s it.”

Just like that, the bus comes alive with banter and teasing each other mercilessly because that’s how you kill time on the road, especially during the first few days, when no one’s sick of speaking to each other yet, and, like Jess said, everything’s still possible—although not exactly the things both Jess and I are dreaming of.

At our next show, when it’s time for me to go out there again for the encore with Lana, I’m riled up when I curl my fingers around the mic, yet I feel carried by the cheers of the audience. I’m so incensed by Lana’s proximity to me and how she plays me so she can play the crowd, that I lose myself in the song even more. I channel all my contradictory emotions into how I’m singing, into how I deliver the words to this song that has, already, come to mean so much to me.

We have thirty-one more shows on this tour. If she doesn't get sick of me, I'll be doing this with Lana thirty-one more times—this approaching each other as though we're going to kiss, proclaiming to each other that it's what we wanted all along. This is only our fourth show and already it's beginning to feel like hours of foreplay with no sign of a climax. All I can do is channel my frustration, my five-minutes-a-day ultra-fierce attraction to her, in my performance.

Tonight, I don't wait for her to walk over to me. I go up to her. Lana's a pro and a rock concert is not a tightly choreographed show. There's lots of room for improvisation, for going with the flow and doing what feels right in the moment. Because we're in San Francisco, the crowd's even queerer than in LA—although I've been warned that a bunch of tech bros sprung big for a meet and greet after the show—and their howls of encouragement only spur me on more to get as close to Lana as I can get.

I watch her as she sings a line, as beguiled by her as every other person in the venue. When Lana sings, it's impossible to look away, because it's not only her voice that makes her who she is—that has made her into the icon she is today. It's her magnetism. The confidence with which she delivers the sultriest lines. The ease she carries herself with on stage, as though it's her one and only home.

What is this that I feel for her? Is it a silly celebrity crush like Jess—and presumably a whole lot of other people out there—has on her? Is it stage-induced lust, which wouldn't be unheard of? Stepping onto the stage is like entering a different realm with entirely different rules. Entertaining a crowd of thousands focuses you like nothing else. In those few minutes that this song lasts, all my focus is directed toward Lana. To have been asked to do this, to be praised for it every single time I walk off by at least a few people, the dizzying satisfaction of having pulled it off, to have held my own next to a legend like Lana, the joy of singing in harmony without any musical accompaniment to the delight of so many, it all pales in comparison to these moments when it's just her and me on stage.

It's some sort of bubble we disappear into, just the two of us, where something magical happens every single time. There's no other way for me to describe it. What I'd really like to find out is how Lana feels when we're out here, when we're doing this. When we croon this love song to each other. Does she feel the same sort of magic? Does she even get a whiff of the chemistry I feel, or is it all just me? By the way she drops my hand once it's all over, I'm inclined to believe it's all just an act to her. That she's more seasoned when it comes to things like this, to faking emotions, to pretending she's into me.

Earlier, in the long hours between the sound check and our set, I typed our names into Google and if the internet's to be believed, Lana and I have fallen head over heels in love already. According to the thousands of comments underneath the video footage of us singing this duet, there's no room left for any doubt when it comes to us.

But Lana and I never discussed any of this. When I went over to her house to practice this song, there was no mention of creating some sort of sapphic fantasy for the fans. Lana just needed a female voice to sing with and I was there—and she deemed me worthy. Surely she must have an opinion on this? I make a mental note to ask her later tonight.

She curls her arm around my shoulders again and there's nothing showbiz-like about her hug.

I revel in her touch and drop my head backward onto her shoulder. The crowd shrieks. This is exactly what they want. They can't get enough of this illusion we create.

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I sing the last line with my head tilted back against Lana's shoulder, my mic held dramatically above me. When the song ends and the audience erupts into a wild applause, Lana gives my shoulder a quick squeeze. I straighten my spine. Again, she takes my hand in hers. I hold onto her fingers a little tighter. We bow to the audience, thank them profusely for all they've given us tonight, and head off the stage.

As though there's an invisible line painted between the stage and the wings, Lana drops my hand as soon as we cross that wretched line that nobody can see.

"Damn, Cleo." At least she speaks to me this time. "You were in it." She arches up her eyebrows as she looks at me. "Thanks for that." Then, she's off again, swallowed up by her entourage, and I'm left feeling all confused again.

Chapter 11

Lana

We've been on the road for a few days. It's Andy's birthday, and he has booked the bar of the Oakland hotel we're staying at for drinks.

We're five shows into this tour, and it has become easier to perform the song I wrote for Joan. It's still weird to not have her with me, to not have her talk me down after a show. Some nights, when I was too buzzed on adrenaline and the occasional other stuff, she would stay awake with me and stroke my back with her calloused fingertips. Maybe I need to find myself another guitarist as a lover again, someone with the same practiced fingers Joan had. The Other Women's guitarist has been non-stop hitting on Tessie, so she surely isn't an option. Not that I would ever consider

sleeping with any member of our support band.

I glance at Billie, with whom my rapport has been growing. By the time this tour ends, we'll be best friends. From what I remember from previous tours, the last few gigs are always the most powerful because of the connection that builds as a tour progresses.

"Hey." Cleo slides next to me on the leather bench of the booth I've been hiding in. It was impossible not to notice her and her bandmates doing shots with Andy earlier. "Can I ask you something, Lana?" She slurs her words. Dealing with intoxicated people is such an inherent part of life on tour, I learned long ago not to let it bother me. Before our hiatus, when the previous night's alcohol consumption had little to no effect on my performance, I was often one of the more inebriated ones. I won't claim to have infinite patience for people who make the same mistakes that I did, but I can practice a certain mildness toward them, especially toward Cleo.

"Anything." This should be fun.

"When we sing 'I Should Have Kissed You', which is, you know, quite an... intimate song."

"Hm." I nod.

"What do you feel? Do you even feel anything at all?" Cleo stares into my eyes.

"What do I feel?" I wasn't expecting that question. "Why do you ask? What do you feel?"

"I feel like a million bucks, Lana, because singing with you is like this huge endorphin rush, and that little act we do for the audience is, um, great, but, I don't know..." She tries to keep her watery gaze on me but her body's swaying too much.

“Truth be told, afterward, I kind of feel... used.”

“Used? How do you figure that?” What am I missing here? I know Jess has a crush on me, although she’s been avoiding me since our backstage chat at the Hollywood Bowl, but what is this? Are all four Other Women going to come up to me in turns and reveal their infatuation with me?

“When we’re on stage, everything you do seems so heartfelt, so real. When you take my hand to walk off together, for instance. Before you say anything, I know you do that to give the audience exactly what it wants. I know that. I’d do the same if I were you, but...” Cleo frowns and falls silent.

“What are you saying? That I should no longer take your hand?” Maybe this is a conversation we should have in the sober light of day. Have I crossed some sort of boundary without knowing? Times are very different than they were before Joan died.

“No, no, no. Take it.” She holds out her hand for me. I gently grab it and lower it to the table. We both stare at Cleo’s palm as though it holds the secret key to unlock this puzzling conversation.

“How about I ask Logan to take you to your room?” I ask.

“No, I don’t want to go to bed yet. I was just wondering if it’s all just pure entertainment for you.”

“What else would it be?” Cleo’s all dressed up for this party, which is more a gathering of the people we spend all our time with these days. She’s wearing the kind of oversized suit that millennials go nuts for, in a shade of pink my parents’ bathroom was tiled in many decades ago.

“I guess it’s different for me because you’re my idol,” Cleo says. “But I do feel something. A connection to you. Some sort of chemistry...”

“Cleo!” Tim shouts. We look over. He’s taken the bartender’s place behind the bar. Maybe we should have toured with a more mature band or, even better, by ourselves. But Sam and Deb seem to be having a great time. Billie’s nursing a drink at the far end of the bar, overlooking things in silence. “Come on. We’re doing more shots.” It’s as though Tim only now notices me. “You too, Lana. Join us.”

I shake my head. I’ll have the odd beer, but I’d much rather find my bed, and rest my weary bones, than do shots with people in their twenties.

“Good chat,” Cleo says and gets up.

Was it? It was baffling rather than good. As I watch Cleo saunter off, her hands buried deep into her pockets, looking every inch the cliché of the glamorous young rock goddess, I replay our conversation in my head so I can try to read between the lines.

I must have done something wrong for her to come up to me and start this conversation, no matter how drunk she is. But I just do what I always do on stage: I put on a show. That’s what we do. Cleo is a very welcome gift to me in that respect. Her presence injects some new excitement into our act. Her voice is more than strong enough to make up for the lack of instruments on stage. Sure, we have a certain chemistry on stage. We’re professionals. Creating the illusion of attraction is part of the deal. Put the least attractive-to-me person in the universe next to me to sing that song with and I could still create that impression for the audience. I’d make them believe it.

Before I call it a night, I put two new things on my tour to-do list: pay attention to what I’m feeling the next time Cleo and I sing “I Should Have Kissed You” and find

out whether what she was really trying to say is that she's attracted to me.

"Please welcome Cleo Palmer of The Other Women back to the stage," I say to a raving Oakland crowd. "We have one last song for you tonight."

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Cleo walks on, hand raised to salute the audience. We haven't addressed what we talked about last night—she and her bandmates hardly made it out of their rooms on time for soundcheck today—but what she said still sits at the forefront of my mind.

“This song's called “I Should Have Kissed You”.” I wait until the audience quietens before singing the first verse. As has become my habit, I look into Cleo's eyes. The only difference is that because of what she said to me last night, this time, I really look. I hadn't even noticed the peculiar blue of her eyes, or is that the effect of the spotlight she's under?

She returns my gaze without qualms. Of course, I'm using her in a way. It works out really well for me to be able to sing these lines to another person—another woman. I use the fact she's here on stage with me to my advantage because that's one of the reasons she's here in the first place.

Cleo plays her part so well. That hint of smile. The way she bats her lashes, tilts her head, and keeps her hands clasped behind her back as I sing to her. All that restrained emotion and how it builds the intensity. Yet another reason I asked her to sing this song with me.

We start the chorus, and the crowd gives an exuberant yelp when Cleo hits her first note. They love her and rightly so. Touring on our own might have been easier—fewer people to manage and fewer egos to cater to—but Cleo has been such a gift. She sounds and looks the part and she can hold her own beside me. Not many could.

What is it I'm meant to feel? What am I doing that's making her feel used? For the

life of me, I can't figure it out. Maybe it's a generational thing. Maybe what she experiences when she's on stage with me is something I can't even imagine because my life experience has been so different from hers.

We alternate lines as we make our way through the first chorus, gazes firmly locked on each other. The vibe in the audience is changing. Even if they were expecting this—because of the internet, nothing that happens on stage is a surprise anymore these days—they're still amazed by what they're witnessing. Oh. I'm getting an inkling of what Cleo might be alluding to. The audience's reaction to the chemistry we project is a direct consequence of how Cleo and I sing this song. This dance we do with each other that is inextricably linked to who we are—front women of queer bands.

Maybe I should watch one of the video clips of us on the internet. Maybe then I might truly get it.

But all of this is just organic to me. Action and reaction. Cleo's reaction to me forces me to react to her in a similar way and so it spirals on. Yet, clearly, what we're doing right now makes her feel something that I don't.

I watch as she belts out the second verse, her voice powerful and vulnerable at the same time and hitting notes with that desperate twang that drives people crazy. She narrows her eyes as she glares at me, as though to defy me to not feel what she's feeling. It's not as though I don't feel anything. On stage, I feel it all. Right here is where I process my life.

The same thing is most likely happening to Cleo, but she's attaching a different meaning to it. I get it. It's easy enough to do. When I'm on stage with my band, I love all three of them with all my heart and I forgive them for the many times they've hurt me and vice versa. It's when we come together to create something that can't exist unless the four of us are on stage together. Making music together can feel like magic

sometimes. And right now, it's just my and Cleo's voices blending together, creating that special moment for the audience, but also for ourselves. I'm not shrink, but I guess she's doing some projecting and it's all enhanced by our time together on the stage. If her boundaries are so blurred, it's no wonder I've crossed them—even though I never meant to.

She does the same thing she did at our previous gig. She finds me for the final chorus. We stand so close together, our cheeks touch a few times as we sing. The vitality that's coursing through her right now radiates onto me. We pull back a little before launching into the final line. In unison, we draw a breath. She looks at me and I look at her. Oh. I do feel something, but whatever it is, I can't let it deter me. We belt out the last line to loud cheers from the audience—as though we've just broken some long-standing Olympic record instead of singing a tune together. Cleo matches me and I match her in return—we make each other better. Oh yes, I definitely feel something now, although it's more inspired by this moment, by the harmonic sound our voices are creating and the audience's reaction to it, than by her, *per se*.

Instead of letting her head fall backward onto my shoulder like last time, Cleo throws her arm around my waist and pulls me close. The volume of the audience's cheers explodes. We hold the note for as long as we can—longer than we've held it at any previous gig. Instead of taking Cleo's hand to say our goodbye, we bow to the audience with our arms folded around each other's backs. I guess that's what she meant by the intimacy of the song. We walk off still clutching at each other. Maybe, previously, I have made too little of this. I have walked off too ignorant and oblivious to how any of this made Cleo feel.

I will be more respectful tonight. Fully intending to thank her profusely, I remove myself from our embrace. Before I can say anything, before I can even give her a well-deserved pat on the shoulder, she's exchanging high-fives with her bandmates, and I'm left standing there, watching her, and concluding that, perhaps, I've just been schooled by a woman more than twenty years my junior.

Chapter 12

Cleo

Ever since I opened my eyes this morning, a hell of a headache hammering at my skull, I've been mortified by what I said to Lana last night. But not anymore. Not after that performance. On top of that, I didn't give Lana the chance to drop my hand from hers as though we'd just settled some admin instead of singing our hearts out to each other. Instead of exchanging all those emotions on stage for everyone to witness.

I hope my bandmates are up for a party tonight because I'm all amped up and ready to go. Maybe we can hit the town and see some different faces. Maybe there's a couple of eligible people hanging around who loved our show and are suitably impressed. It's one of those nights when I feel like I can walk into any room and pick whoever I want to be with.

"Just a gentle reminder," someone from the crew comes up to us. "It's a long drive tomorrow. We're leaving a little earlier than you might have wished."

"What time?" Daphne asks.

"Be ready to go by nine."

"Oh, come on, man," Tim says as though the guy just asked us to leave in the middle of the night, even though 9 a.m. is early for a band on tour.

"It won't kill you to have an early night. On the contrary." The guy's not impressed by anything or anyone. He looks like he's been on the road with bands like ours since long before we were even born. "It'll do you good. This tour is long and full of temptations."

“When they say nine, they probably mean ten,” Jess says. “To keep us in line.”

“Damn, I just felt like a party,” I say.

“I don’t. A little too much imbibing last night. Damn you, Andy,” she says, although Andy is nowhere to be seen.

“I’m working on a new song.” Daphne surprises us all. “I think I’ll just do that tonight. And I need to FaceTime my mom before she forgets what I look like.”

“Is that code for secretly hanging out with Tessie?” Tim always sees and knows everything.

“Maybe, but I would appreciate you respecting my privacy, so there you go.” The smile on Daphne’s face hides nothing. At least one of us is getting lucky.

I guess I’ll do some quiet reading in my room, then. Maybe that’s all fate has in store for me tonight.

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In the car on the way back to the hotel, all four of us hunched over our cell phones as though we've been deprived of them for days, mine buzzes in my hand.

* * *

Can you come to my room later? Any time is fine. Thanks, Lana.

* * *

I read the message a few times to make sure I'm not misinterpreting it. Lana wants me to come to her room? Maybe destiny has far better things in store for me than a few hours of reading to wind down.

I debate whether to tell the band, but decide against it. First, I don't want to make Jess jealous. Second, I already get my five minutes on stage with Lana at every show while the others don't get any of that. Lastly, I know what they're like and I don't want any speculation, innuendo, or dirty talk about Lana.

Video snippets of tonight's encore have already been uploaded to Instagram. I relive the moment I threw my arm around Lana's waist over and over. Maybe that's what she wants to talk to me about. As soon as the car pulls up to the hotel, I say my goodbyes and rush to Lana's room.

Lana's talking on the phone when she lets me in. She motions for me to sit in a chair by the window. Her room is about three times the size of mine, but her band's the headliner and that's how it goes. At least we're not sleeping on a ramshackle tour bus anymore—and we each have our own room.

Lana's pacing around at the foot of the bed. I glance around. Her bed's freshly made up and there's a chocolate on the pillow. She must have just arrived. Maybe I should have given her some more time, but it's late, and we have the same wake-up call tomorrow. I spy a stack of books on her nightstand. Being an avid reader, I'm in two minds to have a look, but it could be seen as an invasion of privacy and I don't want to be accused of crossing any boundaries with Lana—not after the conversation we had last night.

“Hey.” Lana slips her phone into her back pocket. “Thanks for coming. Drink?” She pats the door of a full-size fridge—no minibars in a rock star's hotel suite then. “I have anything you can possibly dream of.”

“Just some water is fine. Thank you.”

“Bit hungover?” Lana hands me a bottle of water. “You had me worried for a minute that The Other Women wouldn't make the show tonight.”

“You'll never have to worry about that. We're made of tough stuff.”

“I was just kidding. The amount of booze The Lady Kings put away in our day... You don't want to know.” Lana tips her head back and drinks water greedily. “I've been thinking about what you said last night.” She sits in the chair opposite me, pressing the sole of one bare foot against the leg of the table between us. “I tried to pay attention to it when we were on stage together earlier.”

Lana listened to my drunken rant? My first instinct is to apologize for my inebriated ramblings, but I'm curious to hear what she has to say.

“I mean, I do feel something. It's impossible not to have feelings when you're singing a song like that. That's the whole point, to convey that emotion to the audience and to make them feel the same, or at least something.” She wiggles her toes. “I've been

doing this for such a long time, I might have been a bit too aloof about it or, at the very least, I haven't taken your feelings into consideration enough. You must understand, though, Cleo, that this tour is a big shock to my system. Joan no longer being here is like..."

She drops her foot and slings one leg over the other, as though retreating from me—as though the mention of Joan has suddenly made her more cautious about what she was going to say.

"What I'm trying to say is that whatever it is you're feeling when we sing together is a perfectly normal reaction to the circumstances, and I promise to be more respectful to you about it."

"Thanks." I take another sip from my water bottle. "Just for the record, I was quite tipsy last night and shouldn't have said those things to you. I really shouldn't have. It makes me look like... I don't know. Like it's too much for me, which it isn't. I love being on stage with you."

"Let me tell you something I've learned over the long years of my career." Lana drums her fingertips on her knee. "There are no prizes for being cool. There are no prizes for anything. All you can do—and trust me, this is where most rock bands fall incredibly short—is be a good person. Be respectful to the people you work with. I sincerely apologize for not being respectful toward you, for not recognizing what happens between us on stage. In my defense, earlier, after we were done, I was going to give you the most heartfelt thank-you of your life, but you were too busy freaking out with your bandmates." She arches up her eyebrows and gives me a weird look.

The most heartfelt thank-you of my life? Damn. I'm sorry I missed that. But there's always the next show. "I didn't want to give you the opportunity to just walk away from me again."

“Playing offense is often the best defense.”

I look into Lana’s dark eyes and realize that this kind of conversation is unique to who we are and what we do. I could try to explain this to my bandmates, and they might get it on a more superficial level, but not the way Lana gets it just because of who she is. When you’re at the front of the stage, when you’re the face of the band and you have to sing the lyrics that bring the music we make together, everything is amplified. I’m in the frontline and while my band members always have my back, it’s not the same, because they don’t have to pour their heart out on stage every night. They don’t have to find a means to protect themselves from what might happen if you expose too much of yourself, or not enough, or when things are a little off and the show never quite takes off.

“I’ll make sure to earn myself another heartfelt thank-you from you, then. One I wouldn’t dare stop you from expressing.”

Lana chuckles. “All right.” She leans forward. “Are we good?”

“Of course we are.”

She pulls her phone from her back pocket and tosses it onto the table. “Earlier, I was doing something I never do.” She points at her phone. “I was watching some clips of the show on the internet.”

“You never watch any footage of yourself?” My father in particular likes to remind me we live in the age of narcissism. Maybe he’s right because it would never even occur to me to not watch any footage of myself performing.

“When we started, that wasn’t a thing. People were still holding up cigarette lighters during a slow song instead of a lit-up phone screen.”

My turn to laugh. “Maybe that was to your advantage. It’s so automatic for us to scrutinize our every move on stage. Maybe we should do a little less of that.” I remember me and my bandmates hunched over our phones in the car.

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“It clearly contributes to making you very good at what you do.”

I shrug. “Maybe, but that almost makes what I do sound too rehearsed. How I am on stage is not rehearsed. It’s much more...” I put my hand on my belly. “Primal. Instinctive.”

“I can tell. It’s in you.” Lana nods. “You’re one hell of a performer as well as a singer. I wouldn’t invite you to share the stage with me if you weren’t.”

“Thank you.” A flush creeps up my cheeks. This isn’t just anyone paying me this compliment. It means everything coming from Lana.

“Ah, that’s just adorable.”

Adorable is not how I want to come across to Lana, but some things can’t be helped. Ostentatiously, I look at my watch. “I’d best get to bed. Early day tomorrow.”

“Good heavens, yes.” Lana longingly gazes at her bed. Does she sometimes share it with someone? I’ve been witnessing firsthand how people go nuts for her, how long the meet and greet queue is after the show, and how people are still shouting Lana’s name when the car picks us up from the venue. How does it feel to be adored like that? “Since Elisa Fox came backstage, I’ve been on an Underground binge,” Lana says. “If I keep that up, I’ll never get through the stack of books I brought with me, but oh well...” She looks at me as though she has just let me in on a dirty little secret.

“I’ve never seen Underground.”

“What? How is that possible?” Lana’s voice has jumped into a register that sounds unnaturally high for her.

“I haven’t spent a lot of time at home the past ten years, let alone in front of a TV.”

“But it’s all streaming on tablets these days and this is such a queer show. Perfect for watching with your band while on the road.”

“I guess it’s just one of those things that have passed us by. There’s so much to watch and I prefer reading before bed. It’s much more calming, especially after a high-energy show.”

Lana nods. “I’m with you on that. It’s just that the pull of Elisa has been quite impossible to resist...”

“She is very hot.”

“And very straight.” Lana pushes herself up and takes a few steps toward her nightstand. “But her show’s anything but. I’m telling you, Cleo, watch it. Something tells me you will enjoy it very much.” She picks up one of the books next to her bed. “What’s also very much not straight is this.” She shows me the cover. I don’t recognize the title, nor the author’s name, Jane Quinn. “Sapphic romance at its very best.” She hands me the book. “Not everyone’s cup of tea, but I really got into it after Joan died. It’s very comforting to know that the ending will always be happy and no one’s going to die.”

I turn the book over in my hands and read the title: *Under a Streetlight*. “I’m more of a mystery fan myself.”

“Feel free to try it. I finished it the other day and there’s plenty more where that came from.”

“Is this your way of telling me I should engage in more wholesome activities than getting wasted with my bandmates?” I tap the spine of the book against my palm.

“God, no. Please don’t even think that for a second. I’ve been where you are and when I was your age, I listened to no one. This is the time when you do your thing. When you act first and think of the consequences later. The only thing I want you to do is enjoy yourself. Really.”

I can only listen to Lana’s advice. I’ll start by giving this book a try.

There’s a knock at the door. “Lana, it’s Billie.”

“I’d better go.”

“Coming,” Lana says. “Good night, Cleo.” She brings her hand to my shoulder and gives it a pat. “Can’t wait for our next duet.”

Chapter 13

Lana

“That kid is hella cute,” Billie says once I’ve closed the door behind her.

“Hands off the support act.” I usher her to the chair where Cleo was just sitting.

“Since when?” She brings her hands to her hips.

“I’m just kidding.” I don’t even know why I said that.

“Or are you and little Miss Cleo...” Billie arches up her eyebrows. “The way you two go about it on stage, you might as well be.”

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“Really?” Maybe I am the only one who has completely missed the chemistry Cleo and I create when we sing together. I make a mental note to watch some more of those videos of our encore later.

“Duh.” Billie sinks down in the chair.

“Can you, um, elaborate on that?”

She squints at me. “What do you mean?”

“It’s different when you’re in the moment. When you’re doing it. It’s hard for me to judge what it looks to anyone else when Cleo and I are on stage together.”

“Well.” Billie leans backward. “It’s probably not my place to say, what with being only such a recent addition to The Lady Kings, but I’ve never been one to mince my words, so.”

“Okay.” I’m not sure what to expect.

“Honestly, the three of us, as we made abundantly clear when you first floated the idea, are perfectly fine with you doing the final encore of the show without us. Just you and Cleo up there. We thought it would make for a wonderful moment of emotional vulnerability and that it would help you to... process certain things now that you’re back, but now that we’ve seen you and Cleo perform that song to a live audience a few times, well, it can’t help but make us a little nervous, because now your duet is quickly turning into the climax of the show instead of a cute little afterthought.”

Is she for real? Have I missed everything this duet is making other people feel? “This isn’t some sort of twisted prank, is it?”

“No—I mean, I only exaggerate slightly. We’re not fearing for our jobs, but the issue is two-pronged because from what I’ve heard from Sam and Deb, The Lady Kings have always been very tight. Yes, you’re the singer and that will always bring you most of the attention. You’re the face of band and that’s how it is.” She huffs out some air. “And what a face it is, Lana. You’re amazing and you’re a big part of what makes The Lady Kings who they are, but... you and Cleo, when you sing together, when it’s just your two voices and your combined energy out there, it’s special. It’s something else. It touches a nerve with the audience as well as with the band.”

“Are you saying that you, Deb, and Sam are feeling threatened by my duet with Cleo?” Maybe I’ve been too insensitive about leaving my bandmates out of the last song of the night. Perhaps this is just another consequence of no longer having Joan around. She was always the perfect buffer between me, Sam and Deb—between the two people at the front of the stage and the ones more toward the back. “If you do, I’m truly sorry about that.”

“Threatened isn’t the right word for it. Maybe just a little left out.”

I should really check with Sam and Deb, who I’ve known much longer than Billie and ask if they feel the same way about this.

“Is that why you wanted to talk to me tonight?”

“No. I didn’t know Cleo was going to be here. I just wanted to hang out with you.” Billie clears her throat. “Make sure you’re happy with my performance now that we’re a few gigs into the tour.”

Ah. I recognize insecurity when it so blatantly stares me in the face. “You’re doing

great, Billie. Surely, you must know that.” As a former applause addict myself, I know there’s no such thing as being told how great you are too many times.

“The vibe between us is good, but then I see how you vibe with Cleo and I’m like—well, it makes me wonder if there’s anything else I can do for us to have that kind of chemistry on stage.”

“I don’t think you can compare the two.” The tour has only just started and I’ve been blindsided with a conversation I didn’t see coming twice already. I knew it would be challenging without Joan, especially the first few weeks, but I hadn’t expected this.

Billie shrugs.

“Do we need to have a band meeting about this?” We’ve learned the hard way not to let negative emotions fester. When that kind of bubble bursts, the mess it leaves takes months to clean up.

“I don’t know. I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

“Fuck,” I say on a deep sigh. “I’m upset with myself because I wasn’t aware of any of this and I feel it’s part of my job to—” To what? To lead? To stay on top of this? Or to, at least, sing the duet with Cleo in the middle of our set instead of robbing my bandmates of the triumph of the final encore.

“Don’t be, Lana. It might just be me. I’m really sensitive to things like this. Coming in as the new girl is quite intimidating and seeing you with Cleo... I guess it’s making me feel a little insecure.”

“That’s understandable.” I haven’t missed Joan this hard, this acutely, in a very long time. “We have a lot of miles to cover tomorrow, so how about we talk about all this first thing on the bus? We’ll have plenty of time to hash it out.”

“Yeah, that would be great. Thanks, Lana.” Billie rubs her palms on her jeans. It’s funny how people who can have such stage presence, such swagger in their step when they saunter up to me for a guitar solo, can look so fragile in real life.

“Hey, Billie, I mean it. You’re an ace guitarist.” And you have some big shoes to fill.

“All right.” She straightens her spine.

