



# Sanctuary (Deviant Hearts #0.5)

**Author:** *N. N. Britt*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** The woman of his dreams has a boyfriend.

But hes certain she deserves a better one.

Wendys plan is finishing beauty school and expanding her client base, maybe even marrying her rockstar boyfriend Jett. No, Jetts not perfect, but hes better than most guys shes dated. Sadly, the European rock festival Jett buys tickets for turns into a nightmare when he abandons Wendy at the airport.

Wendy chalks it up to his busy schedule, but things get progressively worse throughout the weekend. Unexpected solace comes from Cruz, the brooding bassist for the scandalous band The Deviant, as undeniable sparks fly between them. Besides, Cruz doesnt hide his attraction well.

Four chaotic festival days make Wendys reality clear—Jett has never cared for her. Torn between the familiar toxicity of her current relationship and the uncertain promise of a new beginning with Cruz, Wendy must decide: continue enduring Jetts abuse or risk it all on hope for something better with Cruz.

Or maybe, just maybe, she can find the strength to do it alone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

There's a moment in life that strikes hard, maybe once, sometimes twice. Like a sledgehammer to the head, it jolts your brain into overdrive, and suddenly, you're questioning everything.

Where am I?

How did I end up here?

Has it all been a colossal waste?

I figure it's different for everyone. This existential crisis makes you doubt whether the road you've chosen leads to where you truly want to go. It's not something penciled in on a calendar; it ambushes you when you're least ready to tackle it, both physically and mentally.

For me, it happens on a Thursday morning in June as I step off the Lufthansa plane and find no one waiting at the arrival gate in the Munich Airport.

So I stand in the crowded terminal, lost and feeling like a complete fish out of water, panicking a little while the rest of the passengers are dispersing in various directions.

A flash of orange hair catches my eye in a reflection on the glass wall—oh, right, that's me. I'm still getting used to this new color.

The first time Jett saw me with it, he said I looked like a carrot.

I remember wondering—since it was coming from my boyfriend—if he meant it as a

compliment or disapproval.

You can never quite tell with Jett Vice.

" Schei?e! " A severe-looking woman in a black pantsuit glares at me as my overstuffed gym bag topples into her path when I turn around.

I flash an apologetic grin. "Sorry! Ich spreche kein Deutsch! " I don't speak German! It's one of the few German phrases I memorized before this trip. You know, in case of emergency.

Also, I was told a lot of people here understand and speak English.

The woman huffs and continues walking.

I step away from the foot traffic and dig my cell phone out of my jacket's pocket.

I stab at the buttons as rising frustration is starting to replace fear.

Jett was supposed to meet me. He knows I'm terrified of traveling alone to unfamiliar places, especially those where English isn't the first language.

The line rings once, twice. "C'mon, Jett, pick up..." I mutter under my breath, then bite my lip.

Finally, he answers with a slur in his voice, which doesn't surprise me at all. "Hello?"

"Jett? I'm here. I just landed," I shout over the racket of the terminal.

"Wendy! Babe!" Jett yells. "You made it!"

In the background, I hear music and voices—mostly women squealing and lots of English.

"Jett, where the hell are you?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady as I'm jostled by a passing cluster of people dressed in identical hoodies. "You said you'd meet me at the airport!"

"Ahh fuck, sorry, babe," he says, not sounding sorry at all. "Got caught up with some press shit. You know how it goes."

I close my eyes, mentally counting to five while my blood pressure skyrockets. "No, Jett, I don't know how it goes, seeing as I just flew across a damn ocean for you. You said you'd be free on Thursday."

"What do you want me to do? I'm fucking working."

"Can't you take a break and pick me up like you promised?"

"Chillax, honey," Jett says with an infuriating chuckle. "I'll call you back soon, alright? Gotta handle something."

"Jett, wait—" But he's already hung up.

I glare at my phone, resisting the urge to hurl it across the terminal. I'm already terrified of the bill I'll be getting for this call. Roaming is expensive. This is disappointing, but certainly not surprising. Jett's done it before. He has a tendency to over-promise stuff.

Then why are you still with him?

I shove that little voice down. I can't let it ruin my life's master plan.

With a heavy sigh, I adjust the strap of my bag on my shoulder and storm off toward the baggage claim.

The area is a whirling sea of bodies all jockeying for position, shouting over each other in a dozen different languages. The scent of sweat and overpriced fast food chokes the air around me.

With my flaming hair and ripped tights, I feel painfully conspicuous among the suited businessmen and glamorous European women in chic outfits. Sure, there are people in jeans and leggings, but for some reason, I still feel very American and very country.

When I see my luggage, I gently elbow my way through the masses, barely dodging a collision with a stout man. Small women like me have no choice but to get a little aggressive sometimes.

I scramble for my neon leopard print suitcase as the man mutters something in German that I'm sure isn't complimentary. Nothing in German ever sounds so. I flash a tight smile again, saying I'm sorry. " Entschuldigung . Excuse me. Entschuldigung ."

My phone buzzes insistently from my pocket, and I fish it out.

Jett's name is on the screen. For a second, I'm tempted to ignore it because I can't afford another call in a foreign country, but I jab the answer button instead, hoping he's found a moment in his busy schedule and is on his way to get me.

Based on what I found online, the drive from the airport to the festival grounds is only half an hour. It's not like he has to cross multiple borders. It's a straight shot out of the city.

"Should I wait for you?" I ask immediately.

"Babe! Wendy! Can you hear me?" Jett's voice is muffled, barely audible over the sounds of laughter and pulsing music. "I'm sorry, it's this promo thing. Can't leave just yet. Y'know, with the label guys... And there's a potential investor."

"Are you seriously bailing on me right now?" I shoulder my way through the crowd as I wrestle my huge rolling suitcase behind me.

"It's important."

"More important than your girlfriend?"

"Don't be like that."

My gym bag slides from my shoulder and into the crook of my arm. I suck in a sharp breath through my teeth, trying to tamp down my irritation. Of course he'd find a way to turn it all back on me. Silly Wendy for thinking she'd actually come first for once. "Jett, I swear to God..."

"Look, just get a cab," he slurs, and I can practically see him waving his hands around in my mind's eye, a half-empty bottle of vodka clutched in his fist. "Tell them to drop you off at the artists' entrance. They all know where it is. I'll meet you then, yeah? I'll be waiting for you! Iloveyoubye!"

He hangs up before I can get another word in, leaving me gaping at my phone in the middle of the heaving crowd once more.

Un-fucking-believable.

I look around helplessly at the unfamiliar faces, the bustle of the terminal, and I feel

utterly, hopelessly alone. At least, until I spot two girls, no older than eighteen, both sporting hoodies that say I've been Justified.

If one has never heard a single song from The Deviant, they'd probably fail to get the meaning behind the words. No, it has nothing to do with justice that's responsible for interpreting the law. It has everything to do with the notorious lead singer of The Deviant, Justice Cross.

Our eyes meet for a split second, and we share a sense of camaraderie—the kind that one alternative kid feels when he meets another alternative kid.

"I love your tee," one of the girls says in accented English, pointing at the Linkin Park logo slapped across the front of my T-shirt.

"Thanks. I love yours."

"Maybe see you at Ragnarock?" She winks.

"Maybe." I smile.

Then, with a groan, I hoist my bag up on my shoulder and start marching toward the terminal's exit.

The cab ride seems to stretch on for forever because of the traffic around the airport. The city blurs past in a haze of unfamiliar sights and sounds. Buildings and signs whirl in a kaleidoscope of dizzying colors that somehow seem different here.

I lean my forehead against the cool glass of the window, watching as the towering concrete of Munich gradually gives way to stretches of green.

There's an angry dark cloud forming on the outskirts of the city, and I start

wondering if we're getting some rain this weekend.

I hope not. That's never a good thing for a festival like the one Jett's band is playing.

God, what am I even doing here?

Chasing after a guy who can't even be bothered to pick me up from the damn airport. And then I think back to my mom's words, the words she's been knocking into me ever since I was little.

Find yourself a man who'll take care of you, Wendy. Don't end up like me.

Well, sorry to disappoint you, Mom, but it looks like I've gone and fallen for another asshole. One just like dear old Dad. May he rest in peace.

The only difference is that Jett is famous and has money.

Dad drank all the money we had away.

The cab jolts to a stop at a traffic light, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I look out the window to see the festival grounds ahead.

A sprawling sea of tents, amusements, and stages.

And somewhere in that throng is Jett, probably already halfway to blackout drunk and surrounded by a gaggle of groupies.

I feel a surge of jealousy boiling up inside me, hot and viscous. After all the shit I've put up with, he couldn't even follow through on his own promise.



I think of all the nights I've spent waiting up for him, patching him up after drunken brawls, listening to his grandiose rants about the band's "imminent success."

And for what?

To be relegated to an afterthought, a footnote in the epic saga of Jett Vice?

Am I what I claimed I'd never become—a doormat?

The cab swerves toward the signs indicating the artists' entrance and comes to a stop a few minutes later in front of the barricaded parking lot.

Right before I left, I exchanged whatever money I had on me to Euros. Those Euros come in handy now as I thrust a wad of cash at the driver and clamber out of the cab. He hurries to help me with my luggage and then gets back into his vehicle and disappears.

I stand there for a moment, inhaling the fresh air. Even the faint barbecue scent from the campers smells different here.

I dial Jett to let him know I'm here, at the gate, but instead, I'm greeted by his voicemail.

Great.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The entrance to the fenced-off festival grounds is right across the parking lot, and once I've gotten enough oxygen into my lungs, I square my shoulders and start walking.

Alright, Jett. You want me to come to you? Fine. But you better be ready for the hell I'm about to bring.

Turns out, bringing hell past security isn't that easy.

"Pass?" a beefy guy at the entrance asks.

"I'm with Sonic Trash," I supply.

"Sure. Still need a pass."

"I haven't gotten one yet. I just flew in."

I'm jostled from all sides by a group of people rushing to get past the guard. They wave their laminates and disappear inside.

"Look, mister," I say flatly, "I had a really long flight. I'm tired.

I need a shower and a nap. Do I look like a band stalker to you?

" I gesture at my luggage. I'm feeling all the things I just described to the beefy guy.

Filthy and exhausted. And lacking enough mental capacity to solve the pass problem

right now.

"Look, lady." The guard's face remains a mask. "No one's allowed inside without a pass. Including artists."

"My boyfriend's band is play?—"

"Sorry, sweetie, but festival rules are rules.

" Another security guy—clearly with more compassion—steps in.

"Too many big names on the bill for us to be risking our necks for you. Your boyfriend should have arranged for the pass in advance if he knew you were coming. Nothing a quick call can't solve. "

Easy for you to say, buddy. Your partner probably doesn't hang up on you every time you try to get them to talk to you on the phone.

"Holla at your guy inside," the nicer security guard instructs. "Have him meet you here."

My temper's fraying at the edges at the thought of Jett.

I'm pretty sure thinking about your boyfriend is only supposed to bring joyous feelings, so I blame my strange emotions on exhaustion.

You're tired.

Any woman who just flew across the globe would be cranky.

That's right. Makes total sense.

Hitching my bag higher on my shoulder, I fish out my phone and dial Jett's number. Again.

This time, he picks up.

"Hey!" I don't bother with a greeting. The more minutes I use, the higher my cell phone bill will be. So, no, not wasting time on pleasantries. "I'm at the artists' entrance, but they won't let me in without a pass. And you weren't picking up your phone. Can you come sort this out?"

There's a long pause. "Wendy? Yeah, yeah, I'll handle it. Just...just wait there, okay?"

The line goes dead. I stare at the phone in disbelief, then shove it back into my pocket with a mumbled curse.

Minutes crawl by, each one ratcheting up the tension in my shoulders, the ache in my arms from lugging around my overstuffed bags. I shouldn't have brought so much stuff, but I wanted to look nice for him. At this point, I don't think he cares.

"Wendy Fields?" a scrawny roadie shouts from the entrance. There's a laminated pass dangling from his fingers.

I wave at him from my spot by the fence. "Here."

He jogs up. "Hey, how are ya? You Jett's girl?"

I nod, reaching for the pass emblazoned with the Sonic Trash logo. The word Staff is printed in bold letters underneath it.

"You good?" the roadie asks. "Cuz I gotta get back."

I really hope he'll be a gentleman and offer to help with my bags, but he runs off.

After I loop the pass around my neck, I haul my luggage through the entrance and inside the fenced-off area.

I've been to these things back home plenty of times.

Jett's been touring nonstop ever since we met, and he's been dragging me along to quite a few festivals all over the States. From California to Florida.

The chaos in Germany isn't much different from the chaos in America. Just a lot of foreign speech.

Construction for some of the festival's entertainment is still in progress. Vendor stands, food trucks, a couple of smaller stages. Some of the signs that direct traffic into correct zones are still being erected, and navigating the field while prep is unfinished is a bit challenging.

That's when I realize I don't know where to meet Jett. He mentioned a hotel when he told me about the tickets. I better ask someone. With that thought, I stop the first guy I see.

"Hey, do you know where the hotel is?"

The guy scratches his head, looking uncertain. "Hotel? Pretty sure that's outside the festival grounds, mate." He's got that heavy British accent I sometimes can't understand. "Bands are all staying in the tour buses and tents back here." He jerks his finger to point behind his back.

No hotel? My stomach sinks. "Right... Okay. Can you just point me in the direction of Sonic Trash's camp, then?"

The guy gestures vaguely toward a cluster of vehicles and tents on the far side of the backstage area. "Over there. Can't miss it. Look for the one with all the empty beer cans piled outside."

Wonderful. Fucking fantastic.

"Thanks."

"Have fun, mate."

Fun? Fun is the last thing I'm having right now.

With a sigh, I start trudging in the direction he indicated. All I want is to dump my stuff, take a shower, and sleep for about a year. I'll sleep on a couch without a pillow at this point.

And then, when I'm rested, Jett and I are going to have a serious talk about his idea of "taking care of me." Because this? This is bullshit, and I'm not putting up with it anymore.

I just hope I can keep my resolve once I'm face to face with him again. Jett has a way of making me forget why I'm angry, of sweet-talking me into forgiving him no matter how badly he's fucked up.

But not this time. This time, things are going to change.

They have to.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes tops," Angelo, our manager, says to the crew from German rock 'n' roll magazine Uber Rock . "Busy schedule for the boys today." He glances at his watch and gestures for the makeup artist to move out of the frame.

The press tent smells like stale coffee, spilled beer, cheap pizza, and anxiety.

The air is filled with the hum of generators and the distant thrum of drums bleeding through the canvas walls.

Someone's in soundcheck , I note to myself, slouching on a worn leather couch, my boots propped up on the edge of the scarred wooden table in front of me.

"They look fine, Di." Samantha, the PR girl traveling with us on this tour, snaps her fingers impatiently, wanting to get this show on the road. Our public relations team thinks we should continue to do all on-camera press in makeup. Sometimes, I feel like they have something against showing our real faces to the crowd. And then I remember that's the whole shtick of our band. Hiding behind stage personas.

It creates mystery.

"Come on." Angelo claps his hands. "Time's money."

We flew in last night, still jet-lagged and disoriented, but that's nothing new when you're constantly touring. Weeks turn into months, and one day, you wake up a year older and a couple of mil richer.

Works for me.

So I do what I'm told. I'm just a backdrop anyway. Most bass players are.

The interviewer from Uber Rock adjusts her mic, her red lipstick smudged just enough to make her look like she's been up all night.

She's got that wide-eyed fan-girl vibe, but there's a sharpness in her gaze too, like she's looking for cracks in the facade.

I don't blame her. We're all cracked here. Some of us just hide it better.

Justice, our lead singer, sits to my left, his elbow brushing mine as he leans forward, already owning the room without saying a word.

His black hair catches the dim overhead light, framing his sharp jawline like a goddamn rock deity.

Or rock royalty. Everyone knows who his uncle is.

We just avoid discussing it. Angelo forbids it.

Our drummer, Zander, is sprawled out on my right, all golden-boy charm in his vintage band tee and ripped jeans, drumsticks twirling between his fingers.

Chance is perched on the armrest next to Justice, his guitar pick flicking against his thigh like a nervous tic.

He's the one with the anxiety issues, and it's coming off him in waves.

I don't know why he's so nervous. Asshole has always been a natural in front of the camera.



"Alright, boys," the interviewer starts. "Since time is limited, let's dive in. Your new album, *Saints & Sinners*, it's been called your most raw and personal work yet. What's the story behind it?"

Justice doesn't hesitate. "The album is about losing your old self to find your new self." His voice is smooth and low, like he's sharing a secret with the world. "It's about the chaos, the highs, the lows—the moments when you're so far gone, you don't know if you'll ever come back.

"He flashes that trademark smirk, the one that makes everyone in the crowd lose their minds. "But, hey, we always come back."

Chance chuckles, his fingers still tapping out some invisible rhythm. "Yeah, and sometimes you come back with a killer riff or two."

Zander snorts, tossing one of his drumsticks into the air and catching it effortlessly. "Or a killer hangover."

The room laughs, but it's Justice's laugh that fills the space the most. I stay quiet, my fingers tracing the edge of my bass strap where it rests against my thigh.

My mind drifts, not to the album or the crowds or the fame, but to the streets I came from—the cracked pavement, the graffiti-tagged walls, the sound of sirens cutting through the night.

I remember the first time I picked up a bass, how it felt like I was holding on to something real in a world that kept trying to knock me down. I was eleven years old.

"Cruz," the interviewer says, snapping me back to the present. "You've got this incredible presence on stage, but you're also kind of the quiet one in the band. What's your take on *Saints & Sinners*?"

I glance up, meeting her eyes for a second before shrugging. "It's honest. That's what matters. We didn't hold back."

Justice claps me on the shoulder, his hand heavy and warm. "That's our Cruz. A man of few words, but when he speaks, you listen."

Zander grins, punching my arm lightly. "And when he plays, you feel it. Dude's got the soul of a beast in those fingers."

I shake my head. "Yeah, well, someone's gotta keep you guys in line."

The room erupts in laughter again, but I can feel Justice's gaze on me, steady and assessing.

There's always this unspoken thing between us, this tension that never quite resolves itself.

He's the frontman, the face, the voice. I'm the backbone, the one who keeps it all grounded.

We need each other, but it's not always easy.

The interviewer moves on, asking about the tour, the fans, the stories behind the songs.

Justice takes the lead, spinning tales with that effortless charm of his while the rest of us chime in with jokes and anecdotes.

I stay mostly silent, my thoughts drifting again, caught between the world I left behind and the one I'm living in now.

The tent feels smaller somehow, the air heavier, like it's pressing down on me.

But I don't let it show.

I never do.

Because I don't fit in here. Not really.

My boots are scuffed, my jeans are frayed at the knees, and my hair's a mess, half tied back, half falling into my face.

Even with all this money coming in, I'm used to simple.

My bandmates... They're polished, effortless, born into this world like they were meant for it.

Me? I clawed my way in, blood and sweat and grit under my nails.

That's not something you forget, no matter how big the stage gets.

Justice laughs again at something the interviewer says, his voice drawing the room's attention like a magnet. "Yeah, man. We were in the studio for months, pulling all-nighters, chasing that perfect sound. But when it clicks, you know...it's like lightning hitting the ground."

Zander grins. "Lightning, huh? More like a damn hurricane. Cruz here nearly broke his bass during the solo on 'Blackout Nights.' Dude was possessed."

I glance up, catching Zander's eye. He's always doing this, trying to pull me into the conversation, but I'm not built for the spotlight.

I shrug. "It's what it needed," I supply.

Chance kicks my boot lightly with his Converse sneaker. "That's my man. All vibe, no bullshit."

The interviewer chuckles, her pen poised over her notepad. "So how do you guys feel about the album's reception so far?"

"It's...real," Chance says. "People connect with that. They want something that hits them in the gut, you know?"

Justice nods. "Exactly. That's what we're going for. No filters, no apologies."

I lean back, letting the conversation flow around me, a river I'm content to watch from the shore. Zander cracks a joke about trashing a hotel room in Berlin last year, and Chance chimes in with a story about a fan who tried to climb onstage in Barcelona.

The interviewer moves on to the next question, and the next, and the next. And then it finally comes.

She looks directly at Justice and asks with a poker face, "So how much of your Uncle's success?—"

Angelo steps into the frame immediately. "Let's keep it about the music, darling." His tone is firm, almost unkind. He's got that menacing look that means one wrong word from the interviewer will cut the interview short, and the magazine will never get a chance to speak to the band again.

She hesitates, her smile faltering for a split second before she nods, flipping to a new page in her notebook.

I catch the flicker of annoyance in Justice's eyes, but he covers it with a grin.

After a few generic questions about some of the songs on the album, the interview shifts, and suddenly, the spotlight's on me.

"Cruz," the girl starts, her voice soft but probing.

"So you were the last one to join the band.

How did it feel to be teaming up with three guys who were high-school friends? "

I feel the weight of the question, heavy and loaded, like a stone dropped into still water.

What's a kid like you, from the poorest part of LA, doing with these guys, who grew up with everything their privilege gave them?

I decide that making it into a joke is the best course of action here. "Not sure how these guys picked me, honestly."

"Man, you slapped that bass like nobody's business," Zander says. "We needed you."

The others laugh, the tension breaking like glass, and I let myself smile a little.

Because—let's be honest—occasional uneasy band dynamics or not, this is still me living a dream. It's just that no one promised it would be easy.

When the interview wraps up, the guys scatter—Chance heading for the bar, Zander disappearing into the crowd, and Justice being escorted out by the throng of security to who knows where. Maybe another Victoria's Secret model is visiting him. The guy is the biggest fucking playboy of the decade.

"Here." Di shoves me some makeup remover on a napkin while we're packing up behind the press tent.

"Thanks."

"I can do it," she offers.

"It's fine. I'm going to walk for a bit. Jet lag is kicking my ass."

I know if I fall asleep now, I'll be fucked up the entire weekend, and we have a busy one ahead of us. Need to be in top shape for both shows.

"Don't forget about the dinner, Cruz," Angelo reminds me as I head for the entrance.

Some European company to schmooze. I don't even remember what they make. Was it clothes or drumsticks? "I'll be there," I reply automatically. Part of the job.

"Good. Later."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I swipe the napkin across my cheek, feeling the gritty residue of paint stubbornly clinging to my skin as I step out of the tent. The open air wraps around me like a familiar embrace—wild and untamed, smelling faintly of trampled grass mixed with smoke—the quintessential concert scent.

Legend has it that the idea of the band was born when our lead singer messed with his sister's makeup one reckless night.

Whether he was tipsy or stone-cold sober during that stroke of genius remains our little mystery.

And thus, The Deviant emerged—a wicked reimagining of what Kiss immortalized back in the seventies but with our own twisted flair.

And I knew it when I auditioned.

I knew I had to wear this war paint on my face night after night whenever we took the stage. I thought it was some poser shit, but I needed a steady gig badly. And musically, these three had it together.

"Yo, Velez!" someone calls from behind, pulling me out of my head.

I turn, squinting into the setting sun, and spot two familiar faces—Tommy and Dex, my buddies from the days before The Deviant.

I know Dex has a band of his own now. Not signed, but they get booked locally a lot.

Tommy's always wanted to be on the road, doing lights.

I'm actually surprised to see them here.

Back in LA years ago, we were all just scrappy kids trying to claw our way into this industry.

Tommy's got a red bandana tied around his head, and Dex is holding a coil of cables.

Tommy jogs up. "What's up, man?" He grins, slapping my shoulder. "Long time no see. You're running with the big dogs now." He jerks his chin in the direction of my face.

"Yeah, something like that," I say, rubbing the napkin a little harder over my cheek and jaw, wondering if I look like a clown. "What about you guys? Still hustling?"

"Hell yeah." Dex's voice is sandpaper raspy—from too many cigarettes, no doubt. I remember him smoking two packs a day even back then. "We're with Black Haze now. Tommy does lights for pretty much half their bands, and I work for Atlas."

"Houser?" I ask.

"Yeah," Dex replies, the pride in his voice evident. "Taking care of all his guitars."

"Dude hauls at least a dozen when he's on tour," Tommy chimes in. "You should see his trailer."

"Not bad." I nod my approval. A young guy like Dex getting a gig with someone as big as Atlas Houser is a rare occurrence in this industry. People sometimes work their way up for decades before a major band hires them to tech directly for their stars.



"Label's got us working double shifts, if you know what I mean." Tommy laughs.  
"But, hey, it's a paycheck."

"True that."

"Remember when we waited tables at that Mexican diner not far from your grandma's place?" Dex asks.

"Fuck, it's embarrassing to even remember," I admit. I lasted two weeks at that joint. It was the first and the last time I worked in customer service.

"We've all gone through that shit," Dex says philosophically. "You think you're born a fucking rockstar?"

"Except for your singer," Tommy adds knowingly.

I shut down that topic for discussion immediately. "Black Haze, huh?" Everyone knows what happens when your bandmate has a famous relative. They all want a piece of you so they can have a piece of him as a direct line to the superstar. "Solid label. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, man," Tommy says, his grin widening. "But seriously, Cruz, you're killing it yourself. Saw you on stage last month in Canada. That bassline on 'Broken Chains'? Fucking unreal, bro."

"Just doing my job."

We exchange a few more words, the kind of small talk that usually happens when you haven't seen someone you used to be tight with for years. Then I'm moving again. Their voices fade behind me, swallowed by the hum of the fairgrounds.

I don't look back.

There are no answers in the past, only more questions.

Up ahead, I spot Ramsey leaning against Sonic Trash's bus, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

He goes by Ramses. His long hair is tied back, and his dark eyes catch the light like polished onyx.

There's something about him—quiet, intense.

Unlike the rest of his band, he's the kind of guy who doesn't need to say much to make an impression.

He nods as I approach, exhaling a plume of smoke that curls into the late afternoon air.

"Velez," he says. "How's the grind?"

"Ah, same shit, different day," I reply, leaning against the bus beside him. "You?"

Ramses takes a drag, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "Can't complain. Just keeping the rhythm alive."

"You think you'll ever get sick of it?"

Ramses turns to look at me like I just sprouted a pair of wings or something. "You're already tired of being rich, Velez? Cuz if you are, I'm ready to take your place."

"Just curious. You know how all these old-timers are now touring less and less."

"Nah," he says, flicking an ash onto the ground. "It's in my blood, you know, the music? I can't just walk away. I'll be sixty and I'll still be itching to go on the road."

I know exactly what he means by the music being a part of him. The bass isn't just an instrument—it's a fucking anchor, something that keeps me grounded when everything else is spinning out of control.

"I saw your new Fender," I compliment his new bass that he's been sporting on this tour.

A faint smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Found it in a pawn shop in Detroit. Guy had no idea what he was selling."

"Lucky bastard," I mutter. "Neck's a little wider than the newer models, though. Takes some getting used to, right?"

"True," he agrees, offering me the cigarette.

I decline with a shake of my head. I'm trying not to get sucked into the oblivion like Chance has. One bad habit on top of another, and then you can't go on stage unless you're strung out, because your body doesn't function without the stimulators anymore.

"But once you get the hang of it, there's no going back," Ramses goes on. "The tone's richer, deeper. You can feel it in your chest."

I nod, exhaling slowly. "Yeah. Like it's part of you."

"Exactly."

For a moment, we just stand there, looking at the chaotic fairgrounds and the Ferris

wheel in the distance rising above it all.

Tomorrow, this place will be flooded with fans, and lines will be drawn between the bands and the attendees, but tonight...

tonight we have this entire field to ourselves to explore.

Ramses eventually breaks the silence. "I'm serious, though. If you're tired of touring, holla at me first, yeah? Get your boy a recommendation letter." He cracks a loopy grin.

"I'll keep that in mind," I say, knowing that I will not be stepping away anytime soon. It always feels like something is missing, but it's not enough to make me want to stop touring with only the biggest rock band on the planet and give up that massive paycheck.

No one said being in a band with three entitled assholes would be a walk in the park.

And I'm a pro at beating the odds.

The smoke from the cigarette is curling around me like a ghost of my own thoughts when she catches my eye. I don't even know where she came from. One minute, she wasn't there, and the next, she's directly in my line of vision.

A sparkle of orange in the colorless chaos—bright, untamed, like a little candlelight cutting through the darkness of a room.

