



Star Rucked Lovers (Rucked By You #4)

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Category: Sport

Description: Rugby captain George Dennis had his game plan sorted lead Australia to victory, keep his head down, and focus on the sport he loved. Then he met Myst, the mesmerizing pop star with a voice that could bring a stadium to its knees. She was everything he wasn't polished, perfect, born to shine in the spotlight.

Their worlds couldn't have been more different: his dominated by muddy pitches and bone-crushing tackles, hers by red carpets and platinum records. But underneath the glitter and glory, they found something real.

Now they just have to prove that a rugby captain and a pop princess can write their own love story even if it means rewriting all the rules.

A sizzling contemporary romance featuring a hot-as-sin rugby captain and a chart-topping pop star who find that true love is worth fighting for. With sizzling chemistry, emotional depth, and the perfect balance of sports and stardom, this opposites-attract romance will leave you breathless.

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Chapter One

The very last thing George Dennis needed right before his first game of rugby as captain for his country was to get distracted by a beautiful woman.

He'd thought he was ready. He was in the best physical condition of his life, had just won the title of Australian Player of the Year, been named captain three months before the tour of Europe began, and used that time wisely to study up on the teams he'd be facing and to gain the respect of his teammates.

And yet, on the verdant turf of Dublin's Aviva Stadium, with the Irish supporters turning the inside of the stadium as green as the lush grass underfoot and a pack of burly Irishmen waiting to pound George and his teammates into the dirt, he looked full into the face of a delicate slip of a girl and completely lost his heart.

It was her voice, he tried to tell himself.

She was singing his national anthem and doing it with a fervency even the most rabid nationalist would approve of, her voice surprisingly powerful for a slight little thing, fully-trained and perfectly on pitch.

George appreciated music, but his own singing left a lot to be desired, he knew.

Still, he sang along, well aware of the TV cameras tracking down the line of gold-jerseyed players, aware viewers would be watching who was singing and who was not.

There were only a few seconds between the end of Advance Australia Fair and a burly tenor stepping up to sing the Irish national anthem, and George used them to turn to the national coach, standing beside him, and ask a question which should have been the last thing on his mind.

“Who’s the singer?”

The coach shot him a raised eyebrow before shrugging. “Misty something.”

“She sang well. Got the boys fired up.” George attempted to come up with a reasonable explanation for his interest.

“Stay hungry,” was his coach’s parting shot before the band started to play, and George nodded, turning to face respectfully forward again.

Still, his eyes tracked to one side, following the slight figure in the shimmering silver dress making her way to the side of the field.

She had long, wavy dark hair which hung all the way to her ass, long strands dancing in the gusting wind blowing around the ground.

She’s probably cold , he thought. It was a chilly April day in Dublin and the silver dress was sleeveless and flimsy-looking.

Everyone else in the stadium wore more substantial clothing than Misty, or whatever her name was, even the players in their shorts and short-sleeved jerseys; at least they had long socks on and would soon be running and sweating, keeping themselves warm.

As though aware of his scrutiny, the singer stopped at the sideline and turned, catching him staring as she looked him full in the face.

She tilted her head as though curious, and then a fleeting smile crossed her face.

She mouthed something; George puzzled for a moment before realising she'd just wished him luck.

Instinctively, he smiled, and she raised a slender hand in a tiny wave before turning on her heel and proceeding up into the stands beside the assistant obviously there to escort her.

"Are you seriously eyeing up a chick right now?" his vice-captain grumbled at his side, voice low, and George shook himself.

"Just thanking her for a good performance singing the anthem."

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on!"

"Shut up, it's game time!" Saved by the whistle, George thought in relief, and put all thoughts of the beautiful singer firmly out of his mind.

About seven hours later, after an exhausting, bruising game they'd won by a scant two points, a news conference, a shower which wasn't hot enough, a recovery massage which didn't last long enough because the entire team needed help, a very large dinner and a lot fewer beers than he'd have liked, George finally closed the door of his hotel room and collapsed on his bed, alone at last, and very grateful his status as team captain at least afforded him the privilege of his own room.

He'd never been particularly comfortable in crowds, and the pressure of being 'switched on' socially all evening was making him feel as though his smile was cracking around the edges.

Reaching for the TV remote, he turned it on, looking to find something mindless to

help calm his mind down so he could sleep.

A Bond movie or something, maybe. He channel-surfed for a few minutes, flicking hastily past sports channels.

That was work, right now, and he didn't want any part of it.

Finally he found some late-night Irish talk show with the host currently interviewing an American actor he vaguely recognised, figured that would do.

Tugging his suit off, he debated dumping it on the floor, but sighed and hauled himself off the bed to hang it up.

He was tired, but not tired enough to be a slob.

His phone fell out of his pocket as he hung his trousers up, and he switched it back on, smiling wearily as it began to ping with messages.

Congratulations, he supposed. Flopping back down on the bed in just his boxers, he answered the messages from his parents; everyone else could wait.

His eyelids were already drifting with weariness.

On impulse, he brought up a search bar and typed in 'singer Misty'.

None of the images which appeared resembled the beauty in the silver dress from that afternoon, though, and he scowled in frustration, wondering how to refine the search.

He was pretty sure she was Australian, from the fervour with which she'd sung the anthem, and added that to the search, with no better result.

Maybe her name's Misti with an i? He tried that, to no avail.

Tired and annoyed, he slapped the phone face-down on the bed.