“Touring is both a lot of fun and very hard at the same time.” I lean forward and pat Billie’s knee.

“In the spirit of not mincing my words.” She looks me in the eye and for a moment I fear I’m about to have another conversation like the one I had with Jess last week. “I guess I’m a little jealous... of you and Cleo. Were you serious earlier? When you said no hitting on the support band?”

I huff out a chuckle. “I honestly don’t care who hits on whom.” Billie’s ten years younger than me and much closer in age to The Other Women. “A tour is a tour, people are people, and things will always happen.” In our early, wilder years, even Joan and I had special rules when we went on tour.

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“Seriously, though, Cleo is hot as fuck.”

“As far as I know, she’s single, so...” Once again, I feel like I’ve been catapulted a few decades back in time. Although I am too old to keep track of who has the hots for whom. The older you get, the less you care about soap-opera antics like that. All I want is for everyone to get along as well as possible.

“All right.” Newly invigorated, Billie jumps out of her chair. “See you bright and early.”

Instead of crawling into bed with Elisa Fox on my tablet, I remain in my chair, coming up with the pep talk I need to give my band in the morning.

“Where’s Billie?” The bus is about to leave and we’re one guitarist short.

“She arranged to ride with The Other Women this morning,” Andy says. “She cleared it with me.”

“What the hell?” Did I dream last night’s conversation?

“Is that a problem for you?” Andy narrows his eyes and stares at me.

“We had agreed to a band meeting on the bus today.”

“Looks like someone doesn’t feel like being in a meeting,” he says. “Do you want me to get her back on our bus?”

“No. It’s fine. We can talk later.” This will give me a chance to grill Sam and Deb. I find my seat. While the bus pulls away, I picture Billie sitting next to Cleo on The Other Women’s bus. Part of me wishes I could be a fly on the wall, if only to witness Cleo’s reaction.

Once we’re on the highway, I collect Deb and Sam and we retreat to a private spot where we can talk without being overheard, although true privacy is an illusion on a tour bus.

“It’s a bit disconcerting to have this meeting without Billie, when she’s the one who basically asked for it,” I start.

Deb rolls her eyes. “I’ve had my suspicions all along, but it does look like we’ve got a bit of a drama queen on our hands with her.”

“She’s great at what she does, but, in the personality department, she’s no Joan Miller,” Sam adds.

“We’ll get used to her,” I say. “She’s finding her feet. It’s only normal that there’s some drama. It can’t be easy for her.” I look my fellow band members in the eyes. “How about you? Billie has raised some concerns about my duet with Cleo.”

Deb rolls her eyes again. “With my hand on my heart, I’m telling you, I have zero problems with that.”

“On Joan’s grave,” Sam says—all of us are drama queens, of course, “neither do I.”

“Was Billie putting words in your mouths?” If so, this is a bigger problem. I’m perfectly willing to cut Billie all the slack she needs to adjust to us, but I will never accept lies.

“She came to us about it, but we told her to cool it,” Deb says. “She seemed okay.”

“I told her to talk it out with you if it bothered her so much. I guess that’s what she tried to do,” Sam says.

“Pity she isn’t here. I’m beginning to understand why.”

“She has the hots for Cleo,” Deb says. “That might actually be what this is all about.”

“We should have taken a gay male band on tour, not another bunch of lesbians,” I joke, although there is some truth in it.

“Daphne is all over Tessie already.”

And Jess would love to be all over me, I think. Billie’s got a crush on Cleo. And Cleo... I don’t know. She hasn’t said it in so many words, but maybe she’s telling me every single time we go out on stage together.

“You and Linda are okay?” I ask Deb, just to be sure.

Deb nods. “She’s flying out to New York once we reach the East Coast,” she says matter-of-factly, as though it’s the most normal thing in the world for Deb to be away from home for two months, touring with a bunch of queers. It was Deb and Linda’s normal for a long time—until Joan’s death turned their world upside down as well.

“I’m still off women. Can barely stand to be around them,” Sam jokes.

“Tough titties for you then, girl.” Deb slings an arm around Sam. “Because there’s a lot of estrogen on this tour.”

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“I’ll get over it soon enough. Give me a few more days. Although...” She flashes us a big grin. “Billie does look mighty cool on stage and when she plays the solo in “Like No One Else”, her head thrown back like that, I always go a little weak at the knees.”

“Oh, no,” I groan.

“I’m kidding,” Sam says.

Deb jabs Sam in the biceps. “You’d better be.”

“What? Everyone else is allowed their infatuation, but I’m not?” Sam tilts her head. “That’s hardly fair.”

“How about you, Lana?” Deb asks, abruptly changing the subject—and the focus away from Sam.

“What about me?”

“Well...” Deb and I have been friends forever. She looks me straight in the eye when she speaks. “If Billie has the hots for Cleo, it’s no wonder your duet rubs her the wrong way. You might as well be kissing on that stage instead of singing to each other that you should have done so.”

“That’s just stage chemistry. You know that. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Sure,” Deb says, her tone full of irony.

“What?” Why won’t they believe me?

“Sometimes—” Deb shakes her head, as though thinking better of what she was going to say.

“Please, don’t keep whatever it is you’re thinking from me.” Clearly, I need all the outside perspective on this that I can get.

“Sometimes... the way you and Cleo are together on stage, so natural, so together, it kind of reminds me of how you were with Joan. I think that’s what makes the audience react to it the way they do. That includes all of us, by the way.”

“What? No.” Of course I balk at the mention of Joan’s name. What she and I had, off and on the stage, was special, of an entirely different order than anything else I’ve felt in my life. “Now you’re just talking out of your ass, Deb.”

“You may think so, but I know what I feel and what I see.”

I look at Sam for support, but she doesn’t say anything. She just looks at me as though Deb has just voiced exactly what she’s thinking as well.

“You can fake a lot, but you can’t fake that, Lana. It’s so intense. It’s like when you sing together, everyone else disappears, and the audience is bearing witness to something that they shouldn’t be watching. Something so intimate, it should be private, making it utterly irresistible, of course. I’m telling you, by the end of this tour, that duet is going to be the most talked about bit of our show.”

I want to go on the defensive again, but maybe I should listen to Deb—really hear what she has to say. I trust her and Sam completely, including their judgment of what I do on stage.

“Obviously, I feel something when I sing that song with Cleo. I asked her to sing it with me for a reason and she has exceeded all my expectations, but... what you describe is not how it is for me, even though I may make it seem as though it is.”

“I’m not saying you have feelings for her that you don’t even know about,” Sam says. “I’m just saying that your chemistry is unique, and I think that might have set Billie off.”

“Okay.” I pause. “So, do we have to do something about Billie or just let it play out?”

“Let it play it out,” Sam is quick to say.

“Maybe she’s hitting on Cleo as we speak,” Deb says. “She can get it all out of her system.” She waggles her eyebrows.

I suddenly wish I was much more than a fly on the wall on the other bus. Although I don’t begrudge Billie anything, part of me is hoping that Cleo will rebuff her advances. And not just because it would complicate tour-related matters. Or compromise our on-stage chemistry. It’s beginning to dawn on me I might have other reasons for Cleo not to fall for our guitarist.

Chapter 14

Cleo

Jess is grilling Billie about Lana, firing question after question at the poor woman. It’s hard to focus on the lesbian romance I’m reading. While I wonder what Billie is doing on our bus—Jess might have invited her, although if she wanted to find out all there is to know about Lana, she surely would have been better off with one of the original members of The Lady Kings—I pop in my earphones. I put the book aside, smiling as I do. Even though an attempt has been made to smooth out the pages, it’s

easy enough to spot which ones have been folded over.

On my phone, I scroll to a remastered live recording of a Kings concert from the mid-nineties. I close my eyes and let Lana's voice wash over me. It only takes a few seconds of her voice in my ears to be reminded of how lucky we are.

When I told Lana what her band means to me, I was grossly understating the facts.

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Someone bumping against my seat disturbs my train of thought. I resettle, exhale deeply, and tune into her voice again. Lana's voice is the reason—

“Hey, Cleo.” The bumping continues. I have no choice but to open my eyes. Someone appears in desperate need of my attention. I take out my ear buds, silencing Lana in the process.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Billie says. “Can I sit with you for a minute?”

She must be over Jess asking her all the questions about Lana. And I can hardly say no to a Lady King. “Sure.” I remove the book from the seat next to me.

“How are you?” Billie asks as she sits next to me. “Is touring with The Lady Kings everything you've ever dreamed of?”

Maybe not exactly everything, but close enough. “It's fucking amazing. How is it for you?”

“It's great. The spirit of Joan is still alive and kicking, and it's not always easy having to fill that spot, but it is a dream come true to be on stage with Lana, Deb, and Sam every night. They're living legends, so I'm counting my lucky stars.”

“Oh, I know.” Maybe Billie and I can bond over our shared admiration for The Lady Kings. She's in a unique position as a new member of the band. “So are we.”

“That encore you do with Lana is off the charts, by the way. She'd better watch out or you'll run off with her crown.”

I chuckle. “Not much chance of that.” I turn to Billie so I can get a better look at her. “What was it like when you first played with them?”

“Like becoming part of rock history. Getting this job has been...” She holds up her hands as though it’s too much of an honor to adequately express in words. I know exactly how she feels.

I nod.

“I was just saying to Jess that your band is pretty damn amazing,” Billie continues.

I pull my face into a grimace, hoping it will convey my apologies for Jess’s hardcore interview earlier.

Billie leans into me. “She’s got the serious hots for Lana, huh? And she’s not shy about it either.”

“Did Jess invite you onto our bus to get all the dirt on Lana?”

Billie shakes her head. “I invited myself. I thought it a good opportunity to get to know you better.”

“Sure.” Maybe she’ll take turns sitting with all four of us on this long drive.

“Just for my information, am I going to spend the next half hour talking about Lana Lynch as well?” She beams me a smile.

While it would be no hardship for me to ask Billie all she knows about Lana, I get the message loud and clear that she’s done talking about The Lady Kings’ front woman.

I shake my head. “Tell me all about yourself, Billie.” I send her an encouraging

smile. “Not the stuff I’ve read on Wikipedia. Tell me something I don’t know yet.”

She finds my gaze, then looks away. “Sorry, I was trying to think of a pickup line, but my brain doesn’t seem to be wired for that this early in the morning.”

A pickup line? What is she talking about? I decide it’s best to ignore what she’s just said. This tour is long and remaining on good terms with everyone is always one of the biggest challenges. Then her phone rings. She quickly fishes it out of her pocket.

“Speak of the devil.” She shows me the screen. “It’s Lana. I might be about to get an earful.” She picks up and turns away from me.

Why is she about to get an earful from Lana? Billie’s sitting right next to me, so it’s impossible not to eavesdrop. Meanwhile, I push myself up and try to find someone to make eyes at so they can come to my rescue. I find Tim’s gaze and wordlessly try to get the message across that I need rescuing from a Lady King who might be about to hit on me. In return, he just shoots me a funny look.

“I’m sorry,” Billie says into her phone. “I know I should have said something. I just wasn’t feeling it this morning and I didn’t want to get into the whole thing. We’ll talk later. Okay?”

She makes some guttural noises in the back of her throat as she listens to what Lana has to say on the other end of the line, then hangs up.

Shoulders deflated, she sinks into her seat. “Apparently, I’m a bit rusty when it comes to band politics, especially tour politics,” she says on a sigh.

I don’t want to stick my nose in where it doesn’t belong, but I am curious. “Are you okay?”

“I have some wrinkles to smooth out with my bandmates. It’s my own fault, really.”
She takes a breath and turns to me again, her smile high-wattage. “Can I ask you something delicate?”

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“Shoot.” As long as she doesn’t ask me out, although, I guess that wouldn’t be the end of the world either. We’re all adults here and I’m sure Billie can take no for an answer.

“Do you think it’s normal that it’s just you and Lana on stage for the very last song of the night—of our show? Would you do that to your fellow band members? On your reunion tour?”

That is a question made of the most expensive, fragile porcelain. Why is she even asking me?

“You can’t compare our band to yours. It’s different.”

“Oh, come on, Cleo. You’re the singer. You’re the front woman. Do you also rule over the other band members with an iron fist like Lana does over The Lady Kings?”

“Billie, um, I don’t feel comfortable having this conversation. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I know it’s this enormous privilege to become a Lady King, to play with them, and to be on this tour. I know that, but for some reason, I’m having trouble finding my groove. Half the time, I can’t help but feel like the odd one out, like I don’t belong.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. You probably need some more time, some more shows together. It’s only normal.” I clear my throat, feeling massively out of my depth. This explains why Billie is on our bus. “Have you talked to the others about this?”

“I had a chat with Lana about it last night. After you left her hotel room.” She looks at me as though she’s dying to find out what Lana and I discussed before she arrived, but I’m not going to tell her that. “We were meant to have a band meeting on the bus this morning, which I cowardly escaped by hitching a ride with The Other Women.”

“Oh, shit.” No wonder Lana wanted to give her an earful.

“I know. I’m a bad girl.” She grins crookedly. “I’m sorry, Cleo. I shouldn’t be putting all of this on you. I just, um... I like you.”

I did not get enough sleep last night to deal with this. On top of that, aside from being on this tour, my mind has been so absorbed by Lana that I haven’t given Billie a second thought. Not in that way, at least. All I know is that she’s a more than decent guitarist and a great replacement for the legendary Joan Miller. She and Lana seem to have good-enough chemistry on stage. But things are not always what they seem—I know that from experience.

“Um,” I start. “I—” Did Tim not register my wordless cry for help? Mercifully, my phone beeps with a message. “Sorry.” It might be rude to check that message, but what else am I supposed to do?

To my surprise, it’s a message from Lana.

Can we talk?

“Something important?” Billie sounds sheepish.

I shake my head, even though I’m dying to find out what Lana wants to talk to me about. Is it about last night and the things that were said?

Billie huffs out some air. “God, I’m such an asshole. I’m so sorry, Cleo. I’ll leave you

to it. Let's not speak of this again, shall we?" She slides out of her seat. "I'll get back on the other bus at the next break." Without giving me a chance to reply, she saunters off.

Lana, Deb, and Sam have their work cut out integrating the newest member of their band. Although I'm perfectly willing to go easy on Billie, and honor her request of not mentioning our conversation ever again, because going on tour is hard for different people in different ways. Being away from home. The absence of a grounding routine. The pressure. The highs of being on stage alternated with the lows of the drudgery of life on the road. A different room every other night. A strange bed. Never being able to cook a meal for yourself. It's the little things that get to you in the end and not every human being is made for a life like this.

I text Lana back that we can talk. Then I wait, but it takes her such a long time to reply that the bus is pulling up to a rest stop and we're all getting out to stretch our legs.

I find Lana walking around the parking lot, her ear glued to her phone. I don't want to interrupt because she probably sought out privacy to have a personal conversation, but she clocks me, and makes quick work of dismissing whoever it is she's talking to.

"Sorry for not replying to your text. I drifted off and before I knew it, we were pulling in here."

I nod my understanding. A few yards away, Billie is ostentatiously reuniting with Deb and Sam.

"Was Billie okay on your bus?" Lana stands next to me.

I can't help but chuckle.

“What?”

“No, Lana, I don’t think she’s okay. Something’s going on with her.” I stick to my resolution of not mentioning that Billie also made a feeble attempt at hitting on me.

“She’s having a hard time going from regular life to tour life, that much is obvious.”

“I know. We’ll deal with it,” Lana says matter-of-factly, as though it’s a done deal already. “How are you?”

“I started on that book you gave me. It’s quite entertaining.”

“Quite entertaining?” She smiles at me. “That sounds exciting.”

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“Did you want to talk to me about something specific?” We’ll be back on the road in a few minutes and inquiring minds want to know.

“Yeah, but, to be honest, I was going to ask you via text. It seemed easier that way.”

It hits me that what’s actually hardest about being on tour is having to deal with the various people you’re traveling with. The secrets. The indiscretions. The gossip. The expectations. All of it can become utterly exhausting.

“You’re Lana Lynch.” I arch up my eyebrows. “Just ask me.”

“Actually.” Lana runs a hand through her hair. “Would you like to have dinner with me tonight? In my room? We can talk then.”

My cheeks flush and I know I should just say yes, but it’s like the word, that stupid silly single word, is stuck a long way down my throat.

“Oh, not like that, Cleo,” Lana says. “I’m not asking you on a date, okay?” She stands there grinning as though the mere notion of her and me going on a date is preposterous. “I want to talk about our duet. The band and I have been discussing it and I just want to clear some things up. Mainly for myself.”

“Yeah, sure. We can have dinner.” My cheeks are still burning. How is it that I can go on stage with this woman, sing the sexiest song alongside her without breaking a sweat, but not casually accept a platonic, tour-related dinner invitation? The answer is easy enough. “I’ll see you then.”

“Great,” Lana shouts after me as I hurry back to the bus.

Chapter 15

Lana

“Our duet is ruffling some feathers,” I say to Cleo. “More than I had expected.” After my little chat with Deb and Sam, it’s impossible for me to look at Cleo in the same light. My bandmates have put this idea in my head—that there’s something more between us; even something akin to what Joan and I had—and now I can’t stop thinking about it. On the long bus ride, I’ve had plenty of time to consider how unfair it is that I’ve banished the rest of The Lady Kings from the stage for the apotheosis of every single one of our shows. It wasn’t my intention when I first asked Cleo to sing with me, but then we started rehearsing, and it all suddenly made perfect sense. And there’s no doubt the audience loves it.

“Apparently.” Cleo seems a little on edge—a long day on the road without the release of playing will do that to you.

“I find myself between a rock and a hard place.”

“How do you mean?” Cleo leans against the windowsill. She’s too antsy to sit.

“I don’t want to fall out with my band over this, but by now, even though we’re only a few shows into this tour, it already feels like something we can’t deny the audience. Because of the internet and how it raises expectations.”

“How about we don’t sing it a cappella then? Let the rest of the band come back out to play?” Cleo says.

I nod, because it makes sense. But it also wouldn’t be the same. “I was thinking we

might do a couple of run throughs with the band at sound check tomorrow? Or maybe just add guitar. We'll have to see. Are you up for that?"

"It's your song and your gig, Lana. It's up to you."

"I wouldn't want you to think you're just some kind of prop to me. What you bring to that song is vital." By now, I've watched quite a few recordings of "I Should Have Kissed You". "We don't need the band for that song. That's the simple truth. Sam and Deb can accept that, but I'm not sure Billie can, and things with Billie are a little complicated at the moment."

"She told me she liked me," Cleo says. "I've been mulling it over and it was a bit inappropriate, actually."

"Sorry about that."

"It's hardly your fault." She huffs out some air. "At first, I thought Jess had invited her to ride with us so she could grill Billie about you."

"It's all a bit silly, isn't it?" I settle next to Cleo, leaning against the windowsill. "Jess has a crush on me. Billie has a crush on you. It's like high school all over again."

"That's how it is when you put a bunch of people together for a longer period of time, although Jess has had a crush on you since she was twelve—long before we started *The Other Women*, so it's not really the same, it's just confrontational for her because we're on tour with you now."

"Jess's infatuation with me is not a problem for me. I will always try to be respectful toward her, but it's not something that keeps me up at night. Is it an issue for you?"

Cleo shrugs. "She tends to go on about you and perhaps reads too much into certain

situations, but it doesn't bother me. Billie on the other hand... It's different. She did apologize, but she seems like a bit of a loose cannon, to be honest."

There's a knock at the door. That must be dinner.

"I hope you're hungry." I walk to the door and let in two men who make a spectacle of setting the table for us, pulling our chairs back, and simultaneously lifting the silver cloches to reveal what is underneath.

Once we've taken a few bites—and had a few sips of wine—I ask, "I take it you're not interested in Billie in that way?"

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“The thought had never even crossed my mind.”

“I’m sure Billie will have gotten the message.”

“I hope so,” Cleo says.

“You don’t have to worry about Billie. You really don’t.”

“But you do.” Cleo looks at me.

“She’s new. Well, new-ish, and it’s all trickier than anticipated, but it’s not an impossible situation. Deb, Sam, and I have known each other forever. We grieved for Joan together. We have so much history between us. It’s hard for Billie and it doesn’t help that her personality is, um, let’s just say she has no trouble standing up for herself, nor should she. But that’s another thing you don’t have to worry about, Cleo. I’ll deal with my band. It’s just that it’s not the same without Joan.” This reminds me again of what Deb said on the bus this morning—about Cleo and me. “It can’t be.”

“It’s a real shame I never got to meet her.” Cleo’s such a sweetheart. “You and her on stage... although not just on stage. The two of you being together, out and proud, meant so much to so many people at a time when it really mattered.”

“It wasn’t always easy. The previous century could be pretty vicious to queers, especially when you had a high profile.”

“It’s one of the reasons so many people are still shouting your name as though you’re the second coming. Because you paved the way for them. For me as well.”

“A queer audience is a loyal audience, that’s true.” For all that looking at Cleo is a lot like looking at a younger version of myself, our journeys could not be more different. All-female bands are a dime a dozen these days. When The Lady Kings started out, we might as well have been the only ones—especially the only ones who refused to be made into sex objects who also happened to play musical instruments.

“Nowadays, it’s almost odd when at least one member of a band isn’t queer,” Cleo says. “Look at Tim. I won’t say no one batted an eyelid when he transitioned, but it’s like it’s part of who we are that he did and it would never even occur to us that him identifying as a man would damage us as a band, on the contrary. Even a band called The Other Women.” Cleo smiles and puts her fork down. “Not too shabby for hotel food, by the way. Do they have a special chef for the people staying on the top floor?”

“Not that I know of, but there are many things I’m not aware of.” Cleo has no idea that what I’m actually referring to is how I might—or might not—feel about her.

“Such as?” She tilts her head. Or maybe she is aware of much more than I am. Maybe people her age notice different things than people my age, hence that drunken chat we had in Oakland.

“Something you brought up after having too many shots in a hotel bar somewhere in Northern California.”

“Oh, god, Lana. I told you I was sorry about that.”

“Deb and Sam—and Billie—seem to have noticed something as well. Something that happens when you and I sing together. Maybe what they see is whatever it is you feel. It’s harder for me to notice because after Joan... it’s like I have this wall around me. This thick layer of protection. I thought I carried it with me on stage as well, but the stage is a tricky place. Don’t you think? Aren’t you a different version of yourself on

stage?” Way to deflect, Lana. Well done.

“Not that different. Heightened, for sure. Free of most inhibitions that bog down daily life. Actually, free is a good way to describe it. The closest to free as a bird, to flying, that a human being can ever get, because I always get a little beside myself—or outside myself.”

I nod, because I recognize every single thing she’s describing. Maybe we should write a song together sometime—but now is not the time to introduce that notion to my bandmates.

“It’s why I eventually resurrected The Lady Kings, even though I knew it would be difficult without Joan.” Some days, when I’m having a hard time, I tell myself I owe it to her to die on stage. To continue doing what I’ve been so lucky to have done for the biggest part of my life. Play rock music. Make something come alive in the people listening to us. Create the particular energy that can only be released when The Lady Kings play together.

“I, for one, am so glad that you did.” Cleo sits there grinning. “Fuck, Lana, you have no idea.”

“No idea of what?”

Cleo puts her fork down and leans back. “The effect you have on people.” She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip.

“I think I have a pretty good idea.”

Cleo shakes her head. “I’m not sure you do. Who’s the one musician that you admire the most, the one whose songs you had on endless repeat when you were a teenager, the one you would consider a true idol?”

“Kay Cooper,” I blurt out without thinking. “She paved the way for me.”

“Imagine going on tour with her, being invited to sing a duet with her, and going up to her room for an impromptu dinner.”

“We have actually toured with—” Oh. Wait. What is Cleo trying to say? I study her face, but it’s hard to read—I’m all out of practice. “Is this too much for you?” I wave at the half-eaten food between us, realizing that what I’m saying is also up for misinterpretation. “Does you being here make you uncomfortable?” Have I overstepped another boundary I wasn’t even aware of?

“No, god, no, Lana. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I’m loving every minute of it, but what you must understand is that you are my Kay Cooper. I have nothing but respect and admiration and... well, some other things, for you.” She pushes her chair back a fraction, as though she has to distance herself from me. “I know that part of it is irrational, because a lot of it is just projection. It’s my brain making me believe you are a certain kind of person, although I have no way of knowing. But getting to know you has not disappointed me whatsoever. You have so much integrity and there’s absolutely nothing fake about you. Singing with you is like...” She sucks air into her cheeks and lets it escape slowly. “It’s like going to another planet for five minutes. It’s better than sex.” Her cheeks flush. Maybe she hadn’t meant to add that last bit and it got away from her, but Cleo, as are many people her age, sure is much more eloquent at expressing her emotions than most people of my generation.

“Better than sex, huh?” I’ve had a few flings since Joan died, but if they are anything to go by, then Cleo is right. Being on stage is better than sex.

“In a manner of speaking.” Cleo has regrouped quickly.

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“I’m very flattered by what you just said.”

Cleo plucks the bottle of wine from the ice bucket and refills our glasses. She squares her shoulders and looks me in the eye. “When you were on the road with Kay Cooper, if she’d ever made an overture, would you have... you know?”

I take my refreshed drink into my hands. Cleo sure is excellent company—she doesn’t have a dull bone in her very shapely body. “For the record, she never did. As far as I know, Kay Cooper is straight as an arrow, but that’s not what you’re asking me.” It feels like the evening has taken a turn. “Joan and I were together since before we started the band, but I guess that’s also not what you’re asking me.” Cleo keeps her gaze trained on me. There’s still a hint of pink on her cheeks, but she seems to have a whole new handle on things. “Of course, I would have said yes.” This might not be entirely true, but it can hardly be fact-checked. “Kay Cooper is what?” I do a quick calculation in my head. “Early seventies now? But any room she walks into, she’s still the hottest woman in it. No question.”

“I must disagree with you on that.” A small smile plays on Cleo’s lips.

“You’re perfectly welcome to disagree with me.” My head is spinning, trying to decipher all the things Cleo is actually trying to say. I’m to her what Kay Cooper is to me. But just like Kay never made a pass at me, I would never make a pass at Cleo. It’s unprofessional and she’s far too young for me to have any such notions about. Yet, she’s also, if I’m reading this correctly, telling me she wouldn’t mind if I did. I don’t know whether to shut this down or to continue playing. It’s been such a long time, and I’m having fun. But I don’t want to put any ideas into Cleo’s head. Isn’t that my responsibility, as the older one?

“As long as we’re clear on that.” She sucks one lip into her mouth and slowly lets it slide out again. “You’re the hottest woman in every room I’ve ever been in.”

Especially after what has been made clear to me today by my bandmates, I’m not immune to what Cleo is putting out. All the more reason to shut this down, no matter how pleasant.

“Look, Cleo, maybe this conversation has gotten a little out of hand. I’m not going to hit on you like Billie did. You are wonderful in many ways. Truly, you are.” I hate to state the obvious, yet I don’t have much choice. “But let’s face it. I’m old enough to be your mother. I can’t go there. This tour has only just started and I don’t want to jeopardize what we have going on when we sing together. It’s too special. Too precious.”

“Fuck,” she says on a sigh. “Way to kill the mood.”

Fuck, indeed. Instead of relief, something else washes over me—something I can’t place. Regret? Frustration? Some sort of arrogant entitlement that I should definitely keep on ignoring?

“I’m sorry,” I hear myself say, which surely is not the correct sentiment to express because it’s too confusing.

“If you don’t mind—if you have nothing else extremely important to discuss with me—I think I’ll go now.” She rises. She looks so cute in her oversized jeans and top. Cleo flicks her hair back, then reaches for her bag. “I’ll be there for the soundcheck tomorrow.” She opens her bag and takes out something. “Here. I brought you this. It’s not romance, but the protagonist is hella gay.” She hands me a book.

Deflation swamps me, but what else was I meant to do? “Thanks.”

“Night.” With that, Cleo hurries out the door.

I turn the book she gave me over and look at the cover. The author is H.S. Barr and I’ve never heard of them. It looks like one of those cozy mysteries set in the idyllic British countryside. I put it next to my bed and I ponder the past hour in Cleo’s company.

My head tells me I did the right thing, but quite a few other body parts don’t necessarily agree with that.