She's walking with purpose but also a kind of uncertainty, like she's not entirely sure where she's going, but damn if she's not going to get there anyway.

Her hair is short, cropped at just above her shoulders, and it glows under the recently

turned on festival lights like molten copper.

It's wild, and I can already tell it's as much a part of her as the ink—old and new—on my skin are a part of me.

"Who's the girl?" I ask Ramses, my voice casual, like I'm not already hooked.

She's small, but she carries herself like she owns the ground beneath her feet.

Her gym bag swings at her side, and I notice the way her arms flex slightly with the weight.

There's strength there, hidden beneath the soft curves of her figure.

She's wearing a tank top, and her jeans are ripped in all the places that matter.

Her eyes—Jesus, her eyes—are wide and searching, the color of whiskey in dim light.

They're sharp, like she's always one step ahead, but there's a vulnerability there too, something raw and unguarded.

Ramses follows my gaze, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "That's Wendy. Jett's girl."

Jett's girl.

The words settle in my chest like a stone.

I didn't peg Jett as the type to keep someone around long enough to call them his.

He's more of a hit-it-and-quit-it guy, the kind who leaves a trail of broken hearts and

empty promises in his wake.

But Wendy...she doesn't look like someone who'd let herself be left behind.

"Jett's got a girlfriend?" I say, raising an eyebrow. "Since when?"

Ramses shrugs, his expression unreadable. "A while now. They've been...steady, I guess you could say."

I snort, shaking my head. "Steady? Jett? Didn't think your drummer was the settling-down type."

Ramses snorts. "He's not. But you know how it is. Girls who date rockstars either don't know better or they don't care. They stick around anyway."

I glance at him, grinning. "You saying she's one of those?"

He shrugs, flicking an ash off his cigarette. "Who knows? Maybe she's just riding the wave. Or maybe they have some sort of agreement. Beats me. Girls like her—they're not exactly simple."

I watch her take a long swig of water from the plastic bottle she's holding.

"What about Jett's...extracurriculars?" I ask, keeping my tone light.

Ramses gives me a sideways look, his smirk widening. "Doubt she knows. Or if she does, she's playing dumb. Either way, she's still here, right?"

I shouldn't care. It's the world of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, and no girl in her right mind should be expecting exclusivity if she's seeing a dude from a popular band.

But, damn, thinking about this shit makes me sick to my stomach.

I don't know why, and I don't know why now.

Besides, I've never been a man of virtue myself.

But I've never really had a girlfriend either.

"Man, Jett's got it made. Girl like that..." I let the words linger in the air.

Ramses grins, clapping me on the shoulder. "That's life, hermano . You'd know if you weren't so busy being Mr. Responsible."

"Responsible?" I snort. "Since when?"

"Since always. You're the guy who actually shows up to soundcheck on time. That's practically a sin in this business if you're a headliner."

I laugh, but my eyes drift back to Wendy.

She's moving again, disappearing into the crowd, her orange hair the last thing I see before she's swallowed by the sea of bodies.

Something about her sticks with me, though.

Maybe it's the way she carries herself, like she's got something to prove.

Or maybe it's just the way she looks, all fire and attitude, like she could burn you if you got too close.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm curious.

Really curious.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The festival grounds are a different kind of mayhem at this hour. Most of the tents and structures have been erected by now except for the main stage, and the air is thick with the smell of booze and campfire smoke.

I weave through the crowd of partying event staff and roadies, unsure what exactly I'm looking for. Maybe a familiar face or maybe just a sober one.

The sky has darkened and the temperature has dropped a little. Enough to put on a hoodie.

As I pass the main stage, the crew there is still lugging heavy equipment, shouting orders to each other over the din of buzzing generators.

When I arrived at the band's tour bus earlier, Jett was absent. Instead of searching for him, I walked in on their guitarist, Griffin, and lead singer, Kian, playing poker. They looked positively high, and the interior smelled like weed. And of course the beer can tower was there as promised.

"Wendy, babe! About time you showed up," Griffin said, giving me an overly familiar hug. His fingers lingered a bit too long on my lower back.

"Where's Jett?" I asked, extracting myself from his grip.

Kian shrugged. "Probably already in the VIP tent, getting a head start on the party. You know how he is."

They showed me to my bunk bed and retreated from the sleeping area to continue

playing. I took a quick shower, then tried to nap, but sleep never came. My mind was too wired. And the muffled voices and raucous laughter from the front of the bus made it even harder.

I changed into a pair of clean jeans and a fresh tank top, then grabbed my passport and some of my jewelry and shoved them into my gym bag.

Not a chance I was leaving my valuables unattended with these clowns.

Kian is more or less of an okay guy and doesn't try to grope me, but Griff is a disgusting piece of shit who was once arrested for stealing a pack of chips from the grocery store. On a dare.

"Hey, Wendy, wanna join our poker game?" Kian called out when I walked out of the sleeping area.

"Yeah. One round," Griff added. "We can make it interesting. Play a little strip poker..."

I rolled my eyes and gave them both the middle finger before heading out.

But even now that I'm out of that stinky tour bus, frustration continues to build in my chest. I was excited to fly out here when Jett asked me, but something tells me I'm not going to have a good time this weekend.

It's this stupid gut feeling that I try to ignore because it's gotten me in weird situations before.

I fish my phone out of my bag and dial Jett's number. Straight to voicemail. Fuck.

Spotting a harried-looking festival staff member, I approach her. "Hey, sorry. Can

you tell me where the VIP lounge is?"

She barely glances up from her clipboard. "Down that path, past the trailers. Look for the white tents behind the red velvet rope."

"Thanks," I mutter, already heading in that direction.

I walk for a good ten minutes before I finally see the lounge. It's just like the girl said—a collection of a dozen pristine white tents on a neatly trimmed lawn. Even from a distance, I can hear the throbbing baseline of music and the laughter of groupies.

I wave my laminate at security and pass into the roped-off area with no issues. Thank God. Inside, the space is divided into sections, and each section has its own tent dedicated to a specific artist. Most have flags or signs up front indicating who the artist is.

As I get closer to the center of the lounge, I spot a banner fluttering above the entrance to my right.

The Deviant.

A second set of ropes and two security guards stand nearby.

Of course Jett would be hanging out where the headlining band is, probably ready to kiss their very famous asses. I don't have any illusions about him being an opportunist. I mean, everyone in this business is.

As I draw closer to The Deviant's tent, my curiosity gets the better of me. It's them, the infamous band members, each living up to their scandalous reputation.

Justice, the brooding frontman, is sandwiched between two scantily clad girls, their hands roaming his naked chest as he throws back a shot.

Chance, the wild-eyed guitarist, balances precariously on the bar, a bottle of vodka teetering on his head as he slurs out some words.

And then there's Zander, the cutie of the band. Of course a gaggle of admirers swoon at his feet. I don't see the bass player.

I can't remember his name. He's usually the quiet one.

It's a trainwreck I can't look away from, a glimpse into the glamorous world of the filthy rich and famous that Jett so desperately wants to be a part of.

"Move along, miss, if you don't have an invitation," a security guard barks.

"Yeah, sure."

Chance Hollowell chooses this exact moment to lose his balance, tumbling off the bar in a fit of drunken giggles. The security guards and people in the tent rush over to help him up.

I don't know what happens next since do as I was instructed—move along because I just spotted a Sonic Trash sign.

My heart pounding, I duck into the tent and scan the crowd. It's a sea of leather, skinny jeans, smudged eyeliner, and tousled hair.

Finally, I spot my wayward boyfriend.

He's sprawled out on a white couch in the back of the tent, a half-empty bottle of

Jack Daniels dangling from his fingertips.

I push my way through the throng of musicians, roadies, and hangers-on, ignoring the slurred greetings and drink offers.

Mostly, it's just people working in the industry and their friends, and I've met some of them.

When you date a guy in a semi-popular band, every other person on the scene soon becomes your buddy.

As I draw closer to Jett, I realize he's not alone. He seems to be in a deep conversation with two men I don't recognize.

"Jett!" I call his name over the noise as I approach the group.

He lifts his head, his face splitting into a sloppy grin.

"Wendy, baby!" he slurs. "You made it! C'mere.

" He shoots up from the couch, swaying under the pull of gravity and too much alcohol.

His arm is thrown over my neck and a sloppy kiss lands on my cheek.

"You're looking gorgeous, babe," he whispers in my ear, then shoves me toward the couch.

"I want you to meet my new partners." He gestures wildly to the man beside him, sloshing whiskey onto the already stained fabric.

"This is Mick." The bottle in his hand moves to the other guy. "And his associate, Clem."

I plaster on a smile, unsure of what to make out of these two.

Mick's easily pushing fifty. He's in an expensive suit and has an oily smile and graying temples.

Clem's twitchy stick, about the same age as Jett, and has that weird darting gaze that makes a guy stand out.

And not in a good way. A slightly crooked front tooth winks at me when he smiles.

He looks like a dollar-store version of Eminem.

"They're gonna help take my brand to the next level, baby," Jett says, dropping onto the couch.

He yanks me down to sit on his lap, but he's too drunk to make it work. Instead, I bypass his legs and sit next to him.

"So you're the famous Wendy," Mick purrs. He's got some sort of accent, but I can't quite tell what it is.

Definitely European. And I bet Mick isn't even his real name.

"Pleasure to meet you, beautiful." Mick's hand snakes out to grasp mine.

His palm is clammy, his grip a little too tight. "Jett's told us a lot about you."

I pull my hand out of his. "About me?" I eye Mick, surprised. "I don't know what

there is to tell."

"You're even prettier than he described. Like a little rock 'n' roll Barbie doll."

Excuse me, what?

"You're a dream," Clem mutters.

"I don't think we know each other well enough for you to call me a dream," I immediately tell him, then turn to Mick. "Or Barbie."

"Come on, babe. It's all just friendly talk," Jett says. He pours a shot and hands it to me. "Here. Relax a bit. You're probably tired."

No shit.

I take a sip and force a smile, trying to ignore the unease churning in my gut.

Something about these guys feels off. But Jett is too far gone to notice, his eyes glazed and unfocused.

Right now, as he beams at me, he reminds me of a kid who did something wrong and is trying to be cute to avoid harsher punishment.

I think this cuteness is what drew me to him in the first place.

He'd be the asshole of the year, but then just wash it all away with a silly smile like the one he's flashing me presently.

"Sorry, darling," Mick supplies. "Didn't mean to offend you in any way."

"Be nice, babe," my drunk boyfriend demands. "Mick and I are gonna be doing business together."

I'm not sure what to make of all this. Jett's been talking about his own vodka brand for several months.

I have no clue where he got the idea, but he's been making a fool out of himself in front of every potential investor.

And they're getting worse and worse. Now, we've got googly-eyes Mick and his icky buddy Clem, who look nothing like people who'd know how to manage a new brand of alcohol.

Unless, of course, consuming it is their main marketing strategy.

"Isn't this great, babe?" Jett says, nudging the shot I've barely touched yet closer to my mouth. "Let's celebrate."

My earlier frustration gives way to a sinking feeling of dread.

I plaster on my best supportive-girlfriend smile and grit out, "Can we talk? Privately?"

"We're all friends here."

"Not really, hon." I slink my arm around his elbow and yank him to the side. "I just need a minute." To Mick and his sidekick, I say, "We'll be just a sec, guys."

I lead Jett a few steps away toward the quieter corner of the tent. "What the hell, Jett? You said you'd meet me when I got here. You didn't show up."



"Jesus fucking Christ, Wendy. You know I'm always working, even on my days off. I'm hustling for both of us."

"You said you were going to have free time."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Yeah, to do some goddamned business. And I need you with me on this one. Can you play nice for a few minutes?"

His words sting, the implication clear. He's the one putting in the work, while I'm just along for the ride, living off his dime.

"You didn't have to pay a penny to get here. Got you the ticket, didn't I?"

Does that make me an ungrateful cunt if I don't feel much appreciation? He can sometimes be so convincing that I get confused.

"You made it sound like you'd have a lot of downtime and we'd spend that time together. And there's no hotel," I whisper angrily. Although I'm not sure if I'm angry at him or myself.

Jett's eyes flash with annoyance. "Time together? What, so you can complain about my potential business partners some more? They're my shot at the big time, babe." He slams his chest with his fist as if he's trying to prove something. "I need this investment from Mick. For our future."

He reaches for my hand, but I pull away, glancing around to make sure no one's watching. No one is. Everyone's busy partying.

"That potential business partner"—I use air quotes—"of yours doesn't even know me yet, but he was ready to suck my fingers in front of you," I grit out.

Jett's expression shifts, and I can't tell if he's understanding what I'm trying to say or

if he's too drunk to put two and two together.

Then he leans in close and says quietly in my ear, "Come on, babe. I know they're a little weird, but we're in goddamned Europe. Everyone's weird.

I need you to be my ride or die like you promised. "

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to calm my beating heart. I want to believe him, want to trust that he knows what he's doing. But the doubt lingers, a strange bitter taste in the back of my throat.

"You know what?" I take a step back to remove Jett from my personal space. "Find me when you're sober."

His face twists. "What?"

As I spin on my heel, I can't resist one last parting shot. "Oh, and thanks for the heads-up about sleeping with your farting bandmates in that shitty trailer. Real classy, Jett."

I don't look back as I shove my way out of the tent.

Goddamn Jett and his empty promises. Hotel room, my perky ass.

I'm fuming as I stomp through the VIP area in the direction of the exit. My combat boots thud against the narrow asphalt pathway snaking between the sections, and I'm kinda hating this damn gym bag I've been hauling around with me. And I'm cold. I should have grabbed a hoodie.

Expectations vs reality—the eternal struggle.

I pictured fluffy matching robes and room service, not bunk beds smelling like it's a dispensary.

Honestly, I can't even remember doing anything like that with Jett. Ever. He's more of a Netflix and chill kinda guy. Doesn't put much effort into it.

Life's a bitch, then you die. Or in my case, get murdered by obnoxious fumes from Griffin's lactose-intolerant colon.

Why am I here again?

It's not like I expected things to be any different in Europe. Jett Vice is still the same jerk no matter the continent.

As I round the corner, a red burst of neon to my right catches my eye. It's one of the bigger tents in the area, buzzing with somewhat more relaxed activity and no security guard. Its sign reads Bar.

Screw it.

I deserve a drink after the day I've had. The world's shittiest boyfriend, handsy investors, looming flatulence—time to drown my sorrows in some overpriced booze.

I hitch my gym bag higher on my shoulder and march forward, determined to salvage something from this flaming dumpster fire of a day.

I elbow my way to the front through a group of men discussing someone's latest album. At the bar, I signal the handsome bartender with a no-bullshit glare and the flick of a wrist. When you're a small girl, you really gotta know how to make yourself seen in a crowd of giants.

"What's it gonna be, miss?"

"Cosmo, please." I mean, if I'm gonna suffer through this weekend, I'm gonna do it thoroughly buzzed. And on my own terms.

"Coming right up."

As he slides the drink my way a moment later, my mother's voice echoes in my head.

Find a man who'll treat you right, Wendy. Someone who'll take care of you. Someone who's got a fat wallet and a place of his own.

Oh, the irony. Jett was supposed to be that man, but instead, he's just another disappointment in a long line of letdowns.

Settling on an empty stool, I take a swig and let the sweetness warm my throat a little before taking another one.

"Rough night?" a male voice asks from somewhere.

I turn, ready to verbally eviscerate whatever drunken douche is trying his luck, but the wrong words come out. "When is it not after an international flight?"

"Not a frequent traveler to Europe, I take it." The man offers a small smile, and I swear to God, he looks familiar. I've met him before. But that can probably be said about half the people here tonight. It's the scene.

"No, honestly, it's my first time," I reply. I don't know why I don't tell him to fuck off. Maybe because—contrary to my expectation—he appears to be the only sober person in the entire VIP area.

He's tall and muscular, with clear obsidian eyes that seem to pierce right through the night. His hair is dark and long, and his ears have small black tunnels in them. Makes him look like he has just enough edge without being too flashy.

Recognition sparks in my brain again, but I can't quite place him. And now it feels like a personal challenge—to remember where we've crossed paths before.

"You get used to it eventually," the man says.

He gestures to my nearly empty glass. "Can I buy you another?"

"Oh." I hesitate, the urge to drown my sorrows warring with the instinct to keep my guard up. But there's something calming about this man. Fuck it. "Sure, why not?" I shrug, aiming for nonchalance.

As he steps closer and signals the bartender, I study him from the corner of my eye. The tattoos snaking up his arms, the way he carries himself with quiet confidence.

"I'm Wendy," I say while we wait for my cosmo and his beer.

"Cruz," he offers.

And then it hits me.

"Wait." I lean a little bit closer to him as if saying what I'm about to say is supposed to remain top secret. "You're Cruz? From The Deviant?"

A slow smile spreads across his face, revealing a single dimple. "Guilty as charged."

I laugh, the sound foreign to my own ears. "I almost didn't recognize you without all the paint."

"That's the idea."

"To keep us mortals confused?"

"Haha."

"I think I saw you earlier with Ramses." I motion at his face. "You still had some of the facial palette on."

He chuckles. "Palette?"

"You know what I mean."

He nods, then whispers a question, "So what do you think? Disappointed by the real me?"

I tilt my head, considering. "Nah. You look like a big ol' teddy bear."

Cruz throws his head back, his laughter rich and warm. The sound wraps around me like a cozy blanket, chasing away the chill of Jett's indifference. What is this even? I just met this guy.

"Have been called many names," he says. "Never a plush toy."

"I won't tell anyone what's under that mask." I take a nervous sip of my second cosmo the bartender just set in front of me.

"I hope you don't."

"Ruined reputation?"

"Exactly."

"So what brings a teddy bear like you to a place like this? I'd think you'd be hanging with your bandmates in that tent security's patrolling like it's the national treasure."

"So you've seen how they are?"

I nod. "They're exactly like one would expect guys making millions would be." They're even bigger clowns than Griff and Kian, with the exception that they have it made.

"Not all of us."

"You think?"

"I know," he says, a bit too serious, but his tone changes to a lighter one immediately. "What brought you here?"

I want to tell him the truth. To tell him that I have a boyfriend and that I'm with him, but it's like my tongue just stops functioning.

Jett paid for this ticket, Wendy. The brain signals, but the body doesn't follow through.

"Whatever everyone else is doing here this weekend. Listening to music, hanging out." I pump my fist in the air. "Palmdale gotta represent too." Why did I say that? I don't ever reveal where I'm from. It's the crappiest part of LA County. Unless you don't count some parts of South LA.

"No shit? You're from Palmdale?"



"Born and raised in the armpit of California," I quip, the alcohol loosening my tongue.

"You say it like it's a bad thing."

"Palmdale is trash, dude."

"Trust me, I know all about growing up in a poor neighborhood. I'm from East LA." Cruz grins, holding up his fist. I bump it with my own, a gesture of solidarity. "Guess we're both from the wrong side of the tracks, huh?"

"Peas in a pod, my friend. Except, you know, you're probably wiping your ass with hundred dollar bills these days."

He chuckles, but there's a hint of something else in his eyes. Something that looks a lot like understanding. "It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"Believe me, only rich people say this shit, but they would never give up their money."

"You'll get there. Where you need to be."

Either I'm drunk or he's that good a talker. His words hit me like a sucker punch. How can he be so sure? How can he have so much faith in a stranger he just met? As I search his face, I find nothing but sincerity.

We fall into an easy rhythm, trading random stories of our childhood for the next fifteen minutes. When I drain the last of my drink, Cruz motions to the bartender. "Another round?"

My head is swimming, and I feel like if I don't stop right now, I may end up doing

something stupid. "I probably shouldn't..."

He nods, understanding in his eyes. "No worries. I probably need to head back anyway. Early press tomorrow."

We linger for a moment, neither of us quite ready to say goodbye. But eventually, I slide off my stool, slinging my gym bag over my shoulder. "It was nice talking to you, Cruz."

"Likewise, Wendy."

For a second, there's this awkwardness between us. Why, though? We didn't do anything wrong. We just talked.

Yes, bitch, and you failed to disclose you're Jett's girlfriend.

"Ah...mmm." Before I can think of something better, I whip out my hand.

A handshake, Wendy? Really? What, you in some executive meeting?

Without missing a beat, Cruz shakes my hand, his slightly calloused fingers sending a jolt of electricity up my arm. "I'll see you around?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. And as I walk away from the bar, I feel a strange sense of lightness, a glimmer of hope in the darkness.

How can a person you hardly know have this effect on you?

Is that what they call stage presence and charisma, or is it something else?

Just when I'm about to exit the VIP area, I hear someone calling my name. "Wendy!"

Baby! There you are."

Jett.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

My mind's still swirling with thoughts of Wendy as I step into the poorly lit tour bus. Her bright orange hair and those huge brown eyes.

Be careful, Cruz.

Ramses warned me she was Jett's girl, but while we were talking at the bar, not once did she mention that boyfriend of hers.

I met him.

Jett fucking Vice.

What a tool.

Even his name screams douche. His band sucks ass too. No talent whatsoever. The singer isn't bad, but he won't make it with the other three.

The muffled sounds of laughter and movement drift from the back of the bus as I move along.

I sigh, frustrated. All I want is a moment of peace, away from the swarming groupies.

It was nice at the beginning. When the first wave of fame hit us.

You play a gig. You drink. You find some cute girl.

You spend the night together. And you move on.

And most of these girls have no expectations of any strings.

They're ready to sell their soul to sleep with a rockstar at least once.

And then, after a few years, it becomes redundant.

And boring. And you just want to play the gig and get some sleep.

"...the fuck, bro!" someone who sounds a lot like our guitar player snorts out drunkenly.

I make my way down the narrow aisle and toward the laughter that grows louder and louder. At the back of the bus, I'm greeted by the sight of Chance and Zander, digging through our scattered belongings. No guests. Thanks God.

"Cruz, my man!" Chance pauses whatever he's doing to call out with a skewed grin on his red face. "Where you been hiding?"

"Yeah." Zander's hand whips out to pat my shoulder, but he misses and pats the air instead. "We've been looking all over for you."

I exhale slowly. "Needed some space, that's all."

Chance attempts to raise an eyebrow, but instead, his whole forehead scrunches up with exaggerated surprise. "Space? On a tour bus?" He returns to fumbling through someone's clothes littering the couch. "You're in the wrong line of work then."

"I thought you were all out partying," I say, watching my bandmates and their restless rummaging for whatever elusive item they've misplaced.

"You look too serious, man," Zander comments as he continues his relentless pursuit

without looking at me.

I shrug. "I'm a serious dude, you know."

"True that. Every band needs at least one serious dude," our drummer supplies, flopping onto the couch. "Come on, sit down. Tell me your worries." He seems tired and tired Zander is better than hyperactive Chance.

"You're gonna try to psychoanalyze me? In your condition?" I ask, shaking my head, leaning against the wall of the bus opposite the couch.

"Alcohol flows through these veins." Zander raises both arms and imitates one of his signature moves on the drums. "Lay it on me, brother."

I take a moment to think. "So if you're chatting up a cute girl and you know she has a boyfriend, but she never mentions him during the conversation... What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know my position on chicks who belong to someone else," Zander mutters past a hiccup.

"We. Don't. Fucking. Touch." Both he and Chance say in unison. They sound surprisingly sober for being three sheets to the wind.

I get it. The loyalty code drilled into us since forever.

But Wendy is like a complicated web, and I find myself tangled in it pretty good. Because her image refuses to leave the forefront of my brain.

"The way I see it," Zander slurs out, "she's either so comfortable in her relationship with that dude that she doesn't need to validate it by saying she has a boyfriend.

Or—" Our drummer pauses for effect. "He's a douchebag, and she wishes she had someone like you."

"Dude, I know for a fact he's an asshole," I grit out.

"Monkey ass balls," Chance grumbles under his breath. "I swear it's here somewhere." He yanks the drawers open and tosses aside the contents, his movements jerky and uncoordinated.

"Goddamn it, man. What are you looking for? You're giving me whiplash," I say.

"My stash, bro. I need it. I'm seeing shit."

I step closer and place a hand on his shoulder. "Maybe you should take it easy."

"I need it. Jet lag is killing me."

"I think what you need is to sleep it off."

Chance jumps to his feet, our faces level now. "And who are you, my mother?" His eyes are wild and bloodshot. "Don't tell me what I need. I gotta keep things going, and coke helps. You should be fucking grateful. Without my riffs, all our songs would sound like donkey shit."

My gaze shifts to Zander for a brief second. He just shrugs at me from the couch as if to say, 'Let him be.'

I've seen Chance spiral before, seen the way the drugs consume him. It's not pretty. And trying to send him to rehab is impossible. Angelo managed it twice, and both times, Chance ran away.

"Fuck, I'm just worried for you," I tell him honestly as he prostrates himself on the floor, trying to reach under the folding table.

"Worry about yourself," he mumbles, then immediately after that, he lets out a triumphant shout.

"Got ya, motherfucker." He begins to stand and, of course, hits his head on the edge of the table.

Back on his feet again, he kicks the table with his Converse a few times as if the poor piece of furniture is guilty of all the crimes in the world.

"See, Mom." Chance shoves a small baggie filled with white powder in my face. "We're gonna party for real now."

I swat his hand away from my nose. "Come on. Cut it out."

He simply laughs, the sound harsh and grating. "Relax. It's just a little pick-me-up. Nothing I can't handle."

He pours out some of the coke on the table, separates it into neat lines with his laminate, and snorts them all one by one.

He even has the audacity to offer some to me and Zander, but we both decline.

Zander hit a rough patch with this shit a couple of years ago but cleaned up real fast after he started fucking up some of his drum solos.

And I've never really been into hard drugs, period.

Growing up where I did, I saw firsthand how it ruins lives.



"There we go," Chance says, jumping back up from the couch. His voice is buzzing with artificial energy. "Now I'm ready." He jerks his chin toward the door on the opposite side of the bus and looks at Zander. "Let's go."

I shake my head, disappointed. I want to say more, to try and talk some sense into him, but I know it's a losing battle. Chance is too far gone, too lost in the haze of his addiction. And my words alone won't work. He needs to want it himself. That's when it will stick.

"Let's roll." Zander nudges me in the direction of the door as he and Chance file out into the aisle.

"You guys go ahead," I say, my voice tight. "I think I'm going to hang here for a bit."

"Nah." Chance moves to stand next to me and throws his arms over my neck. "A brother won't let a brother be alone. Especially if someone else's girl is involved."

The decision made, I let myself be literally dragged out of the bus and back to the VIP area. There, the music is turned up to nearly unbearable decibels. The tents are all flashing lights and gyrating bodies, the air thick with the scent of sweat and alcohol.

The three of us navigate through the crowd, through the hot press of people against us, with Chance shouting greetings and other nonsense to almost every person we pass.

But even in this chaos, my eyes are drawn to her. Like she's some sort of lighthouse in this stormy night. Wendy. I thought she was long gone, but she's here again and she's not alone.

She's with Jett fucking Vice.

Something is off.

Even from across the packed VIP lounge, where flickering strobe lights cast elongated shadows on leather and lace, I can sense the tension simmering between Wendy and Jett.

They're facing each other like opposing forces in a tight circle of curious spectators, who inch closer with every heated word exchanged.

I'm already wrestling out of Chance and Zander's grip, urgency driving me past clusters of bodies until their confrontation comes into full view.

The first thing I can make out is Wendy yelling, "I'm not your goddamn property, Jett!"

Her small frame is vibrating with anger as she jabs a finger at his chest. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

Jett grabs her wrist, his knuckles white. "The hell I don't. You're my girl, Wendy. Mine." His drunk, possessive words slur together.

She wrenches her arm free, defiant. "Fuck you. I'm done with your controlling bullshit."

Jett goes for her elbow, but she manages to avoid it, then turns on her heel.

"Where the fuck are you going, bitch?" Jett roars.

The dude is not big. Or tall. But he still has five inches on her, and this is such shitty dynamics. I fucking hate cowards like him who think just because they're quasi famous, they can treat girls like crap.

I don't even understand why I'm pissed. I just met her. But it's like there's some kind of protective instinct that suddenly woke up in me when we crossed paths. Like something was dormant until she came into the picture.

"Fuck you, you fucking cunt!" Jett shoves his fist in the air, yelling in the direction of storming-off Wendy.