Her name probably wasn't Misty at all; the coach had seemed pretty vague about it.

Maybe one of the newspapers tomorrow would mention who'd sung the anthems. He'd be reading all the columns anyway...

Sleep was drifting over George in a slow wave when he heard her voice.

Powerful, sensuous, soaring, it jerked him right back from the edge of unconsciousness and snapped his eyes open.

Sitting up, he stared at the television in disbelief, because there she was, singing on a small stage in a TV studio, wearing a sparkly gold top and tight black leggings with high-heeled boots, her wavy dark hair a thick soft mass tumbling around her.

Riveted, George stared at the screen. His mystery singer had an incredible voice as she belted out what he could only call a power ballad, a song he guessed was called something like Your Hand In Mine from the words of the chorus.

A frantic grab for his phone and another search finally revealed her identity; she was a breakout star, he quickly discovered, Australian as he'd already guessed, and known only as Myst.

"Myst," he whispered, watching as she finished her song and stepped down from the stage, smiling, to greet the talk show host waiting for her.

George had the impression she steeled herself for the interview, as though uncomfortable talking rather than singing, but the host was a pro and soon had her at

her ease, that gorgeous smile breaking out as she answered his softball questions.

The interview was pretty short, and by the end of it the only new thing George knew about her was that she had an album out and was in the middle of a European tour.

She'd played at Dublin's 3Arena the previous night and was playing another concert there on Sunday night before travelling on to the mainland UK.

I wonder if I could get tickets, and the okay from the coach to go?

George wondered as he watched. He was sure one of the team's 'fixers' who travelled with them and whose job it was to make anything they wanted appear as though by magic, could handle the tickets, at least. Permission from the coach might be trickier, especially since he already suspected George had been distracted by Myst before the game.

Maybe George could drop a few hints to one of the younger players, get someone else to suggest it as a group outing...

worn out, his eyelids finally drifted shut as sleep claimed him.

George woke up with Myst still on his mind, much to his own private frustration.

It was hardly as though he had a problem meeting attractive women; hell, there'd been plenty the previous evening who would have been only too delighted if the national team captain showed interest in them!

And yet... there was just something about her which called to him, something he'd never previously felt before.

Don't be a creepy stalker. She won't appreciate it .

Still, he couldn't resist the temptation to open a social media app and do a quick search for her.

She had an account, with a blue verified tick, and a little to his surprise, a post from the previous afternoon with a photo of her singing at the stadium and a comment about being honoured to be asked to sing the anthem.

The hashtag #GoAustralia made him grin. He clicked the Like button and shared the post with a note saying 'Thanks for such an inspiring performance!' before following her account from his own.

I'm such a dork. Like she's going to notice, from the thousands of other likes and shares of that post, and the half-million followers she has. Get over yourself, George.

Pushing himself to his feet with a suppressed groan—he had bruises everywhere—he headed for the shower, already thinking ahead to breakfast... and which of the younger players might be susceptible to a suggestion of going out to a pop concert that evening.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

As it turned out, he didn't have to do anything.

One of the fixers turned up to breakfast waving a sheaf of tickets, with a broad smile and an announcement that Myst had invited the entire team to the concert that evening.

Amidst the general enthusiasm from the squad, the coach just shrugged his shoulders and said of course they could go...

as long as they all remembered to stick to the two-beer limit and were in bed by midnight.

"Shall I sort out a bus?" the fixer asked, and was treated to a withering look from the coach.

"This isn't a school outing. They're all grown-ups. They can find their own damn way there and back again. I'm going out to dinner with a friend."

George waited for the coach to leave the room before sidling up to the fixer.

"Hey, I'd really like to meet Myst, thank her personally for doing such an awesome job singing the anthem yesterday. Any chance you could arrange that?"

The fixer, a perky and extremely competent young woman named Zoe, apparently saw nothing suspicious in his request, because she immediately looked down at the phone which was never out of her hand and began tapping on the screen. "Leave it with me, George!"

If anyone could make it happen, Zoe could, so he left the matter in her capable hands and went sightseeing with some of the others. She was waiting for him on his return, slipping a lanyard into his hand with a conspiratorial grin.

“Don’t tell the others, they’ll all want one!”

“You’re a magician, Zoe, thank you.”

She winked before scurrying off to deal with one of the other players who’d somehow managed to lose his room key, and George pocketed the lanyard surreptitiously.

It was a full backstage pass, he saw when he got up to his room and was able to check; he’d be able to go before the show and maybe meet Myst. If it finished late, he might not get back to the hotel on time, so he’d just have to hope she didn’t hole up in her dressing room right up until she had to go on stage.

Now he just had to plan out how to evade his team-mates and get to the arena on his own...

“That special guest you were hoping for has turned up.”

Myst’s eyes popped wide open, causing the makeup artist working on her face to tut in frustration, and she spun in her chair to look at her assistant Jessie, leaning on the doorframe of the dressing-room with a smirk on her face.

“For real?”

“Uh-huh.” Jessie pretended to examine her nails.

Myst tried to peer past Jessie. “Where? Don’t keep him waiting for me!”

“Why not? Don’t let him think you’re over-eager. Men like that have women throwing themselves at him all the time. Keep him hungry. Besides, you’ve only got one false eyelash on.” Jessie grinned. “Let Kaya put the other one on, and I’ll bring him in.”