Chapter 16

Cleo

It only takes a couple of jumbled tries with the other members of The Lady Kings—in various formations—for everyone to conclude that Lana and I singing “I Should Have Kissed You” a cappella is much more intense and satisfying than in any other arrangement.

So, that’s what we do. I go out there and sing this song with her and I’m not stupid enough to believe it’s this particular song making me feel what I feel—the lyrics telling the tale of two people who missed all their opportunities to get together—but when I’m on stage with Lana, singing these words to her, that is what I feel. The only difference is, tonight, she knows. I might have alluded to it when I had that drunk conversation with her in Oakland, my inhibitions too lowered for me to keep all of that locked inside. But last night, the veil was lifted all the way. And now, she knows how I feel about her. She knows that when I croon to her that I should have kissed her, I might very well mean it. This is no longer a mere stage act—although it never really was.

I want to kiss Lana so badly, I have to check myself. I have to make sure I don’t lose

myself in this performance completely and bring my lips so close to hers that we might as well be kissing.

But this is Lana Lynch and I can't help myself. Not during these five minutes. I'll control myself afterward. The band is dying for an epic night on the town. We'll go out and I'll try to get this out of my system. But right now, when I'm standing so close to Lana I can smell her, and her body heat radiates onto me, I give it all I've got. I lean into her a little more than before. I let my gaze linger on hers a little longer—I even let it slide down to her cleavage and make no bones of ogling what is on display. This is why I'm here. This is what makes our duet special. And this is all I'm ever going to get from Lana. Maybe it can be enough.

But tonight, it's as though I've taken some drug that makes everything more intense. There's more unbridled energy coursing through me and there's only one way for me to get it out. To sing my heart out to Lana with even more vigor, with more pain in my voice, with the regret of never having kissed her plastered all across my face.

On top of feeling this all-consuming, feverish emotion, Lana looks more gorgeous tonight than ever. Even though I've seen The Lady Kings play so many times now, I still can't get enough of their show. I don't want to miss a single second of it because they mean so much to me—and Lana means the most. I meant it when I said to her last night that she's the hottest woman to have ever graced a room.

According to Tim, being the front woman of a hip band is like being a magnet for sexy ladies and he's right—anywhere I go, I'm surrounded by hotness, but none of those people are Lana. Unfortunately, Lana, being the front woman of an iconic band herself, is totally immune to my lead singer magnetism. She sees right through it.

But not in these five minutes, which are quickly coming to an end. Too quickly. Five minutes every other day with her like this are not enough. I want so much more, especially now that she has told me, in no uncertain terms, that she can never give me

what I want. Lana telling me she's old enough to be my mother might be theoretically true, but it doesn't help to deter me. Because Lana is nothing like my mother or any other mother I've ever come across. She might be fifty-four, but she's also a Lady King and for that reason alone, her age doesn't matter. That number is erased simply by her being who she is. Besides, rational arguments were never going to work. Not as long as we do this, as we sing to each other, in front of thousands of people who can't get enough of it, that our lives would have been totally different if only we had kissed each other.

We're singing into the same mic and I'm so close to Lana, the edges between us are blurred. We might as well be one body, one voice, doing this. When the song ends, I'm of half a mind to actually kiss her—it would drive the crowd all the way over the edge and I can always claim I was caught in the moment, by the song and its powerful lyrics—but I don't, because I'm only Cleo Palmer and I can't go around kissing Lana Lynch. I'm still self-aware enough to know that would be all kinds of wrong.

But when Lana takes my hand as she always does, I hold onto it a little tighter. We walk off stage and I prepare myself for her to drop it coldly again, only to find that she doesn't. Instead, she holds it up between us, like evidence of something that can't be said out loud, and says, "Can you come with me to my dressing room, please?"

"Of course." My heart's already beating double time.

Lana lets go of my hand. I follow her. Logan gives her water. Andy tells her how great she was. There's lots of chatter between her and her bandmates that my brain doesn't register because it's too busy processing what's going on—and trying to predict what might happen. Has she changed her mind? Did my intense rendition of that song convince her of something?

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A few moments later, Lana ushers me into her dressing room and closes the door behind us. She leans against it and holds up her hand while she chugs back the entire bottle of water. She's a little out of breath when she's finished it. She locks her gaze on me and says, "Maybe we shouldn't do the duet anymore."

"What?" Not what I was expecting by a long shot. "Why?"

"I think you know why."

I shake my head. "I don't."

Lana pushes herself away from the door, but then lets her back drop against it again. "Come on, Cleo. Don't make me say something I don't want to say."

"Like what?" This is starting to feel like a mother-daughter situation now. I very much feel like I'm being told off for something I'm not even aware of doing.

"You were all over me up there. That's not okay."

My eyes grow wide. "Since when?" I might have given it a bit more than usual, but I don't see how that could have made such a difference.

"Since last night. You came on to me and I'm not going to judge you for that. But you equate me with..." She pulls up her shoulders. "I don't know, some sort of goddess. Which I'm not. I'm just a woman. You're going to have to snap out of that."

So much for not judging me. And Lana isn't just a woman. I take a few stuttering

breaths. I'm going through a swift and cruel decompression from those wonderful five minutes on stage earlier. I try to look at her, but I can't. I'm being dressed down in Lana's dressing room, and not in a good way.

"Fine," I say, hating how I sound—too petulant, too young. "Consider me snapped out of it." I can't help but add a sigh worthy of the most ill-tempered teenager.

"That's bullshit and we both know it. Look, Cleo, I don't want you to suffer for a song. It's just a song. We don't have to sing it. No matter what the audience wants. We're in charge."

"I'm not suffering. What are you talking about? I love singing with you. You know that."

"Maybe you love it a little too much." She reaches for another bottle of water on the table next to the door she's still leaning against. "I can't ask you to snap out of it while demanding you perform with me. That's insane."

"What should I have done differently tonight?" I bring my hands to my sides. I'm not leaving here without arguing my case.

Lana's still knocking back water. She draws up her knee and puts her foot against the door. She could not look any sexier if she tried. She's aglow with post-performance endorphins. Drops of sweat pearl on the skin of her neck. Her hair looks like she just—

I'd better get a grip.

"It's hard to say exactly. You know that."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. We have meet and greets. Lana's going to be late for

hers if she doesn't shower soon. "Let's not decide now," I say. "We're emotional from the show. Let's sleep on it."

Lana puts the bottle down with a sigh worthy of an entire gaggle of hormonal teenage girls.

"I don't want to take from your performance, Cleo." She steps away from the door. She turns away from me, then grabs the door handle. She doesn't open the door to me, though. Instead, she lets go of the handle and spins on her heels. She pins her gaze on me. "Maybe it was a little too good." Her voice has dropped all the way into ultra-sultry territory. "Maybe the problem is me."

Chapter 17

Lana

I'm not made of stone. Beneath the protective layer of my skin, I'm as brittle as they come. After I've put myself out there on stage, for all the audience to see, I can't just go back to being the person I became these past ten years. When Cleo sidles up to me like that, when she speaks to me the way she did last night, when she stands there all defiant, I can hardly keep on pretending it's all her. I have feelings too. I'm human too. I sing that song to her every night after I've performed two hours without Joan by my side—after all my defenses have been so lowered, they might as well never have been there.

I can't blame myself for trying to protect myself, for trying to play it cool and resorting to drastic measures like no longer singing with Cleo at all. I've been in this game long enough to not let the fans dictate what I do—and I know that, by now, they want Cleo and me to sing this song more than anything. It reminds the audience of something that The Lady Kings lost when we lost Joan. It ignites a kind of nostalgia in them that is irresistible because it's so deliciously bittersweet. I can see

all of that. More than that, I can feel it too.

By telling Cleo that we should no longer duet, I'm protecting myself much more than her. She's young. She has decades of life and love ahead of her. She still has enormous unused capacities for recovery, whereas I don't.

I reach out my hand to her. She bridges the distance between us. Our fingers touch. We have touched many times before on stage, but this is different. This is for us only, not for the benefit of an audience. Her fingertips against mine spur me on to look up, to not look away from this. I find her blue-eyed gaze. I've stared into those eyes for minutes on end, yet it feels like, in this moment, I'm seeing them for the very first time.

"Cleo, I'm—" I say, but she lifts her free hand and brings a finger to my lips. My skin is cooling off, yet heat radiates from deep within me.

"Don't speak," Cleo whispers. "Don't say another word, please." She swallows hard, then leans toward me. Then she waits.

It takes me a few seconds to realize she's waiting for me to close the final gap between our lips. Then I do. I touch my lips to hers and as I do, as we kiss, a long-held tension inside of me collapses—as though I've finally set myself free of shackles only I had the key to.

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I pull Cleo close as our kiss deepens. She curls her arms around my waist. The tip of her tongue darts into my mouth. I groan in the back of my throat. She smells so fresh and clean, whereas I'm drenched in sweat from the show. I could see it as a metaphor for the difference in our ages, but I refuse to. Because all I want is to lose myself in this kiss. Free myself, the part of me that's been holding onto all this grief and darkness, in Cleo's arms.

Her hand sneaks under my top, her fingernails scrape along my back. My skin breaks out in goose bumps. She's lighting a long-lost fire in me. Because I may have been with other women since Joan died, but none of them have made me feel like this. And Cleo and I are only just kissing.

I know that in this kiss we carry over a lot of what goes on between us on stage. Maybe it's even a logical consequence of singing that song together. I'm sure this kiss means very different things to each of us because we are different people in very different stages of our lives, but fuck, it feels so good to hold Cleo in my arms. To renew this kiss again and again, to allow myself to choose this pleasure again and again, because a pleasure it is. Pure joy courses through me as our lips lock and our tongues dance. Her hand snakes higher up my back. My top's riding up. Does she want to remove it? Does she want to take this a step farther?

Post-show sex is just a fond memory for me now, although I wouldn't mind refreshing it. There's nothing like adding an orgasm to the blissful high that's so unique to performing. The combination of the two used to be somewhat of an addiction.

But when I lower my hand to Cleo's behind, her phone's buzzing in her back pocket.

And there's an insistent knock on my door. We have obligations and my days for a quick, exhilarating fuck backstage are long gone. Touring has changed. Everything is timed—and time is money.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan into her mouth.

“I have to go,” Cleo says.

“I need to get ready for... stuff.” I don't have my full wits about me yet. I just want to pull Cleo back to me, plant my lips on hers again, because, by god, doing so felt even better than performing.

“Can I come to your room later?” she asks.

“Yes.” I nod vigorously. “We should probably talk.”

She looks me square in the eye, a hint of smile on her lips. “I'm not coming to your room to talk, Lana.”

Jesus. This girl. How did I even resist her for this long?

As though saying it isn't enough, she kisses me again. It's soft yet full of intention, full of all the things she brings to the stage. She's right. More talking is the last thing I want to do.

“I'm going now,” she says, but instead of leaving, she kisses me again, as though now that we've started, stopping would be foolish.

“Go,” I urge her when we break for air. “We have all night.”

She gazes deep into my eyes as she flicks the tip of her tongue over her lips, and I can

feel it all the way in my core.

“Go,” I repeat, because someone—probably Andy—is still knocking on my door, although I want her to stay right where she is.

She nods and without saying another word, opens the door.

“Oh,” Andy says after Cleo has strutted past him, “I thought you were in the shower.” He gives me a once-over. “But you haven’t showered yet.”

I glance behind him at Cleo making her way to wherever she needs to be, wondering what on earth I have unleashed in myself.

Cleo keeps texting that she’s on her way up, but she’s been doing that for the past forty-five minutes and she still hasn’t materialized. She’s leaving me too much time to think this through. I don’t know what to do with myself. I’ve re-arranged my hair a dozen times. I even switched T-shirts, which is utterly ridiculous. I know that all Cleo will want to do as soon as she walks through my door is hoist whatever top I’m wearing over my head and be done with it.

I stand in front of the mirror and take a good look at myself. I’m not going into this blind with lust. I know who I am, and I know who Cleo is. The biggest difference with last night, when I gave her my little speech—when I was still able to do that—is that I’m allowing myself whatever it is that’s going to happen between us. And something is going to happen. The anticipation beats wildly in my veins.

Where is she? Did she get a better offer? I grin at my reflection. With the way Cleo was going on about me last night, and how she sang to me earlier on stage, it’s highly unlikely.

Cleo is so many things for me. She’s the woman I sing a song with. She’s a performer

who I have the same chemistry with as I had with my late wife. She's the stunning front woman of an amazing band. She's a person who has loved our music for a long time. She's gorgeous and gifted and a hell of a singer. All these things have played their part in bringing me to this point.

Another text.

One minute away, it says.

I take a deep breath, and another. I'm doing this. I'm going to let Cleo into my room, and we won't be doing a lot of talking.

There's a soft knock. I can't rush to the door quickly enough.

"Hey." Already, Cleo looks so different to me—like the woman I want more than anything else.

I pull her inside.

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“Sorry it took so long,” she says. “But I’m here now.” She smiles at me. “Where were we when we got so rudely interrupted earlier?” She doesn’t waste time coming for me. She hooks a finger under the waistband of my jeans and pulls me close. “Oh, yeah. You couldn’t keep your hands or lips off me.” Her smile morphs into a grin. She’s got me right where she wants me and she knows it.

“Wow.” I look into her eyes. “No more deference for Lana Lynch?”

“Let me show you exactly how much I respect and admire you, Lana.” She wedges her bottom lip between her teeth. It makes her look so damn sexy. She releases her lip and leans in. “Hey, again.” This time, she doesn’t wait for me to close the gap between our lips. She kisses me and everything changes again.

When did this happen to me? Has this been going on inside me all along and have I been too stubborn to notice? Or too wise, even? But this is no longer something that I consider shouldn’t be happening. I know damn well when it all started. When we were on stage together. When she looked into my eyes and sang to me. When she rolled her head backward onto my shoulder. When she stood so close to me, I could feel her heart beat in sync with mine.

“I want you so much. You have no idea,” Cleo whispers when we break from our kiss.

“You’re giving me a pretty good idea,” is all I can reply. I just want to feel her lips on mine again. I want her tongue to slip inside my mouth again. I want her to make my breath hitch in my throat time and time again.

“I hope you know you’re making all my wildest dreams come true.” She flips open the button of my jeans, making her intentions well and truly known—not that they weren’t already.

This time, when she kisses me, her tongue divine against mine, her hands roam to my back and her fingertips slip beneath my jeans. Her lips travel downward, to the sensitive skin of my neck, and I throw my head back. All those duets we’ve done so far, they’ve been the most spectacular foreplay. My blood pulses in my veins. My skin is hot for her, and those kisses aren’t helping.

Legs and arms entwined, we stumble toward the bed. It’s only when I reach for her T-shirt to pull it over her head that I notice it’s a Kay Cooper one. Nice move. I like Cleo Palmer more with every single second that goes by. With every kiss she plants on my skin. With every breath I take.

She has no qualms about removing her bra and it’s easy enough to see why. Her breasts are perfect and mesmerizing and begging to be cupped by my palms. Oh, fuck. Cleo is so excruciatingly beautiful—even more so, here with me, than on stage. I reach out my hand and rub my thumb over her nipple. It hardens and even though its reaction is entirely expected, it still floors me.

The time for audaciously grinning at me has passed for Cleo as well. When I look up from her chest to her face, her expression is serious and her eyes are full of lust.

“I want to see you,” she says. “All of you.”

I take off my T-shirt, but I’m more hesitant to dispose of my bra. Perhaps Cleo senses my hesitation because she reaches behind my back, her hands soft and warm on my skin, and finds the clasp. She looks into my eyes as she unhooks it and then slowly lowers it.

“Fuck,” is all she says after she’s dropped my bra to the floor and I stand before her half-naked. “Oh, fuck, Lana.” She puts both her hands on my belly and, ever so slowly, slides them upward. Her fingers are featherlight when they stroke my breasts. Already, she’s making my breath hitch in my throat.

One hand cups my breast, while her other scoots more upward, until her fingertips reach my cheek. Cleo looks into my eyes. There’s something so unexpectedly gentle about her. And that glint in her eyes tells me everything I need to know about how much exactly she wants this. She looks like a woman whose wildest dreams are about to come true. It’s an honor to make that happen for someone like Cleo—and for myself, as well.

Her face disappears from my field of vision as she leans forward. Her tongue skates along my erect nipple before she takes it between her lips.

My knees are about to buckle already.

I drag Cleo onto the bed with me. She topples onto me, but it doesn’t take long for her lips to find my nipple again. Then the other. Cleo lavishes all her attention on my nipples and my breasts and, as she does, long dormant parts of me awaken.

I’ve slept with the occasional woman since Joan. No matter how cliché, it’s far too easy for the front woman of a legendary band to find someone to spend the night with—but I haven’t been to bed with Cleo Palmer. It’s different with her, although this might very well be a one-night stand. Ever since Joan died, I refuse to look too far into the future because of its utter inability to be predicted. I’m only looking as far as the next kiss.

Cleo’s lips travel upward, along my neck, to my lips.

I pull her to me, I pull her as close as she can possibly get, and I kiss and kiss her. She

feels so good, so warm and comforting and exhilarating against me. Her hands wander down. She unzips my jeans and skates a fingertip along the waistband of my panties, setting my skin on fire.

When we break from our kiss, I take a moment to look into her blue eyes again. I swallow hard at the sight of her. She's so gorgeous and so generous with her talent—and her compliments for me. I barely know her, yet she has changed something inside me already.

“Can I?” she asks, while hooking a fingertip inside my panties.

I have to chuckle at her politeness, but maybe this is how things unfold in the bedroom these days, between people her age. The other day, Tim was wearing a T-shirt with consent is sexy stenciled on the front. I could only agree, just as I can now.

“Yes,” I say. Because, oh yes, she can. I'm so ready for Cleo, so ready to feel all of her everywhere.

She sends me a smile, then kisses me again. God, these kisses. I can't seem to get enough of them. I most certainly haven't been kissed like this since Joan kissed me last.

This time, when we pause for air, Cleo scoots downward and pulls down my jeans. Greedily, I give her a hand, before helping her out of her jeans as well.

I reach for her panties next. I can't wait to see all of her. My heart beats double time in my chest. I feel more alive than I feel on stage, if that's even possible. I didn't think it was. What is it with this woman that she turns me on so much, so beyond the boundaries of what I've come to know? I find her gaze before I remove her underwear. She gives me a small nod. I slide her panties off her and simply doing so is enough to ignite a wild pulsing between my legs. But Cleo doesn't let me have my

way with her just yet. She wants me fully naked—a desire I totally understand.

She pushes me onto my back and takes off my panties. She runs her fingertips all the way up from my ankle to my upper thigh, leaving me no room to maneuver—or let me come for her. I'm too enthralled to fight for top. My time will come. It always does.

Her fingertips trace all sorts of figures on my lower belly before returning to my thighs.

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“I want to see you,” she says, again. This time, it’s more of a whisper than a question. Her fingertip dips in the space where my thighs meet.

I spread my legs and let her see.

Cleo sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. It makes her look completely irresistible, but I resist. I let her go through whatever she needs to go through. I let her have her moment. There will only ever be a first time for this.

Her breath comes faster and her lips are slightly agape. Her fingertip skates along my inner thigh, drawing more delicate figures, until it meanders up higher.

She slides a finger through my wetness as she leans in to kiss me again. It’s all so gentle and tender and unlike how I’m used to going about things when I’m in bed with another woman. I always feel like I have to give them the full Lana Lynch experience, whatever that is, and exceed any expectation they might have had about sleeping with me.

It’s the opposite of that with Cleo. She’s giving me the Cleo Palmer experience and every single second of it is as exquisite and delicate as she is.

I run my hand through her hair as I moan in the back of my throat. I hope she knows this is as much—if not more—a treat for me as it is for her. She might have known that she wanted this for a while, but the suddenness of my realization, the lack of time leading up to it, doesn’t take away from its acute fierceness. I want her so badly. I want her all over me and inside me. I want her so much that despite my inability to predict the future, I already know that one night won’t suffice for all the things I want

to do with her.

Cleo kisses her way down again. Her lips against the skin of my neck rev up the engine of desire inside me even more. So much so that I'm perfectly happy relinquishing full control to her. Cleo pauses at my breasts, bestowing the full attention of her lips and tongue on them for long, delicious minutes. Then she kisses her way down my belly, lingering around my belly button, but it's clear to see she has only one final direction in mind.

When she reaches her destination, I'm already half beside myself. She cranes her neck and looks back at me and her expression is so serious, it sets me off all the more. I spread wide for her, and then Cleo bows before me. She kisses my inner thigh and delightfully slowly makes her way to the apex of my thighs.

Her tongue is warm and soft on me. Her hair tickles my belly. Her fingertips dig into the flesh of my behind. Everything about this moment is utterly perfect. It's that dizzying instant before everything explodes, like when I walk on stage, glance at the audience, and curl my fingers around the mic, anticipation building to that sublime crescendo, just before I sing the very first note. On stage, a moment like that doesn't last very long. I have to follow the music and I can't revel in that magic space longer than the song allows. But here, I can linger as long as my body will allow me. As long as I can take it. As long as I can withstand the deliciousness of Cleo's divine tongue on me.

Oh, damn. I usually last a hell of a lot longer than this, but my neglected body is no match for Cleo's intensity. For her effortless sexiness. For how she sings "I Should Have Kissed You" with me. For how much she wanted this and how she could so perfectly translate that desire into a climax for me.

I come wildly at her deft tongue. I let myself be carried away on this dazzling wave of her, because Cleo is nothing if not dazzling. When she takes to the stage as well as

when she kneels between my legs.

Next time we sing together, when she sings to me, this is the image that will come to me and—no doubt—as long as we’re on stage together, I won’t be able to resist doing this over and over again.

So much for not predicting the future.

Chapter 18

Cleo

I’m feeling cockier than after the rare occasion of a perfect gig. Did this just really happen? The evidence is on display in full glory right in front of me. Lana Lynch climaxing is the most glorious thing I’ve ever seen in my life. My elation is greater than after the first time we sang together. Maybe this is my ultimate high: making Lana come. I sure hope this won’t be the only time I get to do this because there’s an addictive quality to having the great Lana Lynch clasp her thighs against your ears in ecstasy like that.

She opens her arms to me and I nestle inside her warm embrace. Lana rolls on her side and slides her knee between my legs as she holds me close. As glorious as making her come was, to lie in her arms like this is even more of a thrill, although it’s only this thrilling because of what came before. Because of everything that has come before. I gaze into her eyes and all I can think of is how the hell I’m going to stop myself from falling in love with her—if that’s even still possible.

I can still taste her on my tongue; I can still smell her deepest essence on my lips.

“Hey,” she whispers, her mouth close to mine. “That was...” She juts out her bottom lip. “Out of this world.”

“Thanks.” Thanks? Way to go, Cleo. Way to, in one split second, destroy your image in Lana’s eyes. “I mean, my pleasure.”

Lana sends me a sweet smile. She looks so different than she does on stage. Much more vulnerable without that ever-present mask of cool she likes to hide behind. She brushes my hair away from my face.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you weren’t coming to my room to talk.” Her fingertip skates along the edge of my ear.

I shake my head as I smile back at her. I seem to have lost the ability to talk altogether—it’s better than spouting nonsense, anyway.

“Let’s see if I can return the favor.” Her fingertip slides down my neck to the hollow of my throat. “You’re so beautiful.” She sounds as though she means it from the bottom of her heart. Her finger makes a straight line down as she leans in to kiss me. Her kiss is soft, her tongue heavenly against mine. I close my eyes and press myself against her. She cups my breast and brushes her thumb over my nipple. I want her so damn much. Even though I’m wrapped in Lana’s arms, part of me still finds it hard to believe this is happening. That she’s about to ‘return the favor.’ But my breast is cupped in her palm. My lips are claimed by hers. My clit is beating like a second pulse. My body is more than ready for Lana even though my brain is still trying to catch up.

While we kiss, she gently pushes me onto my back. Her hand slides down my belly, then stops, her fingertips so close to my clit that the delicious anticipation is overwhelming.

We break from our kiss and she stares at me for what feels like the longest seconds of my life. To have Lana Lynch look at me like this, like I’m the most delicious piece of food she’s about to take a bite of, with her fingers dangerously close to my clit, is at

the same time the most torturous and divine sensation in the world.

While I know, in my head, that my infatuation with Lana is based on a version of her that probably doesn't even exist, my heart doesn't care. For now, I let my heart win. My head will—hopefully—be there for me when I need it most. But I don't need it now. What I need most of all is for Lana's fingers to slide down, and down, and down.

I know her and I don't know her, yet I want her with the kind of ferocity that I usually reserve for someone I love. I don't give away my heart so easily. Yet, to Lana, I would give it in a single heartbeat. I would give it to her in the space it takes for us to sing a song together. Because it's our duet that has sealed this deal. It's because of us singing together that her fingertip is edging closer and closer to my clit.

She's still looking at me as though she wants to absorb every expression on my face, as her hand finally disappears between my legs. Her fingers are light as a feather as they slide through my wetness. I want so much more of them—of her.

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“Lana, please,” I beg, looking her in the eye. How can she refuse me when I do that? She can’t. A finger travels upward to circle my clit.

“Argh,” I groan.

She has the most sensual lips. Her hair is all over the place. Her arm looks strong and the motion of her shoulder stirs something deep inside of me because it’s that very motion that is making me feel like this.

Lana draws a few more slow circles around my clit, then lets her finger slip down again, all the way inside.

My breath stalls as she pushes inside of me. When I look into her eyes again, it’s as though the world stops. Everything else ceases to exist. There’s just us, Lana tethered to me, to my most private spot, with her finger high inside of me.

Her finger moves. Lana thrusts inside me gently. The movement is still so minute, yet I feel it everywhere. This is the woman whose posters graced my teenage bedroom walls. This is the singer who inspired me to start my own band. The feminist who made it all look so easy while it damn well wasn’t. That very woman is moving her finger inside me while gazing deep into my eyes, as though wanting to unearth some secret from the depths of my soul.

Her finger retracts and is swiftly replaced with more. She spreads me wider. She pushes deeper. Her motion picks up speed. Her shoulder shudders as she fucks me. As she takes me. As she changes something inside me forever because how can I ever be the same after doing this? With her? With Lana fucking Lynch.

“Oh, Lana.” I need to say her name.

Her lips part a fraction, as though she might say something back, but she doesn't. Then, it all becomes too much too quickly and I can't keep my eyes open any longer. I give myself to the pleasure she's coaxing from me. I give myself to her. I let her take me there. I ride her fingers until my muscles are spent and my body is all climaxed out. Until I feel as though I've just played three gigs in a row.

Lana lowers her forehead to mine. When she blinks, I can feel her eyelashes brush against mine. Slowly, her fingers retreat. She brings them to the small gap between our chins, then sucks them between her lips.

Holy mother of god. I'm about to spontaneously come again at the sight of her. Then, I know I'm a lost cause. Then, I know I'm already so in love with her, or this version of her, that I won't know what to do with myself for the rest of this tour. But I wanted this. I started this. Whatever happens next, in however many pieces my heart might be broken, it will have been worth this night a thousand times over.

Lana crashes down next to me. This is no time to be bashful. Besides, I need to take all I can get from this night with her. I turn to her and curl my arm around her waist.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“More than okay.” Maybe this is the best moment so far, even better than all the spectacular ones before—this quiet, peaceful moment we're having together now.

“Thirsty? Hungry?” she asks.

I shake my head. My hand skates a little lower, cupping her buttock. “Only for you.”

“Cleo,” someone whispers in my ear. “Hey, Cleo.” When I open my eyes, I wonder if

I'm still dreaming. Lana's face is close to mine. "Sorry to wake you, but..."

"What time is it?" It's hard enough to keep track of the schedule, but my brain is complete mush this morning. Are we on the road today? Are we playing tonight?

"It's early, but maybe you should go back to your room before people start waking up," Lana says.

"Okay." I stretch my arms above my head. Every cell in my body wants to remain in Lana's bed. "Did you get some sleep?"

"Oh, yeah. You wore me out. A show followed by..." Lana arches up her eyebrows, as though it's somehow difficult to express in words what we did last night. "That."

"We had sex." I have far fewer qualms about that. I pull her to me, not caring about how uncool that might appear. "And it was fucking spectacular." I want to kiss her, but she pulls away.