As she disappears in the writhing crowd, a knot tightens in my gut. I can't just let her go, not with Jett in this state. Ignoring Zander's curious look from afar, I push my way through the masses, determined to reach her.

Sweat-slicked skin presses against me from all sides, and for a moment, I'm lost in the abundance of colored lights strobing across faces twisted in ecstasy. But my eyes stay firmly locked on that shock of orange hair moving toward the tent's exit.

"Hey, Wendy, wait!" I call out, but my voice is swallowed up by the surrounding noise. She doesn't hear me—or doesn't want to. I quicken my pace, shouldering past drunken revelers, not giving a damn who I piss off.

This need to protect her suddenly consumes me, drowning out the nagging voice that whispers I barely even know this girl.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

Still, I feel it deep in my bones.

Outside the tent, she just keeps walking, away from the people. That same gym bag she carried around with her earlier is now hanging at her side, the strap having slipped down to the crook of her elbow.

I'm close enough to touch her now, my fingers grazing her shoulder. She whirls around and her eyes flash. And then I have to brace myself for the impact, because the gym bag flies at me.

All I have time to do is block the attack with my elbow.

"Fuck off, Jett!"

"Not Jett! It's me." I sidestep before she lands another gym-bag blow.

She shrieks, probably realizing she just tried to murder someone other than her boyfriend.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," I offer. "I saw you two fighting. It looked kinda ugly."

"And you thought you could follow me?" she snaps. "What the actual hell, Cruz?"

"I'm sorry. I swear I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

She squares her small shoulders, tilts her head up to meet my gaze, and asks boldly,

"Why wouldn't I be okay?"

The sudden quiet of this corner of the field presses in on us. We're far away from the VIP tents now, somewhere behind the merch booths. Here, in this intimate space, the music is just a faint hum in the background, and every ragged breath, every heated glance feels amplified. Dangerous.

I hold up my hands in a gesture of peace, trying to ignore the electricity crackling between us. "I promise I'm not a stalker. Jett was acting like a real pendejo back there."

She scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. But I catch the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes before she shuts it away. "I can handle Jett. I don't need you to rescue me."

"I know you don't need rescuing," I say softly, taking a tentative step closer. Maybe it's me who needs rescuing. "But you deserve better than some cabrón who humiliates you in front of everyone."

Wendy's gaze meets mine, defiant yet searching. Her laugh is harsh when it comes out. Brittle, even. "You think I don't know that?"

"I'm sure you do, but why stay with him?"

She flinches as if I've struck her. "You seriously just went there?"

I fucked up. I knew it the moment the question slipped out. Yep. Way to go, Cruz. You see a pretty girl and your brain stops working. "Sorry."

"I didn't ask for your relationship advice. You don't know a damn thing about my life."

"Never said I did. Just hate guys like Jett, who think they own everyone and everything because their band has one decent song with just enough airplay for people to recognize their name in certain circles."

"Not a good look on you right now."

"You think I'm showing off?"

"That's exactly what you're doing. Just because you're in a bigger band doesn't mean shit."

"I think it does."

"Screw you." She flips me the bird.

"I've lost track of what we're arguing about," I confess.

She blinks at me rapidly, quiet and tense at first. Then we both burst into mad laughter.

"Listen, I'm really sorry," I say to her when we calm down a little. "I know you can take care of yourself. I just saw you ripping your boyfriend a new one in front of everyone, but I mean it. He's not considered to be...what you'd call a gentleman.

I just think you should be aware. What you do with that info is up to you. "

She rolls her eyes. "Sometimes, Jett can be embarrassing. Especially when he drinks."

"Most people are."

"He becomes a real asshole."

"Wanna know a secret?"

"Sure."

"You don't become an asshole. You're either an asshole or not."

"Did he do something to you? Why are you hating on him so much?"

Oh, yes, he did. He stole the girl I'm interested in from me before I even knew she existed.

That's what he did. But I don't say it out loud.

I have a feeling that getting too pushy with Wendy will only have an adverse effect.

"I don't like guys like him is all," I admit instead. "Guys who don't respect women."

"And you're what? Mr. Saint?"

"Yep. I'm the only saint in my band."

"The tour name must be wrong then. A Saint & Sinners, not Saints & Sinners."

I chuckle at that. "I'll tell our management."

Slowly, deliberately, she takes a single step forward. "You do that, Cruz." Her eyes blaze with a hidden challenge, daring me to cross the line we've been toeing all night.

I realize that despite our little squabble a few minutes ago, we're drawn to each other like two stars caught in a gravitational dance. The air around us trembles with a tension so thick, I can hardly breathe.

But before I can do something reckless, before I can say something I can't take back, the moment shatters.

"What the fuck is this?"

Jett's garbled voice cracks from afar. I turn to the sound of him trudging through the grass. My heart thunders against my ribcage as he stalks toward us, his eyes glassy and filled with rage.

And I know, with a bone-deep certainty, that things are about to get a whole lot worse.

"What the fuck is this, huh?"

Jett stumbles closer, his movements unsteady but his fury unmistakable. "I fuckin' knew it. Knew you were sniffing around other dudes, you whore."

I take a step forward, placing myself between him and Wendy. My hands flex at my sides, ready for whatever comes next.

"It's not like that, man. We were just talking."

My attempt at de-escalation falls on deaf ears. Jett's face twists into an ugly sneer, his eyes darting between Wendy and me.

"Talking? Is that what you call it? Looked more like you were about to shove your tongue down her throat."

Beside me, Wendy flinches, and a surge of protectiveness floods my veins. I meet Jett's furious gaze head-on. "Watch your mouth. You're drunk, and you're being an asshole. Why don't you walk it off before you do something stupid?"



A harsh, humorless laugh rips from Jett's throat. "Oh, I'm the asshole? That's rich coming from the guy trying to steal my girlfriend."

He takes another unsteady step forward, jabbing a finger in my direction. "I'm warning you, Velez. Stay the fuck away from her, or I swear to God, I'll?"

"You'll what, Jett?" Wendy asks sharply, her chin lifted in challenge. "You don't get to tell me who I can and can't talk to. I already told you I'm not your goddamn property."

Jett's eyes narrow. "Shut up, babe. Just shut up. This isn't about you."

"The hell it isn't!" she fires back, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "I'm so sick of your jealous, controlling bullshit. I can't have a conversation without you losing your mind."

I stay silent, a quiet pillar of support as Wendy stands her ground. I know that if I hijack the situation, she'll be pissed, and for some reason, I don't want her to be mad at me.

Jett's face darkens, a vein throbbing in his forehead. "You." He drives his fist toward my face but never actually touches me. "If I see you anywhere near my girl again, I'll break your fucking neck."

"We're leaving. Now." Wendy grabs Jett's hand before I can react with a response of my own. She offers me a small, apologetic smile before dragging her drunk boyfriend out of my sight.

As they walk away, Jett's arm possessively drapes over Wendy's shoulders.

A cold knot forms in my stomach. Every instinct I have screams at me to go after her,

to protect her from the storm I know is brewing.

But I force myself to stay put, watching until they disappear from view. The night air feels heavy, weighted with words unsaid and chances missed.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I grip Jett's hand tightly as I yank him away from Cruz, my heart pounding wildly against my rib cage. The vodka fumes emanating from Jett's breath make my stomach churn. I clench my jaw, praying silently that we can avoid another blowout argument tonight, when he snakes his arm around my neck.

As we stumble behind the food trucks, Jett jerks to a halt. His abrupt stop forces me to whirl around, my hand still clutching his.

The muffled sounds of the dying party are nothing more than a distant buzz, and it feels like it's just me and him in the entire damn world.

"What the hell, Jett?" I snap, frustrated, and drop his hand like it's scalded me.

"The fuck was that?"

"I can't talk to other people now?"

"Other people? Yes. Him? No!"

"What's wrong with him? And why do you always have to put me down in front of everyone? Do you get off on humiliating me or something?"

Jett snorts derisively, waving a dismissive hand. "Oh please, babe. You always think it's about you."

"It's supposed to be about us, not about you or me."

Jett closes the distance between us. He tilts his head forward and hisses out, "Let me get this clear. You're here to support me this weekend. To help land this vodka deal. That's your fucking job. That's what girlfriends are for."

"Excuse me?" I try not to show it, but deep down, it stings. I feel like a pawn in his grand scheme, not a human being.

"Instead, you're over there chatting up that loser. He and his entire band are fucking one-hit wonders. Tomorrow, nobody'll even remember their names."

Anger flashes through me, hot and bright. "You're unbelievable, you know that? I bust my ass for you, Jett. I'm sick and tired of you treating me like?—"

"Like what? An accessory?" His eyes narrow into slits. "Because, babe, that's exactly what you signed up for when you moved in with me. Don't forget it. Don't forget who puts food on the table."

"Of course," I grit out. "It's always about you and your needs, your feelings. What about mine, huh? This isn't a relationship when it's so one-sided!"

"Ungrateful bitch," he growls, his voice low and menacing. "You'd be nothing without me. I've given you everything, and this is how you repay me?"

Fear knots in my stomach, but I refuse to back down. Not this time. "Giving me a place to stay doesn't give you the right to treat me like shit, Jett."

In that moment, clarity washes over me. No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, Jett will never change. He'll never see me as anything more than a stepping stone to his own success. He just called me an accessory. And yes, he is drunk. But drunks are rarely liars. On the contrary.

"I never should've come to this stupid festival," I say, my voice flat. "I'm going to get a hotel."

Turning on my heel, I start walking. My pulse is a staccato beat in my ears, loud and hard to ignore. Fear and thrill course through my veins in equal measure.

"Fuck you, Wendy!" Jett yells after me. "Good luck finding a place to stay! You think any hotel 'round here's got room with all these people coming to see all these bands? You'll come crawling back, babe. You always do."

I flip him the bird over my shoulder, not bothering to look back. "Go to hell, Jett. I'll take my chances."

What a shit show of a first day.

The partying on the festival grounds is starting to gradually die down as I trail across the lawn with no destination in mind. It's pretty late, past midnight, and a lot of crew members will need to be up tomorrow at the crack of dawn to get ready for the first day.

Jett's right. With over a hundred thousand people expected to attend from all over Europe and beyond, finding a hotel I can actually afford just to get a couple hours of sleep will be challenging.

With each step, the reality of my decision sinks in, the adrenaline giving way to a creeping sense of uncertainty.

Where will I go?

What will I do?

Can I just sleep outside?

At some point, I come to a stop and look around, wondering why the hell I agreed to fly over here in the first place. I could have picked up some extra shifts at the salon. Weekends are always busy, and I need the hours.

Beauty school doesn't pay for itself.

"Hey, dollface," someone calls from the group of drunken revelers stumbling past. "Wanna come party with us?"

Ewww . "No thank you," I reply. "But you go ahead."

They don't insist. Thank God. I don't think I can deal with more bullshit today.

And I can't go back to Jett. Not tonight.

Not when the alcohol has unleashed the worst of his temper and entitlement. The thought of facing him again, of enduring another tirade of belittling insults and dismissive cruelty sends a shudder down my spine. Plus, my pride won't let me.

But the alternative—wandering the festival grounds alone, with nowhere to lay my head and no money to my name—is equally daunting.

Frankly, there's no choice but to go back to Sonic Trash's tour bus. If I'm lucky, Jett's already passed out. Or not even there. That way, I can get a bit more rest.

I take a deep breath and start walking again. I've survived worse than this. I've clawed my way out of the wreckage of my childhood, fought tooth and nail for every scrap of happiness and self-worth.

I won't let Jett break me. I won't let myself become my mother.

I think it's intentional that I walk really slowly. Deep down in my gut, I know Jett will probably be waiting, all tweaked out and victorious, ready to gloat.

When Sonic Trash buses finally emerge in the distance, I'm so anxious over this confrontation that hasn't even happened yet that I can't think straight.

As I approach, I see a young woman leaning against the crew bus, a cigarette dangling from her fingers. She looks up as I draw near, her eyes narrowing in recognition.

"You're Jett's girl, right?" she asks, her voice rough and smoke tinged.

"Wendy." I stop. "Yes."

A faint smile tugs at her lips. "I remember you from that music video shoot last year. 'Wild Dogs.' The one we did in Glendale. In that huge warehouse."

The memory surfaces, hazy and distant. A crowded set, the glare of lights, Jett's arm slung possessively around my shoulders whenever he didn't need to be in the take.

I agreed to do the guys' makeup and hair for free.

It was right after I started beauty school, and I needed to work on building my portfolio.

"I'm sorry, I don't recollect your name," I admit.

"I'm Nell. I manage gear. On the road and in the studio."

My mind conjures up the girl's face from that day, a blur of piercings and dark eyeliner while she's hauling equipment and barking orders. She's maybe a few years older than me.

"Right, of course," I say, forcing a smile. "It's good to see you again."

Nell takes a long drag of her cigarette, the ember glowing bright in the darkness. "What are you doing out here? Shouldn't you be with the guys?" She jerks her head at the band's tour bus standing side by side with the crew one.

I know better than anyone that gossip in this industry spreads way too fast and has a tendency to become something it's not, but I'm not sure anything I say to justify Jett's behavior will be of much help.

Being with him is like holding a breath underwater, I realize.

"I...don't feel like going back to the bus tonight. "

"You and your man had a fight or something?" Nell asks.

"Something like that."

"He's on a bender again, huh?"

"Yep."

Nell nods, her expression softening with understanding. "Sounds like our drummer. Everyone knows when Jett's trashed. He's a fucking ugly, loud, egotistic drunk."

A surprised laugh bubbles up from my chest, the tension easing slightly. "You've got that right."



Nell flicks her cigarette to the ground, grinding it out with the toe of her boot.  
"Listen, if you need a place to crash, you can stay with the crew tonight."

"Oh gosh, I don't want to put anyone out."

"One of the guys left to visit some friends in town, so his bunk is free."

"Are you sure?"

Nell waves a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. We're all down-to-earth guys.  
No drama, no bullshit. You'll be safe here."

The knot in my chest loosens, and I feel myself nodding. "Okay. Thank you. Really."

She shrugs, a half smile playing on her lips. "Us girls gotta stick together, right?  
Come on, I'll show you inside."

And then she gestures for me to follow her onto the bus.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I wake with a start, realizing that I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

The memories of last night's bullshit flashes through my mind like the remnants of a bad dream. Rubbing my eyes, I sit up slowly, taking in the surroundings of the crew's bus. I slept in my clothes, and they're all wrinkled. Whether I want to or not, I'll have to go get my shit from the band's bus. Besides, my phone is dead.

The bunks are all empty, but there's noise coming from the common area, and I make my way there.

Keith, one of the techies, sits at the table, his eyes glued to his phone, his hand hugging a paper coffee cup.

"Good morning," I say, my voice still rough with sleep.

Keith shifts his gaze to me. "Hey." He tips his chin. "What's up?"

"Is Nell here?"

"Nah." He shakes his head. "Out. Working, like everyone else."

"I see." I pause, feeling like I'm intruding. "You don't have an iPhone charger by any chance?"

"Sorry. Mine's android."

"Okay."

A knock at the door jolts me fully awake. "Wendy?" a voice comes from outside. "You there?"

"Your boyfriend?" Keith chuckles, getting to his feet.

"Sounds like it," I mutter groggily.

"Well, I'm out anyway." He grabs his phone and coffee and heads for the door. I follow him, running a nervous hand through my tangled orange hair.

He swings the door open and exits the bus, briefly greeting Jett standing there. With flowers.

And not just flowers. They're goddamned roses. Their colors are almost too bright against the cloudy sky and the boring bus exteriors lined up behind them.

I freeze on the top step. The height advantage makes me feel a little better.

"Can we talk, babe?" Jett asks, his voice pleading, and he looks at me with an uncharacteristic softness in his dark eyes. There's a tentative smile on his lips, and I think I understand why he has so many female fans. Most girls don't know shit about drums, but a smile like that will surely grab your attention.

"Please, Wendy. I was an ass last night. I know it. I swear this won't happen again."

I hesitate, my heart thumping against my ribs. The scent of the roses wafts toward me, sweet and heady, and for a second, I allow myself to hope. Maybe this time will be different.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm so sorry," Jett says, his words tumbling out in a rush as he takes two wide strides to close the distance between us. "Please, let me make it up

to you. Let's go get some breakfast and talk this out."

He reaches for my hand, his fingers brushing against my skin.

I feel the old familiar spark, the pull toward him that I've never been able to resist. I know I shouldn't be doing this.

My pride cringes at the way my heart sways.

My mother's words are whispering that stupid nonsense again in the back of my mind—about a man and about his place and money and how women need all that to survive.

Against my better judgment, I nod. "Okay." I accept the flowers from him. "Just let me grab my stuff and then I need to get changed."

Thirty minutes later, after I've brushed my teeth and fixed my hair and makeup, Jett and I are sitting at a small café table in the VIP area.

He's surprisingly calm. Usually, he's the worst when he's hungover.

The distant thrum of a bass and the screech of guitars drift over from one of the smaller stages across the field where the bands have been sound-checking all morning.

The festival is coming to life around us with artists, vendors, and attendees arriving.

It's noisy and chaotic, but my focus is solely on the man across from me.

I wonder if I'm making a mistake by giving in so easily.

Jett leans forward, his elbows on the table, his bleached hair falling into his eyes. "I know I've been a dick lately, babe," he says. "It's the stress of the tour, the pressure to write the new album...it's been getting to me. But that's no excuse for how I've treated you. For real."

I nod, my fingers absently tracing the patterns of the plastic tabletop. I want to believe him. I truly do.

"I need you, Wendy," Jett continues, reaching across the table to take my hand. "I can't do this without you."

"What?" I ask absentmindedly. "Write the new album?"

"Come on. I'm serious." He pulls my wrist to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. "I'm talking about the vodka deal. It's an investment in our future. For you and me."

My dumb heart starts melting a little. I'm forgetting all about last night's humiliation.

Because that's Jett. He can make you feel like shit one minute and like his most prized possession the next.

And I'm positive I'm a masochist, because I think I enjoy this back and forth a little.

The low is crap, but the high that comes after the low is better than any drug.

Not that I'm a pro, but I have a pretty wild imagination and have seen enough in the past couple of years.

"The band, everything...it's all going to be huge, baby," Jett coos, squeezing my hand. "And I want you by my side through it all and after. You're my ride or die. Remember?"

His words are sweet and seductive at the same time. Looking back at when I was broke, couch-surfing, and cheated on by my previous boyfriend, I wasn't a nice person. It must be the same for him. Things are taking longer than he expected and he's irritated. That's why he's like this.

At least, that's how my brain rationalizes his behavior from last night, especially in front of Cruz.

Ah, now I get where the tall, dark, and handsome term came from.

I don't have any other way to describe The Deviant's bassist.

Hold up, bitch!

Why are you thinking about another man when your perfectly acceptable boyfriend is trying to earn forgiveness for being an ass?

"Jett—" I start, but he interrupts me, kissing my knuckles again.

"I know, I know. I'll cut back on the booze. I promise, babe."

His eyes are pleading. If my resolve was wavering minutes ago, it's completely gone now.

While my heart yearns to believe him, the rational part of my brain screams at me to walk away, to remember all the times he's made promises before and broken them. Still, there's a fraction of me that can't forget the good times, the laughter, the passion.

.. He came into my life when I was at a very low point, and he made it interesting.

And currently, he's the only safety net I have.

Would it be so bad to give him an opportunity to get better?

"Okay," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the distant thrum of music. "One more chance, Jett."

His face breaks into a grin, and he raises my hand to his cheek, pressing it against his face. "You won't regret this, baby. I swear, things are going to be different from now on."

As he signals the waiter for the check, I try to ignore the nagging voice in the back of my mind, the one that whispers that I've heard those words before.

Instead, I focus on the warmth of Jett's hand in mine, the glimmer of hope in his eyes. But unfortunately, I can't unsee him taking a long swig from the beer bottle in his other hand. Doubt stirs in my gut.

Who drinks at noon?

The next few hours blur by in a surprisingly fun haze.

I love these sprawling multiple-day festivals—the kind bursting with many stages and endless crowds.

It's always chaos, vibrant and pulsing, where you bump shoulders with fascinating strangers or rekindle sparks with half-remembered faces from your past. I guess because high school felt like one long series of misfit moments for me, slipping into this scene feels like home.

Here, wrapped in the electric drone of music and excitement, I finally feel like I

belong—like I'm part of something that matters.

And I know I've been a whiny bitch ever since I stepped off the plane, but I have to give Jett some credit. Being his girlfriend comes with its perks, especially when it means I get the same VIP treatment his band does.

I spend the earlier part of the afternoon accompanying Jett and the rest of the guys from Sonic Trash to some press events and get to see a couple of on-camera interviews.

One for some British YouTube blogger and another for a local music magazine.

Then Jett and Kian join a podcaster in another tent, and Ramses and Griff do a live Q&A for a radio station.

One of the publications talks the band into doing a quick photo shoot, and I watch that unfold too.

Watch Jett doing his thing, transforming into the guy I want him to be all the time.

A guy with an easy smile and a charming demeanor.

It all slips into place like a well-worn mask.

He jokes with the photographers as if they're the best of buddies, and I wish he'd always be this mellow.

The rest of the band join in, their energy infectious as they pose for the cameras, goofing around like a bunch of overgrown kids.

I stand off to the side, observing the controlled mayhem of the press area.



Fans clamor for attention, waving posters and shouting the band's name.

Jett and the others indulge them, signing autographs and taking pictures with their Cyber-shot cameras, their faces alight with genuine joy.

It's moments like these that remind me of why I fell in love with him in the first place—his drive, his talent, the way he comes alive on stage.

As the day progresses, the festival kicks into high gear. Smaller bands take various stages scattered throughout the festival. If you stand between two of them, their music blends together in a jumble of sounds, and you can't really tell the bands apart.

When dusk is starting to slowly settle over the fairgrounds, Sonic Trash is the first band to breathe life into the massive main stage, where only four acts are set to perform tonight, with The Deviant closing.

I mean, everyone knows about The Deviant. If not because they like their music, then because they're out of their freaking minds.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

Three best friends who left Northern Cali for LA a few years ago. That's where they found the last member of the band—Cruz. And the rest, as they say, is history.

If anyone can write songs about fucking and praying at the same time, it's those guys.

Cruz . I don't know why my mind returns to the mysterious bassist all of a sudden.

I'm backstage, watching Jett and the guys perform their latest single in front of a decent-sized crowd pressed against the barricade.

And instead of thinking about my future with my boyfriend, I think about the man I really shouldn't be thinking about.

By the time Sonic Trash finishes their set, the crowd is primed and ready for the next band, their energy in the air palpable.

It's hectic with roadies clearing the stage and preparing it for the next artist, but we're allowed to stay in the wing and watch the next set. Jett steps away occasionally to greet some people, so

I've hardly had time between songs when the music isn't booming to tell him he was amazing.

"You liked it, baby?" He grins at me, his eyes a little glassy, which tells me he's been drinking without my knowledge, but so far, he's been good.

"Of course I liked it."

"Come here." He draws me closer and places a kiss on my lips in front of everyone. I hear a couple of claps from the crowd and a whistle.

"You go, Jett!" someone shouts over the music.

"That's my baby girl!" Jett yells out, shooting his index finger in the air. "That's my fucking ride or die, y'all!"

I ignore the fact that I'm a little uncomfortable with his arm squeezing my shoulder too hard. Any man publicly announcing his love is a man you should probably hold on to. I know my mother would say that.

"I gotta go talk to some guys, babe, okay?" he whispers to me during the next short pause between songs.

I nod.

Jett disappears into the sea of people cramming the backstage area.

He doesn't return for a while. The band's set is over, and I'm still rooted to my spot, watching the changeover.

Next up is The Deviant, and their props and stage lights are freaky.

Gives the illusion that you are indeed in a church, and I'm a little intimidated by the fact that it makes me feel like a sinner.

For thinking about their bassist while I'm taken.

I scan the surroundings once more, but Jett's nowhere to be seen. Then my gaze lands on the group of people emerging from around the corner.

The Deviant.

I recognize them immediately. All-black stage outfits, faces hidden under makeup.

They're like a magnet, drawing people closer and closer.

And despite somewhat uniformed costumes, I spot Cruz right away.

It's his hair and body. You can't really mix them up with the other three.

He's got big shoulders, and I bet he works out.

Probably lifts weights. I mean, you have to be in shape to be touring this much.

Doesn't matter the age. Being on the road is exhausting.

I know that because Jett keeps reminding me about it all the time.

I'm distracted for a second by a crew member asking me to step aside so he can check some cables. When I look up, Cruz is in front of me, smiling weakly.

"Hey, we meet again," he says loudly over the racket of the crowd and the background music.

"Ah, hi."

"You look great." His eyes drop to my feet and then slip up my body and to my face. And I at once feel naked. I had no idea a man could do this. I've definitely heard about the trick—undressing a woman with his eyes, but I've always thought it was exaggeration.

Never been on the receiving end of it. Until now.

"So do you," I reply.

He chuckles. "It's just a work uniform."

"I don't believe people out there"—I gesture to the crowd in front of the stage—"think that."

"I hope they don't."

There's a moment where it's somewhat awkward between us. Just a split second—a heartbeat longer than it should be—the space between us almost crackling with static.

Wake up, bitch!

What the hell are you doing?

Cruz leans in, closing that already-teetering gap, and asks softly, "How are you holding up after last night?"

"His voice drops to his lower register.

I can almost feel him—like a hum beneath my skin—and Jett has never reached me this way before.

It's disorienting. And not in a bad way, leaving me breathless and on the edge of something unnamed.

Bad Wendy.

Very bad Wendy.

I'm caught off guard by this realization.

What is this shit? Why now and here while we're surrounded by all these people?

"I'm okay," I say. "Just tired, you know? It was a long couple of days."

"Your boyfriend treating you well?"

I shrug, trying to play it off. "It's not a big deal. He was just stressed about the show, that's all."

Cruz frowns, clearly unconvinced. "You don't have to make excuses for him. What he did was not okay."

"I don't think it's the time or the place to discuss my relationship," I reply with a smile.

"Sorry. You're right."

Around us, the backstage area is a flurry of activity as The Deviant's crew hustles to put the finishing touches to whatever needs those touches.

They dart through shadows, lost in a whirl of last-minute adjustments.

Out there, on the other side of the barricade, the crowd is feverish with anticipation.

People of all ages, dressed in the band's merch or something similar to what their favorite band member wears on stage, are pressed against each another.

"Good luck," I tell Cruz. "Or break a leg. I don't know what to say in these situations. I don't really mean you should break a leg, but?—"

"Good luck doesn't really help, right?" he finishes my sentence for me. "Or at least, that's what they say."

"Yeah. I've heard that too."

"Don't worry, we got this." He winks at me, his charm cutting through layers of expertly applied makeup.

"Velez?" someone calls, pulling Cruz's attention.

Looking over his shoulder, he raises a hand in an easy wave at the source while neon lights coming from the rack suspended above dapple his skin like liquid fire.

A jittery man materializes from behind the velvet curtain, anxiety written all over him as he pats Cruz on the back—a touch that seems urgent and a little patronizing. "We're gonna do a quick one-on-one right now with those YouTube guys," he urges, oblivious to my presence.

"What, right now?"

"Yes, right now."

"We go on in ten minutes, man."

"That's the whole point. They'll film that part. But we need you to say a couple of words too."

Cruz nods dismissively, brushing it off with casual coolness. "Yeah. I'll be right

there."

"Hurry up, alright?" the man insists, finally shifting his gaze to me. He says nothing before disappearing into the dim glow of backstage.

"Fucking Angelo," Cruz mutters under his breath, and I guess it's just a reflex, but he rakes his hand through his hair streaming down his shoulders and a strand sticks out right on top of his head.

I suppose it's an instinct for me too. I reach up to put it back in place, my fingers careful not to mess up the rest. "Sorry," I mouth at him, straining upward.

"Your hair..." So soft and nice. "You got a little..."

mmm." I feel like an acrobat all of a sudden balancing on my tippytoes—if platforms had those, of course—to brush my palm over the top of his head to smooth my work.

Another charged second passes between us when our gazes meet in this tiny space. Before I'm completely lost in the moment, I pull back slightly. "Sorry. Hair is my specialty," I blurt out the first excuse that comes to mind.

He punches up an eyebrow.

"Cosmetologist in progress," I explain.

"See, I told you you'll get where you need to get."