She did look a bit stupid with only one false eyelash on, Myst conceded as she glanced in the mirror. With an apologetic glance at Kaya, she closed her eyes and sat as still as she could manage.

“I’ll just tidy up the seam and put mascara on,” Kaya said, obviously sensing Myst’s sudden jitters, “and then you’re good to go.”

“Thank you.”

“You like this guy, huh?”

“I don’t even know him,” Myst admitted, “but... have you ever had that thing where your eyes just meet with a complete stranger’s across a crowded space, and everything else just falls away?”

There was an uncomfortable silence before Kaya said quietly “I’ve never been that lucky, no. You can open your eyes now.”

Gentle hands whisked away the cape protecting her outfit, and Myst sighed and opened her eyes, already knowing from that awkward silence what she’d see. George was standing just inside the door, shoulders nearly as wide as the opening, face slightly flushed as he stared at the floor.

“Ten minutes ’til you’re on,” Jessie said, and then she and Kaya were ducking past George and scurrying out, leaving Myst alone with the man she’d just admitted to developing a completely ridiculous crush on despite never having spoken a single

word to.

All she could think was, it was a good thing her stage makeup was so thick. It was covering up the burning blush she could feel scorching her entire face.

“Hi,” she said awkwardly.

“Hi,” he said back, looking just as uncomfortable as she felt, and then his eyes flicked up to meet hers.

It was a good thing she was still sitting down, because otherwise she thought she might have fallen.

Meeting his gaze was almost like a physical blow, a gut punch of sensation which expanded the flush of heat in her face throughout her entire body.

She gasped, a soft little intake of breath, and he took a step forward, closer to her, his hands lifting as though to embrace her before he lowered them quickly and stilled.

“I felt it too,” he said, his voice a deliciously deep rumble Myst felt all the way down to her toes.

“That... whatever it was yesterday. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since.

Asked an assistant to get me this so I could meet you for real.

” He flicked at the lanyard hanging around his neck, never looking away from her face.

“I invited the team because I wanted to see you again. I was trying to work out how I could invite you backstage when the request came in to get you a pass,” Myst

confessed, and George smiled, the expression transforming his battered, rough-hewn face.

He'd never be handsome, but when he smiled... ah, when he smiled he was beautiful .

A loud buzzer sounded, and Myst sighed. "There's no time ," she said, despairing. "Can you come back, after the show?"

"For a while." He looked sheepish. "I have to be back at the hotel by midnight."

His life was probably almost as regimented as hers, she realized, constrained by a timetable written by others. Nodding, she accepted the stricture. "I'll finish around eleven. If you're in here then, we could get a few minutes to talk."

"I'll be here." He took another small step closer. "What is this?"

She knew exactly what he was asking, and she told him the truth. "I don't know."

He reached out a hand, palm up. Waiting.

With only a brief hesitation, Myst held her own hand out over his, noting with amusement the size disparity between them.

George must be at least six foot four and massive, burly with muscle, whereas she was five foot one in her bare feet and less than half his weight.

Her hand looked childlike over his, in the few seconds where she held it still before lowering it and letting her skin meet his for the very first time.

She didn't know what she'd expected, but the jolt of electricity felt almost familiar,

expected , as though she'd known from that first moment of looking into his eyes that this was how it would be when they touched.

Thick fingers closed gently around hers, and she saw the awareness, the shared sensation, in his eyes.

“Whatever this is,” she said, “I’m not willing to walk away without finding out.”

“Me neither.” He moved a half-step closer, and in an unexpectedly gallant gesture, bowed over her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers lightly. “You have to go.”

“I do,” she agreed, wincing as the buzzer sounded again. “That’s my two-minute warning.”

He lowered her hand, letting it go with apparent reluctance.

“Myst!” Jessie’s voice yelled from outside in the hallway.

“I’m coming!”

George moved aside to let her pass, followed her out.

She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. “Enjoy the show.”

“I’m looking forward to it... and even more to the end, because I’ll see you again. I’ll be here.”

Myst felt her smile widen. Jessie took her arm, tugging on it, pulling her towards the stage entrance.

“You look incredible, by the way!” George called from behind her.

She looked back, seeing him standing there square-shouldered and solid, a still, massive presence amidst the chaos backstage.

He smiled when she looked back and she laughed, still unable to believe the sheer ridiculousness of it all.

A rugby player. Of all the unexpected, unlikely people for me to have instant chemistry with!

There was no more time to think as Jessie practically pushed her up into the stage wings, where her band were waiting for her, jogging on the spot with impatient energy.

Trying to push George from her mind, a feat she feared was going to prove utterly impossible, Myst pasted on a smile and took the microphone her sound manager held out with a nod of thanks.

“Good evening, Dublin!” she cried, walking out on stage, and, as it always did, the welcoming roar of the crowd filled her with a surge of energy. Her smile turned genuine as the band struck up the opening chords of the first song, and she opened her mouth and let the music pour out.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Chapter Two

Myst worked incredibly hard on stage, George thought as he sat in the stands watching.

She didn't do much of the choreographed dancing he saw some singers do, but she was constantly on the move, engaging with the audience, running all over the stage.

Her music was vocals-heavy, making the most of that astonishing, powerful voice.

She took two quick breaks for fast outfit changes, and he suspected that was more because she was literally soaked in sweat than just for aesthetics.

"Coming back with us, George?" the team-mate on his left leaned in to ask as Myst finally left the stage and the audience gave one last round of thunderous applause.