"About that," Lana says. "Yes, it was wonderful." She pauses. "But, um, could we keep it between us, please?"

Is she serious? This is a tour. To keep a secret, let alone one like this with two bands plus entourage is asking the impossible. Moreover, I'm not allowed to tell anyone that I slept with Lana Lynch? "Why?" Is she regretting it already?

"Because I don't like people talking behind my back and..." She leans closer again, rubbing her nose against mine. "We don't know what this is yet. It's easier to explore... this, without everyone on the tour speculating about it."

"Okay." I can't really argue with that. "But, Lana, realistically, I won't be able to keep this from my bandmates for long." Tim will be the first to notice there's

something different about me. “This smile.” I paint on an exaggerated grin. “Will give me away in no time.”

“Just for now, please.” Lana pushes her nose against my neck. I feel the heat of her breath as she expels a deep sigh.

“We’d best not ride on the same bus today, then.” I think we’re on the road today.

“That would be a recipe for disaster—and so much gossip, we might never recover from it,” she whispers in my ear. “I find you utterly irresistible, Cleo.”

Music to my ears. To let her know I feel the same, I pull her closer again. Her breasts pressed against mine awaken my arousal.

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“You don’t have to resist me,” I whisper back—most certainly a sentence I’d never dreamed I’d say to the likes of Lana Lynch. “Can we get together tonight?”

“I’d like that, but let’s see.” Lana gently kisses me on the cheek. “Let’s play it by ear. You know how it is on tour.”

I do know, but I’ve never toured—or slept—with Lana before so, for me, all the usual rules are out of the window.

“Sure.” I try to sound casual. Should I say something about how much last night meant to me? But after how it was between us, surely she knows.

Lana reaches her arm across me and grabs the corner of the duvet. “Now,” she says, as she slowly peels it away. “Time for you to go.”

I pretend to shiver, even though I’m running hot with desire for her.

Lana seems to have second thoughts about kicking me out as well. She gazes at my naked breasts as though mesmerized. She huffs out some air.

“I told you,” she says on a sigh. “You’re irresistible.”

“And I told you.” I look into her eyes. “You don’t have to resist me.”

A hint of smile plays on her lips. “I do right now.” She quickly presses one last kiss to my cheek, then looks away. “Go. I can’t watch. You’re too gorgeous. Just gather your stuff and go.”

I maneuver onto my knees and glue myself against her naked back, making sure she feels how hard my nipples are. “Tonight,” I whisper. “Because I can’t resist you either.”

I kiss the nape of her neck, take a deep breath, and get out of bed.

Chapter 19

Lana

Logan’s going over the schedule with me on the bus, but I can barely focus. Whereas previously when I engaged in a bout of bedroom activity, I felt invigorated, restored even, it’s different this time around.

“We’ll be in New York next week,” Logan says. “Isabel Adler has confirmed she’s coming to the show.” He all but bats his lashes. He wasn’t there when Isabel and I recorded “I Should Have Kissed You” and he doesn’t miss an opportunity to remind me of that. “I don’t ask for much, I think.” He tilts his head and puts his hands together. “But, please, pretty please, can you introduce me to her? I will forever be indebted to you. I will love you and stay with you, working for you in this capacity as your humble servant, forever. And I swear to take all your secrets to my grave.”

Secrets? What’s he talking about? Someone might have seen Cleo leave my room this morning, but Logan’s not the type to keep quiet about something like that.

I ignore the unruly thought. “No problem. I’ll make sure you meet Isabel.” Another thought pops into my head. “Actually, we should all get together. You know what? I’ll text her myself.” I want Cleo to meet Isabel Adler. After all, she sings her part in our song every single show.

Logan claps his hands together. “Great idea!”

I fish my phone out of my pocket. There's a message from Cleo. Instinctively, I turn my screen away from my assistant's gaze. Cleo has left me a voice message instead of a text. I can't possibly listen to that with Logan sitting so close to me.

Instead, I text Isabel, inviting her to a get-together with The Lady Kings and The Other Women. Has she seen any of the videos on the internet of Cleo and me singing our song? If so, what does she make of it? And can she tell that it was in the cards that Cleo and I would do much more than sing? That we would actually kiss—and then so much more than that? I'm swamped with a cascade of memories from last night. Cleo's lips against mine. Her perfect breasts resting in my palms. Her mouth on my—

My phone buzzes in my hand. Isabel has texted back already.

* * *

Leila and I would love to have you all over for a party. Anything for The Great Lana Lynch (says Leila). ;-) Have your people contact mine and we'll make it happen. We're looking forward to The Lady Kings' show So Very Much! Izzy xo

* * *

I make Logan's day by showing him the message. "How about that?"

Logan pretends to faint on the spot, the back of his hand dramatically pushed against his forehead. "Have you read her biography?" he asks.

"Of course." That reminds me I need to read the script Roy gave me—the one about my own life. Maybe I should ask Cleo what she thinks of someone making a movie of my life. It would be great to get a fresh perspective on that, from someone much younger with very different viewpoints.

“Some people are just... larger than life,” Logan muses.

“You go dream of Isabel Adler,” I say. “While I make some calls.”

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“Let me know if you need anything else.” Logan gets up and fixes his gaze on me. “Seriously, though, Lana. Thank you.”

“Thank you for everything you do for me.” I shoot him a wink.

“It’s my absolute pleasure. You know that.” I watch him saunter off. Logan is such a ray of sunshine, I should pay him just for bringing that to my life. Who else was crazy about Isabel Adler again? One of The Other Women’s mother. Another reminder of how much older I am than Cleo. Speaking of, a message from her is waiting to be heard.

I put in my earbuds and glance around. Everyone’s going about their business. Billie’s back on our bus and deep in conversation with Andy. Sam and Deb are working on a bass line. Most other passengers are reading or dozing. The coast is clear for me to listen to what Cleo has to say. My heart does that crazy pitter-patter again as I navigate to the message.

* * *

Hey, Lana. It’s Cleo. I forgot to tell you something before you kicked me out at the crack of dawn. Or maybe it was too hard for me to say to your face. I don’t know, but, um, I think you are so amazing. Last night was sooo amazing. Literally, like all my wildest, craziest dreams coming true. I know you want to keep this quiet and I will respect that. Of course, I will, but I would really, really, really love to see you tonight. Okay. See you later. Bye.

* * *

The message ends with the sound of an air kiss. Could Cleo be any cuter? Of course I want to see her tonight, but I don't want to raise too much suspicion. I'm not ready to tell my bandmates what happened. I don't feel like dealing with any of what that might bring about—like Billie and Jess being jealous.

I text her back that I got her message and that I look forward to seeing her at the next rest stop. I'm of half a mind to switch buses, but now's not a good time to upset the natural order of things, if such a thing even exists on a tour. But of course it does. Otherwise, none of it would work. So much can be arranged, controlled even, except the humans. For such a young band, The Other Women have been a dream to tour with so far, although I might be biased. Aside from the odd unrequited crush, there have been no tantrums or raucous behavior. If you discount last night. Although I wouldn't call what Cleo and I did raucous. It was passionate and delicious and definitely more-ish.

It was almost a logical consequence of what we go through on stage together, although that logic doesn't hold up to too much scrutiny. I'm on stage with Billie, Sam, and Deb for many more hours and I'm not sleeping with any of them—although I did sleep with Joan for a very long time.

The bus pulls up to a rest stop and I can't wait to get off. I can't wait to see Cleo. I may be old enough to be her mother, but I feel as young and reckless as the members of our support band.

Back in the day, Joan and I usually stayed on the bus whenever it stopped. The two of us walking into a service station together caused too much upheaval for us to want to deal with. We'd briefly stretch our legs and get some air in a secluded spot, away from anyone who might recognize us. Because the one thing I've learned from a career in music spanning decades is that fame does funny things to people—to the famous ones and the ones who adore them alike.

If you get told, over and over, how your voice unleashes some long-buried emotion in someone, or how one of your songs conveys a particular sentiment that can't be expressed any other way, there's a real danger of that going to your head. Especially if you're the face—and the voice—of the band.

That's why The Other Women are even more impressive, apart from their relatively good behavior. Despite their success, they don't act as though they are the second coming of rock music. They must get smoke blown up their asses all the time—I know how it goes—yet they're much more down-to-earth than I ever was at their age. Maybe it's because they don't have as much to fight for any longer. Bands of their composition are automatically accepted these days. They are the norm, whereas The Lady Kings operated outside what was considered normal for the first decade and a half of our journey. We always acted as though we had something to prove for the simple reason that we did.

These days, it's impossible for me to stay on the bus, if only to catch a glimpse of Cleo. Huge—some might call them obnoxious—sunglasses perched on my nose, I walk over to where The Other Women and their entourage are huddled together.

Jess is the first one to spot me. Her face lights up instantly.

“Question,” I say as I approach. “Who wants to hang out with Isabel Adler when we're in New York?”

Daphne shrieks. “I do!” Her eyes grow wide. “I have to call my mom.”

Cleo finds my gaze. Something passes between us. For an instant, I allow myself to imagine what this would be like if we were together and people knew about it. It's a foolish thought because Cleo and I have only slept together once and there's no point in thinking it will go much further than fooling around on the tour, but still. Because all I want to do is fold an arm around her shoulder and pull her close, inhale some of

her scent, remember some more of last night's magic.

"I'm nervous already," Cleo says. "Have you spoken to her? Do you know how she feels about you and I singing your duet?"

"Don't worry." All I can do is send Cleo my biggest smile. "You have nothing to be nervous about." I look into her clear blue eyes.

"But still," Cleo says. "She's an icon and I..."

"You're Cleo Palmer. You're the future of music," Tim says. "Isabel is... I won't say the past. I like the music she's making now, but you can't compare it to what we do. It's not the same."

"How do you figure?" I'm both needling him and curious about what he has to say about this subject.

"Well." Tim turns to me. "Tell me honestly. If you'd gotten the request to record a duet with Isabel fifteen years ago, when both of you were at the absolute top of your game..."

Ouch. Way to kill my vibe, Tim.

Cleo elbows Tim in the biceps.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean any offense. You know I don't, Lana." I admire how Tim is so unperturbed by so many things that don't really matter. I figure he's been through a thing or two in his young life. "What I mean is that you were the singer of this ultra-cool rock band and Isabel Adler was this—how to put it."

"Amazing singer with the biggest set of pipes that's ever graced our ears," Daphne

chimes in.

“I’m not saying Isabel Adler isn’t an amazingly skilled singer and performer, but she always relied on sentiment and drama so much.”

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“So did The Lady Kings,” I say.

“Maybe, but in a totally different way.”

“You’re so full of shit, Tim,” Daphne says.

Tim ignores her and continues. “I’m just wondering if you would have recorded that song with Isabel Adler fifteen years ago. That’s all.”

“What does it even matter?” Cleo says.

“It does and it doesn’t,” Tim turns to her. “Fifteen years ago, we were fourteen years old.”

Ouch again. I should have stayed on the bus.

“We were so into The Lady Kings back then. We still are now. The Lady Kings are our beacon.” Tim fixes his gaze on me now. “That’s why it should be obvious that I mean no offense with anything I say, Lana. I—we—love you so much. You have my respect and admiration forever, but... things would have been totally different if you’d released a duet with Isabel Adler fifteen years ago. That’s all I’m saying.”

Ah, the arrogance of youth. In a way, it’s a beautiful thing.

“If Izzy had asked me back then,” I say, pushing my sunglasses up my nose, “I would have jumped at the chance to make music with her. She’s a class act. There’s no one like her. That’s my final answer.”

“It’s easy enough to say now.” Tim can’t let this go. It will be interesting to introduce him to Izzy next week.

“On the subject of this song.” I take off my sunglasses. “Cleo, can I talk to you in private for a minute?”

Admittedly, my segue isn’t as smooth as I would have liked it to be. But the bus will leave soon, and I just want a few moments alone with Cleo.

“Sure.” Cleo takes a few steps back and, together, we walk to where the buses are parked.

“Thanks for your message,” I say, successfully keeping myself from touching her.

“Sorry about Tim. I don’t know what’s with him today.”

“That’s perfectly fine. My ego isn’t that easily bruised.” Anymore.

We stop and look at each other. Even though we’ve only slept together once, there’s already so much between us. “I’d love to see you tonight. I’ll text you my room number later,” I can’t resist saying.

“Can’t wait.” Cleo digs her fists deep into her jacket pockets. “I haven’t told anyone, but it’s hard. We’re on that bus all day, and all I can think of is you and I can’t tell my friends.”

“I know. Time feels so compressed when you’re on tour and you feel so many emotions so much more intensely.” That’s probably why standing here with Cleo and not being able to touch her feels like absolute torture. “But think of Jess. You don’t want to...” You don’t want to get her into a state over something that might be nothing, I think, but don’t say. I wouldn’t mean it. Despite the heightened emotions

that come with a tour, something nobody is immune to no matter how many tours you've been on, I know this is not nothing. "You should probably break the news to her extremely gently."

Cleo nods. "You know what else I look forward to?" she says.

I shake my head and I can't help myself. I take a step closer.

"Singing with you tomorrow night." She tilts her head. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be talking about now, anyway?"

I nod. I glance around. As far as I can tell, no one's looking at us. I reach for her wrist. She slides her hand out of her pocket and I take it in mine.

"That's how it all started," I say, threading my fingers through hers—and losing my mind a little more.

Chapter 20

Cleo

We've been back on the bus for an hour, but I can still feel where Lana touched her fingers against mine.

"Can we talk?" Jess has appeared out of nowhere.

"Sure." I make room for her next to me. "What's up?"

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“I might be wrong about this, but I have this... hyper-awareness when it comes to Lana, because, um, because of how I feel about her. You know how I feel about her, don't you?”

Damn. It's that time already. I nod, trying to keep a grave expression on my face.

“Earlier, when you and she walked off, I couldn't help but look over and... I got this vibe that... you were discussing much more than the details of your performance together.”

“Jess, I—” I say, but she holds up her hand.

“No, no. There's no need to say anything. I just need to know that you wouldn't do that to me. We're best friends. Have been for many years. We're in this amazing band together. We have a dream life. We're touring with the freaking Lady Kings. This, right here, is the dream, Cleo. Surely, you don't want to jeopardize that?”

Is she saying what I think she's saying? “Um, no, of course not. Although I wasn't aware that I was jeopardizing anything.”

“I know you probably think it's silly, but my feelings for Lana are real. And they will not go away while we're on tour with her. She's just...” She puffs up her cheeks then blows out some air. “I'm so crazy about her, Cleo.” Did her voice just break a little? And are we back to being fifteen years old? “I'm not sure I could bear it if...”

“If what?”

“If she... started fooling around with one of my best friends.”

“We’re just singing a song together.” What am I doing? Why am I lying? Surely this will only make things so much worse in the long run.

“Okay.” Some of the tension drains from Jess’s face. “That’s all I needed to hear.” She swallows hard. “Thanks for the talk.” With that, she’s gone.

Damn, damn, damn. The problem is I know exactly how Jess feels. I’m crazy about Lana, too, and the thought of her getting involved with one of my bandmates is infuriating and frustrating—on top of being unforgivable.

After dinner, Jess keeps chattering at me. We’re not exactly having a conversation because she’s not letting me say anything. She’s obviously trying to keep me at the restaurant because she’s afraid of where I might end up if I leave.

“Are we going out? There’s word of an amazing club a few blocks from here,” Daphne says. “Tessie’s totally up for it.”

“We’re in!” Jess hooks her arm through mine. She looks at me, as though defying me to say no.

“All right,” I say. “Why not?”

Several more people confirm they will come with us.

“Shall we ask the Kings if they want to join?” Tim asks.

“Despite being well past their prime?” I ask.

“I really didn’t mean it like that, Cleo. Can we just let it go now, please?” He blows

me an air kiss.

“I’ll try to round them up,” Tessie says. “It’s high time for an epic on-tour blow-out.”

Although it would be great if Lana could join us, it won’t solve any privacy problems. If she doesn’t come, I can always go for a little while, try to shake off Jess—who has become my shadow—and go to Lana’s room a little later than planned.

Tessie makes the rounds of the tables. Lana’s not at the restaurant. Is she in her room waiting for me already?

“Billie’s in. Sam and Deb are thinking about it, but look as though they might. Lana’s doing whatever she does in her room, but Billie’s going up there now,” Tessie says when she returns.

Jess visibly perks up at the prospect of Lana joining us.

“You’re a star, but I already knew that.” Daphne caresses Tessie’s hand. They’ve only just met—and taken things much farther, by the looks of it—and they’re able to show it off for everyone to see.

“Treat me to a cocktail in the bar?” Tessie waggles her eyebrows at Daphne.

“Come on.” Daphne indicates we should all join them. “Let’s prepare for our big night out.”

This is my chance. “I’m going to change into something more suited to clubbing.”

“Something more suited to driving all the chicks in the club cray-cray.” Tessie winks at me.

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“Maybe,” I play along. “See you in a few.” I hurry out of there, hoping Jess won’t follow me—but she’s not that bonkers yet. I correct my thinking immediately, because this is one of my best friends I’m referring to. Someone I trust implicitly. Someone I’ve been through ten years of ups and downs with. Someone whose friendship I can’t just set aside because I have the extreme hots for the same rock star as she does.

I’m alone in the elevator. Billie was still downstairs, but I expect her to be up soon. Lana texted me her room number earlier. I make my way over. The door opens as soon as I knock.

“You might want to hide me in the bathroom,” I say, by way of a jumbled hello. “Things are afoot. Billie’s coming this way to get you to join a big night out that I already got roped into.”

Lana looks at me in that calm and collected way she has, unswayed by the mad human tornado that just waltzed into her room.

“Hey,” she says, and curls her arms around my waist. “I’ve been waiting all day for some alone time with you. I’m not going to some club with people half my age. I have far better plans tonight.” She leans in to kiss me, but just as her lips are about to touch mine, someone knocks on the door. Billie.

“Bathroom’s over there.” Lana points to a door on her left.

I rush into the bathroom and gently close the door behind me. Lana’s suite is so big, the bathroom is too far from the door for me to hear what Billie is saying—or even be

sure it's Billie at the door. Whoever it is, Lana has made quick work of getting rid of them. Only a few minutes pass before she opens the bathroom door.

"The coast is clear. Where were we?" She holds out her arms for me.

"You don't get it. I have to go. Jess somehow knows about us, or at least suspects, and she's going to go mental if I don't go clubbing with them tonight."

"Jess knows?" Lana's eyes go wide.

"She must have seen us at the rest stop earlier. Or she might have just sensed a change in the air. I don't know, but she reminded me of our long friendship and the repercussions on the band if you and I..." This all sounds so utterly crazy when spoken out loud. It's not as if, when we started the band, we all swore an oath to never fall for the same woman. These things happen and people deal with it.

"Hey, calm down." Lana puts her hand against my back and guides me to a couch over by the bed. "Let's sit for a minute."

"I don't have time to sit. They're expecting me downstairs."

Lana sits as though wanting to lead by example. "There's always time." She reaches out her hand. "That club isn't going anywhere."

I take her hand and let her pull me closer. "I'm so conflicted." I straddle her legs but keep standing. "If I were in Jess's shoes, I'd be upset too."

"Jess has absolutely nothing to be upset about." Lana's hands ride up the back of my thighs.

"I don't see things the way you do."

Lana nods. “I know, which is what makes you so wonderful to be around.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“What do you want to do?” Lana’s tone is so casual, it irks me. She’s not getting how serious this could be—or at least become—for me.

“I want to stay here with you.” And pretend the outside world doesn’t exist.

“Then stay here with me.”

“But then I have to lie to my bandmates, and Jess will know.”

Lana exhales slowly. “Oh, Cleo. I wish you could see that this is all such bullshit.”

“Maybe to you, but all four members of The Other Women have hero-worshipped you for years. We’re all different, so we’ve all dealt with it in our own way, but when it comes down to it, I’m not that different from Jess. I’m just lucky because I’m the singer and I go out there with you on stage every night and it led to... becoming more.”

“You’re overthinking this in the worst possible way.”

“I don’t have to tell you what it’s like to be in a band. How intense that bond is, but also how fragile egos can be, especially on a long tour like this. We have more than six weeks to go and I’m not risking weeks of tension over...”

“Over what?” Eyebrows arched up, Lana inspects my face.

“We’ve had one night.” Oh, no. Am I actually saying this? “Maybe that’s all it should be, for the sake of my band and the peacefulness of the rest of the tour.”

“Cleo.” Lana pulls me closer, pressing her fingertips into the flesh of my behind.

“Jess is a grown woman and she’s your friend. She’s not going to begrudge you sleeping with me forever. Do you want me to talk to her?”

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“You’re the one who wanted to keep this a secret.”

“That’s true.” Lana pulls me down so I’m sitting on her knees. “Because there simply isn’t that much to tell. Yet. Because it makes things easier. Case in point with Jess.” Her fingers steal across my back. “Last night was amazing. For me, at least. It was... It meant something to me, Cleo. It really did. It didn’t feel like a one-off, hence why you’re in my room right now.”

“You know how I feel about last night. I left you that message.”

“Okay, so, in conclusion... we want to be together again. I’d very much like for that to happen tonight. I’d like to spend the night with you, unhurried, not tired from just having played a show, with no wake-up call in the morning. From what you’ve told me, you’d quite like that yourself.”

I nod, swallowing hard. I want nothing more than what Lana is describing right now. It’s the stuff dreams I never even dared to have are made of.

I nod again. I want to kiss her so badly, but my trepidation has not decreased.

“How about I join them at the club for an hour or so, and then come back to your room?”

“Sure. Whatever you want.” Lana folds her arms around my neck. “Now, don’t you think it’s about time you kissed me?” She gazes into my eyes.

I can only bridge the gap between our lips and slip my tongue inside her mouth.

Lana's hands drift up to my hair. She holds me close, as though she doesn't want me to leave.

"Do you still want to go clubbing?" Lana whispers after we break from our kiss.

I shake my head. "No, but I have to." I kiss her again until my conscience is blaring like a loud alarm in my head. Then I tear myself away from her. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You do what you gotta do, Cleo," Lana says and regards me with an odd smirk on her lips.

Chapter 21

Lana

Because I don't feel like waiting alone in my room for Cleo, I take the biopic manuscript to read in the bar downstairs.

Some of the older crew members are hanging out. I order a beer and join them to shoot the breeze, to blow off some steam—and to avoid actually reading that script.

"No party for you tonight?" Dave, a burly guy who must be around my age, asks.

I shake my head. "My clubbing days are over."

"Sam and Deb seemed up for it."

"Good for them. How about you?"

"Me?" he gives a hearty laugh. "No," is all the explanation he gives. "I'm glad I

caught you, though.”

“What’s up?” This, too, is part of the touring life. Impromptu conversations with people you’ve just met or that you’ve known forever—like Dave.

“I was just curious how you’re holding up. I was so stoked when I got asked to go back out with the Kings again. I wasn’t expecting it, to be honest. I know Joan’s death hit you hard.”

Dave’s not mincing his words tonight.

“She was my wife.” I glance at the ring finger of my left hand that still holds my wedding ring—I haven’t come across a compelling enough reason to take it off.

“That song you do for her, “The Better Part of Me”, it gets me every single night.” Dave brings his fist to his chest. “Right here. I miss her, too. Joan Miller was something else, all right. She was made of that special stuff. Obviously, you don’t need me to tell you that, but I just want you to know that she was special to all of us and we all miss her so much, especially now that we’re back out on the road without her.”

I glance at Dave’s beer bottle to ascertain what he’s been drinking. I’d better steer clear of whatever beverage made him so sentimental.

“It’s strange without her. The first few gigs, I kept looking over and expecting to see her there, you know?”

“Billie’s excellent, though,” he says. “She really is.”

“Yeah,” I confirm. For a second, I wonder how Billie and Cleo are getting on in the club—whether Billie is putting the moves on her. But it’s easy enough to drag my

mind away from all that frivolity. When your wife, who had seemed perfectly healthy, had a stroke and died in front of you, you learn to see things in perspective—after a while. This is why I can't get worked up about Cleo's drama with Jess. I understand it, but I can't put any energy into it. I prefer to reserve that for things that really matter, like playing—and, perhaps, being with Cleo.

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“Can I tell you something else?” Dave tugs at his graying beard.

“Shoot.”

“I mean no disrespect to Joan, you, or the other members of The Lady Kings. I’ve been with you a long time and The Kings will always be my number one, but that song you do with young Cleo.” He whistles through his teeth. “Something special happens when you two are up there.”

Even Dave has noticed?

“Yeah. She’s good.” Cleo’s made of the same special stuff Joan was made of.

“Good?” He scoffs. “She’s sensational.”

I can only nod approvingly. What would a guy like Dave, and the rest of the crew, make of me sleeping with Cleo? None of these people are saints and many things happen on tour that might not so easily happen in ordinary life. Dave probably wouldn’t bat an eyelid. But that’s the thing with a tour. Once it’s over, all those shenanigans tend to fade automatically because they don’t hold up in real life.

I can easily see myself sleeping with Cleo in hotel rooms all over the country, but I can’t see her staying over at my house on Laurel Canyon, having breakfast with me in my kitchen, in Joan’s chair. That’s about a hundred bridges too far.

“Hey, Dave, you’re a movie buff, aren’t you?”

He nods. “I just caught the latest Jane Campion movie in a theatre downtown while you were all having dinner.”

I slide the manuscript in his direction. “Would you do me a favor and read this for me? Let me know if it’s any good.”

“Untitled Lana Lynch biopic,” he reads out loud. “Whoa. For real?”

“Yeah. Apparently, Faye Fleming wants to play me.”

“Hm. Yeah, I could see that,” he says, as though he’s seriously considering it. “Who wrote this baby?” He peers at the much smaller letters the writer’s name is typed in. “Charlie something. Oh, yeah. Charlie Cross. It’s going to be super queer, that much I can tell without having read one single page.”

“Am I supposed to know who Charlie Cross is?”

“Uh, didn’t Elisa Fox come to the show in LA? Underground is based on Charlie Cross’s books.”

“Really?” Suddenly, I’m a whole lot more interested in reading the script.

“That huge movie with Faye Fleming and Ida Burton that came out a while ago—when there was all this brouhaha about Faye and Ida coming out as a couple. Charlie Cross co-wrote that.”

At least the screenplay writer is queer. That’s something.

“You had no idea?” Dave asks.

“No, because I have no interest in a movie being made of my life. I’m only fifty-four.

What this is..." I tap my finger on the pile of pages in front of me. "Is a movie about Joan dying. That's what it will all boil down to in the end, and I couldn't be less interested."

"Fair enough." Dave eyes the script. "Do you still want me to read it?"

"Yes. I would like that very much." There's plenty of time for me to read it after Dave is done with it. "Thank you. Let's have another beer."

"Right on, Lana."

It's not as if Joan and I were joined at the hip, despite living and working together, but even sitting here with Dave and the rest of the crew feels odd without her. I know my resistance to reading that screenplay, and even more so to the possibility of having that movie made, is me still resisting Joan's death—it's my last-ditch effort against making it even more final somehow, as though she can die more than once.

But it's my prerogative, and I don't care what anyone else has to say about that. If someone even dares to make a move on this production without my blessing, I will sue the pants off their arrogant booty. Who does this Charlie Cross think she is, anyway? Writing a screenplay about me without ever having spoken to me? Where does she get her information? It can only be a load of bullshit. I'm sure, if she were still alive, Joan would agree with me wholeheartedly.

It's well past midnight when I return to my room. There's no sign of Cleo yet. I could text her, but that's not the kind of person I am. If she shows up, she shows up. If she doesn't, too bad for her.

Before I slip into bed with an episode of *Underground*, I search the internet for a clip of our very last duet. The one before we kissed. I watch it a few times, because it's hard not to play it again and again and get sucked into the magic of the moment. Until

I realize it will be too bad for me as well if Cleo fails to show up in my room tonight.

Chapter 22

Cleo

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“Billie, I’m sorry,” I shout over a loud drumbeat. “But this—you and me—it’s not going to happen.” I look her in the eye so this can’t be misinterpreted. “I have feelings for someone else. Okay?”

Billie’s eyes grow wide. “Who?”

“It doesn’t matter who.”

“Someone on the tour?” She sips from her drink while keeping her gaze trained on me.