I swallow hard, my heart suddenly racing in my chest. There's something about the way he looks at me, the gentle understanding in his eyes, that makes me want to spill all my secrets, to bare my soul to him right then and there.



"What the hell is going on here?" Jett's voice demands right behind me.

My pulse stutters. I feel a rush of panic, my stomach twisting into one huge knot.

Please don't make a scene.

But, of course, when I turn to look at Jett, his eyes are blazing with fury.

"Hey." I plaster a smile onto my face, but it's a futile attempt to pacify him.

Jett's not listening, his gaze locked on Cruz. "I knew it," he snarls. "I knew you were trying to steal my girl, you fucking punk." He whips out his hand and slams his palm into Cruz's chest.

Heads swivel in our direction. I can feel the eyes of the stage crew and band members on us, their whispers like a thousand tiny daggers against my skin.

"Jett, please. You're drunk." I sandwich myself between them before the blow is reciprocated. My heart is thrashing behind my ribs as I raise my hands to keep Jett at bay. "Let's not do this here. Let's just go somewhere and talk about it."

But he's beyond reason. I can tell by the stench of alcohol wafting at me from his mouth. "You're nothing but a lying, cheating whore," he spits out, shoving his finger at my shoulder right above my collarbone. "And this asshole"—he shifts his attention to Cruz—"needs to learn his lesson."

A fist flies right past my head, surely aimed for Cruz's jaw.

I can't tell what the result of the attempt is, though, because this is the moment when chaos erupts around us.

People are shouting and pushing through as they try to intervene.

I'm jostled back and forth. And then the security guards are there, their arms wrapping around Jett and dragging him away.

"Fuck you, Velez!" he yells.

Hysterical flashlights dance across the crowd. "Everyone clear out! Only the band and their crew stay. No guests! I said no guests! Everyone out!"

In an instant, I'm being pulled away too, strong hands gripping my arms as they escort me out along with the rest of the onlookers. The last thing I see before the curtain falls is Cruz's face—puzzled, shadowed by a touch of melancholy.

Five minutes later, when the first chords of The Deviant's set vibrate through the festival grounds, I'm standing outside the backstage area, cut adrift from everyone and everything.

What a shit show of a day.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The energy on stage and beyond is wild.

I don't think we've ever headlined anything this big. Hell, if someone had told me ten years ago, when I was playing tiny clubs in LA for a crowd of six, that my band would be headlining a major European rock festival, I wouldn't have believed it.

But here I am—one of the four motherfuckers to light up this field tonight to the delight of nearly a hundred thousand fans. I mean, it doesn't get any better for a boy from East LA.

The bass reverberates through my body as I pluck the strings. The noise of the crowd as they clap and sing along fills me to the brim, fills my chest with something real and powerful.

Still, my mind is elsewhere. Jett's furious face flashes before my eyes again and again. I can't erase his words from my head. Can't forget what he said to Wendy, calling her a whore. Again. The injustice of it all twists inside me like a knife.

No woman deserves to be treated that way.

Even his sloppy attempt to clock me doesn't rile me up as much as his attitude toward the woman he calls his girlfriend. Under different circumstance, I would have fought back, but with minutes left before our stage entrance, I held back.

We're in the middle of the set. Chance is about to do his signature ten-minute solo, and I'm the guy whose single task in this portion of the song is to make him sound better.

Plus, he's been hammered since the morning, so he's a little out of it.

You can't really tell from the audience, but I know better.

The stage lights move from Justice and beat down on me for a flicker of a moment before moving to Chance.

The heat and the sweat under my outfit only amplify my frustration.

My fingers falter on the fretboard, the rhythm slipping through my grasp.

I struggle to regain my focus, but the memory from earlier keeps intruding.

Fucking Jett, being a coward, putting his goddamn hand on me.

Chance catches my eye from across the stage halfway through his solo, his brow furrowed. He mouths something at me, but I can't make it out over the pulsing music. His expression darkens, and I know he's pissed at my lack of concentration.

We barrel through the rest of the set, the adrenaline from the performance still pumping through my veins as we exit the stage to the racket of the crowd.

My heart pounds, a mix of post-show high and guilt churning in my gut.

I fucked up tonight, and everyone knows it—the band, the crew, the audience.

The mistakes were glaring, impossible to ignore.

In the dressing room, the air is thick with sweat and tension, and I grab a towel from one of the crew members to wipe my face.

I ignore the fact that I'm still caked in makeup as I try to steady my breathing and ground myself.

The confrontation with my bandmates is imminent, and I brace myself for the fallout.

Justice stalks over to me, his steely gray eyes flashing with anger. "What the hell was that, man? You were all over the place tonight."

I meet his gaze, defiance battling with shame. "Everyone has off nights. It happens."

"Not like that, it doesn't," Chance pipes up, running a hand through his sweaty, sandy-colored hair. "This is about that chick, isn't it? Jett's girl?"

I clench my jaw, not wanting to admit how much Wendy has gotten under my skin. "Don't worry about it. I'll handle my shit."

Chance sighs and swirls in his spot, yelling at no one in particular, "Hey, someone give me a fucking shot!"

Justice steps even closer, all up in my face. "An off night? You nearly tanked the entire set, asshole."

The space between us is vibrating with hostility, and I feel the weight of his accusation, the truth in it. But I can't bring myself to admit the real reason for my distraction.

Before things between me and Justice escalate, Zander steps in. "What are you doing, man?" he asks. "You trying to start some shit with Jett?"

I bristle at his question. I don't even get it myself—my growing concern for Wendy. I'm not explaining that I don't like how the Sonic Trash drummer treats his girl.

"Fuck off, maybe."

"Jett's a dick, but that's not our problem, is it?" Justice says. "We all know it. After this tour leg, his shit band is out."

"Don't be a hero," Chance murmurs his agreement. He's on the couch, and the makeup artist is rushing to remove the makeup from his face so he can hit the shower.

I feel the pressure of their collective disapproval, like some unspoken expectation to fall in line.

"I'm not trying to be a hero. I just... I'm not going to ignore it when I see something wrong."

Zander throws up his hands. "Dude, you barely know this chick."

I don't have an answer. At least, not one I'm ready to admit out loud. The truth is, I feel drawn to Wendy in a way that's hard to explain. Like she's a puzzle I need to solve, a story I need to unravel.

I push past them, heading for the showers. "You know what? Get bent, all of you. I don't need this shit."

I shower, change into clean clothes, and leave the dressing room without saying a word to anyone. Usually, we'd just invite some people over and hang out, maybe have some drinks. Chance would do hard stuff somewhere in the back of the room.

But tonight, I'm in no mood. Tonight, I have to clear my head.

The festival grounds are slowly dying down around me as I stroll through the artists' section. Crew members scurry about, breaking down equipment, clearing the stages,

picking up trash. Tomorrow, we do it all over again before we leave this city for the next one.

I drift without direction for a while longer, the sting of my bandmates' words still fresh and raw. Mistakes? Sure, I made them—enough to fill a song or two with shame and regret—but they're not the apocalypse lurking in my thoughts.

No, that shadow belongs to Jett Vice and his treatment of Wendy—a real issue tangled with moral dilemmas that need confronting.

And honestly, she probably doesn't need saving. The way she inserted herself between us when Jett blew up was a real turn-on. She's a force to be reckoned with, all five foot five inches of her small stature.

You're screwed, Velez.

And then I find myself standing in front of the Sonic Trash tour buses. I spot Wendy's silhouette by the gear trailers, her bright orange hair hard to miss in the darkness. She's leaning against the side panel of the vehicle, a beer dangling from her fingertips, her posture relaxed yet alert.

My heart stutters in my chest, and I pause for a bit, watching her. She looks like she's waiting for something—or someone.

I take a deep breath, steeling my nerves before I approach. "Hey."

She turns to the sound of my voice, her eyes meeting mine. There's a flicker of surprise in her gaze, followed by something else—something warm and inviting.

"Oh... What brings you to this neck of the woods? I thought oil and water don't mix."

I shrug, erasing the distance between us until I'm leaning against the trailer beside her. "Just out for a walk. Needed to clear my head."

Pause.

"Hey," she blurts out heatedly. "What the hell was that during 'Release Me'?"

"Oh, that." I scratch the back of my neck. "Bad day."

"You're a bass player. It's like the easiest instrument."

"You've heard that too?"

"Yeah. You really did your boys dirty."

I chuckle, unsure if she's seriously pissed off at me for those mistakes or simply pulling my leg. "Are you saying I played like shit tonight?"

She nods, taking a swig of her beer. "You did play like shit. You came in late a few times. Your lead singer looked mad."

"Ah, yeah, all bands have that one guy who's always upset at everyone and everything."

"I know."

We lapse into silence, the weight of everything unsaid hanging in the air between us. I can feel the heat of her body beside me, the faint scent of her sugary perfume mingling with the smoke from the distant campfires.

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, taking in the way the scattered light plays



off her hair, the curve of her lips around the bottle. She's beautiful in a raw, unfiltered way that makes my heart ache inside my rib cage. Such an odd, unfamiliar feeling.

"I'm sorry about earlier," I say, breaking the silence. "With Jett, I mean. He had no right to treat you like that."

She shrugs, her gaze fixed on the bottle in her hands. "It's not your fault. Jett's always been...intense."

I frown, not liking the way she says it. Like she's used to his anger, his outbursts. Like she's resigned herself to being treated like shit.

"You deserve better," I say. The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them.

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine. At first, I think she's going to brush me off, tell me to mind my own business.

But instead, she smiles. A real, genuine smile that lights up her whole face. "That's right. I do."

Something hot that has nothing to do with the alcohol or the post-show high spreads through me. It's her, plain and simple.

Wendy. The girl with bright orange hair and an unshakable attitude. The girl who's crawled under my skin and taken up residence in my thoughts in less than a day.

"If I were you, I'd break up with that asshole," I supply matter-of-factly.

She takes another swig of beer, then offers me the bottle.

I accept it, my fingers brushing against hers as I take it from her hand.

I bring it to my lips, the cool glass still warm from her touch.

It's a small thing, sharing a drink like this, but it feels intimate somehow.

Like a secret has passed between us. An almost kiss.

"So, you never answered my question," she says, nudging me with her elbow. "What happened tonight?"

I shake my head. "You're never going to let me live it down, huh?"

"You'll be all over YouTube tomorrow morning," she says, her sarcasm evident. "Haters will eat you up for those fuckups."

"Ouch." I clutch my chest in mock hurt. "You really know how to wound a guy's ego."

She grins, unrepentant. "Hey, I call it like I see it. And what I saw tonight was a shit player who couldn't keep up with his own band."

I raise an eyebrow, taking another sip of beer before handing the bottle back to her. "Oh, is that right? And I suppose you could do better?"

"Damn straight," she says, rolling her shoulders and popping her hips before she does a very convincing imitation of a bass player on stage.

I laugh, charmed by her confidence. "Well, maybe you should give me lessons sometime."

"Maybe I should." Her eyes sparkle with mischief. "But I don't know if you could handle it. I'm a tough teacher."

"I think I could handle anything you dish out," I say, my voice low and full of promise.

The air between us crackles, just like it did once before. I find myself leaning closer to her, drawn in by the heat of her body.

She doesn't pull away, her gaze locked on mine. I'm tempted to erase the distance completely, to taste her lips, to see if they're as soft as they look.

But I don't. Because as much as I want her, I know it's not the right time. Not when she's someone else's girl.

So I pull back, clearing my throat and looking away. "Anyway, I should probably get going. Early morning tomorrow and all that."

She nods, a flicker of disappointment crossing her face before she schools her features into a neutral expression. "Yeah, me too."

"Hey, you're gonna be alright...with your boyfriend?—"

"I'm sleeping on the crew bus," she says before I finish my sentence.

"That's good." The idea of her sharing a bed with Jett makes me sick to my stomach.

"Yeah. They're cool." Wendy moves, just a half step, as if to let me know she really does need to go.

The conversation comes to a natural stop, and I find myself grabbing at my laminate

attached to my belt.

"Here," I say, unclipping the pass and holding it out to her. "Come see us tomorrow."

Wendy's eyes widen slightly, surprise flickering across her delicate features as she takes in the offering.

She reaches out, her fingers grazing mine as they close around the pass.

I wonder if she did it on purpose. A shiver runs through me at the contact, a jolt of something primal and unmistakable.

Wendy studies the pass, turning it over in her hands.

The dim light catches on the holographic logo, casting shimmering reflections across her face.

"You sure that's okay? I know they don't make extras."

"Yeah. Totally. I'll just tell my manager I lost it." I shrug, trying to play it cool even as my heart hammers against my ribs.

"I don't know... After what Jett pulled earlier, maybe your manager won't want me there."

"Not his call. Besides, I think it's bullshit that you got kicked out. Wasn't your fault. Jett's the one who made it into a problem when there was none. Management's already talking about removing Sonic Trash from the bill after this tour leg is over."

"Are you serious?" Fear crosses Wendy's features. "Shit. Really?"

"Listen to me," I say in a low voice. "Jett's a big boy. He knows he needs to behave if he wants to keep playing these gigs. If that happens, it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with his attitude."

She looks away, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. I want to reach out, to smooth my thumb over her mouth. But I keep my hands to myself, curling them around the beer bottle instead.

"His temper," I supply, "is going to be the end of him one day. I'm not telling you this out of spite. I'm telling you this because guys like him rarely last. So just remember. That's on him, not you."

Wendy tucks an orange strand behind her ear. "I really should go," she murmurs, but she doesn't move.

"Yeah," I agree, even as every cell in my body screams in protest. "But listen, if you ever need anything... If you ever want to get away for a bit..." I swallow hard, forcing the next words out. "You can always come over to our tour bus. No questions asked. No strings attached."

"Okay," she whispers. "Thank you."

With that, she slips the pass into the back pocket of her black skinny jeans and turns to leave. My eyes trace the sway of her hips, the bounce of her hair, and the night air feels suddenly cold against my skin, bereft of her warmth, as I watch her walk away.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

On Saturday, I wake up to a vacant tour bus and the smell of stale cheap coffee.

The thin mattress squeaks beneath me as I roll over.

A spring jabs into my back. Another glamorous morning in the crew vehicle.

Whoop-de-fucking-do. Still, it's better than sharing a bus with high and drunk Sonic Trash guys.

I rub the remnants of last night's mascara from my eyes and fumble for my phone. A text from Jett glows on the screen.

Need ur help landing the vodka deal today, babe. Don't flake on me.

I sigh, tossing the phone aside. Flake on him? That's rich coming from the king of empty promises.

As if on cue, Cruz's words echo in my head.

You deserve better.

And deep down in my gut, I know it. But a greater part of me that's been scared to be alone, scared to be what I was before I met Jett, keeps whispering things at the back of my mind. Things that speak of depressing solitary nights and no permanence.

Jett needs me.

He's not really denying that, and I suppose it's true what they say about us women—we love with our ears and not our brains. Because my brain has been screaming for me to run ever since I got off the plane, but my ears adore all the cheesy words the prospects of a better future.

I think I am becoming my mother , I conclude as I press my palms against my eyes until colors burst behind the lids like psychedelic fireworks in the darkness.

LA is calling me home, but I can't bail now. Not yet.

I throw on yesterday's crop top, hoping the lingering scent of cigarettes and sweat will blend in with the festival crowd for the time being. I decide to take a shower and change later in the day when the band's bus is empty and no one is creeping on me from the common area.

Jett's already in a pissy mood when I find him by the press tent, surrounded by his band of merry dickheads.

"...believe that shit?" He kicks a nearby amp, feedback screeching.

Several crew members turn their heads at him, probably wondering what his problem is and what the amp has to do with it.

"Fuck 'em," Griffin says. "They think they're hot shit just 'cause they headline."

"Their drummer can't even keep a beat."

Jett is definitely wrong.

You don't need to be a drummer to recognize when someone's got that kind of magic. I've been around enough bands to tell who's got it, and The Deviant? They've got it in

spades. Meanwhile, Jett's got his own mess to sort out, always tearing others down just so he can feel an inch taller.

This all loops through my mind as I edge closer to the Sonic Trash guys, this odd mix of heat curling in my chest—part frustration for Jett's nonsense and that cringeworthy second-hand embarrassment gnawing at me because he's my boyfriend.

"Amateurs," Jett snorts out as I hover at the edge of their little bitch-fest. "I'll show them how a real rockstar parties."

Is this really what I signed up for? Babysitting an oversized toddler with an overinflated ego? Somehow, I won't feel guilty if these guys get kicked off the tour for real.

Jett finally notices me, his scowl morphing into a wolfish grin. "There's my girl." He moves to stand closer. "Ready to charm some investors today?"

I force a smile, the muscles in my cheeks aching with the effort. "Sure thing."

He slings an arm around my shoulders. "Cool. Tag along to check us out doing more press, baby?"

Like I have a choice.

For the next couple of hours, I trail behind Jett and his bandmates through the media area.

The girls, mostly models hired to advertise various booze and energy drinks, flock to him, all pouty lips and barely there outfits.

He laps up the attention, his hand lingering a little too long on the small of a blonde's



back, his eyes raking over a brunette's endless legs.

Meanwhile, I stand to the side and watch all this unfold in front of me. Finally, when there's a small window between the interviews and the band's scheduled time to sit in the merch booth and sign autographs, I pull Jett aside.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" I hiss at him.

He rolls his eyes, annoyance evident on his face. "I'm kinda busy here."

"Busy? Is that what we're calling it now?" I scoff. "You're practically drooling over those bimbos."

"Relax, babe. It's just part of the game." He flashes me a smile. "You know you're the only one for me." His words ring hollow. A well-worn script he's recited a thousand times.

I want to scream, to shake him, to make him see how much his actions are tearing me apart. But I swallow the words, my throat tight with unspoken rage. "Whatever."

Pause.

He narrows his eyes. "Is that why you're fucking interrupting me? To tell me I can't be seen with other women because you—what?—got some sort of patent on me?"

"Are you even hearing me right now? People are watching this, watching you pawing other women's bodies. It's humiliating."

"I am working, Wendy. You need to get that into that empty head of yours. This is how things are done in this world. You gotta share me with others."

I'm speechless. I don't really want to argue over this. It's useless anyway. If he wants to grab other asses in front of the cameras, fine by me.

And Jett's already turning back to his adoring fans.

I watch him saunter off. Five minutes later, his arm snakes around some redhead's waist.

I close my eyes for a second, trying to block out the sensory overload. The sun beats down on my skin, the heat oppressive and inescapable. The scent of sweat and cheap beer clogs my nostrils, making my stomach churn. I realize I haven't had breakfast yet. I forgot.

I take a deep breath, the air thick with the weight of my disillusionment. This is my reality, a far cry from the fairy tale I once imagined. But I'll be damned if I let it break me.

I square my shoulders, my resolve hardening like armor. If this is the game, then I'll play it better than anyone. I'll smile and simper and charm my way through this fucking circus.

But in the darkest corners of my heart, I know the truth. This isn't living. It's barely even surviving. And sooner or later, something's gotta give.

The VIP area on a Saturday night is a world unto itself. A glittering bubble of privilege and debauchery. The sun is still up, lingering above the horizon when Jett leads me through the crowd, his possessive hand on the small of my back.

I feel eyes on me, appraising, judging. I tug self-consciously at the hem of my too-short dress, wishing I'd chosen something less revealing. But he asked me to dress nicely, so I listened.

We approach a secluded booth, where Mick and Clem are already seated in the chairs. There's a collection of bottles and some glasses are on the small table in the center.

"Jett, my man!" Clem gestures at the empty couch. "You killed it last night."

"Thanks. Was a sick set for sure."

The three of them exchange handshakes and back pats.

"Look at this lovely creature." Mick flashes me that nasty smile of his. His eyes rake over me, lingering in places they really shouldn't.

Jett grins and flops onto the couch, oblivious or uncaring that his business partner in the making is paying a little too much attention to his girlfriend.

A couple more guys join us. Shots are poured. Weed appears.

I don't really feel like drinking today. I'm starting to develop a headache, but the conversation flows smoothly. Lots of talk about money and potential markets and strategies.

So the least I can do is pretend to be enjoying this little get-together.

Things become muddy after a couple of drinks.

Yes, an empty stomach will do that to you.

Eventually, I find myself sandwiched between Jett and Mick, the leather of the seat sticking to my thighs in a way that's unpleasant.

The table is littered with empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays.

The air is heavy with the stench of cigarette smoke and weed.

Mick signals to a passing waitress, his hand grazing her ass as she leans in to take his order. I look away.

Is this what Jett aspires to? This clichéd caricature of wealth and power?

The waitress returns with a bottle of champagne, the label proclaiming it to be some rare vintage. Mick pops the cork with practiced ease, and the foam spills over onto the table. He fills four flutes, handing them out with a flourish.

"To new partnerships," he toasts, his eyes fixed on me. "And to the beautiful women who inspire us."

I raise my glass, then take a sip, and the champagne is bitter on my tongue.

Jett and Clem are immediately deep in conversation, their heads bent together conspiratorially.

I tune out their talk of market shares and distribution deals as my eyes wander over the people crowding the rest of the tent and the VIP area.

"So what do you do, Wendy?" a voice asks off to the side. "Besides being a beautiful young woman?"

I turn and meet Mick's gaze.

Suddenly, I feel a hand on my thigh, fingers inching beneath the hem of my dress. I stiffen, and my breath catches in my throat. Mick leans in close, his alcohol breath

hot against my ear.

"You know," he murmurs in a suggestive voice. "There's a lot of opportunity in this business. For a girl like you, the sky's the limit."

His hand creeps higher. Yes, I'm buzzed, but not buzzed enough to ignore the fact that his touch is making my skin crawl.

I glance desperately at Jett, but he's lost in his own world, his eyes glazed over as if he's staring into some far-off universe where he's the biggest star of the show.

"I think you're misinterpreting," I tell Mick quietly, hoping that I sound ballsy enough for him to get the hint.

Just as tension knots in the silence, a girl drifts over to Mick's other side. She giggles and slaps his shoulder, inviting him to join her for shots.

Grim relief washes over me. I'm glad the old fart is preoccupied with someone else's ass, but she's not much older than me, so I don't even know what I should feel.

I clear my throat as I lean toward Jett and whisper in his ear, "Hey, babe? Can I talk to you for a sec?"

Jett barely glances my way, his eyes still locked on Clem. "Not now, Wendy. We're in the middle of something."

I press on. "Jett. Please."

He sighs loudly. His face is a huge mask of annoyance as he turns to me. "What is it?"

I lower my voice some more. "It's just... Mick's getting a little handsy. It's making me uncomfortable."

Jett's gaze flicks to Mick, whose hand has already slipped under the girl's skirt and is very blatantly grabbing her ass check.

"Come on," my boyfriend mutters. "He's just being friendly. Don't make a big deal out of it."

I'm not sure if we're looking at the same thing anymore. "So you don't mind if he tries to finger me in front of everyone too?" I hiss out angrily.

"Shut up," he grits out, his eyes flashing with warning. "We need Mick, okay? So just...play nice."

He returns his attention to Clem, their conversation resuming as if I never spoke. I sit back, and my skin crawls as Mick's hand settles on my knee once more.

The music pulses around me. Laughter rings out, shrill and grating.

I feel like I can't breathe.

I thought I wanted this life.

Thought I could handle it.

I was wrong.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The tour bus is a cocoon of clashing scents—sweaty T-shirts, stale cigarette smoke curling through the air, and that sharp chemical bite of cocaine.

The strap of my bass digs into my shoulder as I adjust it for comfort.

I've got a tune in my head that I've been messing around with.

Nothing solid. Just something I may pitch the next time we get together to write a new song.

Right now, though, it's not about creating anything new. It's about the chaos and the fun.

Across from me, Chance is sprawled out on the couch like a king without a court, his eyes two black holes engorged with euphoria. His grin is loose and lazy; he's lost in whatever high he's riding again. I don't think he's been sober or clear-headed during this entire tour leg.

Zander sits in the makeup chair while Di carefully applies the intricate designs around his eyes, transforming him into the masked madman behind the drums that our fans worship a little too much.

Justice paces back and forth in the narrow aisle, his fingers twitching restlessly at his sides. I don't know what his problem is today, but I remind myself not to get on his bad side.

"How's it looking, boys?" Angelo asks, boarding the bus. "Are you ready to rock this

place or what?"

"We were born ready, my man," Chance pipes up.

I watch him taking another hit of his joint, which I know isn't the only thing he's taken tonight. A knot twists in my gut. This isn't like the old days when we'd pass one around to take the edge off before a show. The hard stuff Chance is into now—it's going to burn him out way too fast.

I rise from my spot and sit next to him.

"Yo," I whisper, leaning into him a little. "Maybe ease up a bit, huh?"

Chance chuckles and waves off my concern with a dismissive hand. "Always the worrywart. Tonight's going to be epic."

His words slur slightly, and I exchange a loaded glance with Justice. We both see it, the way the drugs are eating Chance alive, but no one wants to be the buzzkill who takes away his poison. Truth is, there's no time for him to get his shit together with the kind of schedule we have.

Chance offers me a rolled-up bill, a challenge in his bloodshot eyes. "C'mon, live a little." He pulls out a packet of coke from the back pocket of his pants.

I shake my head. "Nah, man, I'm good. One of us needs to keep our head on straight."

Chance shrugs and takes another hit of his joint and then sniffs a line.

Justice pops a couple of pills and chases them with a swig of whiskey. I absently pick at the skull tattoo on my forearm, wishing I could shake the sinking feeling that everything's about to crash and burn.



We're brothers in the spotlight, feeding off the energy of the crowd, but here in the shadows, I wonder how much longer we can keep up the act before it all falls apart. Chance most of all.

When we step out of the tour bus, the air feels muggy and the sky is heavy with rain clouds.

The distant roar of the crowd bleeds into the chaotic energy of the working crew backstage.

We have one interview before tonight's set, and, of course, we're in full gear, our stage outfits and makeup on.

Six security guards escort us to the media tent, where Justice and Zander ramble through the questions using their rehearsed answers.

After the interview is over, we're bombarded by fanboys from smaller bands trying to get autographs and photos.

I don't mind it. Ten years ago, I was that dude, someone who looked up to other major bands, someone who wanted to get to the same place where I've arrived.

To this place of fame and fortune. But it's dreary here. Dreary and lonely.

"Guys, sorry!" Angelo shouts over the din of the crowd, waving his hands at everyone. "But we have a set to play."

He navigates through the sea of bodies with an urgency matched by the pulse of anticipation in the air, gently but firmly coaxing people aside.

It isn't until we make it to the main stage that I notice that our guitarist isn't with us.

"You seen Chance?" I ask Zander.

He shakes his head. "I thought he was with you."

"Do you see him with me?"

"Probably went to take a piss or something."

I scan the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of Chance, but he's nowhere. I mean, he's hard to miss with that makeup on.

A sense of dread coils in my gut as I weave through the throng of people. The drums from the current act on stage reverberate through my bones, only amplifying my anxiety.

Where the hell is that big motherfucking baby?

"Yo, Petey?" I stop one of the crew guys. "Have you seen Chance?"

He scratches the back of his neck, thinking for a second. "Nah, man. I thought he was with your lot."

My panic is on the rise now as I push past the clusters of people, inspecting every nook and cranny, every restless shadow.

I can hear the roar of the crowd, drowning out everything for a few moments.

It's a thundering crescendo of applause as the band before us finishes their last song and is about to clear the stage.

And we're missing our fucking guitarist. Great. Fucking great.

Justice and two security guards intercept me on the opposite side of the backstage area.

"Chance's missing," our lead singer announces with a pissed-off face as he pulls me aside. Even a layer of makeup can't hide that goddamned frown crossing his forehead.

"I fucking know. I've been searching for him."

"Shit," he mutters, looking up at the sky.

Zander rushes over from out of nowhere. "Did you check the bathrooms?" he asks.

"Already covered that," Justice answers, the tension in every word growing tighter.

"What about the women's?"

"The women's?" I clarify, my eyebrows raised.

"Did you fucking see him?" Zander presses, lowering his tone to a growl. "Do you really think he'd notice right now what bathroom he's using? He's probably so high, he thinks he's goddamned Jesus walking on water."

"And how exactly is this my problem?" I fire back, frustration flaring up unexpectedly. The question seems irrational—I know it—but in this madness, my mind isn't reasoning very well. I've been lowkey pissed off about Jett Vice all day today and also worried about Chance.