He shook his head. "No, thanks, I'll make my own way back. Got someone I want to see."

He slipped away from the group as they made their way out, ducking his head to disguise his height and lose himself in the chattering, surging crowd, pulling out the lanyard he'd tucked inside his shirt so the others wouldn't see.

Two minutes later he was slipping back into Myst's dressing-room, and a minute after that the door clicked shut and he turned from staring at the rack of glittering stage costumes to see her smiling at him.

“That was incredible,” he said, and she laughed, obviously on an adrenaline high.

“What a great crowd!” Grabbing a towel lying over the back of a chair, she started blotting at her damp, sweaty face with it, checking in the mirror to ensure her makeup was still intact, or so he assumed.

“Grab a chair, if you like. I’ve really only got a few minutes before the record company executives start knocking on the door. ”

“I know.” He’d already figured that, just like him after a match when the media and sponsors and VIP ticket holders were baying to talk to him, Myst’s time after a concert wouldn’t be her own. “I wish I didn’t have to go, but I do, and we’re flying to Edinburgh in the morning.”

“Yes, I’m off to Manchester myself.” Her eyes met his in the mirror, eyes the pale blue of a winter sky, startling in their brightness. “I looked at your schedule. We’ll be in London at the same time, in two weeks.”

“We are?” He felt hope surge in his chest. “I have limited free time, though.”

“So do I.” Myst turned to face him as she discarded the towel, her smile rueful. “Here’s the thing, though. The timing’s never going to be good for us. Is it?”

“No.” He felt something inside him break. “You’re saying there’s no point in trying, right?”

“No!” She took a step forward, reaching out towards him.

“I’m saying that if we’re going to try, we need to accept right from the outset that it’ll never be easy.

I probably get to dictate my schedule a little more than you do because I can play the diva card sometimes, because without me, there's no show; but we both have commitments, things we can't change or delay no matter what our personal preferences might be. ”

She understood . A flood of relief washed over George and he nodded gratefully. “I want to,” he said, trying to encompass everything he wanted in a few simple words. “I want to try and make it work.”

“So do I, but before we even commit to trying, can we make a couple of really simple rules? If you decide you don't want to try any more, I want to be the first to know.

I don't want to go online one day and discover you've blocked me on social media, or wake up to photos of you with someone else in the tabloid press. ”

“I think you're more likely to be a tabloid target than I am,” George pointed out.

“True, unfortunately. I've already been featured on CelebNation supposedly dating at least three different men I've never even met.“ She made a face. “Don't believe anything you read on that website.”

“Can't say I've ever heard of it,” he admitted.

“Probably for the best.” She tilted her head a little, those winter-sky eyes studying his face. “So, do we have a deal? Anything real happens, either of us decide we don't want to try this any more, we're honest about it, upfront?”

“Absolutely.” He held his hand out to shake, and when she put hers in it, said “I wasn't looking for you. I'm definitely not looking for anyone else.”

Her smile filled the room with sunshine. “Me neither.”

“Myst!” A bang on the door interrupted them.

Myst grimaced. “I’m so sorry, but I have to go. Can you stay a little while?”

“I could, but it might raise some questions we’re not ready to answer.”

She shrugged, her smile reappearing. “Not really. We’re both high-profile Australians in Dublin. It’s not totally outside the realm of possibility that we’re already acquainted, that you came along to the concert to show your support after I sang the anthem yesterday... that we’re friends.”

“That’s all very plausible, or it would be if I didn’t think I’ll do a really crappy job of looking at you in a merely platonically friendly way.” George spread his hands ruefully, and Myst laughed.

“Me, too. I want to spend all night just staring, soaking you in. Taking in every detail of your face, your expressions.” Reaching out, she linked her fingers with his briefly, squeezed. “We’ll have time. We’ll make time, right? In London?”

“London,” he promised.

“Myst, seriously!” The banging on the door resumed, and Myst groaned, letting go of his hand.

“I’m sorry...”

“You don’t have to be. If we’re going to work on this thing, there’ll be times when it’s my turn to say I’m sorry because there’s something I have to do which I have no choice about.”

“You get it.” Her expression was relieved as she gazed up at him. “You really do get

it.”

“I really do.” He stroked his thumb over the backs of her fingers lightly. “I can’t promise I’ll never feel mad and frustrated because stuff happens and we can’t see each other, but I can promise I’ll never blame you for it.”

“And I’ll promise the same.”

“Myst! ”

“I’m coming!” she called in response to the frantic screech, and George let go of her hand.

“Go,” he told her. “I’ll wait a bit before following you.”

“Thank you!” She hurried to the door, looking back over her shoulder to flash him another heart-stopping smile, and he stood with his hand over his heart for several moments. He had the curious sensation of waking up from a dream, as though she hadn’t quite been real.

The door opened again to reveal a different young woman standing there; the one who’d escorted him to Myst’s dressing room.

Jessie, he thought her name was, and looking at her closely now, he wondered if she and Myst were related.

Jessie had the same pale blue eyes, the same waifish build, though she was a couple of inches taller, and her dark hair was cut in an edgy pixie style with a bright blue stripe in the front.

Jessie folded her arms and stared at him, taking him in. George had the uneasy

feeling that he was being weighed and measured, and quite possibly found wanting.

“She’s safe with me. I promise,” he said.

“Physically, I believe you.” Jessie nodded, still watching him intently. “Her heart? Not so sure. I’ve never seen her like this with anyone, and I’ve known her all her life.”