“I’m really not going to tell you.”

Billie nods as though she’s finally getting that I’m not interested in her. “I guess I’ll find out when and if things get serious.”

“Yeah.” Serious? Me and Lana? It seems too far-fetched, but who knows what will happen? Then Jess turns up behind Billie, bopping to the music, and I’m reminded of at least one reason things had better not get too serious between us.

“Friends?” Billie holds out her hand, suddenly looking rather geeky, instead of the slick guitarist of The Lady Kings.

“Friends.” I shake her hand. “Besides, have you seen all the eyes that are glued to your every move in here? All you have to do is snap your fingers, and you can have whomever you want.”

“That’s not quite true, though, is it?” Is that a hint of hurt in her voice? A smidgen of the old sting of rejection? “And, besides, those eyes you just mentioned—they’re all on you, babe. They’re all on you.” She tilts her head toward me. “You tell that person you have feelings for they are very lucky.”

I grin at her as I imagine me telling Lana how lucky she is. The mere thought of it is preposterous.

“I’m serious. Make sure they know,” Billie repeats.

“Hey.” Jess holds up three fresh beers. “I’ve got more drinks.”

At this rate, I’m never going to get out of here. But Lana’s waiting for me.

“Cheers, ladies.” Billie clinks her bottle against mine and Jess’s before disappearing into the crowd.

“Tim’s tearing up the dance floor, as usual. Shall we join?”

I can’t bring myself to tell Jess that I want to go back to the hotel, even though it means missing out on more time with Lana.

I follow Jess onto the dance floor and even though part of me would rather be with Lana and repeat all the glorious things we did last night, it’s not a hardship for me to dance with my friends, these three people that I love so dearly and have such amazing chemistry with—on and off stage.

The more we dance and drink, the more the thought of Lana dissolves, and the more I’m convinced that I’m meant to be here with Jess, Tim, and Daphne tonight, instead of with her. Because they’re my bandmates and, as my level of intoxication grows, my doubts about what Lana is to me—and what I am to her—grow ever bigger.

By the time I make it back to the hotel, I don't even try to knock on Lana's door. It's deep into the night and I don't want to disturb her. I crash into my own bed and only wake up when it's almost time for lunch.

I check my phone, but there are no messages from Lana. There are a ton of Instagram posts about our bender last night and messages in the band's WhatsApp group about how epic it was and the varying levels of headache everyone is experiencing.

I'm not sure if I should text Lana, but I should at least apologize because I said I would go by her room and I didn't. If it had been the other way around, if I'd been waiting all night for Lana to show up and she didn't, I imagine I'd be pretty upset. So I text her:

* * *

Sorry I didn't make it last night. I couldn't get away. Hope to see you soon. xo

* * *

I laze around in bed, checking email and replying to a few messages, but Lana doesn't respond.

We have our soundcheck soon, so I get up and hit the shower, hoping that Lana will have sent me a message by the time I'm dressed, but she hasn't. Maybe she's done with me already. Maybe me going out clubbing made her see her error in judgement in sleeping with me, someone far younger than her. And then there's the stuff with Jess.

According to the WhatsApp group, a bunch of people are at a diner across the street from the hotel. I need to eat something before we head to the concert venue, so I decide to join them instead of ordering room service and stewing in my own

thoughts.

Tim and Daphne whoop when I walk into the diner.

“She’s alive,” Jess exclaims dramatically.

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I hold my head, pretending to have a massive headache, while most of my hangover is made of regret for letting Lana down. I scan the diner for a sign of her, but Billie is the only member of The Lady Kings present. She gives me a thumbs-up.

What's Lana doing? I can hardly text her again. How would that make me look? I need to talk to her, but I won't have time before the soundcheck. Maybe she'll be at the venue. Oh fuck, my thoughts are spinning out of control again.

Ravenous, I order a stack of pancakes with lots of bacon and a large pot of coffee. At least five tables are taken up by people on the tour.

Just as I get my pancakes, my phone beeps. Heart thudding in my chest, I check the message. It's from Lana.

* * *

Don't worry about it. I missed you, though. I hope you won't be too tired tonight.

* * *

I can't help my cheeks from flushing the brightest pink.

"Damn, Cleo," Daphne says. "Did you get lucky last night? And did she just text you something not suitable for the brunch table?"

I quickly hide my phone. I fan my cheeks. "Just... hungover," I mumble. "Nothing of what you are insinuating." I'm just glad Billie's not at our table. I probably shouldn't

have told her I have feelings for someone. What if she tells Lana? Or someone else?

I devour the pancakes, my body craving the sugar after last night's excess. I need all the energy I can get. We have a show tonight. I have a duet to sing with Lana followed by... my cheeks burn again at the prospect of what might happen tonight.

"Chop, chop," Tim says. "You know they hate it when we make them wait."

Chapter 23

Lana

I catch the last of The Other Women's soundcheck. Cleo looks adorable, though, perhaps, a touch tired. Maybe in another lifetime, I would have been annoyed that she failed to show up last night, but in this lifetime, I know that it's futile to hold youth against the young. It helps that I've been exactly where she is now. It's impossible to recall the number of appointments I missed when The Lady Kings were hitting the big time, although my memory's still good enough to know the occasions were many.

Cleo clocks me when she walks off stage. I can tell she's unsure whether to walk toward me, probably because of Jess, who is hot on her heels. I don't get off on testing her loyalties. Even though I genuinely believe the whole thing is a storm in a teacup, I understand that it's a big deal for Cleo.

But then, it's as though she can't help herself, as though there's an invisible force pulling her to me.

"Hey," she whispers. "I'm sorry about last night." Looking at her face is like watching ice cream melt into a puddle.

Behind her, Jess is glaring at us. I barely keep myself from winking at her.

“It’s okay,” I whisper back. Damn. I wish I could give her a hug. Why don’t I just do it? What does it even matter? Clearly, she needs one. And I want to hold her in my arms.

I find her eyes, blocking out everyone milling about, replacing instruments and positioning cables, and Jess, who seems to believe that if she just keeps on standing there, staring at us, nothing will ever happen between Cleo and me. But it’s not up to Jess, or her uninformed crush on me, to dictate what I do. Knowing how fleeting life can really be, how it can all slip through your fingers in a matter of seconds, I open my arms to Cleo.

Hesitation crosses her face. “It’s okay,” I repeat. “Come here.” I let her come to me. I don’t want her to feel as though she has to hug me in front of everyone. It’s all optional.

Cleo exhales slowly, then bridges the remaining distance between us. She folds her arms around my waist and puts her head against my shoulder. I close my arms and hold her tight.

I’m keenly aware of a shift in the atmosphere around us. All work has stopped and everyone is looking at us.

“Oh,” someone whose voice I can’t identify exclaims.

“Oh shit,” Billie, whose voice I do recognize, says. “It’s Lana. Of course.” I don’t know what that means, but I’m sure Billie will tell me later.

From under my lashes, I witness Jess stomp off. Oh, please. It’s not as though I’m passionately kissing Cleo on the lips in front of everyone, declaring my undying love for her. I’m just giving her a hug. Although it’s also true that I don’t go around distributing hugs like this to just anyone.

“It’s all good, Cleo,” I whisper. “Everything’s fine.”

I release my hold on her—the soundcheck must go on—and take her hands in mine.

Cleo has perked up considerably and, for me, it’s enough reason to have hugged her. I wanted to turn that frown on her face upside down, and that’s exactly what I’ve done. I’ve hugged her back into her happy place. Cleo arches up her eyebrows.

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“The cat’s out of the bag now,” she says, and chuckles. “Fuck, Lana.”

“It’s just a hug. People can make of that whatever they want.”

“In the microcosm of a tour, it’s much more than a hug.”

I nod. Just like Cleo and me having slept together only once is so much more than a one-night stand. With all the emotions running through us when we sing our duet, it was already much more than that. With all the emotions unleashed while we were in bed together, it has become even more. That’s why I have no qualms displaying my affection for her in front of other people. Nor do I have trouble admitting that asking her not to tell anyone, under circumstances where everybody is breathing down everyone else’s neck, was not the wisest move.

Cleo drops my hands. “Damn. Jess. Did she see?”

“I think so.”

“I’d better go find her. Try to explain.”

“Hey.” I reach for Cleo’s hands again. “You don’t have to explain anything to anyone.”

“You’re in a band. Surely, you understand that I do have to explain.”

“Do what you gotta do.” Maybe I’m the naive one here. I highly doubt it. But Cleo must go through her own things and fight her own battles. I give her hand one last

squeeze and let her go after Jess.

“Well, fuck me.” As though waiting in the wings for her moment, Billie has already sidled up to me. “I should have known.”

“Should have known what?”

“I can’t compete with you in anything, Lana.”

“What does that mean?”

“Aren’t you a little too old for her?” Billie’s tone is cutting. “And aren’t you the one who said no fraternizing with the support band?”

“That didn’t stop you from hitting on Cleo.” I can be snippy too.

“Once again, Lana gets what Lana wants.”

I get the feeling this is about more than Cleo and me.

“Is there a problem?” I look Billie in the eyes, hoping to unearth what’s bothering her so much.

“Even if there was, who am I to go against the magnificent Lana Lynch?”

I nod slowly, taking my time to let her comment slide off me. “I’m sorry if this makes you jealous, but you know, it is how it is.”

“Do you have feelings for her? Because she sure has feelings for you.”

This is not a conversation I should be having right now, especially with all the crew

around.

“That’s really none of your business.” What did she just say? Cleo has feelings for me? If that’s the case, how does Billie know? Cleo and I really should have a conversation. It appears we suddenly do have a lot to discuss.

“Whatever.” Billie walks off in a huff. I hope she’s the professional she made herself out to be when we welcomed her into The Lady Kings. Either way, she’s going to have to get over it fast, because we have a show in a few hours.

Chapter 24

Cleo

“What the hell, Cleo?” Jess, who usually never swears, yells. “You promised me.”

What am I supposed to say? And did I really make that promise?

“Jess, please, calm down.”

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“You know how I feel about Lana. You’ve always known. You’ve known for fucking ever, yet you... you go and do that.”

“Jess, come on. It’s not like that.”

“Tell me to my face that you’re not sleeping with Lana.” She stands right in front of me.

I back away a little, slamming the door of my dressing room shut behind her.

“Tell me,” she demands.

“We slept together once.”

“Oh, fuck.” Jess’s eyes go moist. “Oh, Cleo.”

“I didn’t do it to hurt you,” I say, my voice a little ragged. “Lana, she’s...”

“I can’t believe you slept with her.” Jess starts pacing.

It’s not exactly something I did on my own, I want to say, but that would only make things worse. I’ve never been in a situation like this before and I don’t know what to say to make things better. In fact, I don’t think I can actually make things better for Jess. Only she can do that.

“I told her how I felt about her.” Jess buries her face in her hands. “I’m such an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. She’s Lana Lynch. She tends to have that effect on people. Present company included.”

Jess takes a deep breath, then drops her hands. “I know I’m overreacting. I’m fully aware of it. I just feel so... inexplicably hurt.” She purses her lips. “It’s probably jealousy. Damn it. I’m so jealous of you. Honestly, when I saw her take you in her arms like that, I thought my heart would just give up.”

“I’m so sorry, Jess.”

“I know I have no right to ask you to not get involved with Lana. My head knows it.” She taps two fingers against her temple. “My heart, not so much. Argh.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know whether to hate you or admire you right now.”

“Oh, Jessie. Please, don’t hate me.” I tilt my head. “Come on.”

“I could never hate you. You’re Cleo,” she says, as though that sums it all up, but I know what she means. “That doesn’t mean this will go down easy with me. I’ve adored Lana for so long and to see her with you now, that is just... That’s going to take some serious processing. That’s going to take some time.” She finds my gaze. “Is it serious?”

I hold up my palms. “I don’t know. It’s truly impossible to tell at this point.”

“But she likes you.” Jess shrugs. “Any fool can see that. Any fool but me.”

“We’re on tour. We’re on stage together every other night. It’s intense. But neither one of us knows whether it can ever be serious, or real, even.”

“That duet. Don’t get me wrong, it kills, but... I’m so jealous of you and Lana up there when you sing together. It’s everything. It’s so intoxicating. So good. I can’t

even say anything bad about that. It's like you're made for each other on stage."

I might as well take it as a compliment. I get a feeling they will be scarce coming from Jess for a while.

Our show's almost done and while it's never exactly the same and lesser shows come with the territory, it's just not coming together tonight. Jess's drum beat seems to be a fraction of a second late, throwing Tim off as well. And I'm suddenly too aware of Tessie in the wings, mooning over Daphne.

While I can accept that it's sometimes going to be like this, I also must take responsibility for it. The band's not on it tonight and it's my fault. Jess is hurt. Daphne's in love. And Tim can only do so much when that special something that we have between us when we play is absent.

Before we launch into our final song, I turn around and make eyes at my bandmates, trying to spur them on to do better, to make an impression on this venue full of people who aren't even here to see us.

Tim gives me a nod. Daphne winks at me. Jess hides behind her drum set.

As I wait for Jess to count us down, I conclude that it would have been easier to go on our own tour, as our own headliners. No inter-band relations to take into account, and a crowd eager to see us play every time.

I sing the first verse and glance to my right. Lana has turned up next to Tessie. Then I know that I wouldn't have missed this tour with The Lady Kings for all the money and fan adoration and peace of mind in the world. Because later tonight, I'll be singing with Lana again, and after that, when we're back at the hotel, I will go to her room and she'll make everything right again.

Lana smiles at me. Does she know I have feelings for her? Even if Billie didn't tell her, she should know. She's the one who opened her arms to me, inviting me into her embrace. Lana's the one who no longer wanted to play it cool, the one who wanted to hold me close against her for everyone on the tour to see. Maybe that's what's thrown me the most. Beneath her cool, sometimes aloof exterior lurks one of the kindest people I've ever met. Of course, I have feelings for her. I smile back at her and instead of being annoyed with my fellow band members, I sing for Lana. I pretend that the audience in front of me is filled with versions of Lana and I sing to them. For the first time since I walked on stage tonight, I feel like I'm good at what I do again.

"That was not okay," Tim says once we've gathered for our habitual post-show debrief. "We did not give a good account of ourselves out there tonight. What's going on?" He looks at Jess. Bass and drums are one package. When one of the two is off, the entire backbone of the band is off.

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“Bad day. Sorry,” Jess says. She looks small. Defeated. Even though I never meant to, I’ve hurt her. I’ve taken away her dream, no matter how far-fetched it was—although, how far-fetched was it really? If I can be in bed with Lana, then why couldn’t she?

“That’s it? That’s your excuse?” Tim still has all this energy running through him. “That you’re having a bad day?”

“Tim, come on. Give Jess a break. We’ve all had bad days. It happens. We have another show the day after tomorrow. We’ll be back on our game.”

“I just want to learn from this so we can make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Tim paces up and down. “There are four people in this band. If we all have a bad day one after the other, we’ll play far more terrible shows than good ones.”

I march over to Tim and put my hands on his shoulders. “Don’t blame Jess. It’s my fault. I—” It’s not like Tim doesn’t know why Jess had a bad gig. “I take responsibility for this one.”

Tim shakes his hands and wiggles his shoulders. “Sorry. My perfectionist tendencies got the better of me. I just think that, no matter what happens behind the scenes, we still should have been better. We owe that to ourselves and to the audience. We didn’t just take this tour so we could play with the legendary Lady Kings. We did it so we could showcase ourselves in the best circumstances. That was not a showcase. That was like a bad rehearsal.”

“Give it a rest, Timmy. Don’t you think you’re exaggerating just a teeny bit?”

Daphne chimes in. “It’s one show. Perfection is an illusion, anyway. It happens. We’ll be better next time.” She turns to me. “Cleo still has a chance to make the audience completely forget about our below-par performance later, when she sings with Lana.” I’m not sure if Daphne is being sarcastic or just plain honest.

Jess dramatically huffs out some air.

“I’m sorry, Jess.” Tim walks over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder. “My energy is changing. I’m calming down. I know it’s hard for you.”

They hug and I’m left feeling even more responsible for everything. My muscles tighten with rising tension. It’s all well and good for Lana to claim that this will blow over and our band will be all right, but I’m the one who has to deal with it.

Instead of letting go of him, Jess pulls Tim close and starts crying on his shoulder.

“I can’t help how I feel,” she says between shaky breaths. “Now I’ve screwed up our show as well.”

I try to find Daphne’s gaze, but she won’t look at me. Is the entire band upset with me now? Is this even worse than I thought it was going to be?

“Okay.” I square my shoulders. “What can I do to make this better?”

“It’s more what you shouldn’t have done in the first place,” Daphne says.

Jess is still crying. Tim strokes the back of her head.

“I can’t undo what I’ve done.”

“It’s like you going after Tessie while you knew I liked her.” The disappointed tone

of Daphne's voice shakes me.

"I would never do that."

"That may be so, Cleo, but it's not hard for me to imagine how Jess feels." Daphne clearly has a thing or two to say. Or maybe it's because we had an iffy performance and all annoyances are bubbling to the surface. "You know how she feels about Lana."

I'm not sure I can argue my way out of this. Everything I think of to say in my defense sounds utterly lacking.

"I agree," Tim says from somewhere beyond Jess's hair. "That this is not how you treat a friend. It's like Friendship 101. Don't sleep with the person your friend has a crush on. Just don't, no matter how much you want to."

Jess stirs in Tim's embrace. She takes a deep breath, then extricates herself from his arms. She looks at us with red-rimmed eyes, her cheeks puffy from the tears that spilled on them.

"It's fine, you guys. I appreciate you standing up for me, but Cleo and I talked about it. It's not like I ever stood any chance with Lana."

"That's not the point, though," Daphne says. "It's the principle that counts."

"Word," Tim says. "But good to hear you feel that way about it, Jessie."

"So..." It's been a while since I've been ganged up on like this. I can't help but be on the defensive. "What do you want me to do? Stop, um, seeing Lana?"

"That would surely help," Tim says.

“It would be the right thing to do,” Daphne adds.

“No,” Jess says on a sigh. “It’s not because I can’t be with Lana that Cleo can’t be with her. That’s just... ridiculous.”

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Phew. “I’ll do whatever the majority tells me to do.” What? No, Cleo. Grave error. Oddly enough, I only have Jess on my side for this. But I do have to ask myself whether Tim and Daphne are right. Have I been so smitten with Lana that I have become the worst friend ever? Did I lose track of what’s most important in my life: the friendship between me and my bandmates and the music we make together because of it? Because our friendship is the secret ingredient of our music and hence, also, of our success.

“I vote that you break things off with Lana,” Daphne says categorically.

Tim doesn’t say anything. At least he’s not agreeing with her—yet.

Jess shakes her head. “Stop it. You make it sound as though Lana just divorced me and Cleo swept right in. That’s not what this is.” She chuckles nervously. “My crush on Lana is... just that. A crush. Because she’s like this divine rock goddess and she’s amazing at what she does, and I’ve been getting too caught up in my head about it.” She wrings her hands. “I would never forgive myself for stopping Cleo from being with her.” Jess shakes her head slowly. “That’s not what I want, because what’s it going to solve?”

Tim squeezes Jess’s shoulder. “It’s your call, Jessie.”

“No, it’s really not my call. You know whose call it is? Lana’s. She gets to decide who she wants to be with and if she wants to be with Cleo, and Cleo wants to be with her, then so be it.”

“Guys, please, you’re making it sound as though Lana and I are running off into the

sunset together. We slept together one time. That's it."

"I stand by my opinion." Daphne locks her gaze on me. "This is your chance to show us what you're really made of, Cleo." She glares at me as though I actually ran off with Tessie. "To show us what's really important to you." With that, she turns and heads for the door. Before she leaves, she faces me again. "It's really not that hard not to hurt your best friends, you know. It's a low bar." Then she exits the room.

Nerves jumble into a ball in my stomach. Lana was wrong. This is a big deal.

"Daphne will be all right," Jess says. "Just give her some time."

"I don't suppose anyone wants to go see The Lady Kings?" Tim smirks at us. "It's like they're getting better with every show."

Chapter 25

Lana

It's the first time Cleo and I have sung our duet since we slept together and I had—wrongly—assumed it would be some sort of sensual musical celebration of that night.

It's anything but. Cleo's stiff and distant and when I walk over to her—because she clearly has no intention of coming to me—she takes a step away. Cleo distances herself from me. Right here on stage.

Earlier, it was obvious The Other Women weren't playing the show of their lives, but these things happen. Tensions can get the better of the greatest bands. The crappy gigs The Lady Kings played when Joan and I were fighting over something stupid are epic in their own way. It's all part of the deal, but Cleo can't see that yet. I'm sure

she's had highs and lows with *The Other Women*, but she's too young to put it all into perspective. She's too young to understand many things that are glaringly obvious to me. Maybe she's right to distance herself from me. Maybe it can make me see a harsh truth as well.

But while we're up here, I will always try to do my very best—to put on a show. I lock my gaze on Cleo as we launch into the final chorus. She returns it, but it's as though she's looking right through me instead of deep into my eyes.

By the time the song ends and we're ready to bow out, I'm not even sure I should take her hand as I always do. But I do. Of course, I do. Not because I'd do anything for the show, for this act we perform which has become so much more than the illusion we first wanted to create for the audience, but because I want to feel her hand in mine. I want to make sure she's all right, even though she clearly isn't, and I don't need to feel her skin against mine to make sure. But I want to feel something of her, I want a way in, an opportunity to pierce whatever armor she's gathered around herself.

I take her hand, and she lets me. We walk off and she doesn't suddenly drop it as soon as we're no longer visible to the audience. Instead, she looks at our joined hands, expels a deep sigh, meets my gaze for a fraction of a second, before removing her hand and walking off. Fun times.

"Trouble in paradise?" Billie whispers as she walks by. At least our show was good. Billie's a pro, she has proved that. She can play under any circumstances.

I drink the water Logan hands me. "What's up with Cleo?" he asks, as he escorts me to my dressing room. By now, everybody knows something's going on between me and Cleo. The rumor mill has been running non-stop since the soundcheck this afternoon.

“I’ll find out.” Instead of heading to my dressing room, I go to Cleo’s. I knock on the door, hoping she’s alone.

She pulls the door ajar, but doesn’t open it fully, as though she has no intention of letting me in.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

“You should shower,” Cleo says. “We have meet and greets.”

“Just for a second?” I put my hand through the gap between the door and the wall and touch my finger against her wrist. “Please?”

In response, she lets me in. She closes the door and leans against it.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Cleo suddenly looks so much younger, as though she just turned twenty instead of being almost thirty. Her hangover’s probably catching up with her as well as the emotions of a bad gig.

“My band... No.” Her gaze skitters all over the place. “They were right.”

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“Cleo?” I reach out my hand to her, but she just looks at it. “What’s going on?”

“We just played one of the worst shows in the history of The Other Women.” Her voice trembles. “And it’s all because of me. Because of what I’ve done. They’re all upset with me, and I can’t blame them. I deserve it. I shouldn’t have...” She pauses, as though she can’t say it. As though, no matter her conflicted emotions about it, our night together can’t be negated just like that. “We... shouldn’t have.”

“Your next show will be all the better for it. I promise.” I care about Cleo, but I don’t need all this drama over nothing.

Cleo shakes her head. “That’s not the point, though. Daphne is angry at me. Jess is pretending she’s okay with it. And Tim... I don’t know. All I know is that I have to fix this.”

“Cleo.” Poor thing. I wish I could just hug it all away again, like this afternoon. “What if there’s nothing to fix? What if I tell you it will all just blow over?”

“You keep saying that. It might not be a big thing for you and your band, but it is for me and mine. We have never let anything like this come between us. You know how hard that is for a band made up of four queers? But our friendship has always come first.”

“Okay. Fine.” I back up a bit. “It’s a big deal for you. But what can you do?”

“That’s simple enough.” She looks me in the eye now.

“Oh. Okay. If that’s what you want.” A knot grows in my stomach.

“It’s not what I want, but it’s what I have to do.”

“Sure.” I nod, slowly and oh-so condescendingly.

“And our duet... I’m not sure we can still do that,” Cleo says.

“I can’t believe this.” I scoff.

“It’s not like I ever signed a contract to sing that song with you at every show.”

“That’s absolutely true, Cleo. You’re free as a bird when it comes to me.”

“Lana, please... This is really hard for me.” She shakes her head. “I feel like I have to choose between you and my band, and it’s excruciating.”

“You don’t have to choose.” I can stand here and declare that all I want, but if Cleo can’t see it for herself, there’s no use. I can’t convince her of something she doesn’t feel in her own heart. That’s like asking someone to love you when they clearly don’t.

“I do.” She sounds adamant, but I can tell it’s more empty bravado than anything else.

“You choose your band.” Following Cleo’s logic, it makes perfect sense, but it undoes something in me. When I slept with Cleo, it was so much more than sex. But maybe we’re already touching on the crux of why this can never work, anyway. The differences between us are too big.

Cleo nods.

I make for the door. “I get it, but...” There’s no point in my pleading my case. What am I pleading for, anyway?

There’s a glint of hope in Cleo’s eyes when she looks at me next, as though I’ve found a magical solution for her impossible conundrum.

“We’ll talk about the duet later, when things have calmed down.”

Cleo exhales and shakes her head. “I can’t do the duet with you anymore, Lana. It’s too much. You’re too... you.”

That’s the first time I’ve ever been accused of being too much of myself, but even this, I somehow understand. We might be professionals, but we’re also humans with feelings. I can choose to see the end of the duet with Cleo as a blessing in disguise. The fans will get over it. I’ll just sing “I Should Have Kissed You” by myself. I’m Lana Lynch. I’ll make it work.

“Okay,” I say. Cleo’s back is still glued to the door. “We’ll stay out of each other’s way.” I point at the door. “Can I go now?” My skin is cooling off quickly. I need to get warm so my voice doesn’t get affected.

She swallows hard before taking a step to the left. “I’m sorry, Lana,” she says, her voice but a ragged whimper.

As I exit her dressing room, I only have a deep sigh to offer in response,

“If I knew she was going to dump me, I wouldn’t have hugged her for everyone to see.” I slur my words, but Dave’s a good sport. Unlike most people on this tour, I’m a lightweight when it comes to drinking. The three beers I’ve had have gone straight to my head.

“Can I join you?” Of all people, Billie turns up at our table. I’m not in the mood for her snark, but what can I say? Apparently, bandmates are more important than anything or anyone else.

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“Only if you bring more drinks.” I have descended deep into a beer-drenched well of self-pity.

Billie signals the bartender before sitting down. “So?” she says. “It’s all over before it even began?”

“If you’ve come here to gloat, can you do it another time, please? Like in three weeks or so? Or three months? Or, here’s a thought, how about never?”

Billie exchanges a glance with Dave. “I haven’t come to gloat. Give me some credit.” She asks the bartender for some water as well.

“Fuck this tour.” With as much drama as I usually reserve for the stage, I huff out some air. “It’s just a fucking duet. We were only ever meant to sing that wretched song together. We won’t be doing that anymore, either.”

“You won’t? Damn,” Dave says. “Pity.”

“We’ll figure something out.” Billie sounds as though she’s totally on top of things.

The bartender comes over to bring our order. I ignore the water and grab another beer. “One bender. One night of reckless excess. One grueling morning of hangovers and self-loathing, then I’ll be good as gold again.” I hold up my bottle. “Be my friends and drink with me tonight.”

“You got it, Lana.” Dave clinks his bottle against mine.

“Sure thing.” Billie follows suit.

“I guess now is not a good time to tell you that script you gave me is the bomb,” Dave says.

“Nope.” I tip the bottle to my mouth and swallow greedily. “Who would want to make a movie out of this, anyway? Who wants to watch this on a big screen?”

“Lana Lynch’s heart being broken by a twenty-something?” Billie says. “Only about a few million people.”

“Heartbroken?” I scoff. “Are you out of your mind? Cleo didn’t break my heart.” I blow some air through my nostrils. “You know what broke my heart? When my wife died right in front of my eyes. That broke my heart into a million pieces. In so many pieces that it still hasn’t mended. That it will never mend. So don’t talk to me about heartbreak, okay?”

“Oh, Lana, please. Not that old song and dance again,” Billie says.