Apparently, for good reason too. Although everyone had access to drugs, most of us managed to steer clear. But not him.

"Nobody's saying it's your problem, asshole," Zander hisses out.

"Come on, Z-man." Justice rests a hand on our drummer's shoulder. For once, he's actually doing what a guy in charge is supposed to do. The opposite of instigating a fight.

I'm quiet, my jaw clenched, my fists tight. There's a sheen of sweat coating the back of my neck underneath my hair, and I'm not liking the direction this evening is taking or the dynamics between us. Going on stage when chemistry is off is the worst.

Plus, our guitarist is missing.

"Hey, you three!" Angelo shouts.

We all turn in the direction of his voice.

"Get your asses over here! Now!" he barks, snapping his fingers before vanishing around the corner.

We bolt, security hot on our heels, adrenaline spiking like electricity crackling through a wire. We dodge and weave through a labyrinth of roadies dismantling equipment from the stage, then barrel past crowds of scantily clad girls partying with other bands.

The narrow passageway leading into the guts of the arena feels suffocating amidst its tangle of wires and fluorescent lights.

Up ahead, Angelo is hunched in predator-like readiness behind a stack of battered black travel cases plastered with stickers. And slumped against the stone wall is Chance—ashen-faced, with slick beads of perspiration covering his skin.

Oh shit.

"Close it up!" Justice commands, gesturing wildly for security to scatter and redirect the masses. Instinct takes over as they spin people around with professional precision, sealing away this pocket of vulnerability from curious eyes.

"He's barely breathing," Angelo supplies, his fingers pressed against Chance's neck.

Next to me, Zander is starting to freak out. He's pacing in small circles as he runs his hands over his dirty-blond hair. "The show starts in twenty. What are we gonna do?"

"Just hold on." I drop into a crouch next to Angelo and slap Chance's cheek gently. "Hey, man. You hear me?"

Seconds tick by excruciatingly slowly.

"Hey, bro?" I press on.

"We need to get him up," Angelo says, his eyes darting like skittish fireflies in the dusk, checking to see if the coast is clear.

His hand flickers through the air as he signals to two guards.

I rise to my feet. "Listen, he's not in any shape to perform," I tell our manager, my voice serious amid the distant thrill of the crowd filtering through the walls.

Angelo acknowledges with a nod. "I see that."

"Let's just get him out of here first," Zander suggests, gesticulating wildly.

"Take him to the dressing room," Justice adds.

The security guards hoist Chance between them to guide him away from prying eyes. We move as one shadowed entity down corridors and into the band's dressing room.

There, we carefully arrange Chance on the couch, and Angelo kicks out everyone but the band and a single guard.

"Anyone know what he took?" our manager asks, his gaze darting between the three of us.

There's a knock on the door. "Not right now!" he snaps.

"It's Samantha," a voice shouts from outside, then the door swings open and our PR girl slips in. She moves to the center of the room and stares at Chance for a few seconds. "What's he on?"

"Probably coke," Zander pipes up, rubbing the back of his neck.

"He did some H earlier," Justice says with a heavy sigh.

"You gotta be kidding me," Angelo mutters under his breath. "What is this dufus thinking?"

"He's not," I murmur under my breath.

Samantha approaches the couch and shakes Chance's shoulder. "Hey, you think you can do the show, or do you want to take the night off?"

He offers her a loopy smile. "Hey, Sam...Sammy..."

"Chance?"

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"I gotta tell you something, Sam. You're too cute to be working with a bunch of assholes like us." He reaches up, his fingers inching toward a strand of her hair. But Sam's too quick. She straightens before he can grasp anything more than air.

"Hey, dude," I cut in smoothly, catching his attention. "You alright?"

"Never better, man." His grin is lopsided but genuine as he then lunges for my hair, his grip firm and unapologetic.

"Seriously, man," I grumble through clenched teeth as I work on freeing myself from his vice-like clutch. "Let go."

Chance chuckles obnoxiously, slurring out a tipsy "snip, snip" while crafting scissors with the fingers of his free hand. The memory bites. Asshole tried to give me a haircut a couple of weeks ago while I was asleep. I'm still pissed at him. If not for Justice and Zander, I'd be a bald motherfucker right now.

"Hey, dude," our drummer steps in. "We're about to hit the stage. What do you wanna do?"

"Stage?" Chance drawls, looking at us with his glazed eyes like we've all just grown extra limbs.

"Lookit, buddy," Angelo says sternly. "If you want to take a night off, you need to tell me right now."

In the corner, Samantha is shaking her head. Her mouth is a thin line, her posture

rigid.

"Dude?" Zander whispers. "You think you can stand?"

We all know that if Chance can't get up, we won't have a guitar player, and we're the fucking headliner. Canceling the show is not an option. With so many people in attendance, it could turn into a riot.

"Oh, we got a set to play," Chance mutters as if his memory has finally returned.

"Yes." I nod. "We're the headliner. Remember?"

Chance attempts to push himself off the couch to no avail.

Time seems to pass in uneven intervals as Justice and Zander attempt to get Chance up.

"Just leave him," I snap, dropping to my knees beside our guitarist. His skin is ghostly under the harsh light of the dressing room. "Look at him! He needs a hospital, not a fucking stage."

Angelo's eyes flash with desperation. "We can't cancel. Not now. First of all, the label will have our heads. Second, have you seen that crowd? We've got over a hundred thousand people who paid a lot of money to see you guys play."

I glance toward the door, where anticipation seems to seep through from outside—an invisible tide pressing against the thin walls, ready to burst at any moment.

"What do you suppose we do?"

"We can ask Jeff," Zander suggests. Jeff is the guy who plays guitar for the band that



went on before us.

"He doesn't know the songs," Justice says.

"It's better than no guitar at all," I argue.

"Fuck Jeff," Chance mumbles, waving his hands haphazardly. "I got it. Just give me a minute."

But a minute turns into five, then ten, then fifteen.

Eventually, there's a knock on the door. The tour manager's checking on us. Angelo steps out for a moment to talk, then returns wearing an even darker expression. He orders everyone but the three of us to leave.

As soon as the door shuts, he says, "Not performing is not an option tonight. The crowd is drunk and getting rowdy. He has to go on."

"He can't." I motion at Chance's slumped form.

"Where does he keep his stash?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I mean where does he keep his drugs?" Angelo stresses every word with a frown creasing his forehead.

"You want to shoot him up?" Justice whispers the question.

"Do you idiots understand what will happen with a crowd like the one we have here tonight if you don't go on? I don't want a repeat of St. Louis in '91. Do you?"

"We're better off asking Jeff or some other guitarist," I persist. "We've got options. It's not like we're the only band on the bill."

"Not when we have to be on stage in the next ten minutes."

Another insistent knock.

"What?" Angelo barks.

The door cracks open and a face pops into the room. I've seen the guy around. He's with the organizers. "Hey, guys. Everything good?" he asks with heavy German accent. "It's getting pretty wild out there. People are starting to get a little anxious."

I check the time on my phone. It's five minutes past the announced set time.

"We're almost ready," our manager replies. Then as soon as the door closes, he turns to us and says, "Get me some H. Now."

"Are you serious?" I blurt out.

"We'll bring him back just enough to play," Angelo says.

"No way." I grab Angelo's arm. "More drugs? That's what got him here in the first place!"

"You want to flush everything we've worked for down the toilet?" Angelo yanks his arm free. "He has to get through the set, or these people are going to destroy the entire field." He's waving his index finger in the direction of the door as he speaks.

"Cruz, we don't have a choice," Zander says solemnly, and the finality in his voice twists my insides.

Deep down, I understand what a hundred thousand drunk, disorderly fans can do to a venue if they aren't given what they came for.

It isn't only about the destruction of property.

It's about people ending up hurt, with broken bones and concussions.

But I also don't want to see my friend falling further into the void.

"Cruz," Justice whispers from across the room, where he's standing with his arms folded on his chest. "We have to play, and we have no time to look for his replacement. Even if we can get someone who's just as good on a guitar, what are the chances they know our songs? Having someone fuck up the entire set would be worse than giving him what he's already taking.

" Justice jerks his chin toward Chance still splayed out on the couch.

"And what about all the women in the audience when things get wild? "

I clench my fists, my heart hammering against my ribs. This is wrong, so fucking wrong. But I can hear the crowd chanting our name, the energy electric and dark even from back here.

"Fuck," I breathe out.

"Let's get this over with before it's too late," Angelo instructs.

Zander leaves the dressing room, grabbing one of the security guards who's standing just outside to go with him.

He returns a few minutes later and presses a small baggie into Angelo's palm.

I can't watch it. Can't watch how they shoot my friend up. I turn around and stare at the wall, waiting for them to be done.

"Come on, buddy," I can hear Angelo murmuring. "Just a little taste to get you back on your feet."

Then there's a sharp inhale. I turn around, bile rising in my throat, and see Chance's eyelids flutter. Angelo sits him up and slaps his cheeks lightly.

"There we go, champ. You've got this."

Chance sways, his eyes glassy and unfocused at first. I step forward and grip his shoulder. "You okay, man?"

"You think you can play?" Zander asks quietly, raking his hand through Chance's hair to push it off his forehead.

Chance grins at us and slurs out, "S'all good, m'dudes. M'ready to rock..." His pupils are now big and black and scary. The drugs are working.

I step aside and move to stand next to Justice as Angelo and Zander help Chance get up from the couch.

"This is fucked, man," I whisper at our lead singer. "He needs rehab, not another fix."

"Don't need a lecture from you right now. You know we have no option but to play."

On the other side of the room, Angelo claps Chance on the back, shooting us a triumphant look. "See? He's fine. Now get your shit together. We've got a show to do."

I watch them stumble out into the corridor as my stomach churns with fear.

I take a deep breath and follow, praying that we make it through the night unscathed.  
But deep down, I know we're just postponing the inevitable crash.

And when it comes, it's going to be ugly as hell.

The stage plunges into darkness. and the roar of the crowd behind the wall of props is an ominous echo that demands attention.

When the lights flicker teasingly, I'm pacing restlessly in the corner, observing Di fussing over Chance.

He's somehow on his feet, looking all fidgety.

The paint somewhat covers the dark circles that ring his eyes, but his hands tremble as he reaches for a bottle of whiskey.

I turn away, unable to watch him poison himself further.

The chaos of the pre-show prep—techs rushing by, groupies with smeared lipstick and hungry eyes standing around, management screaming orders—all seems so familiar, yet tonight, it feels sinister.

Like we're wobbling on the brink of something terrible.

And it's not because we're running behind.

I'm rooted in place before the gear stand, my arms rigid at my sides. My tech is securing my bass guitar against me when, suddenly, a blazing flash of orange explodes in the crowd of guests gathered backstage.

Wendy.

"Hey, give me a sec." I clap my guy on the shoulder and push past the guests to get closer to her.

She smiles as soon as our eyes meet and then shifts uncomfortably, clutching the band pass I gave her with one hand and pulling at the short dress she's wearing with the other.

I'm beside her immediately, and I feel like I'm back in my awkward teenage years, likely blushing beneath the face paint. "You came," I say, my voice unintentionally turning it into more of a question.

"Yes," she replies, her eyes darting around briefly. "It's hectic back here."

"We're behind schedule," I tell her as I gently place my hand on her lower back and pull her slightly closer to let a stage crew member rush past.

I'm not trying to find ways to touch her. It's an honest attempt to keep her out of harm's way, but this sudden closeness amplifies all my senses.

I do my best to ignore the way her hair smells like vanilla or the soft warmth radiating off her skin.

Now isn't the time for distractions, but I can't help wanting to shield her from all of this—the drugs, the anarchy, the darkness that lurks beneath the glittering facade of rock stardom.

The darkness that has already consumed Chance.

My gaze travels over her, taking in the slightly smudged eyeliner, the bright lipstick,

the heavy boots, the leather choker.

She's trying so hard to fit in, and she's doing it really well, but something tells me she doesn't really want to.

The uncertainty in her eyes, the way she worries her bottom lip.

"You look beautiful," I say, my voice rough with unspoken emotion.

A flicker of surprise crosses her face, followed by a soft, genuine smile. "Thank you. To be honest, this dress is a size too small."

"Looks good on you."

"I'm glad."

I lean in and whisper in her ear, "But I'm sure you'd look good in anything."

For a moment, we just stand there, lost in our own little world.

But the spell is broken almost immediately by a drunk laugh coming from one of Justice's groupies stumbling past in a cloud of perfume and booze.

Reality comes crashing back, and I remember where we are. What I have to do.

"We're on in five!" Angelo shouts from somewhere off to the side.

The pre-show track blasting from the speakers is already playing, whipping the eager audience into a frenzy of excited shouts.

The lights flicker again a few times. I know that out there, in front of the stage,

people are getting glimpses of what they're about to witness.

I know some have seen us before and some are here for the first time, and it's my job to give these people what they want, to get them moving, to allow them to experience our music with every fiber in their body.

I squeeze Wendy's hand before letting it go. "Enjoy the show. I'll see you after, okay?"

She waves the pass in front of my face. "You sure they won't be kicking anyone out again like last night?"

"Not with this. Wanna come hang out with us when we're done?"

She hesitates for a heartbeat.

"I promise we're cool," I reassure her.

Finally, she nods. "Yeah. Okay."

"Awesome. Then I'll see you after the set."

With one last lingering look, I turn away, steeling myself for the ninety minutes that are about to follow.

"So that's where the pass disappeared to," Justice rumbles to my left as I start walking toward the stage entrance. Entitled asshole sounds a bit too cheeky. He even has the audacity to elbow me in my ribs. He must be high too. Sober, he's a grump.

"None of your business," I mutter, elbowing him back.



"If you plan on getting into her panties, you better hurry up and make a move. She could be gone tomorrow."

"Fuck off, like for real."

I block out his words. Wendy just doesn't seem like that kind of girl, like someone for a one-night stand.

My hand is resting on the body of my bass as I edge closer to the curtain, putting myself into the circle we usually form right before the set. An awkward group hug takes place.

Tonight is our last night performing here.

Justice is right. Most bands and their crews will be returning home or getting back on the road in the morning.

As for us, after a couple of days off, the endless hotel rooms and late-night partying will resume.

We just started this tour leg. And somehow, we'll have to suffer through the rest of it with Sonic Trash as our opening act.

What a fucking disaster.

But for now, we play. We play until our fingers bleed and our voices give out. We play because that's what The Deviant does. We entertain.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

All the hype about The Deviant is real, including the dumb rumors about them being an actual cult.

And every single person gathered in front of the stage is a devout believer.

They know every lyric or when a song will change its pace or when Justice Cross—the stupidly sexy lead singer with his devil-may-care grin—will croon and gasp seductively into the microphone.

They'll moan and jump with him. And it's hard to tell if he's pretending or having an actual orgasm.

It's this kind of alchemy that makes The Deviant concerts feel electric.

I've been to plenty of gigs—dragged by Jett to nearly every Sonic Trash spectacle imaginable. But compared to The Deviant? Sonic Trash lives up to its name, mere background noise. And yes, trash.

I have no idea why I never noticed it before.

Maybe all that nonsense Jett's been saying about a glorious future together blinded me, but now that I stand side stage, watching The Deviant's brooding bassist playing for a hundred thousand fans and being so cool about it, my eyes have finally been opened.

Jett and I don't have a future together.

You're drunk, bitch, a voice in the back of my mind whispers. It sounds a lot like my mother's—condescending, with that raspy edge from years of smoking.

It's all those cocktails you downed earlier talking.

I shake it off. I want to enjoy the show, enjoy it without Jett's obnoxious hugging and screaming.

Even though the sound here isn't the same as out there, the music still pulses through me like a second heartbeat.

On stage, The Deviant move in a darkly seductive dance, like otherworldly creatures in layers of gothic glamour. I sway on my feet, the vodka from earlier buzzing pleasantly in my head, softening the edges of my surroundings into a neon blur.

Some guy with a loopy smile hands me a drink.

"For me?" I mouth at him, hesitating. I know better than to take drinks from strangers. What if it's spiked?

The guys nods. "You look lonely, hon."

I open my mouth to object, but he shouts, "I promise I didn't roofie it."

I take it gingerly.

The girl next to me, who witnessed the interaction, leans in and says loudly into my ear as if to reassure me, "That's TJ. He throws cash around like confetti. Buys drinks for everyone. Solid dude."

When I glance back to where the guy just stood, he's already long gone. His

silhouette is somewhere further down the side stage, shaking hands with some heavily tattooed guys.

Fuck it.

I take a sip. The alcohol slides down my throat like a warm river.

For a moment, I lose myself in the primal energy of it all.

I'm allowed to have fun, and if you're at the festival The Deviant is headlining and have an opportunity to watch probably one of the biggest bands in the world right now, it would be dumb to forego it in favor of Jett's drunk, boring, and awfully suspicious company.

The band is three songs in when my phone lights up in my hand. Jett's name flashes insistently on the screen, and reality comes crashing back in fragmentary texts.

where r u?

babe?

come back

Wendy, srsly?

whr r u?

need to close this deal baby come help ur boi

guys want to hang with u

please

please my pretty pretty girl

I stare at the glowing screen, squinting to make out the words through the haze of intoxication. In my head, I can practically hear Jett's petulant voice.

this is for us

we gonna be rich

help me out

Mick got us our own bus come on over

I have this dreadful gut feeling. I didn't like that Jett ignored my pointing out that Mick got too handsy. I left for that reason alone—I ejected myself from the situation I wasn't comfortable in. But where did I go? To watch other men pretty much simulate sexual acts on stage.

Does that make me any better than Jett?

Probably no.

I hate this conflicting emotion in me, and I suppose the good, loyal Wendy wins.

With an exasperated sigh, I shove my phone back into my pocket and push my way through the crowd.

I stumble through the labyrinth of backstage, where roadies and techs run around, where the occasional VIP lounges against a wall, and where everyone's awash in

frenetic energy from the show. I feel unsteady, the floor seeming to shift beneath my feet as I walk.

I've had too much to drink, I realize.

Once I'm far enough from the pounding of the instruments to hear myself think, I fumble for my phone and dial Jett's number. I can't be bothered with roaming charges right now. If he closes the deal, I'll just ask him to cover my phone bill.

"Where are you?" Jett yells on the line. "Come on, Wendy. It's no fun without you."

"On my way back." Do I tell him I went to see The Deviant's set? No, probably not. He'll blow up.

"We got our own bus." Jett proceeds to explain where I need to go, and I do my best to memorize it.

Merch stands.

VIP lounge.

To the left of the Ferris wheel.

"You got it?" Jett asks when he's done screaming instructions.

"Yeah. I think so."

"Then get your perky ass in here. Everyone's waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Seriously, baby, just come back. I wanna get this vodka deal done tonight. It's for you."

I know better than to believe a word he's saying. Nothing has been done for me this entire weekend. But he's my boyfriend, and if he's asking for help, I'll do it. I'll go and smile prettily and pretend that I like the attention of his disgusting business partners.

I'm afraid to think beyond the idea of what may happen if I tell him no. I do live with him. He feeds me, clothes me, lets me do whatever I desire in his place.

It's an even trade-off.

That's how our relationship works.

When I finally locate the bus Jett mentioned, I have to grab onto the doorframe for balance before hauling myself up the steps.

Inside, I'm greeted by a typical scene of debauchery. Jett, Mick, and Clem are sprawled out on the couches, drinks in hand, a haze of smoke hovering in the air. There's a hookah in the middle of the table, which is littered with empty bottles and lines of coke.

They look up at my entrance, three predatory gazes zeroing in on me.

"There she is," Jett slurs, and a lazy grin spreads across his face. "My ride or die."

He reaches for me, pulling me down onto his lap before I can protest. His mouth finds mine, his kiss sloppy and aggressive. I taste vodka and cigarettes.

I try to pull back, but his grip only tightens as his hands roam possessively over my

body.

I don't mind him doing this when we're alone, but I don't know how I feel about the other two men being present in the room.

"Jett, come on, stop," I mutter, finally getting enough leverage to draw his face away from mine. "I don't think this is appropriate."

"What are you talking about, Wends?"

"There are people here?" I whisper at him over the noise of the background music.

"So what?" He blinks at me blankly, and I wonder if he hears what I'm saying at all.

"What do you mean so what?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mick rising from the couch across the room and moving to sit on ours. He slides closer, his hand creeping up my bare shoulder.

An unpleasant shiver runs down my spine.

"Jett," I mumble against his mouth as he kisses me again. I'm trying to squirm away, but all the drinks are hitting me hard now. It's like I'm on the outskirts of my own consciousness, sandwiched between the two of them, their touches growing bolder by the second.

Jett's lips brush my ear as he whispers, "You'll enjoy taking on three dicks. I want to fuck your ass, Mick'll take your pussy, and Clem'll fuck your mouth."

His words hit me like a bucket of ice water, and a chill of revulsion rushes through me. But it's like I'm observing it all from outside my own body, too drunk and



disoriented to mount a proper defense.

Their hands are all over me, tugging at my clothes. I make a feeble attempt at batting them away, but it's useless. In a matter of moments, they have me stripped down to my bra and panties, and

I find myself standing in front of the couch. Jett's face is swimming in my line of vision, fuzzy and distorted. Behind me, Mick presses himself against my back, and I can feel his erection.

My stomach churns.

His hands snake around and grab at my breasts. Jett drops to his knees and starts to lower the zipper on my left boot.

"No," Mick says. "Have her leave them on," he instructs.

I'm trembling now, acutely aware of my own vulnerability as I watch Jett ripping off his own shirt. When I look at his inked chest, I feel absolutely nothing. He doesn't turn me on like before. He disgusts me.

"I don't wanna do this," I say.

"We'll all make you feel good," he insists, his voice impatient. "You're gonna enjoy this."

"I don't wanna do this," I repeat.

"You'll love it," Mick says in my ear. "You'll love having all your tiny holes stuffed." His hands are still on my breasts, pawing. Asshole doesn't even know what to do with a woman's body.

It's then that a surge of clarity pierces the drunk fog in my brain. The full magnitude of what they're proposing hits me. Gang rape. That's what this is.

Panic rises in my throat, my heart slamming against my ribs. I can't do this. I won't! With a burst of adrenaline-fueled strength, I swipe Mick's hands away and lunge for my dress and Cruz's laminate on the floor.

"What the fuck, Wends?" Jett shrieks as I elbow him in the stomach.

"What the fuck, Jett?" I blurt out, taking a step back.

My eyes dart to Mick, who's observing us with cool indifference.

Clem is laughing while sipping on a beer. "Real feisty, that one," he comments.

"Relax, baby girl," Mick says, unbuttoning his shirt and taking a step in my direction.

I glance around the bus nervously while clutching the dress and the band pass. I have to go through Jett and Mick to get to the door.

"I'm leaving," I declare and start walking.

Jett puts himself in my path and grabs at my shoulders. "You're not. We're gonna have some fun."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"It won't be fun for me." My tongue feels heavy, and I don't sound like myself.

The part of me that's scared understands that I'm at a disadvantage here, and if they want to fuck me, they will, and there's not much I can do about it.

But my drunk mind always likes to make everything attainable, and my focus is on the door.

"It's not like you're a fucking virgin, Wends," Jett slurs.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shove at his chest with my fist to put some sort of distance between us. My head's spinning and I'm shaking.

It's the fear and the anger that's raging through me.

"You want that fucking vodka deal so bad? Huh, Jett? So bad you'd let those stupid jerks gang-rape me? "

"Whoa, whoa, honey, don't call things what they aren't," Clem's voice drifts lazily from the couch, thick with false calmness.

"We're all adults here," Jett adds, leaning in my direction. "Just having a good time."

"You." I stab my finger at him, but my heartbeat is fast and uneven, and it's hard to speak all of a sudden. "You're having a good time." I spin around toward Mick, who dares to inch closer. "And you! Don't you fucking dare touch me again."

The air is so taut with tension that even the leather couches seem to exhale unease.

Jim Morrison's gravelly hymn wafts from the hidden speakers, dancing against ears that are already too raw from shouting disputes.

Every surface feels sticky—a blend of old whiskey spills and unspoken threats lingering beneath fingertips.

And there's a pungent scent—cigarettes smoldering down to ghosts of themselves, mixed ominously with something sharper—sinister sweetness that's almost like betrayal distilled into aroma.

"I think you should chill, Wends," Jett speaks.

Mick, the old crank, nods toward the table, where a solitary white line of cocaine waits to be sniffed. "Why not take the edge off, darling? It'll feel better."

"Shut up!" I snap, needing a moment of silence to put my thoughts together. My eyes dart around the bus, measuring the narrow spaces on either side of Jett's frame. He's not a big guy. I can easily knock him down. A knee to his balls and I'm free.

"Don't be a difficult cunt, beautiful," Mick hisses. "Your boy here said you're cool."

"I told you to shut up!"

I need to get out of here. I can't breathe, and I won't be able to stand on two feet for much longer. I can feel the pull of gravity amplified by the effects of the alcohol.

Jett says something else, but I'm not listening anymore. I snatch a half-empty bottle of beer from the table and crack it against the edge. Glass shatters. Beer spills to the floor and onto my boots.

"The fuck, Wends!"

"Hey, there's no need for that," another voice says. I can't tell if it's Mick or his sidekick. My vision is swimming. They're all just blurred shapes now, sounding like robots.

I punch out the broken bottle into the empty space in front of me. "I'll fucking maim you if any of you motherfuckers tries anything."

I press the dress and the laminate to my chest and make a break for the door.

Sheer terror propels me forward, my breath coming in ragged gasps.

Jett's furious shouts chase after me as I burst out of the bus and sprint through the cool night air, wearing nothing but my bra, panties, and boots.

But I don't stop running. I can't. All I know is that I have to get as far away from that nightmare as I can.

I run without looking back for what seems like forever. I'm so afraid that if I pause to look back and see if Jett's following—even for a second—I'll get dragged back onto that bus.

My legs are burning from exertion and my pulse pounds in my ears, nearly drowning out all the other post-show sounds.

I'm dizzy, disoriented, and my mind's spiraling from too much alcohol and adrenaline.

Still, I don't stop running. Some primal instinct keeps my feet moving against the pavement and grass as I flee deeper into the labyrinth of trailers and equipment.

Everywhere I look, debris from the festival litters the ground—discarded cups, crumpled setlists, broken glow sticks trampled into the field.

Lights flicker and buzz, painting the night with chaotic hues.

But the crowds are dispersing, and the crew's working hard to clear the space and pack up the equipment.

It's like I've stumbled into some dystopian aftermath, a world after the party ends.

"Looking hot there, cutie." Someone in a group of guys I pass laughs. A whistle follows.

I round a corner and finally come to a stop near an empty media tent, my chest heaving.

It takes me a few moments to realize that it's actually pretty cold.

My skin prickles from the temperature drop, goosebumps rising on my arms and legs.

I'm suddenly acutely aware of my own state of undress as I stand there in nothing but my underwear.

With trembling hands, I pull my dress back over my head. The fabric feels insubstantial, but it's better than nothing. I zip it up with clumsy fingers, willing my rapid breaths to slow.

I glance around while attempting to get my bearings. I'm on some kind of access road behind the main stage, hemmed in by looming scaffolding and idle equipment trucks.

I start walking before someone spots me. I don't feel like talking to anyone. Fuck, I

can hardly get enough oxygen into my lungs.

I walk and walk and walk until I can make out a collection of buses parked further down the path.

One of them is clearly The Deviant's bus.

I know because the band's name is painted in huge shiny letters. It's impossible to miss. Even though I'm drunk.

It's like they want everyone to know who they are.

I start toward it on shaky legs, my progress slow and faltering. But with each step, my doubt grows as my stomach clenches with anxiety.

If you still think Jett is going to give you the future you want, you're one dumb bitch, Wendy Fields.

Run while you can.

So I do.

I run to where every drunk hormonal twenty-two-year-old girl runs when she finds out her man is a total shithead—into the arms of another man.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The bus is a mess of bodies and noise, with Angelo's voice tearing through the chaos being the loudest. "Get him some water!" He launches his hands skyward in red-faced frustration.

Chance is sitting on the floor, slumped against the wall, sweat soaking his hair and neck. With the remnants of makeup on his face, he looks like a ghost, and I can't shake the feeling that we're watching him disappear.