“Are you her sister?”

“Cousin.” Jessie’s smile was a brief thing, sharper and more cynical than Myst’s. “She’s three years younger. My earliest memories are of listening to her singing and playing the piano.”

“I’m glad she has someone to watch out for her who’s not just here for the money,” George said sincerely. “Who’s here because they love her.”

Jessie seemed to soften a little bit at his words. “I do love her, and trust me, if you break her heart I’ll destroy you.”

“I’m not planning on it. I’m not a player; I really wasn’t in the market for any kind of relationship, but when I saw her yesterday it was like someone flipped a switch. I had to meet her.”

“She said pretty much the same thing about you,” Jessie noted wryly.

“Well, if we’re doing this thing, you’d better give me a phone number where I can contact you direct.

That PA Zoe’s very nice, but we need to keep this as tightly held as possible if you don’t want the paps breathing down your neck. ”

George recited his phone number and saved the one she gave him in return. He also offered up a private email address he used on a messaging app, strictly with close friends and family.

“Gotcha.” Jessie entered it into her phone. “I’ll pass that on to Myst, and I’ll be in touch once we get to London, figure out a time when she can meet with you.”

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

She looked up from her phone to meet his gaze, nodded crisply.

“There’s a car waiting at the stage door for you, to take you back to your hotel.

Don’t thank me, thank Zoe,” she added when he began to thank her again.

“I’d take her into your confidence, if I were you, swear her to secrecy.

You’ll need at least one person in your camp who can cover for you and she seems both competent and capable of maintaining confidentiality. ”

“I’ll think about it,” George said. “She’s employed by the team management, rather than me, so if management asked her a question, I’m not sure if she would cover for me.”

“Hm. Maybe a team-mate you trust, then?” Jessie shrugged as though to say, your problem not mine .

“I’ll think about it,” George said again, but he knew she was right.

He did need somebody on his side who’d back up his cover story, because otherwise the gossip network would kick in real fast, and there were actual journalists travelling

with the team, staying in the same hotels.

They were sports journalists, true, but some of them at least would have links with social and gossip correspondents, and the Australian team captain dating a pop princess was too juicy a tidbit to keep quiet.

He made it back to the team hotel with just a few minutes to spare before midnight, slipped into the lobby with a cheerful good evening from the assistant coach who was ticking off everyone as being present.

“Enjoy the concert, George?” the coach asked.

“Loved it. She was great, a real star performer. I’d love to go again sometime,” he said, hoping he was planting a seed when the coach smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, all the others have been saying they enjoyed it. G’night.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket as he reached his room; slipping it out, he smiled to see a message from Myst had popped up.

I’m sorry I didn’t have more time to spend with you tonight, I’d have loved to talk to you more.

Me too, George typed back. Tell me something.

Something?

Something about you not everybody knows. I’ll go first, if you like. I’m the youngest of five and the others are all girls. I have eleven nieces and nephews and I’m That Doting Uncle who does stupid stuff like buy them drum kits.

LOL! OK then. This is a deep, dark secret so you must never share it with anyone, but my real name is Joanna Jones.

I see why you took a stage name. Myst suits you better. Joanna Jones is ordinary and you're anything but.

That means so much more coming from you than all the asskissers I had to deal with fawning over me tonight. Thank you.

They chatted for hours, discovering any number of things they had in common.

They'd lived in the same suburb of Sydney as kids, though attended different schools.

Myst was five years younger than George, but they still found a few shared acquaintances, favourite cafes and places they liked to visit.

It wasn't until the first grey light of dawn began to filter past the blinds over the hotel room's curtains that George looked at the time and realised to his horror that they'd been texting all night.

OMG. I should go. I've got to be on a bus to the airport in 2 hours.

Holy wow look at the time! I'm sorry. So hopped up on adrenaline I couldn't sleep, and I've kept you up all night .

He smiled, reading that. I never noticed the time, enjoying chatting to you too much.

Me too. Hope you get some time today to nap. I'm not flying until tonight.

I'll be fine. Safe travels, I'll talk to you later.

A knock on his door made George start and drop the phone on the bed beside him.
“Yes?” he called.

“Breakfast in thirty,” a voice called. “Look lively!”

“I’m moving.” He pushed himself off the bed with a sigh, heading for the shower.

He should be exhausted after being awake all night, but he didn’t feel too bad.

It’d probably hit him later, which at least would be a good excuse to go to bed early and would make team management happy that he was setting a good example.

Emerging from the shower, he found there was one more message on his app.

Looking forward to talking again soon.

He couldn’t wipe the grin off his face.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Chapter Three

George got very little time to himself on tour, between training, team meetings, organised outings, press interviews and game preparation, but over the next few days he managed to exchange quite a number of text messages with Myst, talking about anything and everything, getting to know each other the best way they could without being able to talk in person.

They managed a couple of late night Whatsapp calls, too, and it was during one of these when Myst mentioned she'd been asked to present an award at a show in London.

"Sounds like fun," George said.

"Well... I was wondering if you'd like to come with me. It's the same day you arrive in London." She cast her long lashes down, peeked back at the camera. "I mean, you're legitimately someone who teenagers look up to, so me bringing you would make total sense."

It was the kind of media opportunity he was always encouraged to seek out, too, so he didn't think there would be any issue. Promising to find out and let her know as soon as possible, he was rewarded with a devastating smile, one which made his heart turn over in his chest.