I might be beyond tipsy, but I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Being a member of The Lady Kings equals respecting my ongoing grief. It’s an unwritten rule of the band.

“Excuse me?”

“I know you loved Joan and the two of you were an epic twosome. But Joan died ten years ago. Don’t pretend that what you’re feeling right now is about her. It’s not. Cleo’s not nothing. She’s not just some girl you had a fling with. At least have the guts to admit that.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m Billie, your guitarist,” she says matter-of-factly. “You can always call me for a much-needed dose of truth.”

I chuckle because what else am I going to do? I glance at Dave. “Can you believe this chick?”

Dave just shrugs.

“Lana,” Billie’s not giving it a rest. “It’s okay to admit you have feelings for Cleo. It’s not like it’s not obvious.”

I roll my eyes. I’ve had about enough of this. I’m ready for this wretched day to be over already, but I still need to get blind drunk—I still need to forget what happened.

“That club you went to last night,” I say, ignoring what Billie just said. “Was it good?”

“Oh, yeah.”

It must have been spectacular if it kept Cleo from joining me in my room.

“Maybe we should go,” I offer.

“Lana, sweetie, it’s late. You just played a show. You’re going to crash soon. Frankly, I’m pretty beat myself,” Billie says. “We’re not going clubbing tonight.”

“How about you, Dave?”

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“There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for you, Lana, but don’t ask me to go to some club where they only play the kind of dreadful music that has no decent guitar riff in it and where everyone is at least half my age.” He pats me on the shoulder.

“That’s me told, then.”

Billie looks at me the way Joan used to, when she got me to do something she thought was for the better, but I vehemently disagreed with.

“Can I ask you something possibly delicate, Billie?”

“You can ask me anything you want.”

“Would you not have gotten over the fact that I was sleeping with Cleo pretty soon?”

Billie purses her lips, pretending to give my question a long hard think. “I wasn’t going to break up the band over it, but... other people are sensitive, too. Sometimes, it feels as if everyone else has to do their very best to take your fragile feelings into account while you can do whatever the fuck you want.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

That’s me told again, then.

“So, you think it’s totally fair that Cleo chose her band over me?”

“Duh.” Billie twirls the neck of her beer bottle between her fingers. “Rule number one of every successful, long-running band. You. Always. Choose. The. Band.”

“I get that you don’t start an affair with another band member’s partner. That goes without saying, although I’m sure it happens all the time.”

Billie gives me a look, as though daring me to continue in this self-serving way.

“What I mean is that, yes, you liked Cleo, but she made it clear to you she wasn’t interested. Just like I have zero interest in Jess. Are those futile feelings really enough to stop Cleo and me from seeing each other?”

“Who are you to decide whose feelings are ‘futile’ or not?” Billie bends her fingers into quotation marks. “It’s not up to you to decide that.”

“Maybe not, but what if Cleo and I have real feelings for each other? Do we really have to ignore them just because we are both in a band?”

“I’m staying out of this one.” Dave holds up his palms when I look at him.

“Do you?” Billie asks. “And what are real feelings compared to what, for instance, Jess has for you?”

“Fuck if I know. I only know what I feel.”

“Which is?” Billie tilts her head. Her gaze on me is soft, making me believe she’s not entirely unsympathetic to my cause. She wouldn’t be here with me otherwise.

“I have feelings for her. She has feelings for me. We slay that duet time after time, apart from tonight. That was quite painful, but it’s also more proof of how we feel. I’m sitting here drinking way too much because... because of what? Some false sense

of loyalty she has for her band?”

“No, Lana—” Billie starts, but I cut her off.

“What you’re actually saying is that if you can’t be with Cleo, no one else can. And what The Other Women are saying is that if Jess can’t be with me, no one else can. Don’t you see how utterly ridiculous that is? How juvenile. How incredibly stupid.”

“It’s way more complex than how you just put it,” Billie says.

“I don’t think it is,” Dave says. I could kiss him for backing me up, but he’s really not my type. “Why overcomplicate matters? Lana likes Cleo. Cleo likes Lana. To hell with everything else.”

“Just for the record, I would have given up the wounded bandmate act sooner rather than later,” Billie says. “But I totally understand where Cleo is coming from. You can’t just dismiss it.”

“They’re still so young,” I say on a sigh. “When I was their age, I might have thrown a hissy fit as well. I don’t know. I always had Joan.”

Billie nods, as though she was there when Joan was still alive. She told me she saw us play together a couple of times and that she loved it—always a great way to introduce yourself to me.

“Anyway.” I empty my beer and slam it down with a dramatic bang. “Thank you for talking me out of going clubbing. Truth be told, if I’d gone up to change, I wouldn’t have made it out of my room again.” I send Billie a tipsy smile. “It’s been a day and a fucking half, my friend.”

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“That it has.” She holds up the bottle to me before finishing her beer. “Back on the road tomorrow.”

“New York, here we come,” Dave says. He taps a finger to his forehead. “Always a pleasure, Lady Kings.”

Chapter 26

Cleo

“Hey.” Daphne turns up at my seat on the bus. I’m not even sure where we’re headed any longer. All the cities we’ve visited have blurred into one. “Can we talk?”

“Sure.” I sit up a little.

“How are you?” Daphne turns her entire body to me.

“Okay.” I try to sound upbeat even though I feel like someone has reached into my gut and pulled out all my insides.

“I’m sorry. I was a bit hard on you last night. I didn’t mean to imply that you’re not a good friend or any less of a member of our band.”

“You were right, though. I got Lana tunnel vision. She was all I could see any longer.”

“Who am I to blame you for that? Look at me and Tessie. We’ve only just met, and I

already want to marry her.” She snickers. “In a manner of speaking. Although we might U-Haul when we get back to LA.”

I arch up my eyebrows. “You’re kidding, right?”

She gives a shrug that’s hardly convincing.

“It might be our biggest, but this is not our first tour.” I realize how jaded I sound. “Things happen on the road, you know that.”

“We’ll see,” Daphne says. Neither one of us speaks for a bit. That’s another thing members of a band need to be good at, being comfortable with silence.

“I was up most of the night,” I say after a while. “Thinking about what you said.”

“It’s not like I know any better than anyone else.” Daphne lets the side of her head fall against the backrest of the seat.

“Maybe, or maybe not, but that’s not the point.” It’s hard to look her in the face. I don’t have the energy for a lot of big emotions today. Thank goodness we don’t have a show tonight. I won’t be going clubbing either. “It’s not that I suddenly think that what I did with Lana was so wrong.” It most certainly didn’t feel wrong. “But you were right when you said I forgot to put the band first. If last night proves anything, it’s that we don’t need that kind of tension. We’re not the kind of band that thrives on friction.”

“We’re too lesbian for that,” Daphne says matter-of-factly.

I can’t help but chuckle. The air it releases passes through me like a welcome relief from all my worries, from all the knots my brain has tied itself into.

“But I truly never set out to hurt anyone.”

“Oh, Cleo.” Daphne reaches for my hand. “I know that. Of course, I know.”

Daphne’s touch is such a comfort. It eases the ache in my belly somewhat. “Either way, it was just a fling and a fling isn’t worth complicating everything over.”

“Maybe we should have a list of people who are so iconic, so universally sexy, such legends, that they make you exempt from following any band rules.” Daphne squeezes my hand. “For the record, Lana would top that list for all four of us.”

“It wouldn’t work because it wouldn’t change that people’s feelings might get hurt.” I try to look over Daphne’s seat to where I thought Jess was sitting, but I can’t see her. “How’s Jess?”

“Jess will be fine.” Daphne sure has changed her tune. I can’t help but wonder whether Tessie had a chat with her. I’d ask her, but I can’t face too many tales of how besotted they are with each other right now. Not today. Maybe I’ll feel better tomorrow. Maybe once we’ve had an epic show, one during which we won over the audience completely and erased the memory of last night’s abysmal performance. “In the end, we’re all big girls and boys.”

“Sure,” I say, despite of a lot of our behavior of the last few days being suited for high school recess.

Daphne smirks. “With all my concern for Jess’s feelings, I haven’t had a chance to ask you...” Her smirk transforms into a big fat grin. “What was it like with Lana?”

“Oh, please, don’t ask me that,” I blurt out.

“Why not?” She drums her fingertips on my knee. “Inquiring minds would very much

like to know.”

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“Fuck, Daph. It was amazing, okay? It was out of this goddamn world.” I wish I could experience it all over again tonight, and the night after, and every single night of this tour. I wish I could get to know her better, peek further behind Lana’s facade, see even more of the real her.

“Oh, damn.” Her fingers tighten around my knee. “As in wow-I’m-in-bed-with-Lana-Lynch or more as in I-think-I-might-love-her?”

Is she making fun of me? Daphne’s just playing, I know that, yet I’m too tender to go along with it.

“Remember when I had that thing with Grace Jacobs? I liked her, but, for me, it was more of a star fuck than anything else. I knew that pretty quickly.”

“A star fuck? Are you for real?” The things that get said when you have hours and hours of time to kill on the road.

“Oh, come on, Cleo. We’ve all done it. Although we’re at that turning point where we are becoming the stars more than the other party.” She pats my knee again. “Maybe that’s exactly what you need. A night with an adoring fan who worships the hell out of you.”

“A groupie? I so hope you’re kidding.”

“You can be holier than thou about it all you want, but again, we’ve all done it. I bet Lana has had her fair share as well.”

“I haven’t,” I say, quickly realizing that’s a flagrant lie. Being in a band is like dousing yourself in the most potent aphrodisiac. Ever since one of our songs made it into the Top 100, and not even very high, I’ve had many a woman throw herself at me and I’ve not always said no.

“Sure.” Daphne gives me a knowing look. “Do you want me to arrange something for tonight? Maybe it’s not the best idea to stay in your room all night on your own.”

I shake my head. “I think being alone for a while is exactly what I need.”

“Suit yourself, but let me know if you need anything.” Daphne gets up. “You never answered my question, though.” She leans into the space between us. “About what kind of night it was with Lana.”

“I don’t think I ever will.” I look away from her, hoping she’ll take a hint. How dare she vulgarize my night with Lana to something meaningless? How can she even imply that it might have been any less than me having feelings for her? But Daphne doesn’t know how I really feel. I don’t even know how I really feel. When you end up with a legend like Lana, it’s always going to have the sparkle of being in bed with a celebrity about it. There’s just no other way because, no matter how naked, no matter how vulnerable she made herself that night, you can’t separate one from the other. She’s both Lana Lynch, front woman of The Lady Kings and the woman behind that persona.

I do know one thing, though. Unlike when Daphne had her fun with Grace Jacobs, Lana means much more to me than that. Now I don’t even get to sing with her anymore, either.

Chapter 27

Lana

We're in Syracuse and I'm about to go back out to perform the final encore of the night—without Cleo.

I have experience on my side and I've had time to prepare for this. The only obstacle I face is, quite possibly, a few boos from the audience when I fail to ask Cleo to join me. The internet is very good at creating expectations and I can hardly claim Cleo's unavailable. They've all seen her perform—kill it, actually—with *The Other Women* earlier.

I can't sing that song a cappella on my own. Technically, I could, but I don't want to. It doesn't feel right. So I've asked the band to join me. Both Billie and Sam can deliver decent backing vocals, but neither of their voices has anything on Cleo's—or Isabel Adler's. At least, once we're playing our three shows in New York City, I'll be able to sing the duet with its original co-singer. I've already called Izzy about it. She said she had to think about it, but she's a performer most of all. Deep down, I know she'll do it.

Tonight, it's just me and my band, performing the song I used to sing with Cleo. If there's one thing I've learned over the course of this tour, it's that "I Should Have Kissed You" is the kind of quiet song that has much more impact dressed down, without too much accompaniment. Not that the original has a bombastic arrangement, like all of Isabel Adler's new music. Her current voice thrives with only a few sparse piano notes as background. Most of the emotion comes from what's not there.

The Lady Kings can tone it down like the best of them, like we do in "The Better Part of Me", but singing a duet alone is never an easy thing to do.

I return to the stage to loud applause that swiftly gets a nervous energy to it because Cleo's not there.

"Just little old me tonight." I hold up my hands in supplication, playing to the

sympathy of the audience. Some people whoop, but there's a slight hesitation. "And the amazing Lady Kings, of course." Sam, Deb, and Billie walk out to howling cheers. Maybe I shouldn't have worried about this at all. We are The Lady Kings—we are the band these people came to see. What better gift can we give them than more of all of us? And if that's the case, have I been wrong doing this song with just Cleo all this time? But there's no time to ask myself these questions now. It will all be discussed in detail in the debrief later.

From somewhere in the back, I make out a few faint cries for Cleo. I square my shoulders and face the audience. Billie's playing acoustic guitar for this last song. She stands by my side.

Deb counts us down and off we go. She only touches the odd cymbal and Sam's baseline is subtle and deep more than overpowering.

Billie annoys me sometimes—maybe because she's too direct and too honest for my liking—but I can't fault the way she plays guitar. She tees me up and then I sing this song, which was never meant for one voice alone, but I make it work. I make the audience believe it, because that's what I do. That's my gift. I can make them believe that Cleo's not up here with me for good reason. Maybe even because I should have kissed her, that's what I'm singing about after all.

But it's not the same without Cleo. Not only because she's one hell of a singer and her voice complements mine beautifully, not only because she could convey the meaning of the song so expertly in how she delivered it, but because it was always a special moment to be up here just the two of us, to say goodbye to the audience and close out the night with this special energy between us.

When the song ends, I swear the applause is not of the same grandeur I've gotten used to. A good portion of the people are left a touch disappointed, and I can't help but feel sorry for them—for not giving them exactly what they wanted. But as

magical as Cleo and I are when we sing, that magic doesn't extend to our time off the stage. I can't make it so that she wants to sing with me again. I can't make it so that she sees that us being together, ultimately, shouldn't be a threat to her band and to her friendship with the other members. That's not up to me.

Deb and Sam join Billie and me at the front of the stage and all four of us bow to the crowd.

When I walk off, the only member of The Other Women watching is Jess.

“That was great,” she says.

“Thanks,” Billie says, then turns to me. “I don’t know, though, Lana. Was that as good as it could have been?”

I shrug. I can’t change anything about the performance we just delivered anymore. “We’ll have Izzy for our next gig.”

“You keep saying, but she hasn’t agreed yet,” Sam says.

“Trust me. Izzy’s going to be on that stage with us,” I say with more confidence than I feel.

I drink the water Logan hands me. He’s beside himself again at the mere mention of Izzy’s name. When I get to my dressing room, Jess corners me.

“Can I talk to you for a second, please?” she says.

“Now?” I pull the towel Logan gave me tightly around my shoulders. “I really need a shower.” And Jess is the last person I want to talk to. If Cleo and I are not going to be together—and if we’re no longer even singing together—I’m more than happy to distance myself from any drama regarding our support band.

“Or later. I’ll wait,” Jess says.

“It’s fine. Come on in.” I invite Jess inside my dressing room. I drink more water as I look at her.

“I wanted to apologize to you in person. I’m so sorry for what happened with Cleo. It’s not what I wanted for you or for her. I don’t have a problem with you two being together. I really don’t. I just wanted you to know that.”

Great. We have Jess’s blessing, not that it makes any difference whatsoever. “Cleo knows this?”

Jess nods. “I told her that I wouldn’t be the one standing in the way of anything that might, um, blossom between you and her.”

“That’s good to know, Jess.” To think I thought it sweet when she confessed her feelings for me that night in LA. Innocent and oh-so sweet. “But nothing’s blossoming between Cleo and me.”

“If you want, I can try to convince her to sing with you again.” She chuckles nervously. “Don’t get me wrong, that version you just did was great, but, um, when you and Cleo sing it, it’s just so unique. Even I can see that. Go figure.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I think we can manage. Besides, for our upcoming week in New York, I already have a very special guest lined up.”

“Yeah, I heard. Isabel Adler’s really going to join you?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Oh my god. That’s going to be amazing.”

“So why don’t we just leave Cleo be?” I don’t care that I sound patronizing.

“Yeah, sure. Is it okay to tell people about Isabel Adler or are you keeping that secret?”

“It’s not a hundred percent done deal yet, so best keep it to yourself for now.”

“You got it.” Jess looks ready to swear a solemn oath. Then I feel for her again. She didn’t choose to have unrequited feelings for me.

“Thanks. No hard feelings, okay?”

“Sure thing, Lana.” She sends me a smile that looks genuine enough. “I’ll leave you to shower now.”

“Hey, Jess. I’m sorry too about how all of this has turned out. Neither of us ever meant to hurt anyone. I hope you know that.”

Jess nods and exits, leaving me to wonder, if she really gave Cleo the same speech as she has just given me, why Cleo still won’t sing with me.

Chapter 28

Cleo

Ever since we arrived in New York City, the air has been awash with excitement. It’s different from LA, because LA is where we’re from and performing there is like playing a home game. Coming to New York to play for New Yorkers demands something different. A little more of everything. A more ballsy attitude. An extra coat of coolness. It’s hard to put my finger on exactly, but it courses through my veins nonetheless, speeding up my pulse.

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It made us play one of the best shows of our band's existence earlier—one to completely erase the memory of every bad or mediocre show we've ever played.

Tonight, none of us, not even me, can resist watching The Lady Kings. Because there's something special in the air, we know, in our hearts, that we have to be here for this instead of lounging in our dressing room and missing it. We sense that something special is about to happen.

Lana is extra sexy up there tonight. Throughout The Lady Kings' show, Jess has barely moved a muscle beside me, so utterly transfixed is she with Lana's every move. And Lana's got moves.

Like when they play an upbeat scorcher like "No Fear In Love" and she wiggles her shoulders from left to right in that special, sultry way she has. She can strut around the stage like no other with those never-ending legs of hers, using the microphone stand in ways that I have tried to copy, but somehow end up looking ridiculous on anyone else but her. She's made of that illustrious kind of stardust that only gets sprinkled around once every few generations. And I can't keep my eyes off her because every single minute of their show, I'm reminded why they are the best, the greatest all-female band of all time, and why we were so quick to say yes to this tour—and how I've somehow fucked up my chance to share the stage with Lana every night.

But if the past two shows of The Other Women have proved anything, it's that we're better if we're in harmony. If there's no strife between the four of us and we can just go out there and play for each other, trying to impress the hell out of each other and the audience in one go. Our singular kind of rock band chemistry doesn't work when

we're fighting. I'm not as naive to think that our band will never have issues, but it all depends on what the issues are about.

"Fuck me," Tim says. "This is a moment, guys. One I'll never forget."

"Lana's the bomb, but that Billie is no slouch either," Daphne says. "I would love to play a guitar duet with her."

"Sam and Deb are tight as hell. They're like one unit," Tim says. "They've played together for so long, it's like they no longer need words between them. Only their instruments."

"Oh fuck." Jess's eyes grow wide.

We've been told about this beforehand, but it's as though Isabel Adler has suddenly been whisked to the wings from a well-hidden spot backstage. Out of nowhere, there she is.

"I'm gonna lose my shit," Daphne whispers. She grabs on to Tim's arm. "Oh my god."

"She's just a singer," I want to say, but I can't get those words past my throat. Isabel Adler is so much more than just a singer. When we were working on our last album and we wanted to write a slower, more emotional song, we listened to Isabel Adler's latest record for inspiration. The way she has found to tone everything down and amplify the intensity of her music is like magic, although we know there's nothing magical about it. It's what music can do.

I also know why she's here. She's here to take the place I took from her. She's here to sing with Lana. Although the musician part of me is absolutely dying to see them perform their iconic duet together, my flawed, deeply human side is not immune to

ugly pangs of jealousy. Although I know very well there's nothing more useless than being jealous of someone like Isabel Adler.

Isabel's surrounded by a couple of people, one of whom is a breathtaking woman with raven black hair and blood-red lipstick. Isabel's partner, Leila Zadeh.

Tim fans himself. "It's getting hot in here," he says. "Someone turn up the AC, please."

The Lady Kings walk off after their first set of encores. I can't help but watch Lana. My eyes are drawn to her, and I couldn't look away if I wanted to. She and Isabel exchange glances and I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't refused to continue to duet with Lana. Would she have replaced me with Isabel anyway? Would it have hurt less or more than it does right now?

Lana dabs her face and shoulders with a towel and quickly drinks some water. Tessie runs a comb through Lana's hair.

"Are you ready?" The smile she flashes Isabel Adler is so wide, so gorgeous, so Lana, my heart breaks into a dozen more pieces.

Isabel nods. Leila kisses her on the cheek. Then Lana walks back out to massive applause. She thanks the crowd profusely, then asks them for silence.

"I have a very, very special guest here with me tonight."

"Cleo Palmer!" someone shouts.

My cheeks flush pink because I'm standing only a few feet away from Isabel Adler and it doesn't feel right for people to be shouting my name instead of hers.

Lana shakes her head. “Nope. Try again.”

I feel dismissed again—even though I dismissed myself.

“Isabel Adler!” someone else yells.

Lana nods slowly. “One hundred percent correct.”

The cheers of the crowd are so thundering, I almost cover my ears.

Lana turns to the wings where we’re all standing. Her gaze glosses over me as though I’m just a prop—as though I have reached a whole new level of insignificance.

“Izzy, will you do me the great honor of joining me, please?” Lana holds out her arm, welcoming Isabel Adler to the stage.

The audience goes wild. Of course, they do. This is so much better than anything they could have hoped for. This is so much better than Lana singing this song with me. It’s their song. It’s The Lady Kings’—and Lana’s—comeback song. This song has nothing much to do with me at all. I was just a visitor to it for a while, for those blessed few times I was allowed up on stage, at Lana’s mercy, to bask in her glory for a few nights. But it’s not my song, nor do I have any claims to make on it.

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“Oh, yes,” Lana says. “I would ask you to give it up for Isabel Adler, but what do you think, Izzy? Was that enough for you?”

“Hell no,” Isabel says. “I can never get enough. That’s why I came back. Isn’t that why you came back, Lana?”

They’re making a skit out of it, entertaining the crowd even more with their banter—something Lana never did when it was me up there. This must be exceptional for her.

Lana blows kisses to the audience. Tonight really is something else. I get the feeling that the best is yet to come—packed into a five-minute, spine-chilling duet between two music legends. The perfect ending to a night like this. I might be prone to a few bouts of jealousy in this moment, but we had an amazing time earlier, playing to this New York crowd. We turned a few heads and perked up a few ears. Now it’s Lana and Izzy’s turn to bring it all the way home.

It’s just the two of them without backing. Lana nods once and the crowd is eating out of her hand to such an extent that they go quiet instantly, giving her the silence this song needs.

Lana starts and it’s the first time I’m watching her perform this without the energy of being up there with her coursing through me. Now, I’m just a spectator, and, instantly, it grabs me by the throat. It undoes something inside me to watch her, and listen to her, in this particular solemn atmosphere. To witness how she quietens, how that frenetic energy she used to bounce around the stage earlier has stilled into this beautiful, peaceful, heartbreaking moment.

It's like we're all holding our breath collectively, waiting—waiting for Isabel Adler to join Lana.

When she does, at first just singing along almost inaudibly with Lana in the first chorus, something changes in the air. It's pure admiration. Every single person in this venue is caught up in this extraordinary moment in musical history. Lana and Isabel have never sung this duet live before in front of an audience.

Isabel launches into the second verse solo, although launch is perhaps not the correct word for it. She approaches it cautiously yet with determination. The words rolling off her tongue are intense and full of melody. She's looking at Lana and Lana's looking back at her. They're staring into each other's eyes the way Lana and I used to do. They're selling the illusion. God help me for what they might do next.

I can't help but stare at Lana. To really see her in this moment, how she enjoys it, loses herself in it. What she does with her hands, how she tilts her head, how she shuffles her feet. All things I never noticed when I was singing with her because I was so lost in our performance, in how she was singing to me and I was singing to her.

Their rendition might also be a cappella but the energy of it is completely different than how Lana and I bring it. Isabel's voice is so fragile, it sounds like it might break any second. And then, as she and Lana alternate lines in the third chorus, her voice does break a little, and it's one of the most beautiful sounds I've ever heard in my life. The croak in her voice matches the lyrics so perfectly, it enhances the song in a way that I could never accomplish. It connects with something deep inside me and, fuck it, I don't hold back my tears. I let them stream freely down my cheeks.

My tears come even quicker when Lana moves closer to Isabel to share the mic with her for the final chorus, to close out the night, and it reminds me of that day, which seems to have happened lifetimes ago, when I went to Lana's house for rehearsal and

suggested we only use one mic for the final chorus. But this is no time to be jealous any longer. It's impossible to be jealous of this, of the beauty their voices create together.

Their chemistry on stage is of a different nature than the one between Lana and me. It's respectful and gorgeous but also a lot less sensual. There's no touching of the cheeks, or grabbing each other's waist, let alone letting their head fall onto each other's shoulder. The vibe they create is much more ethereal than sultry.

In all its stillness, it's equally, if not even more so, effective and visceral than the version I created with Lana.

I follow them with my gaze as they walk off hand-in-hand, tears still running down my cheeks, because if I've learned one thing by watching this duet, it's that my poor heart never stood a chance. I fell hard for Lana the instant I walked on that stage with her.

An arm curls around me. "Damn," Jess says. "I'm not sure I have any words to describe what I just saw." She hands me a tissue. "It's okay, Cleo. I feel it too."

Chapter 29

Lana

Izzy and Leila have been gracious enough to throw a welcome-to-New-York party at their house for everyone on the tour. I'm glad I have a place to go to other than my hotel room, because I'm so amped up from our show, I'm not sure where I might have ended up. It's been one of those rare nights when every little thing comes together to create an extraordinary experience. Three decades in music have taught me that nights like this need to be savored because they don't come along very often. So that's what I intend to do.

It's not like Cleo will be warming my bed tonight, although, I get the impression some of Izzy and Leila's party guests wouldn't mind taking Cleo's place. And you know what? I might let one of them do just that. Because Izzy and I killed that duet. As long as we're in New York, Cleo's vocal services are not required. As far as I'm concerned, Cleo is not required in my life at all. But she and her band and entourage are at the party. This is the kind of event no one wants to miss.

I flit from one person to the next, accepting many drinks as well as kudos for the show. Over the years, I've learned to accept both with ease and grace.

An hour or so into the party, I finally sink into a couch next to Leila. We chitchat for a bit, until she locks her black gaze on me and says, "Can I tell you something in the absolute strictest confidence?"

"Absolutely." I'm quite tipsy, but I'm pretty sure I can keep Leila's secret.

"As breathtaking as you and Izzy singing 'I should Have Kissed You' was tonight, it wasn't the same as when you sing it with Cleo."

"It can't be the same, can it? Izzy and Cleo are very different singers." That's what she wanted to confide in me? It sounds more like simply stating a fact than sharing a secret.

"Sure, but what I mean is..." Leila slants her body toward mine. "I've seen the videos of you and Cleo and, well, all I can say is that they're damn hot and I'm, quite frankly, glad it wasn't like that with you and Izzy. I'd be worried if it was." She flashes me a red-lipped smile.

"Oh yeah. Cleo and I, we sure could turn it on." I take another sip of wine. "She's very good at what she does."

“She is, but that’s also not really what I mean.” Leila’s still sitting very close to me, mostly whispering in my ear. “Sorry if I’m being too forward, but are you and Cleo... a thing?”

“Definitely not.” I scoff. “For some reason I fail to fully grasp, we’re not allowed to be.”

“Ah, so there is something there. I told Izzy. She said that sometimes that’s how it is when two people sing together, but you and Izzy are two seriously hot foxes, and it wasn’t like that earlier. You have a different kind of chemistry. Something much more... chaste, I guess.” Leila nods as though she has suddenly understood one of the deepest truths of the universe. “You and Cleo, you want each other and you can’t possibly hide it—and why would you? That’s what I saw. I’m sure I’m not the only one. It’s plain as day.”

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“Oh, god,” I say while expelling all the air from my lungs. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Cleo doesn’t want to do the duet with me anymore.”

“Why not? Surely she only stands to gain from it?”

“The usual tour antics.” I wiggle my eyebrows at Leila.

“Oh. I can sort of see what you’re trying to say, but it would really help if you spelled it out for me.” She sits there grinning like she’s some cheap gossip columnist instead of an award-winning journalist.

“I can see how you got Izzy to spill her most painful secrets to you while you were finishing her biography.”