One of the girls—Justice's latest fling for the night—darts to the mini fridge and snags a bottle of water.

"Get that window open!" Angelo bangs a fist against the plastic table, the thud reverberating through the cramped space.

Chance's eyes roll back for a second, and I swear my heart stops with it.

"I think he needs a doctor, man," I supply.

"Fuck the doctor," Chance cackles from his spot. How he has the strength or mental capacity to be upset at the medical professionals right now—I have no clue. I can barely think straight after that set. And I'm stone-cold sober.

Justice lounges on the edge of the leather couch, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in his grip.

"Guess the party's not happening," he slurs, trying for a joke that doesn't land. Typical Justice, always the last to flinch. He's been hitting the bottle since the middle of the



set.

Took three shots on stage with the crowd.

I don't exactly approve, because when someone in the band is out of sync, we start sounding like shit, but I have to give the guy kudos. He can still belt out all the lyrics without missing a pitch. It's a skill only a lucky few have.

"Not in the mood to party tonight," Zanders mutters, rubbing at his temples as if to remove the makeup. It's long gone, though. We've all showered and changed. Chance is the only one who's still in his stage costume.

"We need to get him cleaned up," Sam whispers at Angelo, her eyes flicking between the commotion and her phone she's holding.

Zander shakes his head, a silent denial that screams louder than any words. "He'll be fine," he mumbles more to himself than anyone else.

Chance fumbles with the buckle of his belt, his fingers trembling too much to get a grip. Samantha leans over him. "Do we need to call someone?" she asks, her voice tight with worry.

No one tells her yes. We're all thinking it, though. Thinking it and too scared to say it.

The bus feels like it's shrinking, the walls closing in as we exchange pointed looks and nervous glances while Angelo continues to berate us for something we didn't do.

But that's just his personality. He's loud and brash because that's how he gets shit done.

You need a guy like that to handle guys like us.

Chance tries to sit up, and he manages to take a couple of steps before his body sags into the nearest couch. "I'm good," he mumbles, but no one believes him. Not even Chance, if he's being honest.

I lean against the far wall, watching it all unfold for a few minutes. Watching Chance disappear in slow motion.

Angelo yells, "Damn it, boy. Tell me what you want to do?"

"Buddy, look." Sam drops into a crouch in front of him. "We can get you help. But you need to tell me if you're up for it. Because if you're out of here today, you're not going back on the road until you pull yourself together."

There's a moment where everything stills, a breath caught in a shared lung.

Chance's head lolls to the side, and Justice lets out a low whistle. "That bad, huh?" he says, but his bravado is slipping too.

Angelo glares at him, then at the rest of us, like we're all complicit in this mess. Maybe we are. Maybe that's what hurts the most. Zander's phone buzzes and he clutches it as if it has all the answers we need to fix this situation.

Samantha brushes Chance's forehead. "He's burning up," she says, panic creeping into her voice.

I catch her eyes, then Angelo's, and then I stare at the floor.

Looking anywhere but at Chance, because I can't stand to see him like this.

Angelo kicks the table again and lets out a frustrated scream.

"Get a damn fan in here!" he shouts, but unlike earlier, no one moves.

No one knows how to fix this. "And get all of these people out!" He gestures at the girls clustered in the corner. They look wide-eyed, tipsy, and misplaced. They were supposed to party with us, but it's clear that Justice's prediction was correct.

The mood is dreadful.

Samantha's shaking hand clutching her phone is the last thing I see before I close my eyes to block it all out.

I'm trying to pretend this isn't happening. But it is. It's happening, and it's tearing us apart.

"Out!" Angelo orders, and I hear the shuffle of boots and the click of high heels as all the unnecessary guests move in the direction of the exit.

A heavy knock reverberates off the bus's door. We all freeze, caught mid-action, mid-panic.

I open my eyes and look toward the sound.

Chance's ragged breathing fills the pause, a grim reminder of what's at stake.

Angelo barks for quiet, his irritation flaring like a struck match. "Who the hell is it?" he growls, marching to the door with heavy, impatient steps. He passes the girls he's trying to kick out stuck in the middle of the bus. "The band isn't taking any visitors."

The rest of us hold our breath, suspended in a moment that stretches too long yet not long enough.

The door creaks open, and a roadie pops his head in. His voice is low, but I can still make out his words. "Someone's looking for Cruz."

"Can't you see we're busy?" Angelo shouts at the poor guy.

"She won't leave."

My mind snaps awake.

She.

Angelo glances at his watch. "Who the hell could be looking for him at this hour?"

The roadie shrugs. "I don't know her. She's got orange hair."

All eyes turn to me, questioning silently.

I straighten slowly, feeling the weight of their stares. The panic, the unspoken fear—it's all hanging in the air, and I'm not supposed to walk away from it. But I chose to anyway.

"Umm... I'll step out for a bit," I mutter as I grab my jacket.

Angelo's glare could cut steel. "Now? Are you fucking kidding me?" His words are a challenge, daring me to leave, to abandon them.

"You don't need my help. You know what to do. You just don't want to because it'll affect the tour."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Our manager's face is redder than it was a minute ago. But somehow, I don't care about his state of mind.

"I'll be back," I say.

Justice raises an eyebrow, a lazy smirk playing on his lips. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he calls after me, but there's a note of spite beneath the machismo.

Zander looks up from his phone. "Cruz, man," he starts, but I cut him off with a shake of my head. "Take care of him." And I know I'm shifting a burden onto their shoulders.

Samantha watches me with an impassive expression. Chance manages a weak smile, a silent "go" that twists something deep inside me. Angelo doesn't say another word, just gives me a look that promises retribution. I nod to him, a quick jerk of my chin, then step out into the night.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I don't know why I'm here.

I can't figure out the logic behind my coming over to The Deviant's bus.

Alcohol, I tell myself in the privacy of my mind as the cold wind scrapes my skin. But as soon as Cruz steps out of the bus, the truth becomes strikingly clear.

I wanted to see him.

I wanted to be in his presence, wanted to feel that solid warmth of his. That reassurance.

And for a moment, I just stand there, staring at him, into those eyes as dark as midnight.

"Wendy," he says. There's a whole sentence in that single word. He slips out of the shadows, almost like a dream. He's a wall of damp black hair and tattoos. His jacket is slung casually over one shoulder, and I forget to shiver.

"You look cold. And drunk," he says, moving to stand in front of me.

I don't answer. I just pull him into focus, closer, and keep him there. Past his shoulder, I see his band's lineup of buses and trailers. It looks like the spine of some broken monster.

Cruz gives me a soft smile and carefully places his jacket on my shoulders. I'm drowning in leather that smells like him. Like music.

"I was looking for you," he says. "After the set."

"Left halfway through," I reply. "Jett was blowing up my phone."

"What are you doing here so late?" His voice hangs in the air, and I let it. I have to stretch out the moment, to catch up.

"Jett's drunk again," I finally supply. "Didn't know where else to go." I hold my breath so that my answer sounds steady.

He raises an eyebrow. "I told you... You can always come here."

"I know." I feel stupid all of a sudden. Stupid and pathetic.

"Come on." He reaches out to grab my hand, and when his skin brushes mine, it's all spine-tingling heat. I can feel the thunder in it, distant but getting closer.

I glance away. Don't tell him how badly I want that storm.

"You're shaking," he whispers. "We should get you something warm."

"Didn't know you cared," I toss back, bright and sharp like sparks from a fire. He says nothing, but the way he looks at me—I almost start believing him.

"You hungry?" he asks.

"Maybe a little." My voice sounds distant.

Cruz adjusts his grip, intertwining his fingers with mine, and I feel almost weightless, swept along by his quick and steady pace as he leads us toward the last bus in the line of The Deviant tour convoy.

"I'm not offering you much," he says as we walk. "I don't know what they have left." He motions at the vehicle ahead and we stop. Here, the fairground lights hardly reach, like even they're too afraid to look.

"I'll take it," I say, barely knowing what I mean. Only knowing I mean him.

The heavy curtain of his hair lifts in the wind slightly. "Then keep watch," he instructs as he yanks the door open. "Tell me if someone's coming."

I nod, shivering less, grinning more. "Who are we stealing from?"

"Our crew." Cruz moves inside the bus, half dissolving into shadows and steel. I follow him onto the step and look around.

One of the guys on a top bunk turns over but doesn't wake up as Cruz moves toward the kitchen area.

I keep watch, my eyes sharp as he bends to the fridge and grabs a few things.

Two beers. Some sandwiches. From the shelf above the fridge, he grabs a soda.

I trace the curve of his inked arms with my gaze, let my mind fill in the rest.

He throws a smirk over his shoulder and slips the sandwiches in the microwave. We get out quick, faster than we got in.

"Guy on the top bunk didn't wake up," I say. I'm short of breath but laughing.

Cruz hands me the soda, cool and stinging in my grip. "Old Mark." He lets out a chuckle. "Dude's been touring all his life. If he's tired, he'll sleep through an earthquake."



"You think they'll notice stuff is gone?"

"Nah."

We round the bus and walk some more until we get to the band's collection of trailers. There, Cruz grabs an abandoned folding chair, secures it into the ground, and then sits me down.

"Now eat." He pops my soda open for me.

I draw a deep breath and take a small sip. It's room temperature and I'm glad. Then I remove the wrapper from the sandwich and bite into it. It's something with pesto and tomatoes and mozzarella cheese, and it tastes divine. But more importantly, it's warm.

"Good?" Cruz asks, munching on his own food.

My mouth is full, so I nod my approval and take another huge bite, wanting to fall into the night's open arms and disappear. That way, I don't have to face tomorrow. Face Jett.

"You need that many vehicles to haul all your gear and props around?" I ask, motioning at the buses and trailers looming around us.

"You saw our stage setup," Cruz replies, watching me and sipping his beer. The edge of his mouth curves upward. "Sorry, I'm not offering you beer, because you look like you already had one too many."

"Yeah. I did." I lift what's left of my sandwich in the air. "But this is helping me to sober up."

"I'm glad."

We eat and drink in silence for a while, just exchanging glances and taking our time to chew.

Finally, he says, "Why can't you walk away from Jett?"

"Ummm... It's not that easy."

"Just pack and go."

"Well, truth be told, I'm a little stuck," I say, the words prickling my throat, cold and hard. I swallow them down, chase them with a gulp of soda.

"Stuck?" Cruz echoes, letting it stretch like an old, painful scar.

"When we met, I was in a bad place," I explain. And I typically don't talk about it to anyone, but I suppose the alcohol is making it easier tonight. Besides, after tomorrow, we'll go our separate ways.

So I feel like sharing won't really hurt me or my pride.

"I didn't have anywhere to live. I stayed with some friends while trying to get into a beauty school and working two jobs.

Things happened pretty fast between us, and he asked me to move in. Said I didn't need to work so much."

"So he's supporting you?"

"Not exactly. He doesn't give me money, if that's what you're asking.

But I was able to quit one of my jobs to concentrate more on school and looking for clients.

And I don't need to pay rent. If I leave him right now, I don't know how I'll make it work.

And I'm not going back to living with my mother.

"I'm not sure if I want him to hear this, but his dark eyes are steady and understanding and soaking it all in.

Cruz leans back against the trailer and holds my gaze for the longest time. "Is that the only reason? Money?" he asks gently.

His voice stays with me, smooth and low, even as his body pulls away an inch.

"What do you know about it?" I try to tease, but my mouth has too much truth in it. And too much sandwich.

"I know a little. Don't forget I was born poor too. I've got what? Five, maybe seven years on you? You'll be fine on your own. Get a room somewhere clean and quiet. Don't let him treat you like shit. It's not worth it."

"How do you know if he treated me like shit tonight?"

"Seeing that you showed up drunk and shaking, I just do. I'm not going to ask. It's your business. But he doesn't deserve you. Just my two cents."

"I'll have to give up school if I have to pay rent. And how many guys would want me if I wasn't someone? I want to marry and have a family sometimes in the future. I don't want to be just an arm piece. I want to be independent. I want to bring

something to the table too. School's my ticket out."

"There are definitely more than one guy who'd want you," Cruz replies. "But don't forget, I'm the first one in that long line of potential husbands." He grins, turning it into a joke.

I laugh. "Suuuuuure."

"I'm very serious. Whenever you're ready to settle down with a normal dude, I'm at your service."

I laugh again, then take another bite of my sandwich because my cheeks heat up and I need to occupy myself with something. "You really think that being a rockstar and all, you'll get married and have kids and just tour in between family gatherings?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Just sounds insane."

"Nothing insane about it. I want a big family. At least three kids."

"Three kids?" I say, watching his face for something to give away.

Cruz gives nothing, but I can feel him anyway.

He smiles like he already knows. "Who would be stupid enough to give you three kids?"

Have you seen your band? You guys literally twist everyone's brains by talking about sex in a confessional. "

"Hey, I don't write the lyrics." He raises both hands in the air defensively. "I just play bass."

"You're still complicit."

"Does that turn you off?"

"On the contrary. It's sexy." I tilt my head and watch the sky unfold like a map of stars, uneasy and easy at the same time.

"But you get it, right? It's all a metaphor? The songs. The lyrics."

"Yes."

"So then what's wrong with three kids?"

"Nothing... I think when I'm ready to have kids, I'll just settle for one. If I fuck up, at least it's one and not three."

We both smile at this like it's just another joke. But in every joke, there's always some truth.

"Hey, Wendy." His voice drops to its lower register, like he's about to whisper some secret. "I meant what I said. If you have nowhere to sleep tonight, my bunk is available. No strings."

"No strings, huh?" I say, my pulse in my throat. The way he looks at me, like I'm the sun.

He nods. "No strings."

Pause. Because I have nothing to say to that.

"One of these days," Cruz adds, his words so harsh, they could bruise me, "Jett will do something he can't take back, something you won't be able to erase from your memory.

" He throws his empty beer can at the trash container nearby.

It misses. "You won't be able to run away from it.

" His eyes hold mine until the ground tilts beneath me, until my pulse stutters. "I just hope you're safe is all."

I want to breathe him in forever, to catch his words and keep them. "Maybe I need a few strings," I blurt out. Could be just my reckless girl brain or this sick need to attach myself to a man because I can't be alone. I have no explanation.

I give it one second, two. Then I'm on my feet, breathless, crazed, pulling him down by the T-shirt. I press my lips to his, wanting a taste, wanting to know what it's like to kiss a man who respects me, to kiss a man who's unattainable to most women.

It's a slow burn at first, but it catches fast. My heart is fire and fury, brazen and wild, desiring more than it should. His surprise is sweetness. His arms are gravity, heavy and hard as they wrap around me. I'm flying, scarlet against the black. Then I'm falling, and it's breaking me wide open.

I push away before I break for good.

He reaches out a hesitant hand.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," I murmur, spinning around.

I don't look back. I start running, holding his jacket to my chest so I don't lose it, so I don't lose the scent and the warmth he's given me tonight.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I'm not sure what time I wake up the next day.

All the windows are shut, and the dim bus is empty and quiet.

I stare at the bunk above me for a long stretch of time, trying to piece together last night's events.

The set itself. The crowd. Chance high and making mistakes on almost every solo—fans will trash-talk him for weeks after this disaster.

Justice being moody and inadequate for no reason, except maybe because of Chance's fuckups.

Zander in complete denial. Angelo always yelling.

Amidst this jumble of unpleasant memories, there's just one I want to remember—Wendy kissing me.

Wendy as in Jett's girlfriend.

The idea of that fucktard somehow being in the picture riles me up.

The longer I lie here, the louder it is, my thoughts drumming like the crowd's pre-show noise.

Is she safe?



Where did she go when she ran off?

It's hard to let it go. I throw off the blanket and roll to the side, then get to my feet. I try to shake off the obsession before it sinks any deeper. Unfortunately, it's too late. It already has its claws in me.

I clean up, put on a fresh change of clothes, and step outside. The day is gray; the light is thin, hardly reaching from beyond the clouds.

Chance is leaning against the bus, a cigarette stuck on between his lips, his eyes rimmed with exhaustion.

"Hey," I say as I take a couple of steps in his direction.

He coughs and shrugs, flicks an ash off his sleeve. "Hey, lover boy. Sleep well?"

"Not really." I was too tired when I got back to the bus last night. "You?"

Chance looks up to the sky and takes a long drag. "Like a fucking baby, man."

"No shit. You were halfway dead." I shake my head.

"Yeah. Definitely was a mess yesterday," he mutters, and it's almost a laugh. I want to tell him to maybe reassess his health, see a goddamned doctor. But motherfucker is stubborn. He won't listen to me.

"Justice and Zander still alive?" I say instead.

"Out. Went to town. Bar hopping."

That explains why the bus was empty when I woke up. "This early?"

He shrugs, pulls on the cigarette again, and the tip glows for a second like it might last forever, then dies. "What's your excuse for being here, man?" He smirks through the smoke. "I thought you were right behind them."

"Wasn't really feeling it."

I want to ask if he's seen Wendy. I want to, but I can't. Give our guitarist more reason to make fun of me? No, thank you.

So I stand there and watch him, his focus shifting and scattered like the ashes at his feet.

"Got sidetracked?" he asks, blowing tiny clouds of smoke into the cool air.

"Something like that."

"Or someone?" Chance jabs, teasing, but not all wrong. "Zander swears he saw you with some little fox right before you vanished. Said she was cute. And orange."

The taste of Wendy's lips burns through me like it's too fresh, too close. "I guess," I say, a complete understatement.

Chance just grins. The grin that works for the fans.

Cornflower-blue eyes are bright in his worn-out face.

I envy him a little, how he does that, the act—or maybe it's not an act.

It's just that nothing ever seems to get to him.

He tears his soul open to write music, then goes onstage like it's not a big deal.

Like it's his goal in life—to give pieces of himself to his fans.

We fall into the kind of silence where you can almost hear all the things we won't say. "Damn, this gig's nuts," Chance finally mutters, running a hand through his messy hair.

"Tell me about it. We've fucked up more times in two days than in our entire career."

"You hear those Sonic dudes talking trash? They think they're punk, but they're all talk, man."

"Sonic Trash?" I ask, though I know exactly who he means. Probably Jett fucking Vice.

"Yeah. The only decent thing about that band is your little friend," he goes on. "You trying to stir up shit with their drummer?"

"Not really. Besides, I'm way out of his league."

"String bean can punch, I hear."

"He can try."

Chance jerks his chin toward the festival grounds stretching out in front of us.

And we're kids, really. That's what the fans don't see, how it's all games and fake seriousness and going through the motions until it isn't anymore.

But now, this time, it feels real and unshakeable, this thing that's got its hold on me and won't let go. This thing about the girl.

"So what's your plan?" He needles me again.

I tell him I don't have one. "I'll figure it out."

He cocks an eyebrow and pushes away from the bus. "Give Zander and Justice a shout for me when you see them," he says. "I got some stuff to do." He winks, and although his voice was light, his face is drained.

"Right."

I start to leave, then turn back, and this time, I'm as serious as I can fake. "Watch yourself," I say. "We need you."

Chance grins, big and loose, knowing, like he always knows everything. "I bet you do, you three talentless fuckers."

Of course he doesn't mean it. If anything, all of us are pretty damn good at what we do.

I pass lines of parked buses, techs pushing flight cases and breaking down the massive beast of last night's show, before I get there. Sonic Trash. Worn stickers peeling from their road cases, ink-scarred bodies, and big egos scattered among the gear.

I should keep walking. Let it go. But Ramses is right in front of me, coiling cables like a prizefighter, his eyes sharp and quiet.

"You heading out today?" I ask him, and it feels like the wrong question.

"Yeah," Ramses says, unbothered. "This evening."

Usually, we wrap up a tour with the opening acts, but this summer has been a complete disaster.

Management booked us for nearly every venue in Europe, with a few standalone shows in Monaco.

But they only wanted us, not the other acts.

Sonic Trash didn't quite match the vibe, and after this weekend, I can't help but feel a bit pleased about it.

I believe the Germans even have a word for it—the joy you feel from others' misfortune.

"What?" Ramses stops what he's doing. "Gonna miss me?" A roll of cable in his hand, he cracks a smile. "We'll be reuniting in a week anyway. After your private gigs."

"You wish." Then I can't help it. I ask, "You seen Wendy?"

Ramses' face does nothing. He gestures at one of the buses.

"Slept with the crew again," he says with a pause that seems full of more than just the words. He looks at me like he's sizing me up. I know he is. He can't be loyal to both me and Jett.

He's gonna have to choose sides one of these days if things go sideways.

"They were fighting last night again," he adds. "Saw them outside. Fucking loud."

"She leaving with you guys?"

"Don't think so. I'm flying solo anyway.

Jett has some business in town. Heard he was going to stick around.

Something about a sponsorship. Dude's always plotting world domination.

" Ramses sets down a massive snarl of cable, turns, and continues working, shoving the next coil into a trunk like he means it.

I wonder what kind of business a dumb fuck like Jett Vice could have in Germany. I think of Wendy, of last night, and get an almost sick feeling that it's too late.

But I'm asking anyway, "You know what they were arguing about?"

"Same old shit." Ramses makes a sound in his throat. "I mean, he's my homie and we've been doing this thing for so long, but dude ain't relationship material. And Wendy is too nice a girl to leave him."

There's an awkward silence, the two of us standing there all the cables and questions tangled around us. Then Ramses shakes his head, laughs, shrugs like it doesn't matter. This whole scene. This whole life. I almost laugh with him. But I don't.

I start to leave, and Ramses supplies, "Don't look so surprised."

I don't know if he means what he's saying—or what he's not saying—and I think he likes it that way. Mysterious.

"I'll try not to."

"Later."

My frustration turns into something like relief as I pick up my pace. Knowing they slept in separate beds makes it a little less stressful. My booted feet carry me down the line of buses, trailers, all the places she could be until I get to the destination.

I halt in front of the door and wait, listening.

I could come off like a stalker. That's a real possibility.

But she did kiss me last night. She initiated it. So now I have all these questions.

Why?

How?

Does she remember it?

Was it some sort of revenge against Jett?

And unless I talk to her, these thoughts will continue to plague my brain.

It takes me a few minutes to work up the nerve.

I don't know if she's alone. Or if she wants to see me.

She did run away yesterday.

Perhaps she realized her mistake.

Maybe I need a few strings.

Nope, that didn't sound like a mistake.

I take a deep breath and knock.

Light footsteps sound from inside the bus. The door swings open. It's Wendy. Orange hair messy and beautiful, eyes as wide and unsure as I feel. Her body is framed by the darkness behind her, her face surprised and maybe relieved. I hope relieved. I really do.

"Hey, good morning," I mumble out.

"Morning," she replies.

It's a bit awkward at first. Men in their late twenties shouldn't feel like teenage boys, but she just has that effect on me. I think the last time I was actually this aware of myself in front of a girl was in high school when Carmen Flores, who lived a couple of houses down, asked me to prom.

I have that same strange sensation in my stomach now that I did then. Like I'm suspended in outer space with no gravity demanding my presence anywhere earthly.

"You got a minute?" I ask, trying to sound casual but failing, trying to sound like nothing's riding on her answer.

She pauses, just long enough to hurt, and I think of all the reasons she might say no and the one reason she might say yes. She looks over her shoulder as if she's expecting someone else. "Sure," she replies.

"So..." I start, then pause, the word hanging in the air like an echo of an aborted chord. I have to force the rest out. "Want to hang out? May be go for a drive? We're here until tomorrow. It's my day off."

She holds my gaze, and it's all I can do to keep breathing. It's all I can do to keep



standing.

"Day off?"

"Yep," I tell her. "Day off." I want to move closer, but I don't. I want to say more, but I can't.

Wendy doesn't move or say anything either.

She keeps looking at me, all orange and doubt and a little bit of something else. Finally, she breaks the silence. "Okay."

I can breathe again, and maybe she can too.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

Outside, the sky looms gray and metallic, squeezing light into dull shapes. It smells like damp grass and concrete, and the scent clings to my thin shirt as sleep clings to my brain.

I still don't know where that "okay" came from.

Cruz Velez is way out of my league. I don't normally aim big.

At least, not on my own. The plan was always to do it with Jett, but the last twenty-four hours of being his girlfriend only solidified my decision to leave him.

I knew it deep in my gut last night when he was pretty much ready to exchange me for an investment in his vodka brand.

And now that I stand face to face with the man who actually seems to give a shit, I'm not feeling guilty anymore for being a shit ride or die. Because I was never one to begin with.

The memory punches to the forefront of my mind—Jett looking back over his shoulder after we had that nasty fight outside the crew bus yesterday, then strutting away drunkenly.

Nothing I hadn't seen before. That look.

The same cocky smile on the face of some skinny blonde groupie who thinks she won the lottery.

Good luck, ho. The prize is rotten.

I can't remember if he said it was over or just that I was fucking crazy.

I wasn't exactly in my right mind and was still reeling after that kiss.

In any case, we were both drunk, and I won't be surprised if the asshole comes back with a dozen roses later today, asking for forgiveness. That's his thing.

Some things shouldn't be forgiven, though.

"Cool," Cruz says softly, his intense gaze never leaving mine.

"I have to brush my teeth and change," I add. "I have your jacket too. Remember?"

"Yeah." He nods. "So I'll find out about a rental, then. Thirty minutes?"

"Should be enough."

"I'll come back."

"I'll just meet you at the parking lot." I don't want anyone from Sonic Trash to see me leaving with Cruz.

Who knows how Jett would react. I really don't want another scene.

It's a small circle of people, smaller than some would think.

Gossip spreads. Being crowned as a drama queen isn't what I need right now.

Five minutes later, when I'm back inside, my suitcase is already open on the floor.

I grabbed it from the band's bus yesterday after Jett left with that skank.

I fish through the clothes I packed, wondering if this is stupid, if I should just wait until the end of the tour before I actually allow myself a bit of freedom, before I tell Jett I'm done with his bullshit.

It's another four weeks, though. I'm not certain I can wait that long to break up. On the other hand, waiting would give me more time to figure out my living situation.

It's not as easy as it seems in a city like LA. Rent is expensive. So is beauty school.

All this is going through my head as I strip the shirt off my back and pull on my fishnets and a long black tee that I secure around my waist with a worn leather belt. Boots next. My fingers touch the scissors and flowers on my arm as I stare into the mirror. I think I look hot.

Then I breathe out slowly and try not to remember the hurtful things Jett said, try to let it roll off my skin the way he does. It all floods back anyway. His face and then his back. His rage and then that other thing, the thing I hate more than the anger. The disregard.

I'm angry again. Furious even. To the point I'm shaking.

It wasn't the first time. Won't be the last, just not with me. "Get out. Just go, then," I tell my reflection in the mirror, taking my makeup out of the bag. I work my lips back to cherry red. Scrub the black liner around my eyes until they look like they belong to me again.

When I'm done, I sit on the empty bunk and touch my hand to my cheek, let my breath slow and the morning quiet sink back into me.

I'm going to have one good day before I get on the flight back to LA.

I deserve it.

As agreed, Cruz is waiting for me by the artists' parking lot entrance. He's leaning against a flashy red BMW, all smiles, and is wearing a black baseball cap, something I've never seen him do.

"Is that your disguise?" I point at the cap, then hand him his jacket.

He takes it and puts it on. "What? You don't think it works?" He pulls the visor down, and his eyes almost disappear underneath it.

"The hair is a dead giveaway." He's got the most gorgeous hair I've ever seen on a man. Long, silky, and taken care of, and it streams down his back like a shimmery curtain of midnight. And no, that's not an exaggeration. I work with hair. I know.

We drive with the heat on, our bodies close while the rain patters softly on the windows.

The inside of the car smells like old leather and something sweet, and it's holding us like a huge hug.

My finger finds a loose thread in my fishnets and works it, pulling at it with a casual hand, not caring what unravels.

"Nice rental," I comment.

Cruz steps on the gas and shifts gears. The car jerks forward. "We got lucky."

"So you're the kind of guy who likes driving fast?"

"Not always. Just when the situation allows."

"Where are we going?"

"Well, I thought we'd grab some breakfast first. There's a lake nearby. We can hit that later."

"In this weather?"

"What's wrong with it?" He glances at me very briefly, and I catch a flash of a smile from the corner of my eye. I find myself smiling too, like he's infected me with his happiness over something so basic as seeing a body of water.

"You know what?" I say. "You're right. Nothing wrong with it. It's just a little bit of rain."