George strongly suspected he was going to spend an evening in her company just staring at her dumbstruck and looking like a fool, but he couldn't make himself care.

After thinking about what Jessie had advised, he eventually decided that he needed to admit the truth to the team manager and ask if he could co-opt Zoe's services occasionally.

He didn't want to ask Zoe to divide her loyalties, and he really didn't want secrecy to come back and bite him in the ass.

The manager, Joel, eyed him over his glasses as George stumbled through an explanation that he was, maybe, sort-of dating Myst.

"And?" Joel prompted finally.

"I want to meet up with her in London. She's invited me to escort her to the Teen Idol Awards, which is three days before the game."

Joel swung back and forth thoughtfully on his chair, obviously thinking through the implications.

"You still have to obey team regs," he said finally.

"No alcohol at the event, and I get that you'll probably not make curfew because these things run late, but don't be out until dawn.

You're to be on the field training with everyone else the next day, and you'll be on my schedule from then until kick-off. "

"Yessir," George agreed. "And, er, the night of the game..."

"Playing a concert, is she?"

"At the O2," George agreed.

“Once the press conferences are completed.” Joel nodded, returning his attention to the stack of papers in front of him.

“And after that, the tour is concluded; there’s a recovery session Sunday morning and we’ll have a video wash-up Sunday afternoon, but after that your time is your own until you fly home. Whenever that is.”

George had planned to fly home a couple of days after that, but he didn’t actually have to.

He wasn’t required to return to pre-season training with his club for another four weeks.

Looking up Myst’s tour schedule he discovered she was headed on to Paris after London, then Amsterdam, Stockholm, Oslo, Munich, Berlin and more, a full European tour for the next two months.

It felt presumptuous to book himself on a flight to Paris, but he figured it would be pretty easy to do it if he needed to, though he should probably check with Zoe if he needed any visas.

With a quiet thank you to Joel, he slipped out and headed back to his room. He’d send a message to Myst first, letting her know he had permission to go to the awards show with her.

Being team captain was a whole new world, he was discovering.

He’d been a high-profile player for several years, tipped as a future captain almost from his first international game four years ago, and had thought he understood media attention.

Being recognised everywhere he went was unnerving, though, and the way journalists seemed to jerk to alertness when he entered the room was something he didn't think he'd ever get used to.

All of it paled into insignificance when he stepped out of the limo onto the red carpet at the event venue and a thousand flashbulbs went off in his face.

“Relax,” Myst whispered under her breath, her voice barely audible over the chaotic hum of the crowd. She glanced up at him with a quick smile, her pale blue eyes sparkling under the harsh lights. “Just keep walking. Left foot, right foot. You’ve got this.”

“Easy for you to say,” George muttered back, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably in the tailored suit that suddenly felt two sizes too tight. Somewhere to his left, someone screamed Myst’s name like they were announcing the second coming.

“Over here, Myst! Give us a pose!”

“Who’s your date, Myst?!”

“Looking stunning as always, Myst! Can we get a smile?”

She handled it all like she was gliding through water, serene and unshaken. Her free hand rose in a graceful wave, fingers fluttering just enough to acknowledge the crowd without seeming overly rehearsed.

“How do you even hear yourself think?” George asked, leaning closer to her ear. His tone was light, but the bewilderment in his voice was real.

Myst laughed under her breath, a soft sound meant only for him.

“You don’t think, you float,” she replied, squeezing his hand lightly before guiding him forward.

“And if floating doesn’t work, just smile and nod.

Like this.” She turned her face toward the cameras, her expression shifting into something radiant but effortlessly natural.

It was mesmerizing and...a little terrifying, frankly.

George tried to mimic her, though it felt more like he was baring his teeth than smiling. “Like this?” he asked, glancing down at her.

“Close enough,” she teased, her lips twitching as though holding back a laugh. “Though maybe dial it back a notch. You look like you’re about to tackle someone.”

“Force of habit,” he deadpanned, earning another quiet laugh from her. It was grounding, that sound. Amongst all the chaos, Myst was a steady presence, her poise wrapping around him like an invisible shield.

“Eyes up, rugby guy,” she murmured, tilting her head toward another bank of photographers. “They’ll eat you alive if you look lost.”

“Too late for that,” he said under his breath, but he lifted his chin anyway, trying to channel even half the confidence she seemed to radiate effortlessly.

The cameras snapped louder, shouts rising in volume as Myst paused mid-carpet to shift her stance.

She adjusted slightly, turning her body toward George just enough to include him in the frame but not so much that the moment became about him.

She was shielding him, he realized, subtly deflecting the attention without drawing notice.

“Now smile,” she whispered, her voice carrying a playful lilt.

“Still feels like I’m being ambushed,” he grumbled, but he managed a grin anyway. He might’ve been out of place here, but he wanted to try. Not for the cameras, not for the crowd, but for her.

“See? You’re a natural,” Myst said, her eyes lifting to meet his briefly before she turned back to the sea of lenses.

Her hand remained firmly in his, a tether in the storm.

For someone so small, she had a way of commanding space, bending the chaos to her will.

George could only marvel at how easy she made it seem.

“Not sure I’d call this my natural habitat,” he muttered, scanning the frenzy around them. People pressed against the barriers, craning for a better view. Microphones jutted forward like spears. “Feels more like being in the middle of a scrum.”