“Come on.” She bumps her shoulder against mine. “Humor me.”

I glance around. A few people throw furtive glances in our direction, but no one’s close enough to hear what we’re saying. Not that it would make any difference if they did. On the tour, everyone knows what happened with Cleo and me.

“We slept together because... Honestly, it was almost impossible not to. Not after having been on stage with her for so many nights. Something happens when we sing together and it all came to a boil. We stopped resisting it and, yes, we ended up in bed together, and...” I shrug. “And then it all turned to shit, like we’re in two rival high school bands or something stupid like that.”

“I’m so sorry, Lana. What happened?” Leila doesn’t even bother hiding her relentless

journalistic streak. I respect her for that. To think this spectacular woman just walked into Izzy's life one fine day. All I get is someone so immature she behaves like a horny teenager who changes her mind about things on a whim. Although I'm sure Cleo would spin it in an entirely different way.

"Ridiculous band stuff that's not worth wasting any more words over."

"Are you sure? I'm only insisting because I really think you should try to get her back on stage with you. Izzy's not going to join the tour to replace Cleo."

"There's an idea, though. You strike me as an extremely persuasive woman, Leila. Are you sure you can't make that happen?"

"You know Izzy's doing her own tour," Leila's voice brims with pride. Oh, to have someone fighting your corner at every turn. To be with someone who gets you, all of you—as Joan did. Any fool can see how Izzy and Leila are made for each other. Just as any fool can see that Cleo and I are not—quite the opposite.

"Oh, well."

As if us talking about her has made her appear, Cleo walks into the room. My gaze is drawn to her because she has that kind of star quality about her that makes you want to look.

"Do you want me to ask her?" Leila chuckles like the schoolgirls some members of The Other Women still seem to be. "I was standing near her when you and Izzy were singing and she was crying so hard. It was an emotional moment, I get that, but, I don't know, call it journalistic intuition, but I don't think she was only crying because the song hit her so hard."

"Cleo knows what I want. She's the one calling the shots, not me."

Leila turns to me. “Really? Why?” She looks at me with a stunned expression.

I huff out some air. “Can we please drop it now? I’m sick of all these useless shenanigans. I think I’ll go find your missus. Maybe she’ll give me an easier time.”

“Wait, Lana, please.” Leila puts her hand on my knee. “Cleo. Come!” She beckons Cleo over with a wave of her hand, as though it holds magical power. Great. Cleo and I haven’t exchanged more than a few grunted hellos since she told me she didn’t want to sing with me anymore.

“Hey,” Cleo keeps her gaze trained on Leila. “Thanks so much for having us over. It’s such an honor.”

“Oh, please.” Leila isn’t one for airs and graces. “It’s just a party.” It’s so easy to see why Izzy’s life was turned upside down when she met Leila.

“The hell it is.” Cleo grins.

“Great show,” Leila says.

“You saw our show?” Cleo seems genuinely surprised. She also hasn’t acknowledged my presence yet. More schoolgirl antics. More reasons for us to stay apart. If I’m ever going to be with anyone again—and it’s a big if—it should be with a woman like Leila, not someone as young and fickle as Cleo.

“Of course, we did. You and your band are pretty special.”

“Thanks.”

My heart thuds against my chest as Cleo’s cheeks turn hot pink. She’s so adorable when her rock chick cool is pierced by a compliment.

“It was a great show,” I say, inserting myself into their conversation.

“Thanks.” Cleo’s gaze briefly holds mine before skittering away.

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“You know what?” Quick as lightning, Leila pushes herself out of the couch and practically shoves Cleo into her seat. “I’m going to let you two have a much-needed talk.” Without looking back, she walks off, leaving me perplexed.

“It’s okay, Cleo. We don’t have to talk. Just go.”

“Lana, I—” She settles into the couch, keeping a respectable distance. “Um, first of all, fucking great duet.” Cleo takes a deep breath, then nods. “Amazing show in general. You were really on it tonight.” She does look me in the eye now. “What’s this all about?”

“Leila was just sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong. Sorry. She’s not very good at taking no for an answer.”

“What did she say?”

I pivot so I fully face Cleo. “She insisted I try to get you to sing the duet with me again. She’s seen the footage on the internet and that’s her conclusion.”

“Leila said that?” Cleo draws up her knee so she can face me better.

“She said that after she saw me sing the duet with Izzy.” I want Cleo back on stage with me. It doesn’t have to mean anything. It’s just a song.

“Wow.” Cleo narrows her eyes. “She hasn’t even seen us live.”

“Will you think about it, please?” I almost reach for her hand.

“I will. I promise.” Cleo’s voice softens. So does her gaze on me.

“How are you? With the whole... thing?” I might have missed hanging out with her a little.

“I’m fine. As fine as a person who rejected Lana Lynch can be, I guess.”

“This tour is far from over.” I shuffle my knee a little closer to hers, but that’s all I can do as far as bridging the distance between us goes. “Let’s not be strangers, okay?” I peer into Cleo’s bright blue eyes.

Cleo nods. Her gaze lingers.

“As foolish as it may be to be jealous of someone like Isabel Adler,” Cleo says, “I was. I am. I know it’s your song, yet... that song has come to mean so much to me. It’s in me, you know. It’s part of me. As beautiful as it was, it killed me to see you sing it with her instead of me.”

Damn. I wasn’t expecting that. Young people like Cleo don’t have their guard up like we used to. Vulnerability is part of their brand—I think the record company’s marketing people call it authenticity.

“There’s a simple solution to how you feel.” I make sure to not sound even remotely condescending. “You’re always welcome on stage with me. Always.”

“Thank you. That’s very gracious of you after all I’ve said and, um, done.”

“You’re very welcome.” I send her a smile. I’d love to keep talking to Cleo, but a buzz is traveling through the room. My first instinct is that it’s about Cleo and me huddled together in this couch, until I make out whispers of Izzy’s name.

Someone from The Other Women's crew walks up to us. "Izzy's going to sing. Now. In the other room."

"We don't want to miss that," I say.

"I suppose it's better than being ambushed by Leila," Cleo replies, a grin on her lips, "although I'm kind of glad she did."

We get up and follow the stream of people out of the room.

Chapter 30

Cleo

It's magical, impromptu moments like this that make any nuisances that come with a tour more than worth it. To witness Isabel Adler giving an intimate solo performance, just her and a piano, is one of the most fantastic things that have happened on this tour so far—after the obvious, of course. The best part of it, besides Daphne's mom, who flew in last night, going absolutely berserk, being that Lana was standing right next to me throughout the entire mini concert.

I'm still in a state of utter bliss when I end up in Isabel Adler's kitchen, in search of a few moments away from the party, just to let it all sink in.

"Looking for something?" Isabel Adler herself walks in. "Because I'm looking for you."

"You're looking for me?" I bring my hand to my chest. "I find that hard to believe."

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“I have a bone to pick with you.” Isabel walks up to me.

She does? “What did I do to offend the great Isabel Adler? Before you tear into me, I want to say that what you just did out there was spectacular.”

“Thanks. Sometimes, you just really want to... sing, you know? I’m sure you understand. You’re a singer. Has it never happened to you that you just can’t keep it in? Because making music is the most exhilarating activity on earth?”

“Um, yeah. I feel like that pretty regularly, actually.”

“About that...” She leans against the kitchen counter, which is surprisingly clean for a house that’s hosting a party. “You stole my song, but I want you to know that you’re very welcome to it. You and Lana.”

I chuckle. “I hardly stole it. I just sing it with Lana occasionally. It will always be your and Lana’s song.”

Isabel purses her lips and shakes her head. “Nu-uh. I know when a song has found a better owner, for lack of a better word. And as I said, you’re very welcome to it, because the version you and Lana bring brims with all sorts of musical deliciousness. It’s so sexy, Cleo. It’s like watching foreplay, to be perfectly honest.”

Did I step into an alternate universe when I walked through that kitchen door?

“Thanks, I guess, but, trust me, the original is a big hit for a reason.”

“Because it brought Lana and The Lady Kings back. And Lana and I are both queer

and the song is full of irresistible innuendo. And we're both pretty good at what we do, but—" She holds up a perfectly manicured finger. "When you and Lana sing it, there's an extra special seductive sauce added to it." She flashes me a smile. "While we're being honest, Leila and I have a bet going on this." She pins her gaze firmly on mine. "Are you and Lana sleeping together?"

"No." My voice catches in my throat, as though it's a hard thing to admit.

"I could have sworn that you were. Then again, I've been wrong about many things a lot of times in my life, so there you go." She sidles a bit closer. "Anyway, the song is yours now. Thank you for taking it to the next level. Your voice is dynamite, but I'm sure you know that. All I can say is take good care of it. And use it well by singing the hell out of that duet."

"Um, I'll try." It's only half a lie. After seeing Lana sing with Izzy and her words on the couch earlier, part of me is considering going back on stage with Lana after we've left New York. I just have to figure out how I can protect myself from feeling too much while still doing the song justice—while bringing the kind of performance that makes Isabel Adler tell me that I'm very welcome to her song.

"Great, because I have a favor to ask." Isabel flashes me a smile. "I'd love to see you and Lana perform it live. Leila and I have only seen it on the internet with sub-par sound and we want the full experience." She takes another step closer. "We crave it. That's how good it is."

I can only nod. I'm flattered but also trepidatious, because the reason everyone's going so gaga over our rendition of this song is the very thing I need to shield myself from.

"But, Isabel—"

“Izzy, please.”

“Izzy, you can’t deprive your hometown audience of you singing that song with Lana. It’s what people will be expecting now.”

She waves her hand about. “Not if they get you and Lana instead.”

Looks like I won’t have much choice but to go back out there with Lana—and put all of my heart on display again.

“Audiences crave a special moment like that duet. Something they can take home and remember forever. Something out of the ordinary that they’ve witnessed. Because that’s what music does.” She sounds wistful. She clears her throat before continuing. “If there’s one thing I know, that I’ve learned in the hardest possible way in this life, it’s that music is the strongest legal drug in the world. It has so much power. It can convey so much emotion.” Her voice breaks a little. “I lived without music for ten long years. They were the worst years of my life.”

I’ve read Izzy’s biography. I know what happened to her voice and how long it took for her to return to the stage.

“That’s why now, very much against doctor’s orders, I take any chance I can get to sing. When I have people over, I will always end up at my piano, because why not? A duet with Lana Lynch? Yes, please! Because it can all be over in a flash. Take what you can get, when you can, Cleo.” She puts a hand my shoulder and gives it a little squeeze. “Sing my song with Lana as many times as you can.” A hint of smile appears on her lips. “Excuse the hyperbole, but it’s what I used to specialize in.” She chuckles. “But I’m convinced that every time you and Lana sing that duet, you leave the world in a better state than it was before.” She drops her hand and holds it up. “Such is the power of music—and the magic of you and Lana on stage.”

The kitchen door swings open, and a man walks in. “Ah, Harry,” Izzy says. “Just the man I was looking for.”

Before I exit the kitchen, Izzy says, “I know you won’t let me down, Cleo.”

It looks like I’ll be back on stage with Lana sooner rather than later, no matter my trepidations.

Chapter 31

Lana

It’s our last concert in New York and my wish is coming true already. With Izzy’s blessing—and on her insistent urging—Cleo’s singing “I Should Have Kissed You” with me tonight. Izzy is probably even harder to say no to than Leila.

As much as I loved performing with Izzy, I can’t wait to have Cleo by my side again. I’ve not only missed her off the stage, but up here as well. Because this is where we are at our best, where our differences don’t matter, and we can go beyond all that holds us back in real life. When we sing “I Should Have Kissed You”, for five too short minutes, we can pretend that what we had between us was real. We can expel the residual feelings it has left lingering inside our hearts. We can sing it all off us and give the audience exactly what they want while doing so.

From the corner of my eye, I see Izzy and Leila in the wings. All The Other Women are there as well. In fact, things are looking rather crowded at the side of the stage, as though I’m not the only one looking forward to Cleo’s return.

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Before I address the crowd, I find Cleo in the group of people to my right. She looks relaxed and ready to bring it at the same time. Our gazes lock and something shivers up my spine. I find it hard to look away, but we have a show to end—and a song to sing.

“Good news and bad news,” I say to the audience, flashing them my widest smile. Everything I say is followed by a burst of applause, regardless of what it is. “Isabel Adler won’t be singing with me tonight.”

There’s no applause for that statement, and I let the audience have their moment of obligatory disappointment before continuing.

“But...” The pregnant pause is one of my specialties. I let a silence fall while catching a quick glimpse of Cleo again. “Guess who’s back?”

A group of enthusiastic women in the front row jump up and down shouting, “Cleo! Cleo! Cleo!” The rest of the audience quickly joins in. Soon, the entire venue is shouting for Cleo. I wasn’t the only one wanting her back, then. I hope Izzy’s not too offended, but she’s the one who suggested this. She asked Cleo back to the stage. And Cleo said yes.

“Here she is.” I hold out my arm, welcoming Cleo and, as she walks on, all youthful bluster and supreme confidence, I have to swallow a sudden lump out of my throat. I shake it off. I’m just happy she’s back.

Cleo bows to the crowd. She plays them so well—I could tell from that first show they played for us at the Hollywood Bowl, where she won us all over within the first

five minutes. Where, within the hour, I decided, purely on instinct, that we should sing this song together. Because I saw something in her and I wanted to see what would happen when we joined forces.

Cleo grabs hold of the mic and turns to me. Then, she winks at me, and I feel it all the way in the pit of my stomach. She hasn't just come back to cater to the audience, or to please Izzy and Leila, she's here to prove a point as well—to me.

“Ready?” I whisper to her.

“Fuck yeah,” she says, with such poised cool, it reminds me of myself back in the day.

I start the first verse and I can't look away from her. I can't sing it to anyone but her. I have to address the words “I Should Have Kissed You” to her, even though I've already kissed her. We've done much more than kiss, yet us being reunited on stage feels like starting all over again. Like a clean slate. A new starting point from which a different outcome might be possible.

Although I'm getting way ahead of myself. Cleo coming back to duet with me doesn't necessarily mean she wants to do other things with me again. All I know is what I feel when our voices blend together. While our lips are not touching—they're not even near each other—the harmony our voices create is akin to kissing. It's the two of us coming together in a soft, beautiful collision that creates something out of the ordinary. Because when we kissed, it was the direct consequence of us singing together. That's when it all started. That's how I know it's still going on.

It's also why I don't wait for the final chorus to walk over to her. I need to be closer. I want to feel Cleo's breath on my cheek as she belts out the final verse. I want to revel in her presence when she is at her most gorgeous, when she's singing with that beguiling voice of hers, that she should have kissed me long ago.

If Cleo's surprised by my sudden presence by her side, she doesn't give that away. She's a pro, used to dealing with all the surprises a life on stage will throw at you.

I'm aware of the crowd because their energy is impossible to ignore, but all my attention is focused on Cleo. On how her lips move as she forms the words. On how her fingers steal up and down the microphone stand—and the memory of how they can undo me. On her top sliding off her right shoulder, exposing her skin. On her impossibly blue eyes fixed on me.

As we gear up to sing the final chorus together, I do something I've never done before either. I reach for her hand and thread my fingers through hers. The women at the front are screaming so loud, I fear their vocal cords may never recover, but this is our moment—mine and Cleo's. She squeezes her fingers around mine and, gaze locked on mine, sings with me.

Singing will always make me feel like a million bucks, but singing this song with Cleo, in front of Izzy, and this crowd who is sending so much love our way, makes me feel like I can fly. Like I can do anything. Like this life without Joan is still worth living. Like there might, perhaps, be someone else out there for me who makes me feel the same way she did. Like a person can have more than one big love in their life, even if the first one was the legendary Joan Miller.

As we hold the final note together, it dawns on me that the person I have in mind, the person whose hand I'm holding, might not exactly feel the same way about that as I do.

Chapter 32

Cleo

Lana's all over me tonight and I love it, for now. I hold on tight to her fingers. Of

course, I do. I wish we could stay up here forever, under the crowd's adoring gaze, and Izzy's nods of approval, in this perfect moment of musical bliss.

But I know that it will all end soon. Lana will drop my hand the way she did at the beginning of the tour, casually, stripping it of any meaning instantly. Although, the way she's looking into my eyes, and how she walked up to me much earlier than usual, she's unpredictable tonight. Is she putting on an extra show because of Izzy and Leila? Because it's our last night in New York? All I know is the last five minutes were spectacular, and I can't wait for our next show. Although all the reasons I had for no longer wanting to do this will soon come crashing down on me again, when my bandmates surround me, and Jess looks at me with those big sad puppy dog eyes of hers, because I'm the one who gets to go out there with Lana and she's not.

Ever since Izzy asked me to sing with Lana tonight, I've been trying to come up with ways to protect myself and while I now know, after tonight's performance, that's it's impossible to shelter from the hurricane of feelings Lana sets off inside me, my pre-show strategy relied entirely on the friendship of my bandmates. It's my only defense because it's also the reason why Lana and I can't do anything else but sing together. In my head, before I walked on, before Lana started singing to me the way she has just done, it made perfect sense. Right now, nothing makes sense anymore.

Without letting go of my hand, Lana hugs me, before we bow to the crowd. This New York audience has been unbelievable. The entire night has been a fairy tale. But now, Lana and I walk off, and I expect her to drop my hand at any moment, but she doesn't. She holds on to it as we accept praise from Izzy and Leila, as she takes a towel to wipe her forehead, as our bandmates surround us, and we all bask in the triumphant, joyful vibe of the night.

"Oh, Cleo," she whispers, before she, inevitably, lets go of my hand. She has water to drink. Other hands to shake. People to talk to. A shower to take. She huffs out some air and shakes her head. "You rocked," is all she says before she saunters off.

My bandmates are hot on my heels. Instead of looking at me with sadness in her eyes, Jess is jumping up and down. Tim slings his arm around my shoulders as we make our way to the dressing rooms.

“Fucking epic,” he says. “Can you believe this tour?”

“Can you believe this life,” Daphne says.

“Cleo,” Jess says. “Please, do us all a big favor and do whatever Lana wants you to do from now on.”

I chuckle because she must be joking or speaking in general terms, riding that communal wave of elation we’re all trapped in a little longer.

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“I’m serious.” She takes the hand Lana held onto for so long earlier. “If Lana wants you, who am I to stand in the way of that?”

I’m still too wrapped up in all things Lana to argue with her about this.

“You say that now, Jessie, but...”

Tim, who hasn’t been following our conversation, shouts, “Epic goodbye-to-New-York party tonight. We’re going to Glow to dance the night away.” He faces Jess and me. “Word is, literally everyone is going.”

“Izzy and Leila included?” Daphne asks.

“I don’t know about that. They’re kind of past clubbing age, I think. I meant everyone on the tour.”

“Lana as well?” Despite what she just said, Jess can’t help herself.

“Everyone,” Tim confirms, as though he’s everyone’s social secretary. “Before you leave New York, you have to par-tay!” He glances at me. “You’re in, right, Cleo? After a show like that, you can’t possibly curl up in bed with a book. You need to process the adrenaline running through you. You—”

“Tim!” I shout, because he’s completely beside himself. “I’m going.” Our band could do with one of those nights out that we can reminisce over for years to come; something to put the past few weeks of turmoil behind us. And he did say Lana was going as well.

I've always hated cordoned-off VIP areas in clubs because they defeat the whole purpose of going to a club—that shared experience of moving your body to the same beat as all the other writhing, sweaty people on the dance floor. But when you're out with The Lady Kings, you need the protection. Although no matter how thick the rope separating us from the rest of the crowd, it can't keep Lana's admirers away. A line of people who want a piece of Lana has formed, held back by a security guard.

She's gracious enough to give everyone who wants to talk to her a few minutes of her time. She seems to be enjoying herself. Lana has just finished a conversation with a big smile on her lips, even throwing in a quick hug. She taps the security guard on the shoulder and whispers something in his ear. He squares his shoulders and tells the people on the other side of the rope something. Perhaps she's had enough now.

Lana is swallowed up by her entourage. I focus my attention back on my bandmates, but Tim is nowhere to be seen—although I can easily guess he's on the dance floor, enjoying every ounce of attention he can get. Daphne is canoodling with Tessie in one of the couches. Jess seems completely engrossed in a conversation with Billie—it sure beats Billie trying to hit on me again.

Logan sidles up to me. He refills my glass of champagne and tops up his own. It's going to be one of those nights, but we don't have an early wake-up call tomorrow, nor do we have a show in the evening. And New York has been spectacular, in more ways than one.

"Have I told you how much of a fan I am of yours and The Other Women?" Logan says.

"Only once or twice."

"Then this is me telling you a third time." He curves his arm around my shoulder.

"This tour is unlike anything I've ever experienced before."

“Glad you’re having fun.”

“Fun doesn’t even begin to describe it.” He gives my shoulder a little squeeze before removing his arm. “It’s the experience of a lifetime.”

“How long have you been working for Lana?” Now’s as good a time as any to extract a bit of information.

“Coming up to three years now. When I started, this tour was but a glint in Roy and Andy’s eyes, and look at us now. Look at Lana now.”

“How is she doing?”

“Okay, I think.” He gives me a quick once-over. “You?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, puh-lease, Cleo. I look much younger than I am, but I’ve been around the block a few times.” He arches up his eyebrows. “When you sing together, we all see what’s going on. It’s so much more than a duet.” He brings his hand to his chest. “I don’t merely love Isabel Adler. I absolutely adore her, but even I, rabid Izzy fan, must admit that the version you and Lana sing is...” He shrugs dramatically. “I’m usually a guy of many words, but I don’t even have words for it. Just like this tour is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, you and Lana singing “I Should Have Kissed You” to each other in the way that you do, in the way that you clearly can’t help yourself doing, is like a once-in-a-lifetime musical experience. Even Isabel Adler took a step back so she could see you and Lana sing it. What more proof do you need?”

“It’s just a song, Logan.”

“The hell it is, and I think we both know that. Lana knows it. Everybody knows it.

Maybe you're just not ready to see it for what it really is."

"And what might that be?" I take a sip of champagne.

"L.O.V.—"

"Is this man harassing you, Miss Palmer?" Lana playfully punches Logan in the biceps. "If so, I'll have him removed from the VIP area immediately."

Logan eyes Lana, then me, then pulls a face as though drawing the only obvious conclusion.

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“I’ll give you some privacy.” He shoots me a bit fat wink, then walks off with the bottle of champagne swinging from his hand.

“Hey,” Lana finds my gaze.

“Hey, yourself. I wasn’t expecting you to come out with everyone tonight.”

“I can’t always say no and stay behind. Although it’s going to hurt in the morning.” She flashes me one of her showbiz smiles.

“It’s easy to see why you’d prefer the privacy of your hotel room.” I nod at the group of mostly women behind the security guard. “They all want a piece of you.” Who can blame them?

“You know what Joan used to do when we were in a situation like this?” A different kind of smile appears on Lana’s face.

I shake my head.

“She’d kiss me profusely in front of everyone. She could be obnoxious like that.” Lana giggles in a way I’ve never heard her do before—she’s hardly the giggling type. “She made it all so easy. Fame, stardom, all that stuff was such a joke to her, although she did also enjoy it. But in the end, all she ever really wanted to do was make music and be with me. That’s what she always used to say. And that was her life.” Lana shakes off a shudder. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to go there. There’s something about being here that seems to bring it all back. Even though this club didn’t even exist when Joan was last in New York.”

“That’s okay.” Everything about Lana softens when she talks about Joan.

“It’s the one thing that has always been able to comfort me.” She takes a sip of champagne. “She died so quickly, so suddenly, that she didn’t suffer. And she had the most amazing life.” Lana huffs out some air, then looks at me. “Damn, Cleo. You have this mysterious way of making me open up to you.”

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“I think that, sometimes, it’s not so much about what’s being said.” She empties her glass. “That was a great gig tonight. And the encore. You...” She puts her glass away. “Let’s just say that I’m certain that Joan would approve of you. Of every aspect of you.”

Before I get the chance to ask what that means, someone demands Lana’s attention, and she’s off.

I weigh up my options. Join Tim on the dance floor or Jess and Billie who are still talking and are sitting a whole lot closer together than the last time I looked.

I choose the dance floor, but I make sure I’m in a spot where I can keep an eye on Lana. The night is young and I’m dying to find out what she meant by what she just said about Joan approving of me in every aspect.

Chapter 33

Lana

I’ve had more than my fair share of champagne and I haul my tipsy ass onto the tiny dance floor we’ve got going on in the VIP area. It’s still funny to me, after all these years, how everyone makes way for me and a clearing opens up sucking me into the

center of attention, even in this throng of people that I spend all my time with, and who know me better than most. All because out of the four of us in the band, I was blessed with a voice that can hold a tune.

“You’re naive to think it’s just that,” Joan used to say to me. “You’re not just the singer of our band, Lana. You’re our totem. You’re what we stand for. You’re the one people see when they listen to our music, when it touches them somewhere deep inside. You’re the one who brings the emotion and, in turn, brings it out of them. That’s what they want from you when they see you.”

Surrounded by the people who work on this unlikely tour, I dance some more of the night away. The more inebriated I get, the more my brain seems to descend into a spiral of all things Joan. Earlier, for a minute there, it felt like she was right here with me. Although why I had to bother Cleo with sentimental tales of Joan, I do not know. Quite possibly because she moves something in me that only Joan could touch before.

“Lana!” someone shouts over the music from the other side of the rope. “I love you.”

I look over to check it isn’t Cleo loudly professing her love to me, even though she’s not the type to do something like that—and it’s more wishful and very tipsy thinking than anything on my part.

Last I saw her, she was dancing on the main floor, tearing it up with Tim, and looking effortlessly hot while doing so. Of course, it’s not Cleo. Thank goodness it’s not Jess, either. She and Billie must have found some common ground because this evening, they have suddenly become inseparable. Maybe they’re commiserating over Cleo and me.

Cleo is shuffling her way back to the VIP area, Tim hot on her heels. Logan rushes over to them and hands them each a glass of champagne. They knock it back as though they’ve just played a two-hour show and it’s the best water they’ve ever

tasted. Then Logan drags them to our tiny dance floor between the couches and, mere seconds later, I find myself bopping to the beat with Cleo.

All my defenses are down, any inhibitions are out of the window. I'm on tour. Everything's going great. Everyone is happy enough. In fact, I'm happy. For the first time in ten long years, I can unequivocally say that I'm happy, here on this dance floor in this club in New York, having ended a phenomenal run of shows with a breathtaking duet with Cleo Palmer, who is so fucking sexy when she dances, I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

Cleo's eyes are heavy-lidded, which makes her look even more sultry, but her moves are on point. She moves to the beat as though it runs through her body, as though her muscles are controlled by it and she's at one with the music. Cleo embodies all the amazing, wonderful things about music. She's the kind of front woman any band dreams of. Insanely attractive but with her girl next door vibe intact. Warm with the audience in between songs, but oh-so cool and in the moment the second she opens her mouth to sing. And when she sings with me, when I sing to her and she responds, I feel all the things she once told me she felt and accused me of being too reckless with. I feel it all. I feel like, on stage, I've come to need her, if only for those five minutes per night. But what a five minutes they are. That's why it was so hard to do it without her. It didn't feel right, no matter how great Izzy is.

When I look at Cleo now, dancing so uninhibitedly, so freely, she's the epitome of how I used to live my life but, also, of how this life can still be. So, I can't help myself. I dance my way to her—I've got a couple of moves myself. I shuffle right up to her until we're dancing together.

I try to keep up with the music that's being made nowadays, but there's not enough time to listen to everything, and I haven't recognized a single song so far. I'm a rock chick at heart, always have been. Electronic music is all the rage these days, with superstar DJs being paid outrageous amounts of money to push a few buttons instead

of putting on actual records, but my heart has always beat the hardest for the very simple but effective combination of guitar, bass, and drums. And vocals, of course.

Cleo and I move to the beat together, our legs following the same rhythm, our arms close but not touching. Sometimes, the magic of what happened on stage can be carried over to the rest of the night, and tonight's one of those nights. We're all drunk but also intoxicated by having played a show as perfect as it will ever be, with Izzy and Leila watching from the wings, and the crowd eating out of our hands. No matter how much we chase them, nights like these are elusive. Nights like these need to be made the most of. So it's with a combination of too much champagne, being high on our performance, and a bunch of out-of-control hormones riding up and down my blood stream, that I smile at Cleo before finding her ear.