He reaches out for the radio and turns up the volume. Some German tune crackles through the speakers.

"The only German band I know is Rammstein," I admit.

"What about Tokyo Hotel or Scorpions?"

"Oh yeah. I don't know how I forgot about them."

"If you want something a bit more hardcore, Kreator or Destruction. We'd always spin that shit in the backyard on a Saturday night. Sneak some beers from our parents. Or weed."

"Ha, we did that too. Different music."

"You know Milli Vanilli was also from Munich."

"Ohmigod, I forgot about those guys. What a disaster."

"Yeah, that was a total bust. You remember the scandal? You were like what? One?"

I laugh. "Two." I clear my throat. "I obviously don't remember anything in real time."

I found out later. Saw a documentary on MTV.

I think I was twelve or thirteen. It was so disappointing because my mom loved 'Girl You Know It's True.' But I suppose the key takeaway after watching the documentary is not to lip-sync. People will find out sooner or later."

"Why are you looking at me?" Cruz frowns playfully. "I just play bass. You saw our show. We're fully authentic."

"Authentic, haha. You're totally out there."

"That's right. The best damn live band in the world today."

"Arrogant much?"

"That's not arrogance," he counters with a smirk. "That's a fact. Just read any music magazine or ask the critics."

We continue to spar words for a few more minutes until we take an exit and head toward what appears to be a diner.

It looks like a windmill-style house made of dark-red brick.

It's weathered, and the windmill is spinning slowly.

Cruz points at it as he pulls into the parking lot.

It's full of potholes and he takes a moment to maneuver the car into a less bumpy spot.

"Sorry, I don't have an umbrella." He kills the engine.

"I'm sure we'll be fine."

"For you. Not for me."

"Just because I'm short doesn't mean I'm weak." I push the car door open and rush over to the building, water splashing underneath my boots and across my ankles.

"Wait up!" Cruz shouts, then falls into step behind me.

No one pays attention to us as we walk inside. The woman behind the counter gestures for us to sit anywhere we'd like.

I flick back the hood of my sweatshirt as I slide into the booth in the corner. The old vinyl feels cool against my legs.

Cruz's hair is a wet mess under his cap, dripping into his eyes as he looks at me. Then he glances at the menu, shakes his head, and gives me a small, easy smile.

"Hope you like sauerkraut."

"Only if you're buying," I say.



The place smells like pancakes, sausage, and cold cuts, and I realize I'm super hungry.

The waitress comes over and speaks in broken English to take our order. Cruz asks for coffee, and she brings a pot almost immediately.

He picks it up, pours, and sets the cup in front of me while I wipe the rain off my face.

"They got good coffee here," I say after taking a couple of sips.

He grins. "You thought they'd have shitty instant?"

"You never know," I say.

"Food in Europe is way better than back home."

"Yeah?"

"You'll see."

A couple of minutes later, the cook shouts something in German in the background, and it sounds like it could be our order. Cruz looks at me, serious, then amused. I watch his dark eyes, wondering what's really there, what he wants.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry as hell," he says as he pats his stomach.

"Same."

"Nice."

The waitress brings our plates, and we fall into comfortable silence while we poke at our food with forks and dig in.

The place feels like home in a weird way.

I wonder if this feeling has anything to do with the fact that he's here, sitting a couple of feet away from me, his knee almost touching mine under the table.

The space between us is still big enough, but it's getting smaller every second.

"This is pretty damn good," Cruz mutters around a mouthful of eggs, bobbing his head in approval.

I wait a couple of moments, savoring the taste of warm cheese and deli meat on my sandwich. "Why are you spending time with me, anyway?" I ask eventually.

He doesn't pause, just gives me a long, serious look. "Cuz I like you."

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

I feel my cheeks burn red, the space between us suddenly too small, with nowhere left to shrink.

I want to disappear. Not because of what he said, but because of how my body and mind react to his words.

My pulse is suddenly beating too fast, a nervous staccato just beneath my skin, like there's a butterfly stuck there, trying to flutter its way out to freedom.

He looks at me with a knowing smile. "Why are you spending time with me?"

"Well, for starters, you're way more fun than Jett," I blurt out before biting into my sandwich.

"I better fucking be." He lets out a low chuckle.

"You are."

My confession hangs between us.

Then out of the blue, he asks, "How long are you going to pretend?"

"Pretend what?"

"That he's your boyfriend." Pause. "You know he's a manipulative, narcissistic dick."

I shrug. "Not for long. Just till we get back to LA." I hold his gaze. "You're buying,

right?"

He nods. "I invited you. Of course."

We finish our food in relative silence while exchanging random jokes and staring out the window at the rain pelting the trees and the cars in the parking lot.

It seems that even the sky is crying because my relationship with Jett is about to come to an end.

I'm stressed that I won't have anywhere to go once I get back to LA, but I don't regret my decision.

Don't regret that I'm leaving him behind.

It's time.

After we finish our breakfast and Cruz pays the bill like he promised, we dash for the car. The rain hasn't slowed, and the sky is the color of the eyeliner I'd use for a smokey effect, and somehow it feels comfortable, even without the sun.

"I'm so full," I confess when we're in the car wiping the water from our faces and arms.

"It was a good breakfast," Cruz supplies, starting the car.

"You're sure going to the lake is okay?"

"You said it yourself earlier. A bit of rain shouldn't stop us."

"Yeah. I did say that."

I feel a little breathless, and I'm not sure if it's from running across the parking lot or because of his proximity.

He peels out of the lot while fumbling with a piece of paper he's retrieved from the pocket of his leather jacket.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I drew up some directions," he explains.

"Oh. I can help."

He hands me the paper, and I look at it for a moment, trying to decipher his chicken scratch. "You're in the wrong field," I tell him.

"Why do you say that?"

"You have a doctor's handwriting. Hard to read. It's worse than Russian cursive."

"Really?" He laughs. "How do you know?"

"It's LA. Of course I have Russian friends, duh."

"Okay, if you say so."

"I do."

We again fall into silence for the next minute or two, and it doesn't feel awkward anymore.

It feels more as if we've known each other all our lives.

We can talk about anything—Russian cursive, the Milli Vanilli fiasco, what it's like to grow up poor.

I don't think Jett's ever talked to me about random stuff.

Mostly, I just hear how great our future will be once he's filthy rich and worldwide famous.

"I think we need to get off the highway soon," Cruz says. "Can you check what I noted there?" He gestures at the paper I'm still trying to decode.

"Looks like we're taking the next exit." I don't know how to pronounce it, so I just butcher the name of the street. "Münchner, I guess."

Cruz follows my instructions and takes the next right. The car flies down the ramp and then we're on a street, driving past an assemblage of restaurants, hotels, and bars.

The lake isn't far from here, and moments later, it shimmers on my right, all glossy and pearl-gray, with the raindrops turning the surface into something alive, something beautiful.

We follow the road for a little longer until we start leaving busy civilization behind.

Now, it's mostly parks and the occasional beach with small hotels nestled at the edge of the water.

It's pretty—lush green and cozy feeling.

Nothing like the dry, windy winters of my childhood home back in SoCal's desert.

Somehow, I'm glad I'm experiencing all this with him and not someone else.

"You want to stop somewhere for a bit?" Cruz asks.

"Sure."

"Cool. Let's see if we can find a good spot."

"He drives some more until we hit another park filled with trees and underbrush. We turn onto a narrow road and keep going until we end up in a small parking lot surrounded by spruce and pine. It's remote and quiet, but we still have a nice view of the lake from the car."

"How about here?" Cruz looks at me, putting the gear into Neutral.

"It's great."

We sit in relative silence for the next few minutes with music from an English rock station playing in the background.

Water clings to the windows like little crystals, casting dim, tiny shadows as the rain continues to fall. The engine purrs softly, a pleasant hum that matches the pulse in my neck.

"Why did you kiss—" Cruz starts.

"I'm sorry about last night," I talk over him.

"What?"

"I'm sorry I kissed you," I whisper. "I was drunk."

"Are you really sorry?"

"How do you mean?"

He turns his entire upper body toward me, his eyes dark and smoldering. "Are you really sorry?"

"Umm..."

He drives his point home then. "Because I'm not."

I just sit there, frozen and speechless, unsure of what to do next. Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm not sorry at all. Deep down, I liked it. I remember that he felt nice, probably the nicest anything's felt this entire weekend.

"You can kiss me anytime, Wendy." The way my name rolls off his tongue is so seductive. It's not a sexy name, but when it comes from his mouth, it sounds like it is.

"I don't know if this is appropriate," I whisper. It's in total contradiction to what I'm thinking.

Bad Wendy.

But he's just too darn delicious not to try. Besides, nothing is holding me back anymore. I've made up my mind. I'm not going to repeat my mother's mistakes by hanging on to a shitty man like Jett who doesn't value a woman. I'd rather make my own mistakes. And by mistakes, I mean Cruz Velez.

The silence has stretched thin and long, I realize, when he reaches out to brush a strand of hair from my eyes to behind my ear. He leaves his hand there, his warm palm resting on my cheek.

I watch his chest rise and fall under his shirt. I know what I want. I want him. Even if



it's just this once. And when I look into his penetrating eyes, I see that he's communicating exactly what I feel. Desire.

It's like he's offering himself up to me.

I lean toward him and feel the space between us almost crackle with sparks.

I let this moment linger, this moment just before the press of lips against lips. Take the baseball cap he's wearing and pull it off. Visions always get in the way of kissing, so I'm preparing in advance.

I want to remember it later how it feels to finally get something this precious.

"I won't accept any more excuses," he breathes out. His voice is a low, shiver-inducing rasp.

"I wasn't going to give any. I was just going to kiss you while I'm sober. It's not fair that I was drunk and you weren't when it happened."

The corner of his mouth curls into a grin. "I'm glad we settled that."

"Me too," I supply cheekily.

He doesn't wait. He presses his mouth to mine.

Gentle at first, like a test. Like the first taste of something so rich and decadent, you don't want to finish it, because it'll hurt when it ends.

Still, you know it will. Then that first taste turns into more.

Something wild, even a little aggressive.

We kiss for a while, taking our time, savoring each second. His lips are soft and full, and the stubble on his jaw is rough against my skin. His hand touches my hair first, then slides down and rests on my nape, and I can feel the calluses from the strings.

He tastes like coffee, a hint of breakfast, and something else I can't quite pinpoint—something uniquely him.

I wrap my arms around his neck, my heart hammering in my chest as I shift in my seat to adjust my position.

It's been a long time since I felt this alive with a man, and I'm terrified at the fact that Jett's never made me feel the things I'm feeling with someone I met two days ago. How is this even possible?

Cruz moves closer, at least, as close as the car seating will allow. Our bodies are pressed against each other and I can feel every inch of his hard, tense muscles.

We kiss until it's difficult to breathe, so we break away for air, both panting heavily as we stare at each other.

"This is a bad idea," I manage to get out, and my gaze is suddenly darting everywhere but at his face.

"I don't think it is."

"Oh yes it is. I've started something with you, and I don't know if I can stop."

"You don't have to." His hands cup my cheeks, his left thumb tracing the curve of my jaw.

The air between us sizzles with unspent energy, the rain pelting on the roof above us

the only witness.

I tilt my head.

Kiss him again.

Tongue seeks tongue.

Teeth graze flesh.

"But let me just—" he starts, then draws back just an inch to be able to look me in the eye. "Let me make it clear... This isn't why I asked you out."

He's all flustered, and I find it endearing.

"I didn't say you did."

"I just wanted to spend some time with you. I wasn't sure you'd say yes."

"I don't know what's happening here. Am I giving you the wrong signals?"

He shakes his head. "No. They're all the right signals... I think."

"Okay then." I rake my hand through his hair. It's like black silk between my fingers, and I want to get lost in it. In him.

He takes it from there, claiming my mouth again, then trails his tongue down my collarbone.

Oh god, I'm on fire. My toes curl inside my boots. Clothes suddenly feel so irrelevant.

"You want this?" he whispers into my shoulder, gently pulling my tee down to access my skin.

"Want what?"

"Well, the man in front of you, of course."

"Maybe."

He pauses and glances at me, all dark lashes and swollen lips. "Maybe?" One eyebrow rises.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Does that hurt your ego?"

"Yes. Very much." He says it with such a serious look on his face that I almost believe him, but the spark in his gaze at the last moment gives away his bullshitting.

"You're messing with me, aren't you?" I tighten my fingers into a fist and shove it playfully against his chest.

"Ouch, woman." He presses his palm to the spot my knuckles just touched and rolls his eyes dramatically.

I can't with him. He's too cute. I had no idea making out could be this fun.

With Jett, it's always intense, as if he's preparing to run a marathon.

Like his dick is grave business. But, in the end, asshole never gets me to the finish line.

With Cruz, I don't want to cross the finish line, though.

I want to be here, twisted up in the front seat of a foreign car, and giggle at random stuff he says, kissing him in between.

"Is that painful?" I ask, gesturing at Cruz's chest.

"Very."

"Want me to make it go away?"

"Please," he drawls.

I lean forward and put my mouth on the spot. He's still wearing his T-shirt, so I take charge and start removing his jacket, then lift his arms to remove the tee. The car is too small. Not enough room to really stretch out anywhere. But we make do.

"Why am I the only one getting naked?" he husks out.

"Stop complaining," I say. "I've only just started." He has an impressive body, toned and muscled and with plenty of ink, and I take a moment to trace my finger over some of the tattoos on his arms and chest.

His eyes search mine as if he's trying to decipher the meaning behind my words, and it feels like he's looking right into me, right into the depth of my tattered, lost soul.

I wonder if he sees all the nasty shit there, all the anger outbursts of my father, all the broken bones of my mother, all the desolation of my teenage years.

I wonder if he cares or thinks girls like me are trash, damaged goods.

I wonder, but I don't voice my fear. Don't ask it.

"Anyone ever tell you how beautiful you are?" Cruz suddenly says, returning his palm to my cheek. His thumb grazes my chin, touching my bottom lip.

"No."

"Shame."

"You can tell me right now."

"You are beautiful," he whispers, accentuating each word.

"Orange hair not a turnoff?"

"Turnoff?" He frowns. "That's the best part. A girl daring the world to notice her is the kind of girl you'd want by your side."

A knot forms in my throat. I swallow past it. No one's ever said anything like that to me before. And I guess it's the truth. I do want the world to see me. To see me as an individual, not as my parents' daughter. Because in their eyes, I'll always be good for nothing.

"Ride or die kinda girl?" I ask gingerly.

Cruz shakes his head. "Fuck no. I'm talking about the kind of girl who'd walk through fire and come out on the other side screaming 'Is that all you got?' No fucking dying here."

I try to hide my smile. "Sounds exhausting."

"It is," he admits. "But it's also the best feeling in the world. With great risk comes great reward, right?"

Then he leans in, the space between our mouths shrinking, and I brace myself for another kiss.

And when it comes, it's pure bliss. A combination of soft and firm. His hands are all over me, mapping my curves, and I arch into his touch. I run my fingers over his body, memorizing the contours of his abs, the tattoos on his skin, the swell of his

biceps.

It's not enough, I realize. This teasing is not enough to satisfy my craving.

Breathing heavily, I pull away from him and instruct him to lower the back of the seat. He does it without questioning my intention.

I lift myself up and hurl myself across the console to straddle him.

"Oh...okay," he rasps out, and his large, warm hand cups my ass through my tee.

"This will give us some strategic advantages," I explain.

"Strategic advantages, huh?" He smirks. "To do what?"

"What do you think?"

"Beats me."

I grab his chin with one hand, tilting his face up.

"But this is a one-time-only deal." I'm being reckless. I know it. I should have told Jett last night that we're over.

Only, he paid for my goddamn ticket. So I'll do it in LA.

In my heart, we're not together anymore.

I deserve to have fun. But somehow, the guilt is still there, in the back of my mind.

And I know I won't be able to look at Cruz after this.



Won't be able to look at him and not think about my stabbing Jett in the back.

So the only way I can do this is if it won't turn into more.

"Well, I'm not a hit-it-and-quit-it type of guy," Cruz starts.

"Today, with me, you are."

He thinks for a long time, as if I've given him a math problem, then says, "Okay. If that's what you want."

I nod, leaning in, and whisper in his ear, "Let's fuck, then."

Cruz groans, his hips buck up, and I can feel how hard he's gotten.

From here on, it's intense. No words. Just the language of two starved-for-release bodies. My tee stays on, but he slips one hand beneath it and cups my breast through my bra. His touch is like an electric charge everywhere his skin comes in contact with mine.

"I've been dying to do this all night," he groans.

"I thought you said this wasn't your intention."

"Intention and wanting are two different things."

"True. You and me both then." I reach for his belt and undo it. His fly is next. "No second thoughts?"

"No second thoughts," he says between heated kisses while I cup his cock through his boxers.

"I want you so bad."

"I know," he says with so much cockiness in his voice that it makes me laugh.

"Arrogant prick." I plunge my tongue into his mouth as my hand continues to fondle him.

Holy shit, this is so wrong , I think as my hips start to grind against him. I need friction. Need something to take the edge off before I blow up.

He groans and curses, his teeth clenched, his fingers digging into my back.

I love how I can make him lose control like this. I've only ever seen him this unhinged on stage.

I want to explore every inch of his body.

To see if he tastes the same everywhere.

I wish the weather was nicer and we could just do it outside on the grass, stretch out on a blanket and do all the things to each other that we've never dared to try with anyone else.

But the rain has intensified, and we're stuck here, in the front seat of this rental, with the steering wheel bumping against my back. Still, it's no less exciting.

"Can I take these off?" he asks, almost shyly pulling on my fishnets with his thumb and index finger.

"Okay," I breathe out, hiking my tee up a bit to give him access to everything he wants.

I have to change my position briefly, and he doesn't waste any time rolling my tights down my hips. We rearrange our limbs and fumble with our clothes for a few minutes giggling and cursing excessively because there's not enough room to do what we really want.

But we make it work.

Yes. A miracle happens and I eventually find myself back on top of him with my tee on but my tights and my panties on the back seat.

His jeans are half down his thighs, and we're just there, rutting against each other with his cock pressed up to my pussy as if letting me get used to the size of him.

He cups my ass and lifts me up slightly, positioning himself at my entrance.

"Ready?" he asks.

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just have to make sure."

"Oh shut up. Let's fuck, you considerate asshole." I slap his cheek playfully, preparing for the pain that I know will come the moment he enters me, because he's not small at all.

But there is none. Just a pleasant stretching sensation as he buries himself balls deep inside me.

"Jesus Christ." I release a loud exhale, my eyes fluttering shut. "I wasn't expecting you to be so..."

"Big?" he finishes for me. His voice is tense as he seems to restrain himself from moving any more. "There ain't an award for it."

"There should be." A moan lingers right on the tip of my tongue, but I wait a heartbeat, wait until he starts moving to let it out. It feels liberating.

"Is this okay?" he asks. Even now, he's a fucking gentleman. Like there's a polite way to have wild sex in a car.

"It will be if you slap my ass."

He does as I say. A thousand tiny sparks shoot up through my body at the contact.

"Oh, baby," he mumbles against my ear, and one hand reaches up to tangle in my hair as our hips start to match each other's movements. "You feel so good."

My head is thrown back. He feels so good too. So incredibly good. He's hitting the perfect spot as he keeps drilling into me. The car rocks while the rain pummels the roof above us.

"Jesus Christ." I moan again, but this time, it's louder, more desperate.

Deep down, I know this is wrong. It defies everything about me. Ruins who I am. Ruins the fact that I'm not a cheater, the fact that I'm loyal. It almost feels like a revenge fuck on some molecular level. Only, it's not. It's two people enjoying each other. No strings attached.

Works for me and, apparently, works for him too.

"Can't hold it anymore," he mutters against my neck.

"Good," I grind down harder, searching for that elusive release I want— no, need—so badly.

I feel his finger on my clit, rubbing in circles, sending me over the edge. He's the first man I've met who knows female anatomy this well. Just a few skillful flicks and I'm flying.

My walls clench around him, and I scream into the crook of his neck. Then it all comes crashing down. His cock throbs inside me, jets of cum spurting into me as I cry out in ecstasy.

I don't know why I didn't think about condoms. I didn't really plan on having sex with him when I left the festival grounds this morning.

Good thing I'm smart enough to be on the pill.

But these are just afterthoughts. My body is buzzing and I'm suspended too high in this blissful white bubble to care about consequences.

We both collapse into the seat, our chests heaving as we try to catch our breath. My face is buried in his hair, and I just stay still for a while, inhaling him.

When I draw back a little to look at him, he's all sweat and sparkly eyes.

He's gorgeous when he's undone.

"That was—" he starts.

"Fun," I finish his sentence.

"Well, fun isn't the word I was going to use, but that too."

"What word were you going to use?"

"Terrific."

I kiss him instead of speaking. Kiss him because I know my time's up. After this, I'm done with the guys in the bands. Too much drama. Could be my New Year's resolution. It's summer, but I'm just making it in advance.

"Did you like it?" he suddenly asks, sounding shy. "Did I make you...you know?"

"You couldn't tell," I say teasingly.

"I could, but I hear women like to act it out a lot."

"I wasn't."

"I'm glad."

"Why? You think your reputation will be ruined and the guys will kick you out of the band for not being good enough in the sack?"

He laughs. "That's some wild imagination."

I grin at him, shimmying a little in his lap. "It's probably safe that we disengage now." I point down at where our hips meet. His cock is soft and spent, and I'm dripping a little. It's a mess.

"Yeah. Best to clean up before it sticks to the seats permanently," he mutters, reaching out for the central console with his free hand to fumble around for some napkins.

After we put ourselves back together and I return to my seat, we simply sit there, looking at the rain pelting the windshield and the blurry surface of the lake further down.

The song playing on the radio ends and another one starts, and after the intro hits, I realize it's one of The Deviant's latest singles that was released this spring.

"Hey, is it weird?" I ask quietly. "Hearing your music like this? Just popping up everywhere?"

Cruz takes a second to think, staring wistfully at the downpour outside.

"Not anymore," he admits. "It was at the beginning. I mean, we'd make an event out of it every time we got radio play. Eventually, it all just became a backdrop. Not any different from being an accountant. Every night you punch in, do your work, punch out, go home, be yourself. In the morning, you gotta put on a mask and be that other version of yourself because that's what your fans expect of you. "

"Did you always want to be a musician?"

"For as long as I can remember. I wasn't very good in school. There was no future for me in college. I actually wanted to play a guitar, but my fingers are butterfingers for the precision you need to play an electric. So I went with the next best thing. Bass."

"I don't think I can even imagine you as a student."

"Too late for that now anyway. I mean, the whole point of college is to have a successful career to support yourself and your family. But I think I've got it figured out without it."

"You sure do." I'm quiet for a few heartbeats, my hands resting casually in my lap as

I'm wondering if I'll get to reach my own goals when I'm his age.

"Can I get your number?" he asks.

"This one-time ride is all that's on the agenda," I reply.

"Right," he says with a sad smile on his face. "I forgot."

"Sorry." I pause, wait a few seconds, then go on, "I don't know if I'd feel right about this. About us, continuing as if nothing happened. You understand?" I look at him.

He looks back at me and nods once.

"I do."

"I still live with Jett. It's already too complicated. I'll need to figure out how to end it cleanly, and I'm just not ready for anything more than this." My hand bounces between us.

"I get it."

"We should probably head back."

"Yeah." He starts the car but remains still in his seat for a while.

We listen to the hum of the engine as our words fade to an echo. We've said all there is to say.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The approaching night swallows Wendy and me in its sticky black as we cross the remains of the festival grounds, stepping over electric cables that look like broken snakes and avoiding trash that hasn't been picked up, keeping close as shadows play tag beneath our feet.

The same raw anticipation that thrummed right before our first real sober kiss back at the lake sparks in the crisp, fresh air between us. With our hands almost touching, but not for the sake of safety, we walk back to the artists' area.

Everything around us has the feeling of an aftermath—the trailers folding up, the band buses like boxy ghosts slipping away. I catch glimpses of the old rides, dark and skeletal, covered with raindrops. It's a boneyard, stripped naked after its fever dream of sound and light.

Wendy's laughter sparks above it all, catching on my last punchline, pulling me in. Her hair, bright and defiant in the chaos, lures me deeper.

I want more.

I want a way to keep her, to wrap her around my heart and in my bed.

But she made it clear. She needs space. And I'm not Jett. I know that when a woman says no, it means exactly that. No.

"I'm so glad the rain is over," she rambles on next to me as we pass the line of security.

"Me too," I reply monotonously. Up ahead, a familiar face emerges. "Oh shit." I turn around before I'm recognized. I don't want to socialize right now.

"What is it?"

"Just some dudes I know."

Wendy grabs my arm and yanks me sideways behind some trailer, her body warm against mine as we collide for a second. Her cheeks are flushed, but I can't tell if it's from the chill or the heat of being tangled up with me in the rental.

"Let's go through here." She pulls me further down between the vehicles and toward a different path.

We dodge another power line, a loose loop that trips her up, and she yelps.

"Festival booby traps," I say, seizing her by the elbow before she falls to the muddy ground. "Deadlier than landmines."

Her nose wrinkles in a mock pout, and it's too fucking adorable.

I want to kiss her. I want to kiss her and not stop.

Her hair, a wild orange halo, is everywhere I look, and I'm wrecked by how much I'm starting to feel.

It shouldn't hit this fast. It should be slower.

I try to mask the hunger, throwing another joke into the air like bait.

"Think they'll mind if I crash in your bunk tonight?" I ask flippantly.

"Yeah, I do," she says sarcastically. "Jett especially."

The name feels like a crack in the ground, one I might fall through if I'm not careful. I have to remind myself that Sonic Trash is heading back to the States before we reunite after our Morocco gigs. And that should be the end of our tour leg with Jett's band. The end of it all.

Only instead, it feels like it's the beginning of something. She's the beginning of something.

"It could work," I say, keeping my tone light, keeping my hopes from showing. I lean in and whisper in her ear, "We sleep together. Literally. And you hide me under your blanket."

"You think that's all I'm good for, Cruz?" she says, feigning a scowl. But her eyes, bright and teasing, give her away. She's not one of those girls who takes everything seriously. She can have fun.

"I think you're good for a lot of things," I say as we round the corner of a building. "One night might not cover it. But an agreement is an agreement. Right?"

She's not talking, and I feel it then. In the quiet way her fingers slip from mine and the way she turns her head. She's not going to give me her number. She's not going to make it easy. Besides, we're not alone anymore. In the distance, what remains of a VIP section comes into view.

"You wanna get a drink?" I motion at the white tent. "One for the road, so to speak."

"Sure. But just one."

We change our course and walk toward the tent where those left behind for various

reasons are congregating. I spot Zander and Justice and also a couple of execs. Some faces I've seen around the scene

We're right in the thick of it, amongst the remaining guests clinging to the party that should've been over yesterday. But for many of us, it's not just work but a mix of work and pleasure. Gotta live up to that rockstar reputation.

"Where the hell have you been?" a guttural shout comes from the crowd.

I turn to the sound.

Jett is cutting through the last scraps of hangers-on like a blade through butter. Messy hair, tasteless tats, his movements weaving and wild.

Next to me, Wendy freezes.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he yells, stopping right in front of us. His red-rimmed eyes land on her first, then shift over to my face. "I told you to leave my girl alone, didn't I?"

"She's not your property, asshole," I growl out.

"Who's the trash now, huh, Wendy?" the fucker wails out. His body is half on the attack and half about to collapse. I've seen this kind of drunk before, the type that turns violent when it can't stand. I feel her stiffen beside me even more, a tension like a rubber band about to snap.

"We're done, Jett," she says, her voice as sharp as broken glass.

"Like hell we are," he slurs. "Like hell we're done." He whips out his hand and tries to grab her wrist, but she deflects it. "Come on. Let's go. Before I paint this

motherfucker's face red." He jerks his chin toward me like I'm not here, like I'm two hundred pounds of an afterthought.

My instincts are buzzing through me, telling me to hold on to her, to hold tight.

But Wendy's not a girl you hold without her letting you, and she's moving toward Jett now, small and fierce and unafraid. She's moving toward him, and I'm helpless to do anything but follow.

"Why the hell are you embarrassing me?" Jett fumes. He can't help himself, that little abusive weasel. He grabs at her hair, then slaps her cheek. It's not hard but it pushes me over the edge.