“Ah, but scrums are your specialty, aren’t they?” Myst quipped, throwing him a quick sideways glance. Her lips curved into a smirk, and for a split second, George forgot about the cameras, the crowd, all of it.

“Touché,” he admitted. Her energy was infectious, pulling him out of his own head and into the moment. Maybe this world wasn’t his, but with Myst leading the way, it didn’t seem quite so insurmountable.

There were a lot of voices yelling, calling Myst to look in every direction at once, smile, asking who her date was.

“Don’t any of you watch sports?” Myst laughed, a shimmering sound which made George’s spine tingle. “This is my good friend George Dennis, captain of the Australian rugby union team, you heathens.”

The intensity of the flashbulbs increased again, making George blink. Questions were being yelled at him now, asking how he knew Myst, were they dating?

“Good friends, you jackals,” Myst said, her smile never wavering.

“Leave the man alone. George, let’s move on in.

There’ll be someone else arriving in a minute and I’m sure there’s someone on the red carpet waiting to shove a microphone in my face.

” She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and nudged lightly, and he turned instinctively in the direction she indicated.

A tall, beautiful Black woman in a sparkling lime-green suit was waiting for them, a TV camera at her shoulder and a microphone in her hand. Myst’s smile widened, turning a little more genuine, George thought, as the woman stepped into their path.

“Rebekah. Good to see you.”

“It is faaahbulous to see you again, Myst my dahling,” the woman drawled. “And who is this delicious hunk on your arm? A little bird in my ear is murmuring he’s one of your fellow convicts, I mean Australians?”

George grinned, liking the woman immediately. “George Dennis, ma’am. A pleasure

to meet you.” Gallantly he bowed over her hand, brushing the ghost of a kiss against her knuckles and winking at her as he straightened back up.

“My word,” Rebekah murmured appreciatively, eyeing the breadth of his shoulders.

“Myst, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“I don’t,” Myst said in a confiding tone, leaning forward, and then cracking up in a full-throated laugh as even the cameraman lifted his eye from his lens piece to stare at her.

“George is a friend, Rebekah! He’s the captain of the Australian international rugby union team.

They’re over here on tour. They’ll be playing England at Twickenham on Saturday, but for tonight, he very kindly offered to escort me to the awards. ”

“Well.” Rebekah looked him up and down, then cast Myst a wicked grin. “If I was in your shoes, dahling, I’d take shameless advantage. And talking of shoes, by the way, those are faaahbulous, who made them? And your gown?”

“I liked her,” George murmured into Myst’s ear a few minutes later, as they moved on down the red carpet.

“I think she’s genuine, despite the superficial attitude.

I like her too.” Myst nodded and smiled but didn’t stop again, despite other hosts trying to beckon her over.

They passed through the doors into the building and George looked around, a little dazzled by the bright lights inside, the sparkle from the gowns.

It was a lot better lit than the rugby awards dinners he was used to, and he realised straight away it was because of the TV cameras located everywhere, positioned

where they would be able to catch the reactions of anyone in the audience at any moment.

George sat stiffly in his chair near the front of the grand hall, feeling entirely out of place amidst the glittering sea of designer gowns and tuxedos.

Around him, the air buzzed with chatter and the occasional burst of polite applause as awards were handed out.

But none of it really registered. His focus was on Myst as she strode across the stage under the glow of a thousand lights.

She looked radiant, her wavy dark hair cascading down her back, catching the soft shimmer of the dress she wore, a deep emerald green that seemed to shift shades with every movement.

George watched as she approached the podium, her confidence palpable, even from a distance.

She didn't just walk; she commanded the space, every step purposeful, every smile calculated yet somehow genuine.

"Thank you all for being here tonight," Myst began. She spoke comfortably, weaving humor and grace into her speech as she introduced the nominees for the next award. The audience hung on her every word, completely captivated.

George couldn't help but marvel at how effortless she made it all look.

This was her world; bright, polished, endlessly demanding.

It was nothing like his own, where grit and teamwork ruled the day.

Watching her now, surrounded by glamour and applause, he wondered if he was just fooling himself thinking he could fit into this life she'd built.

As the winner was announced and cheers erupted around the room, George shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Maybe this wasn't a scrum, but it felt just as overwhelming, just as relentless. He adjusted his cufflinks, trying to shake off the doubt creeping into his thoughts.

Then Myst glanced his way.

It was fleeting, just a flicker of her gaze over the crowd, but it landed squarely on him.

And when her lips curved into a soft, knowing smile, it was as if the rest of the room vanished.

In that instant, it didn't matter how different their worlds were.

She saw him. Not the rugby star or the fish-out-of-water in a tuxedo—just him.

George felt the tension ease from his shoulders. He straightened in his seat, returning her smile with a faint one of his own. Maybe he didn't fully understand this world of hers, but for now, that look was enough to remind him why he was here. For her.

A few minutes later, he leaned against the wall backstage, his hands shoved into the pockets of his tuxedo pants.

The familiar click of heels on polished floors broke through his thoughts, and there she was, slipping through the curtain with an ease that made it look like she owned the place, which, honestly, she kind of did.

Her dark hair shimmered under the low backstage lighting, cascading over the sleek emerald gown.

She looked like a dream, and George felt like a very large, very awkward extra in her movie.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Myst said, a teasing lilt in her voice as she stopped in front of him, tilting her head just slightly to meet his gaze.

“Yeah, well,” George replied, scratching the back of his neck, “I figured I’d camp out back here and try not to break anything expensive.”