"When we sing together," I say to her, inhaling her scent. "I feel it too. I feel it all." I drop my arms and reach for her hand, like I did on stage earlier, when I wanted to hold on to it forever.

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I look at her and everything and everyone else slips out of focus. It might as well just be Cleo and me in this club, on this crowded, makeshift dance floor. I only have eyes for her. She doesn't smile. She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. She stares at me as though I've just said something unfathomable, something that's taking her a while to process. She stops dancing and stands completely still, her breathing heavy and a little ragged. Then she takes a step closer. She brings her free hand to my cheek and cups it.

"Oh, Lana," she whispers. "Oh, fuck it." She leans toward me and kisses me right there and then. I kiss her back with all I have. I push my hand into her hair as I press my body close to hers. I don't care that we're in the middle of a busy club. I don't even care that footage of this kiss will have spread around the world come morning. Why would I care? I'm kissing the most divine woman, and she's kissing me right back.

Loud whoops and cheers pull me from the moment. A few people around us are clapping.

"Fucking finally," I hear Logan say.

I still only have eyes for Cleo. I wrap my arms all the way around her, as though wanting to shield her from everyone around us.

I find her ear again. "Do you want to get out of here?"

Her chin bounces against my shoulder.

“Car?” Logan is standing behind me. He’s nothing if not efficient, even on a night out like this.

“Yes, please. Thank you, Logan.”

“On it.” I don’t know how he can go into business mode just like that, but it’s one of the reasons I appreciate him. “We’ll go out through the back. Follow me and that big dude over there.” He nods at the bouncer who’s been guarding the VIP area.

“Do you need to say goodbye to anyone?” I let go of Cleo.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.” She stands there grinning, as if she’s just won the biggest lottery prize possible. “I think it’s quite obvious you and I are leaving now.”

Chapter 34

Cleo

In between bouts of kissing, Lana and I sip water in the back of the car like our lives depend on it, but of course we’re still tipsy when we reach the hotel and stumble into her penthouse suite.

She comes for me immediately, but I hold her off for a moment. “Are you sure you’re not going to regret this in the morning?”

“I just kissed you in the middle of New York’s hottest club.” She pulls me close. “The only thing I’m ever going to regret is not kissing you sooner.”

“You must still be very much under the influence, because I believe I kissed you.”

“That’s just a technicality.” Lana brings her lips a hair’s breadth from mine. “How about we kissed each other?”

“You did come for me, though, like a lion lunging at their prey.” I might be making jokes, but my heart is hammering away furiously beneath my ribcage.

“I couldn’t take it anymore.” Lana stills and pulls back a fraction. “I want you to know that this is not happening because I’ve had too much to drink. This is happening because... I’m in love with you.” Her hand rests on my side and she pushes her fingers into my flesh there. “I couldn’t see it because of... well, so many reasons. Good ones and bad ones, but in the end, none of them matter. That much I can see now.”

“I’ve only been in love with you half my life,” I blurt out.

Lana chuckles. “Oh, god.”

“Wrong thing to say?”

She shrugs. “At this point, there are no more right or wrong things to say.” Her hand rides up a little higher. “In fact, maybe we should stop talking altogether now.”

“Definitely one of your better ideas.” I gaze into Lana’s dark eyes. It’s not the first time this is happening, but the fact that it’s happening again is like a small miracle, like the odds conspiring greatly in my favor. Because throughout all the drama with the band and all my inner conflict, I never stopped wanting Lana.

When we lay it all out on stage, that’s what makes it so special. She’s the one and only Lana Lynch and I’m utterly, completely crazy about her—and have been for as long as I can remember. Of course, back in the day, when I first fell in musical love with The Lady Kings and their out of this world singer, I had no idea I would ever get

to know Lana. That I would meet her, and my own band would go on tour with hers. That we'd sing a duet that would change everything.

If that duet had never been recorded; if Isabel Adler had never lost her voice; if Lana hadn't been looking for the perfect comeback song; I wouldn't be in this room right now. I would just be the singer of The Other Women, the opening act on this tour. But that song brought us together, brought us here, made us feel that there was so much more going on between us than we were willing to admit. Because of that song, what I feel for Lana is infinitely more than what Jess could ever feel for her, so much more than a one-way crush on a rock star.

On stage, Lana and I are equals. On stage, I got my first glimpse of what that was really like. On stage, I felt her respect and admiration for me grow. I'll deal with my band later. I'm just as certain as Lana that I'll have zero regrets in the morning, only a massive headache and a thirst for more.

Her hand snakes up higher, hoisting up my top. I lift my arms so we can get rid of at least one piece of fabric. There's impatience in Lana's actions. She can't get my T-shirt off me quickly enough. But when you do what we do, when you get so close together on the stage without being able to find a proper outlet for the emotions we create, this is the only way it can be. Hungry. Frantic. Every cell in our body taken over by desire.

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So I tug at Lana's shirt. I want her naked. I want her stripped of everything she hides behind. Because we are no longer on stage. This is not a performance. This is as real as it gets. As intimate as it gets.

"Hey," Lana says after both our tops have been removed and we stand in front of each other in our bras. She flicks her tongue over her lips before pulling me close and kissing me. Our kiss in the club was intense, but this kiss is of an entirely different order. It's hot and full of intention and it connects directly to my throbbing, aching clit. I've wanted Lana for such a long time and only now, even though we've done this once before, does it feel like that deep ache for her is finally being dealt with.

She just told me she's in love with me. I might have started out smitten with the version of her I had created in my head all these years ago, but I'm well past that now. I know Lana much better now. Beyond her ubiquitous rock star hotness, she's also kind and considerate and a woman who lost someone she loved more than anything. A woman who has had to dust herself off and find a way back into the life she once she knew, but will never be the same again. She's brave and confident and more than two decades older than me, but fuck if that doesn't turn me on. If that doesn't light an extra fire right underneath my skin where her fingers skate up my arms. I love everything there is about Lana and, deep down, I know my bandmates won't end up hating me for this, because how could they? How could my best friends not want me to have this?

"Oh, Cleo," Lana whispers when we break from our kiss. "I need you." Her voice sounds as brittle as the flimsiest glass, yet her hands are swift as they find the button of my jeans.

I know exactly what she means. A fresh wave of lust washes over me and I help her remove the rest of my clothes. I watch as she steps out of her boots and jeans. We eye each other and in silent agreement, we strip until we're naked.

The entire expanse of my skin breaks out in goose bumps and not because I'm cold—quite the opposite.

We tumble onto the bed. Lana drapes her warm body next to mine.

“Hey, again.” She draws a line with her fingertip from my temple over my cheekbone to my lips. “You're so beautiful,” she murmurs. “Like a dream.”

Then she kisses me again and I lose myself completely in this kiss. I pull her on top of me, grab fistfuls of her hair, push my knee between her legs.

I'm about to beg her for much more when she starts kissing her way down. She pauses at my breasts, which she seems to be especially fond of. I relish in the soft touch of her tongue on my nipples as well as in the certainty of what's about to happen next. Lana's divine tongue in an even more intimate spot. I spread my legs in anticipation. When Lana kisses a moist path down my belly, groans escape from my throat. My most persistent fantasy is about to come true. Lana Lynch is about to go down on me.

She maneuvers herself between my legs, then looks up at me. Mischief glints in her eyes, but something else as well. I know that this means much more to her than the previous time we did this. Just as I already know that when we wake up in the morning, she won't ask me to sneak out of her room and make sure no one sees me. Everyone already knows. She came for me in a club full of people, where everyone witnessed our kiss. This is the next step, and there's no way of knowing what the next step after this will be, but that's hardly something to complain about. The fact that this is happening, that Lana is kissing her way down to the apex of my thighs, is

proof that you can never predict what's going to happen next, but that it can be damn delightful.

Lana exhales slowly, as though she has to take a moment to ground herself, to process everything that's happening and that has already happened, before her lips touch down on my inner thigh.

I'm breathless with anticipation for what's about to transpire, even though, from experience, I know it's impossible to prepare for the moment when all your dreams come true. So many of my dreams have already come true, but none of them can compare to this one—to the one I've always returned to. To the woman playing the leading role.

When the tip of Lana's tongue skates lightly along my clit, my brain goes into a tailspin of lust. Instantly, I'm dragged under by a blend of the wildest emotion and the purest desire. And through the haziness of lust that crowds my very being, I know, with absolute certainty, that nothing or no one else will ever do again. It's all Lana for me now because she can never be someone I can recover from. My brain might be cloudy, but my body tells me everything I need to know as it takes over, as it becomes a crackling ball of fire, and I surrender to the soft touch of Lana's tongue.

She's all warmth and delicious intention on me. Lana's tongue on me there, between my legs, licking me, is everything. I'm no match for the power of my dreams, for all that Lana stands for, for what we are, here in this bed tonight, together.

What ultimately tips me over the edge, is that Lana wants this just as much as I do. That she needs me and wants me in equal parts. That what we prove on stage every time we sing our duet, that together we are so much more powerful and special than we can ever be alone, also holds true in this moment.

I give myself to her because I have no choice. Because it's all I've been doing since

she asked me to sing with her. I may have tried to resist. I may have tried to take the high road for the sake of my band. I may have even believed for a while there that the solution was to no longer sing with her. All of it was utterly futile, because, by now, I need Lana as much as she needs me. The fact that I have her, that her tongue is touching down on my clit over and over again, that she's putting all her focus into pleasing me, into making me feel the best I've ever felt in my life, is the most miraculous of all.

I scream her name when I come. I hold on tight to her shoulders, digging my nails deep into her flesh, as pure happiness courses through me. I could scold myself for not seeing that this is what I wanted all along and that it was okay to go for it, that I didn't need to jump through a dozen hoops to get here, although, come to think of it, maybe I did. Maybe I had to go through all of that to reach this moment with Lana now, and all the moments that will come after.

She crawls up to me, her chin glistening with my wetness, and to see her like that floors me again. I open my arms and hold her close, because, if it's up to me, I'm never letting her go again.

Chapter 35

Lana

I could go to sleep perfectly happy right now, lying in Cleo's arms, her chest rising and falling rapidly beneath me as she catches her breath—after I've just made her come like that.

She holds on to me as though I might decide to leave this room any second, or maybe she's a little overcome. It's been a day and a half. It's been an eventful few weeks and she has just released a lot of pent-up emotion—and lust.

She buries her nose in my hair, then loosens her grip on me a little.

“Are you okay?” I push myself away from her to get a better look at her face. God, that face. Thousands of people must dream of waking up to this face in the morning, after having done what Cleo and I just did. From experience, I know that having that effect on people simply because of what you do, because of the privilege of being able to play music for an adoring audience, means absolutely nothing.

“The biggest paradox of being famous,” Joan used to say. Out of the two of us, and in my never-wavering opinion, she was the hot one, with the most pleasing features and the most symmetrical face—“a killer smile and boobs to match,” Joan used to joke—yet I was the one receiving most of the attention, because of my voice and my position on stage behind the microphone.

“I don’t know.” Cleo curls her fingers around my wrist. “Is this real? Are you really Lana Lynch or am I in the middle of some sort of delirious fever dream?” She grins at me. “Did we really kiss in a club full of people and did you just...” Her grin turns shy. “Make me come like nobody’s business?”

“It’s all real.” I brush the back of my fingers along her flushed cheek.

“I must be the luckiest girl on earth.”

Now is not the time to launch into a speech about how I’m nothing special just because I’m the lead singer of The Lady Kings, about how I’m just a fifty-four-year-old woman in bed with another woman who is, quite possibly, much too young for her.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:31 pm

“I think the pleasure is all mine.” I close the distance between our lips and kiss Cleo. I could kiss her all night long. In fact, I may do just that.

When we break from our kiss, Cleo gives me a funny look, the tips of her eyebrows drawn together.

“What?” A smile breaks on my face at the sight of her.

“Even your down-to-earth spiel has something sexy about it.”

I chuckle because it sounds so very much like something Joan could have said. Maybe Cleo has reminded me of Joan all along, of certain aspects of her, of all these things I’ve been without for too long.

“What’s so funny?” Cleo has recovered from the intensity of her climax. She pushes me off her and lies on top of me, wedging her knee between my thighs, reminding me of the fact that I’m fully naked and a whole lot turned on.

“Absolutely nothing.” My voice has dropped into a lower register. I’m so hot for Cleo, not only because she’s gorgeous and so much fun to be around but, also, because part of me still believes that I shouldn’t be—that there’s a forbidden edge to what we’re doing. I’m too old. She’s too young. Her bandmates don’t approve. I can only imagine what her parents would think of this, of us. The PR people at the record company, a department I’ve grown to care less and less about over the years, will surely throw a hissy fit. But what turns me on the most, is that I don’t care, because I can do whatever I want, and so can Cleo—and there’s no doubt the fans will love it.

“Good.” Cleo gazes down at me. I gaze back into her clear blue eyes, and I realize that she’s the only person who can hurt me when it comes to this. She has chosen her band over me once before, and she might do it again. She’s still so young. She has so many tours left to go on, and dozens of records to make, hundreds of hearts left to break—I can only hope she doesn’t break mine, but I can’t control it. Just like I couldn’t control, nor stop, Joan from dying, without a single word of warning, of a massive stroke, right in front of me. “Because things are about to get serious again.”

I swallow hard at her words because of what they mean. Because I want things to get very serious right now. I want Cleo. I want her in the way I’ve only ever wanted one other woman.

She leans in, and I kiss her as though there’s no tomorrow—although there very much is, and in a few days we’ll be going on stage together again. I can’t wait for that particular stint of magic either.

But first things first. I pull Cleo close and revel in the touch of her thigh pressing against me. She’s all over me, the way Joan used to be. Given the chance, she was always touching some part of her to some part of me, be it a finger hooked into mine or a hand resting against my back. Joan was possessive that way, although not in any other ways. I know because she died much too soon, and at a time when our love, which had gone through many peaks and valleys by then, was at its best, I’ve come to idealize her. I made her into a saint that she surely wasn’t. Perhaps I could even draw a parallel with how Cleo sees me as a version that only exists in her head.

But none of that matters now because these are Cleo’s lips meandering down my neck—and decidedly not Joan’s. It’s Cleo whose warmth is all over me, breathing new life into parts of me I had allowed to die, making me feel as if I can fully become the Lana Lynch I used to be, with the addition of a few wrinkles. Cleo doesn’t care one bit about the lines on my skin, judging by the way she skates the tip of her tongue along my neck. I guess what turns me on most of all is how much she still wants me,

because, by now, she must have caught a glimpse of the Lana she didn't know—the real me with all my vulnerabilities and hang-ups. Yet, she's still here. She came back to me, and I opened my arms to her as wide as they would go.

Cleo's lips have reached my breasts. My nipples ache for the soft touch of her tongue. My entire body throbs with need for her. She takes a nipple into her mouth, and I groan wildly. I let it all out, the way I do on stage, when my vocal cords are the perfect extension of what's going on in my heart. Making music again has been healing in more ways than one, but when I decided to go back on the road, to sing for people again, I had no inkling of all the other things I would get in return. One of The Other Women—the opening act I believed we didn't need—in my bed, raking her teeth over my rock-hard nipple, making me moan low in my throat.

Cleo slips off me and her wet lips on my nipple are replaced by her fingers. She cups my breasts as though they are the best present she has ever received in her life, before lowering her hand, and drawing ever-tightening circles around my belly button.

My entire body aches for her now, for a resolution to what she has set off in me. I may be older than her, but that doesn't mean I feel any less of this—on the contrary. The wounds that life has left me with are deeper, their scar tissue more fragile, because all she's been doing since I met her, since our voices hit that first note together, is niggling at it, leaving me ever more exposed.

Cleo fixes her stare on me as her hand wanders lower still and my clit becomes the center of attention.

I gaze back into her eyes, which are the color of a hazy summer sky in LA, the endless blue sky that I can watch for hours from Joan's favorite vantage point in our garden.

My breath hitches as Cleo's fingertip edges along my clit, only to retreat

immediately. With her gaze glued to mine, she brings two fingers to her lips and sucks them deep into her mouth, before lowering her hand and, ever so slowly, slipping her fingers through my wetness.

Cleo moves inside me and I'm all the way there with her already. She may end up hurting me, or I may end up hurting her. But we will always have had our time on stage, and we will have had this, which is much more than two people on tour having sex. Cleo made me open myself up again to something I believed I was no longer interested in—to something that I thought was no longer in the cards for me after my wife died. Although I should have known, all along, how surprising life can be.

When I was growing up, singing along to Kay Cooper songs, I could never have guessed that I would someday be part of a boundary-breaking all-female rock band with a career of decades—and counting. So many things could have happened to The Lady Kings over the years. We could have split up over the most silly thing, but we didn't. The only thing that brought us to our knees was our guitarist dying. Yet, here we are again. Joan couldn't be resurrected, but our band could.

I could have put my foot down and said no to taking an opening act on tour. I could have made “I Should Have Kissed You” work on my own, dismantling the duet part of it and making it into one of our own songs. So many things could have happened, and so many things did happen. Still, most of them were unforeseen.

What's most unforeseen is that I'm thundering toward a climax at Cleo's fingers in this New York hotel room. Cleo Palmer, lead singer of The Other Women, front woman extraordinaire—and she's not bad with her fingers either.

She thrusts high inside me, leaving me breathless, leaving all of me a little ragged, like parts of me are coming apart at the seams, the parts of me that had come to subsist on denial, on no longer doing what I love doing most in the world—and no longer believing in the possibility of love.

I pull Cleo toward me and kiss her divine lips as wave after wave of climax rolls through me, as I give myself to her completely, and, piece by tiny piece, I go back to the joyful, fearless Lana Lynch I used to be.

Chapter 36

Cleo

On the bus out of New York, every one of us is suffering from a hangover. Jess seems to be worse off than most. She's bundled underneath a blanket, a thick eye mask covering her face.

"She stumbled into her room as Tessie and I were getting up for breakfast," Daphne whispers to me. "I bet she didn't spend the night in her own room."

"You're kidding." I look into Daphne's amused face. Maybe because she's newly in love, the collective hangover we're all suffering from seems to affect her less.

Daphne shakes her head. "We all know she didn't sleep with Lana. Not after that kiss."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:31 pm

“About that.” Daphne gave me such a hard time about it before, I’m more wary of her reaction than Jess’s.

“It’s okay,” Daphne says. “We don’t have to do this now.” She glances at Jess. “If Jessie’s okay with it, then I think I’ll be just fine.” She draws up her eyebrows. “Who do you think she spent the night with?” She slants her body toward me. “Between us, my money’s on Billie.”

“No fucking way.”

Daphne nods. “They were talking to each other the entire night. First, I thought they were processing some things about you and Lana, but no one processes something for that long in the middle of the night in a club.” Daphne purses her lips and gives a confident nod. “So, on second thought, I now think they were flirting.”

Jess pushes up her eye mask. “You know it’s very hard to get any sleep when two people are gossiping about you within hearing distance.”

“Oh, sorry,” Daphne whispers. “I thought you were out of it.”

“And that makes it okay to talk about me behind my back?” Jess sits up. Her face is all crumpled and she has dark circles under her eyes, looking very much like she didn’t get any sleep at all until she sneaked into her room this morning.

“It’s not exactly behind your back,” Daphne jokes. “And we were just speculating.”

“Yeah, right.” Jess doesn’t look as though she’s going to throw us any bones, until

her face suddenly bursts into a smile. “If you must know, I was with Billie last night. She’s, um, yeah...” Her cheeks flush. “She’s pretty great, actually. But sometimes you just can’t see what’s right in front of you because you’re too focused on something else.” She eyes me intently. “How was your night with Lana?”

“I’m going to need more coffee before I can have this particular conversation,” I say.

“How was your night with Billie?” Daphne shrieks.

“All I can say is that she’s a skilled guitarist and has very agile fingers.” Jess chuckles.

“I can’t fucking believe this tour.” Daphne scoots into the seat with Jess.

“Is there a band meeting going on that I haven’t been invited to?” Tim rocks up to us. He slides into the seat opposite Jess. I might as well join them. “We’re not gearing up for another epic fight, are we?”

“For once, Tim has no clue,” Jess says.

“No clue about what?” Tim rubs his eyes. We’re all bone tired, yet we won’t be catching much sleep on this bus ride, not just yet. Not only did we play three legendary shows in New York, so many other big things happened as well.

Jess tells Tim about Billie, and I wonder if Billie has told her bandmates about Jess. Maybe the four of them are huddling together on The Lady Kings’ bus, rehashing last night’s events. It’s easy enough to find out. All I have to do is call Lana—I can do that now. I also get the feeling that come the next bus ride, many more band and crew members will be riding on different vehicles.

We chitchat for a while, mainly debating whether Jess’s night with Billie was a one-

night stand or not, but no matter how much we discuss it, only time will tell.

“I’m the only one who hasn’t hooked up yet on this tour.” Tim clicks his tongue. “I’m the only one who takes this tour as the serious musical challenge it is, without giving in to distractions of the flesh.”

We all burst out laughing until inevitable fatigue catches up with us and we go quiet again.

“If I can just say something.” I clear my throat. “I want to make sure that none of you think I chose Lana over the band.”

All three of them immediately start protesting. I hold up my hands and they back off.

“In the end, I don’t think it was really a matter of choice. You are my three best friends. You’re my chosen family. We breathe the same air day in day out. We go out on stage and do our best for the audience, but also for each other. I could not ask for better bandmates and I love you all so much. It was never my intention to put any of that at risk. I really need you to know that. You three will always come first.”

“But Lana is just so good at licking p—” Tim says while grinning at me.

Daphne play-slaps him over the head. “Don’t say it, Tim. Don’t take the great Lana Lynch’s name in vain like that.”

“Is she, though?” Jess peers at me from under her blanket.

“You want me to dish the dirt on Lana?” I bring my hand to my chest. “I was just telling you how much I loved you, being all heartfelt about it, and that’s what you really want to know?”

“Duh!” Daphne says. “We love you too, Cleo, but, yes, we damn well want to know what Lana’s like in bed.”

I shake my head. “I can’t kiss and tell.” Throughout our years together, I’ve sat through many a bedroom confession from all three of them—and I’ve given a few of my own. This is what bands do—at least it’s what The Other Women do on tour. We tell each other everything. We share details from our lives that friends who are not on the road together might perhaps keep to themselves. Decorum and other unwritten rules don’t apply to us.

When you’re in a band, you aren’t simply best friends. You are friends to the nth degree. It goes deeper than any other friendship I’ve ever known because it has to withstand more. The foundation has to be strong so that when things get tough—and they always do—our bond just gets stretched a little instead of breaking. Details from our personal life are what that bond consists of—that and endless jokes, in bad taste and in good. And the incomparable experience of playing show after show together and knowing that we will always have each other’s backs, on stage and off. “If you must know.” It’s hard to keep my voice steady as my brain is being flooded with memories from last night. “Lana is every bit as spectacular as you’d expect her to be.” I pause for effect. “And then some.”

Chapter 37

Lana

It's different calling Cleo to the stage now that we've been sleeping together for a few weeks—although sleeping really isn't the right word to describe what we've been doing in all those hotel beds.

Behind a locked door, Cleo is every inch the person she is on stage. Seductive, confident, and always a little unpredictable. In addition to, I've come to find, utterly addictive.

"Please welcome—" The audience cheers so exuberantly, I don't get the chance to say Cleo's name. The crowd's reaction to our encore has grown in intensity as much as our act has—although I can't still call it a mere act. What Cleo and I do on stage is more than an act and that's what the audience responds to. Sparks fly when we sing to each other. They did from that very first time, but those sparks have multiplied a thousandfold since.

I wait for the audience to quiet down, enjoying every single second of their reaction and how I get to play with it.

"The amazing, incomparable Cleo Palmer." My voice bursts with pride. Most people present here must know about Cleo and me. In this day and age, a passionate kiss in a club no longer stays under the radar. The fans in the front row are beside themselves shouting Cleo's name.

Cleo walks on with her usual irresistible swagger. I could swear that she still grows in confidence every night I call her out here. The Other Women's gigs have taken on some of that mid-tour momentum as well, that sweet spot where it all seems to go so easily, when all band members operate on the same powerful wavelength.

When I told Cleo the other day she was getting better every time, she said it must be because she's sleeping with the best in the biz. I kissed her for a good long while after she said that.

We start out the same way we've always done. I sing the first verse, making my voice as delicate as I can manage. It's usually enough to silence the audience. Now that Cleo and I are all over each other every night, singing to each other is even more like the most exquisite foreplay—especially because we can't touch each other apart from some on-stage antics, which only contribute to the sensation of it being the prelude to what's to come after.

Cleo's voice comes in for the first chorus. She sounds gorgeous again, holding back, keeping it inside for now so she can let it all out later. Oddly enough, we can be more disciplined about this now—maybe because we know, in our hearts, what will happen later. And how we really feel about each other. When you duet together as often as we do as well as sleep together, that other person really gets under your skin. Making music together can be like spilling all your secrets, like offering the other person a glimpse of what lurks deep inside your soul.

On stage, Cleo tells me many things she can't or won't say with mere words off stage. Since our first performance at the Hollywood Bowl, we've shattered all boundaries between us. We've fallen in love.

We keep our distance for Cleo's solo in the second verse and even though I've seen her do this so many times, I can't keep my eyes off her. Just like that first time we saw The Other Women in LA, my gaze is glued to her because watching Cleo is as much a feast for the eyes as listening to her is a party for my ears. She's the whole

package. She puts as much emotion into her voice as she does in how she carries herself and she has some moves I wouldn't mind copying. But this song isn't about spectacular moves or stage tricks. This song is a ballad about two people who should have kissed each other. It requires more stillness than bravado, more control than exuberance. This too, Cleo excels at—and not just on stage.

She looks deep into my eyes as she sings the last line of the verse, before sashaying up to me in that ravishing way of hers, hips swaying to an inaudible beat—a beat only our hearts can hear.

Cleo joins me at the mic for the next chorus. The audience screams as though they've all just won a million dollars, and we've learned to wait, to draw out this song, for them as well as for us. Because when I'm on stage with Cleo, I never want to leave.

This is the final song of the night, and I should be exhausted, but I don't feel tired. Having her stand so close to me that I can hear her breath invigorates me, makes me forget that I'm close to dehydration and my muscles will require a vigorous massage to recover. It makes me forget the physical as well as the emotional discomfort of touring—as though, so many years later, I'm learning again what it's all about. As though I've been injected with that reckless energy I used to have on our first tours and nothing else mattered but this. The song. The music. The moment. Joan always by my side. Deb and Sam always having my back. All that musical magic we created—because how else can I describe it when four individuals come together with their separate instruments and produce a sound that drives a crowd of people crazy?

What Cleo and I are doing now is like The Lady Kings in our early, heady days. And, of course, it feels this way because I'm in love. I'm besotted with Cleo. Right now, she's the magic maker in my life. She makes me feel as though I have everything to live for again—as though I want to do this until the day I die.

Our voices tumble over each other, play hide-and-seek with each other, until we hit that perfect harmony, those few breathtaking notes before the grand finale of the song

and the show.

We belt out the last chorus together. Our fingers meet and we hook them together before grabbing hold of each other's hands—not to let go of any time soon. All the while, Cleo's blue gaze is trained on me. All her delicious attention is on me.

"I should have kissed you long ago," we sing in unison. We hold the last note, Cleo's voice high and strong, mine low and gravelly with life and age.

In that split second between the song ending and the audience erupting again, I hold up my free hand and ask for silence.

"And then I did," I say into the microphone.

The audience holds its collective breath. I close the last of the distance between Cleo and me. Inside, I'm smiling, bursting into the widest grin, while my lips find Cleo's.

For everyone to see, I kiss her. I pull her close and press my lips to her. We might be on stage, but this is not a stage kiss. It's real, releasing all the energy we created by singing this duet, and all the duets before. I open my mouth to Cleo and let her all the way in.

The crowd whoops and howls. I make out some applause from the wings. But I'm not doing this for anyone else. I'm doing this for us. For all the emotions that are blossoming in my heart.

I'm kissing Cleo because I should have kissed her long ago.