I step in, putting my body between his and hers, and shove both palms against his chest, knocking him back a few inches. I want more. Want to snap this fucker's neck for even touching her, but she's been through enough bullshit this week. "Apologize," I demand.

"What? Get lost, Deviant," Jett barks. "Get fucking lost and leave us alone."

And then it happens. That stupid move every pissed-off, wasted asshole makes. That fucking stupid move where he thinks he's king of the fucking world.

He swings. No aim. Just a fist flying through empty air.

I block it with the hard line of my arm, my body moving like it's done this a thousand times. Like it knows exactly what to do. Because it does. Growing up where I did taught me some decent fighting skills.

"Stay the fuck out of this!" Jett screams with his teeth bared and ugly. He lunges again, his balance shot to hell. But I'm faster. I'm faster, and he doesn't see it

coming.

My knuckles find his jaw, dead center, and I hear the satisfying crack of bone before he reels back, shocked and off-balance.

His eyes are wide with disbelief. Like he's never been hit before. Like he's untouchable.

"Fuck!" he cries, doubling over, grabbing at his bleeding nose.

I don't hesitate. I don't even think. I'm on him, twisting his arms behind his back. The world collapsing to the rapid thud of my pulse and his hot breath near my face as I hold him down.

Wendy's forgotten me in the midst of it all. She's focused, livid, striding in with her bright hair and bruised emotions.

"What the fuck, Jett?" she says. I can feel her heat, her absolute certainty.

"Let go!" Jett demands.

The crowd swells around us, everyone catching the scent of blood and drama that's long overdue this weekend.

I tighten my grip, adrenaline eating my sense of time, drowning me in this insane blur of anger and noise and Wendy's fire. She's blazing, fierce and pure, and in the split second before she speaks, I wonder what she's waiting for.

"You're a disgusting rapey asshole!" she says, each word loud and clear. "My things won't be at your place when you get back home!"

What?

My mind short-circuits

Rapey?

I'm still processing when her hand slams into his face, a final, shattering punctuation, and the sound reverberates through me. A boundary drawn. A truth spoken. Everything, all of it, vibrating like a string pulled too tight.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"I hope his jaw hurts double," I grit out through clenched teeth.

Cruz's hands are fire against my throbbing fist, his fingers steady while mine tremble. He's quiet, confident, the opposite of everything I've ever known.

We're in the common area of The Deviant's bus, and he's putting an ice pack on my knuckles.

All around us, his bandmates are rowdy, their taunts of Jett rising above the low rumble of background music.

The lights here are blinding, harsh, and I close my eyes against them, imagining the bruises, imagining the memories and how easy it would be to let them both fade away.

"It's not too bad," Cruz says. His voice has that quiet warmth that vibrates inside my chest. He sits across from me on the leather couch, his face in deep concentration, as if holding that ice pack equals launching a rocket into space. "Battle wounds are pretty."

I'm struck by him, by the way he manages to be all grit and tenderness in one tight, inked package. It makes my head spin, especially after a year with Jett, where everything had its own upside-down kind of logic.

"I'm too young for battle wounds."

"Plenty of stories for the grandkids," he chuckles.



"Are you calling me a grandma already?"

He shifts the ice pack a little, the chill of it biting at my skin. "No."

"Brother's got no game," Chance, their guitarist, says with a playful wink, leaning in for a second. "Like at all."

"Fuck off," Cruz hisses at him.

Chance just laughs. He's the band's charmer. A little loopy from all the booze he's been consuming from that bottle of Jack Daniel's in his hands. But nice. Friendly.

"Jett had it coming," Zander croaks from the couch across from us. He's on his phone, texting furiously. He's got wild blond hair, a little lighter than Chance's.

Their lead singer, Justice, is in the corner, leaning against the wall.

Without the makeup, he is even more intense.

Black hair. Gray eyes. Perfect square chin.

He's got the dark aura of authority. I can understand why women and men all over the world worship him.

He's not my type, though. Too out there.

Still, there's a weird comfort in being here, even if they're practically strangers to me. It feels safe with Cruz by my side. Better than I ever felt with Jett and his bandmates. I think of the last thing I heard that piece of shit yell before he was dragged away.

You won't find anyone better than me.

Yeah, right.

"Cruz's got himself a real wild one," Chance drawls with a knowing smirk on his lips.

"Bet Jett's losing his shit," says the drummer.

"Someone needed to give that asshole a reality check a long time ago," Justice comments broodingly.

Cruz stays silent, his concentration fixed on my hand as if willing it to heal. And I appreciate it that no one asks me any questions about what I said earlier. The rapey part. I didn't plan on spilling it but it just happened and now that it's out, I feel strange.

"He's a real piece of work, your boyfriend, isn't he?" Zander asks matter-of-factly.

"Ex-boyfriend," I correct him.

Cruz shifts his gaze from my knuckles to my face as if making sure I mean the ex-boyfriend part. There's hope in those dark eyes. Bright and genuine hope. And then there's this other thing—the concern.

I feel bad. Maybe I was too harsh when I shut him down when he asked for my number.

Maybe not all guys are the same. But Jett was also nice at first.

My thoughts are a train wreck, too fast, too slow, but all headed in the same direction. The door. A way out.

It's best to leave, because getting tangled up with another guy in a band is not on my

to-do list.

Still, I don't move.

I remain on the couch.

"You okay?" Cruz asks. His voice pulls me back to him, to the soft command in his words. The question feels bigger than it is. The ice burns against my skin, and I nod, even though I'm not sure if it's true.

"I'm fine."

The band returns to their banter—more laughter, more off-color jabs that make me wince and smile at the same time.

They've all got the same vibe, rough and alive, like they've seen everything and still get a kick out of it all, only to build their own thing that's become this massive mania of worship.

I'm imagining the Sunset Boulevard loft I'm leaving behind.

Jett's drums, Jett's sound, Jett's promises looping on repeat.

It all seems distant now, unreal, like I watched it in a movie and can't remember how it ends.

I wasn't going to do it this time. Wasn't going to let myself get sucked into another fantasy.

But Cruz appeared like a quiet answer to a question I didn't even know I was asking. And now I don't know what to do with him and his googly eyes.

"We can go look for a medic," he supplies.

"Really, you don't have to. It'll be okay."

"It's not a problem."

"Don't give that asshole's jaw too much credit."

"Alright." He laughs a little.

Someone offers Cruz a beer, and he takes it without loosening his grip on me. The bottle sweats between his fingers.

"I'm sorry this weekend was shit," Cruz says, the slightest curve to his lips.

"It was definitely a learning experience."

"You can always hop on the bus with us and tag along to the next city," Chance challenges. "Have you ever been to Morocco?"

"Yeah. The next stop isn't that far," Justice chimes in in that cold, unbothered manner.

"Maybe she doesn't need the next stop," the drummer teases. "Maybe she needs something else."

Cruz's cheeks flush. "Shut up, Z-man." He flips him the finger.

They don't shut up. But they don't mean much by their jokes either. They're all drunk, catching up on partying before tomorrow.

Eventually, they leave us. Justice exits the bus, and I hear some giggling outside.

Zander moves to his bunk and shuts the door to the sleeping area.

Chance just disappears. I don't know where or even when.

I noticed that he has this strange habit of being right in your face one minute and gone the next.

Cruz sets the beer down, rests my hand on the table, and fumbles for a piece of paper from one of the notepads on the couch. He then proceeds to scribble something on it.

"I'm not asking for your number since you made it clear you need space," he says, tearing off the piece of paper and offering it to me. "But I'll give you mine anyway. If you ever need anything, call me."

"I—"

"No strings," he adds quickly. "I had a great time with you today, but I can understand where you're coming from. I don't want to be that guy."

With trembling fingers I accept it and look at the digits. They mean nothing to me and everything all at once. Ink, blue and messy, like he scrawled it in a hurry. And now he waits. And waits. And waits.

I stare at the paper, at his hands, at the sharp angles of his jaw and the way he holds himself like he knows exactly where he's going, with or without me.

My eyes start to sting, and I know it's tears. I know they're from repressing my emotions this past year. They're threatening to spill, but I suck in a lungful of air and will myself to remain calm. I can't be a stupid cliché crying on the tour bus of a guy who's too good to be true.

"Okay," I breathe out. "Thank you."

"I mean it, Wendy. No strings."

And I'm well aware he does. Even if secretly I don't want him to.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

The next morning, I'm back at the Munich International Airport, ready to board a plane to take me back to LA.

The terminal buzzes with a soulless, electric noise while I stand in the center of it all, a tiny dot drowning in a flood of steel and glass and plastic chairs, feeling just as inadequate as I did when I arrived.

Faces blur into a featureless mass as I clutch my luggage and try not to think about what happened over the weekend.

I got assaulted. More than once.

Broke up with Jett.

Slept with The Deviant's bassist.

Oh, and I'm homeless now.

In the privacy of my mind, I'm cataloguing all my friends who might be able to help with a temporary place to stay, but I know I can't be couch-surfing like I did right after my move to the city.

It's different now that I'm in school. I need a room where I can work on my portfolio, and I can't be doing it in my friends' living rooms.

The thought of going back to my mother's and just commuting to classes from Antelope Valley has my stomach churning. I have too many shitty memories tied to

my childhood home. I told myself I'd never return there unless I was rich so I could throw some bills at Catherine Fields and prove her wrong.

Yes, I can do it on my own. I don't need to be some guy's possession to do well in life.

But as it stands right now, I can't do it on my own.

And it feels like the Universe is laughing at me.

"Next?" the airline rep shouts my turn.

I reach the counter and hand her the boarding pass.

She tries to scan it, and a frown appears on her forehead. She wiggles the pass in front of the scanner a few times, then checks something on the computer. "I'm sorry," she says, "but it seems that your ticket has been voided."

"What do you mean?" My grip on my gym bag tightens.

"It's no longer valid."

"But I need to go home," I counter in disbelief.

"You're welcome to purchase another ticket. Would you like me to check if there are any seats left on this flight?" She smiles at me from behind the counter like this is just some small hiccup, but I'm not having it.

"I don't want to purchase another ticket," I hiss out. "I had a ticket. I want to use it."

"I'm sorry, but once it's voided, we can reverse the transaction. You'll need to



purchase a new one."

"I don't think you understand." I lower my voice because I don't want to feel even more embarrassed than I already am. "I don't have the money to buy a last-minute international flight ticket."

"Hey, young lady," some man behind me shouts. "You're holding up the line." Someone adds something in a foreign language.

"Would you step aside, please?" the airline rep asks, fake politeness and all.

I don't want to make a scene. I made plenty this weekend. So I do as I'm told and move to the side, then start pacing around my luggage. Sweat beads on my palms as I call Jett's number. It goes to voicemail. I redial again and again, wishing for him to just answer the fucking phone.

It's not a mistake.

I know that piece of trash did it. He bought the ticket, and he had the audacity to cancel it too.

My fingers are numb from the constant tapping, each call ending the same way. Jett's voice on the recording, taunting me with its calm, artificial tone.

I squeeze my eyes shut and lean against a cold pillar, feeling the vibrations of the place pulse through me.

How many times have I stood in a spot like this, caught between escape and the reality that he controls everything?

I open my eyes and stare at the blank faces of people passing by, all of them rushing

toward something, none of them caring that I'm stuck in this limbo.

It's supposed to be different this time. I walked away.

An announcement blares over the speakers, flight numbers and gates blending into a meaningless hum. The noise grates against my nerves, setting my teeth on edge. I try to focus, to keep moving forward, but the lights stab at my senses, leaving me disoriented and drained.

I shove the boarding pass back into my bag and I dial Jett's number again, more out of habit than hope. The line clicks over to voicemail once more.

A plane roars to life somewhere outside, the sound reverberating gently through the glass. I press my forehead against the window and watch it taxi. I wonder if it's the one I should be on.

After a few minutes of painful contemplating, I reach into my gym bag and pull out the crumpled scrap of paper with Cruz's number. I smooth it with trembling fingers and stare at the digits. Yes, I'm stalling, not wanting to be pathetic.

Call. The words form in my mind, soft and insistent. Call him.

I bite my lip and hesitate, fear and doubt battling inside me. What if he doesn't answer? What if he regrets giving me the number in the first place?

Another boarding announcement echoes through the terminal.

Ah, fuck it.

I punch the keypad.

It rings, and I can barely breathe, waiting for it to go over to voicemail like all the rest. But it doesn't. He picks up on the second ring.

"Yes?"

My heart lurches at the sound of his voice.

"Hey, it's me," I mumble tentatively.

"Wendy?"

I hold the phone tight against my ear and spill my desperation in a rush. "I know I said this was a one-time deal, but Jett's voided my ticket back to LA. I'm stuck at the airport."

There are no questions. Just a brief "I'll be right there."

Somewhere in the background, I hear Zander's voice. "Where are you going, dude?"

"Gotta take care of something," Cruz tells him, his voice a little distant, as if he's placed a hand over the microphone.

"Yo!" That's Chance. "We're about to leave."

"Go without me. I'll catch up in a rental."

I can't make out the rest. Instead, I hold my breath, afraid to trust what I'm hearing, afraid to believe that he really means it.

"Wendy," he says again, this time to me, soft and resolute. "Wait for me, yeah?"

"Okay...yes, I will. Thank you."

It can't be this easy. Nothing is ever this easy. Right?

The connection cuts out, and I stare at the screen, my hand trembling. The world around me stands still, everything suspended in my uncertainty whether I did the right thing.

Thirty minutes later, as I shift in the hard plastic seat with my foot tapping a restless rhythm on the floor, I see him coming.

He's weaving through the crowd, his strides long and sure.

He looks a little wild but solid, like he was made for me.

My personal wall to protect me from the outside—all muscles, leather, and ripped jeans.

A baseball cap low on his forehead. But, of course, the hair gives him away.

My pulse quickens, and I find myself grinning from ear to ear.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

Colors stab at my eyes as a swirl of bodies rush past me when I step inside the terminal. I see her immediately. The exclamation point of orange sitting on a hard plastic chair.

A fissure of joy and trepidation cracks my heart. She lifts her head as if she senses me arriving, and her smile punches me in the chest.

Faces move between us, and I push forward, caught in a stream of roller bags and screaming kids. It's a synthetic galaxy—bright signs, the smell of cheap coffee with a high price tag, voices in various languages that rise and echo in every direction.

I squeeze past a trio of businessmen glued to their phones, dodge a sticky-fingered toddler and his worn-out mom.

Overhead, a boarding announcement comes from the speakers, garbled and lost by the time it reaches me.

The rush is contagious. I want to be next to her already.

I want to be next to her more than anything I've ever wanted in my life.

And it's a terrifying feeling.

She stands up right before I reach her, her expression a mix of relief and something else—something bruised. "You found me," she says with a smile, but her voice is paper thin.

"Hey." I return the smile. "What time's your flight?" My words come out easy, belying the clatter in my chest.

She glances at the ticking red letters of the giant wall clock. "An hour." A nonchalant shrug, but I see the pulse fluttering at her throat. "We still have time to get you on your flight," I say. "If they have seats."

There's an urgency around us, people wheeling bags like burdensome dreams, an orchestra of comings and goings. I want to wrap my arms around her and make all this static go away.

She looks at me. "Cruz, I don't know if?—"

"Let's see if there are tickets." I take her hand and feel a bolt of lightning all the way to my shoulder. Then, with my other hand, I grab her luggage.

We weave through the madness to the airline counter.

"I'm sorry," she mutters. "I hope I didn't put you out."

"Nonsense."

"Weren't you guys leaving for the next city?"

"I'll grab a rental and just catch up. We don't play until tomorrow night. Plenty of time to send you home."

"I feel a little weird about it."

I glance at her. "Why? I told you to call me if you needed help. This is me doing what I promised."

At the counter, I ask her to give me the voided pass, then show it to the attendant. The woman's smile is flight-attendant vacant, accustomed to desperation.

"Is there anything you can do?" I ask, injecting confidence I don't quite feel.

Wendy is standing next to me and whispers in my ear, "Cruz, I don't think this can be reverted back?"

I turn to her. "Let me just check," I say gently to both of them.

The attendant types into a keyboard, perfectly polished nails clicking like a metronome. The world distills down to this moment. To her. To me. To us in this waiting space, with everything else drowning in the noise.

She lifts her eyes from the screen. "I'm sorry, sir. The ticket is void." Her words have the same easy cadence as a turbulence warning.

Wendy makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. She leans closer, a sweet chaos of shampoo scent and uncertainty. "Looks like I'm not going anywhere," she murmurs.

I reach for something hopeful. "Any chance there are seats left?" My voice presses against the impatience behind me—a growing line of travelers with urgent itineraries and little time for broken girls and the boys trying to save them.

The woman's fingers tick against the keys again. "Yes. We still have seats." She says it like she's just announced an early arrival.

"Let's get one for this young lady." I rest my hand on Wendy's shoulder for a second.

"Sure. I just need her passport," the attendant drones and resumes clicking the

keyboard. "Economy okay?"

And this is where I gotta be that guy, that guy with money and too much pride and a reckless need to impress the girl he likes a little bit too much.

"Business," I reply, going for my wallet.

The attendant's eyebrows arch slightly at the upgrade.

"I don't need an expensive ticket," Wendy says in a panic next to me, pulling at the sleeve of my leather jacket.

I grin at her, feeling daring and just the right amount of foolish. "I can afford it."

Silence sits between us, unexpected and loud as I watch Wendy holding the new boarding pass like something precious and fragile. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out at first. I'm ready to fill the silence, to say something stupid or careful, but she finds her words.

"You didn't have to do this." Her voice is small but finding itself, unfurling in the brightly lit air.

I shrug, trying to be casual about how much this matters. "You had a bad weekend," I say softly. "You deserve something nice."

She looks at the ticket again, then back at me. Her eyes are a carousel of emotions—surprise, disbelief, gratitude—spinning wildly. And somewhere, tucked away like a stowaway, perhaps hope.

With a slow sideways grin, she tilts her head, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. "So you're my consolation prize?" The words could cut, but there's a



playful warmth beneath them.

"If that's okay, then yes, I'd like to be."

She stares up at me through a fringe of dark lashes, then reaches around and slides my phone from the back pocket of my jeans. "Wanna unlock it for me?"

I do as she asks, my heart thundering in my chest louder than Zander on drums. I watch her fingers dance over the keys. Her orange hair glows under the airport's surgical lights, a bright flare against all this gray.

"My number," she says, handing the phone back, our fingers grazing like an electric current.

The screen blurs for a second as my mind runs wild and uncontrolled with the possibilities. "Can I call you sometime?" I ask.

"Do you think I gave it to you for decoration?" she says cheekily.

Then we stand there. The world is a ghost of itself, spinning at its usual dizzy pace, but we're locked in our own private orbit.

"I really have to go now," she finally whispers. I can't hear her well over the noise, but I read it on her lips. "I still need to try to check this bag and go through customs."

"Yes. You better do that."

Another pause, long and inflated and filled with everything left unsaid that's probably better not to be shared in the airport in a rush.

I break the silence and start to close the distance between us. "I guess this is a

goodbye."

She meets me halfway, taking a step forward until our bodies almost touch. "For now." A soft collision of lips follows. The kiss lingers, as delicate as a half-formed wish. It's over too soon.

I pull back, breathless in ways that have nothing to do with oxygen, and see a spark in her eyes—a little fire that says she needs and wants more. It takes everything in me to let her go. I watch her shoulders lift as if she's about to disappear into the unknown.

"Thank you," she says, the words barely a whisper and somehow the loudest thing in this goddamn terminal.

"I'll call you soon."

"You better."

Boarding pass in hand, she takes a step away toward luggage check-in, toward something better than what she's left behind. I stand like a lost boy, an expectant fool, wanting to carve this moment into something permanent.

She gives one final glance back, a hint of a smile tracing her lips. Her eyes catch mine like a promise across the Universe, and then she's gone. Just like that. Gone.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Nice saturation, Wendy," my mentor, Renita, says. "Just don't rush it." She's hovering like a cat, but it's a good kind of hovering. Her feedback has really helped me improve my technique a lot.

All around us, the salon buzzes like a high-voltage power line. Clippers drone, scissors whisper, customers buried in magazines peek out like deer from a thicket. Blonde today, pink tomorrow—hair's no less indecisive than hearts.

Outside, busy Melrose traffic blurs past the windows. It's a nice place. Way better than the one I worked at earlier this year. But they weren't willing to let me work on hair, even though I'd taken enough classes and had plenty of practice not to fuck up a simple cut.

Renita didn't seem to mind that I had very little experience. She took a chance and here we are. I'm finally doing what I've always wanted.

I'm wrist-deep in peroxide, mid-transformation of a redhead into a blonde. I don't mind my mentor floating by with an appraising nod or clipped praise, part approval and part instruction.

It's how I like it, busy and a little dangerous. Better than wondering which part of Sunset Boulevard Jett Vice is self-destructing on.

Renita's eyes dart from me to the client's head to the clock. Everything is timing here.

With confident hands, I work the bleach into long, wet strands, focus on the quality,

focus on the immediate task.

My mentor waves a hand in front of my face, bringing me back. "Did you hear me? Don't forget to set a timer."

"Sorry," I say. "My head's not here. I'm trying to make sure this is perfect. And yes, of course."

"Oh, honey," the client croons. "You're doing a great job. You have a very light hand."

"Thank you."

I finish up the bleaching process and tap the digital clock on my station to set an alarm for thirty minutes from now. "Sit tight," I tell the client and offer her a magazine before I begin resetting my station to prep for the color.

"How's the new place?" one of the other girls working at the salon whom I made friends with asks as Renita and I move to the cabinet with pigments.

"Cheap enough that I can pay the rent if I keep doing ten-hour days."

"That's why you're pulling double shifts?" Renita says, a little surprised. "Thought you and that drummer had a cushy setup. Weren't you dating someone in Sonic Trash?"

It's a small world, this scene. Apparently, Renita works with a lot of musicians, and she heard about me and Jett from one of the clients.

I smile at the curiosity that's half hidden in her questions. "I'm paying my own way. We're not together anymore."

"How come?"

"He's an asshole," I reply. I don't need to keep Jett's shitty character a secret. I don't owe him anything. Besides, the world already knows he's crap. Sonic Trash was kicked off the rest of the tour with The Deviant.

"Aren't they all?" another girl cutting her client's hair says sarcastically.

"True, true," a third one chimes in.

"Well, not all," I counter. Cruz Velez immediately comes to mind. Yes, that Cruz. The one who called me like he promised a week after our weekend in Germany and then again two months later. He sounded tired both times we spoke, but the fact that he actually did what he promised he'd do still makes him a better man than Jett shitty Vice. Even if this goes nowhere.

"There are some good ones out there," Renita supplies as she fumbles with tubes of color, looking for the right shade. "You just gotta grab them while they're available."

"I suppose so," I agree quietly.

Then the women in the salon, both the employees and the clients, are suddenly chattering agitatedly about the evil men crawling through this city. Everyone has a story to share about a douchebag ex.

I listen while preparing the rest of the tools.

"Hey, Wendy," the receptionist calls, approaching me. "Someone's here to see you."

I glance at the front of the salon that's lit up by the afternoon sun streaming through the large windows. A male figure stands there, a dark silhouette against the brightness of California August.

My pulse stutters, then speeds up.

I rest the tools in my hands on the tray and look at my client reading a fashion magazine, then at Renita.

"I'm going to step away for a second," I inform them both, pulling off the latex gloves and discarding them in the nearest trashcan.

I grab the digital clock and shove it into the pocket of my apron.

"Be back when it's time to apply color."

Then I walk to the front of the salon. Every step feels substantial, like I'm wading in the direction of my goal.

The reception area is a blur of cheetah print and expensive handbags. Women gathered around the register are swapping gossip, the ritual exchange of desperate housewives with too much money and too much free time. And behind it all, by the door, he stands.

He's taller than I remember, bigger in my mind than in the room.

But maybe that's because my imagination has always magnified him in my thoughts. He's holding a drink carrier with two cups of iced coffee.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I ask as I draw near.

He smiles. "Just passing through."

"Passing through?" I glance at the stretch of busy salon behind me and then back at Cruz. It's a little loud here with all the blow dryers running and music crooning in the background.

"How did you even find me? Because, you know, this is a new one," I say, not covering my surprise.

"Guys don't usually chase me down here."

He offers me the drinks. "I wasn't sure what you like, so I got a vanilla latte and a mocha."

"Which one is for you?" I ask, eyeing the drinks. They both look great. And I sure could use some caffeine.

"Whichever one you won't drink." He smirks. "Unless, of course, you want to try them both."

"That's a lot of coffee," I supply, then motion at the door. "It's a little noisy in here. You wanna go outside?"

"Sure."

We exit the salon and sit on the wooden bench by the entrance.

"I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I?" Cruz asks, placing the coffees between us.

"No worries. I've got a few minutes to spare while my client's bleach sets in." Then I return my attention to the drinks. "Okay, give me that latte."

He extracts it from the carrier and hands the cup over to me. "Here."

"Thanks." I take a sip and look at him. "So you never told me how you found me?"

Cruz laughs softly. "Ah. My buddy gets his hair done here," he explains. "Mentioned you."

"Me?"

"Well." Cruz clears his throat. "He said he saw 'that shorty with fun hair' last time he came in."

"Shorty with fun hair." I taste the words. "Your buddy sure has a cringe way to describe women."

"Nobody taught him, I suppose."

"And you just decided to show up and check it out for yourself?"

"I'll be home for a while."

"Yeah. I saw your tour dates for the rest of the year. You don't have anything until October."

"We're starting to work on the new album. We'll spend some time in the studio." He inspects me from head to toe, and his eyes linger on my new blue hair and then move to my right arm, where a freshly inked heart sits.

"New tattoo?" He points at the design.

"Part of the post-breakup package." I grin. "New hair color and freedom too. Just thought I'd treat myself a little."

"So you guys are over for real?" he asks carefully.

My mind stutters between then and now, the past and the present. He waits for me to breathe, no pressure. "Yes. Jett's history," I finally say.

"Good."



"Are you happy because of my heartbreak?" I tease him.

"Let's be honest, Wendy." He leans in closer like he's about to whisper a secret to me. "Motherfucking Jett Vice was never the man for you. He didn't deserve you."

Goosebumps riddle my arms. I know we agreed this would be a one-time thing back in Germany, but then we exchanged numbers and he called and now he brought coffee. It feels like the Universe is trying to tell me something. That maybe, just maybe, Cruz Velez is here to stay.

He draws back and rests against the bench, looking wistfully into the blue California sky as pedestrians move past us in both directions.

"I was thinking, you know," he continues talking with a reserved smile on his face. "I'm a man who's willing to compromise. How about two?"

"Two what?" I'm totally clueless as to what he's talking about right now. Sounds like some code I forgot.

"I said three and you said one when we were in Germany. So I say two is a good middle ground." He turns his head to me, and there's a cocky smile there.

I shake my head once, prompting him to explain. "Two of what?"

"Kids."

I almost choke on my coffee. "Come again? Kids? Is that what you want from me?"

He nods innocently. "Yep. But not from you. With you."

"I'm twenty-two."

"I know."

"That's a little fast."

"I'm not saying right this moment. I was thinking we'll start slow. How about I ask you on a date first?"

I promised myself I'd take time off from men and concentrate on my school and my career, but he's just so damn hard to resist. "Okay," I say after a long moment of consideration.

His smile cracks open again. "Dinner and a movie?"

"Yeah. Dinner sounds good."

The timer in my pocket buzzes, and that's my cue to stand up and go back in. I'm aware of my body and his, the proximity, what happens next. I pretend it's harder than it is, but it's not hard at all—to close the distance between us and to kiss him on the lips.

"I really gotta run. Or Renita will fire me," I mutter demurely as I pull back.

"Call you this evening?" he says.

"Yeah. I get off at eight."

"Sounds good."

"Bye." I dash for the door.

"Two!" he shouts after me.

And somehow, the thought of having children with him doesn't scare me away.

It's not right now, but it feels right anyway.

"Hey, Cruz," I call from the doorway as he gets up from the bench.

He looks at me.

"You were never a consolation prize," I say. "You were the prize."

He just smiles, and I realize that one-time with him isn't enough.

THE END... OR NOT QUITE

Grab the next book in the series [here](#) .