Myst laughed, soft and warm, and the sound eased some of the tension knotting his shoulders. “You’re not doing too bad for a rugby guy who stole the show on the red carpet.” She raised an eyebrow at him, a playful challenge glinting in her pale blue eyes.

“Stole the show? Pretty sure I was just trying not to trip over my own feet,” George shot back. “Let’s face it, you’re leagues ahead of me at all this.”

“Leagues?” Myst repeated, pretending to consider it. “Maybe. But I’ve got to say, you clean up all right. I think you might’ve given a few people heart palpitations out there.”

“Stop it,” George groaned, though his ears were definitely turning red. “I’m not built for this celebrity stuff. I’m more ‘muddy boots and bruises’ than... whatever this is.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she said, nudging his arm lightly. “You’ve got charm when you’re not dodging cameras like they’re tackling you.”

“Well,” George countered, leaning down just enough to catch her eyes, “if I’ve got

charm, it's only because I'm standing next to someone who carries the whole room without breaking a sweat."

"Flatterer," Myst murmured, rolling her eyes, but the pink hue dusting her cheeks suggested otherwise. For all her poise, George liked knowing he could still catch her off guard.

The moment shifted, her smile softening as she glanced toward the curtain she'd come through. The noise from the hall had faded now, replaced by distant chatter and hurried footsteps of staff resetting the stage. When she turned back to George, the sparkle in her eyes dimmed just a fraction.

"Thanks for being here," she said quietly, her voice dipping into something more sincere. "These nights... they can feel so big and loud, but somehow still lonely. Having you here makes it easier."

"Lonely?" George frowned, catching the faint vulnerability in her tone. "You? You're surrounded by people who adore you."

"Adoration isn't the same as connection," Myst replied, lifting one shoulder in a small shrug. "It's different when you're always expected to be 'on.'" She paused, then smiled at him, a little wistful, perhaps a little grateful. "But tonight, I don't feel quite so alone."

"Well," George said after a beat, his voice softer now, "I'm glad I could help. Even if I'm basically your human shield from the paparazzi."

Before she could respond, Jessie appeared around the corner, dressed in all black with a headset perched on her ear. "Myst, the team wants you at the afterparty. It's already started."

“Do they now?” Myst replied, her voice edged with something unreadable. She glanced at George, as though weighing her options.

“Go,” George said firmly, giving her a nudge. “This is your night. Don’t let me hold you back.”

“Hold me back?” she repeated, her brow furrowing. “George, I’ve spent the entire evening parading around under flashing lights and scripted smiles. If I want to skip one party to spend time with someone who actually grounds me, I think I’ve earned that.”

“Fair point,” George conceded, though he felt the heat rise to his cheeks again. “Still, won’t your team be annoyed?”

“Probably,” she said, her lips curving into a mischievous smile. “But they’ll survive. Tonight, I get to decide what I want, and right now, I want to stay here.”

“With me?” George asked, raising a sceptical brow.

“With you,” Myst confirmed, and there was no hesitation in her voice. “I’m skipping the party, Jessie!” she called to her cousin, who nodded as if it was exactly the answer she’d expected.

“Have fun,” Jessica called after them. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Myst tugged at George’s hand, her heels clicking a staccato rhythm against the concrete floor as they slipped out of the side exit.

The muffled roar of the show faded behind them, and in moments they were back inside the car, headed for Myst’s hotel, a quiet, discreet and very expensive old building just a few blocks away.

As the elevator's polished doors slid shut, George leaned back against the mirrored wall and let out a long breath, reaching up to free his bow tie and stuff it into his jacket pocket.

"Tell me again how I got roped into this?" he asked, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward.

"Roped in?" Myst echoed with mock indignation. "You practically volunteered. Don't think I didn't see you puffing your chest out on the red carpet."

"That wasn't puffing," George defended. "That was survival. Do you have any idea how terrifying those cameras are? They're like vultures with flashes."

"Welcome to my world," she said softly, her smile slipping into something quieter. She looked down at their joined hands as if realizing only now that she hadn't let go. For a moment, neither of them moved. Then the elevator chimed, breaking the spell.

"Come on," Myst murmured, pulling him forward. "Let's get out of here before someone decides to hunt us down."

The room was expansive yet cozy, the sort of luxury that felt lived-in rather than staged. Warm golden lamps cast a soft glow over plush, antique furniture and a coffee table scattered with sheet music and an abandoned cup of tea.

"Wow," George said, shoving his hands into his pockets as he took it all in. "This is... not what I expected."

"Good or bad?" Myst asked, kicking off her heels and sinking onto the couch with a sigh of relief. Her petite frame seemed to melt into the cushions, her usual poise giving way to something far more human.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“Good,” he said quickly, then added, “I think I expected more... glitter?”

“Don’t let the stage persona fool you,” she said, waving a hand.

“Most days, I’m lucky if I can find matching socks, let alone glitter.

” She tilted her head toward the seat beside her, and after a moment’s hesitation, George joined her, peeling off his jacket and leaving it on the armrest. It was warm in the suite.

For a while, they sat in companionable silence. Myst tucked her legs beneath her, absently tracing patterns on the armrest, while George leaned forward, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing in particular. It was Myst who broke the quiet first, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Do you ever feel like... you’re living someone else’s life?”

George turned to her, surprised by the question. “What do you mean?”

“Like you’re playing this role everyone expects of you,” she explained, her gaze fixed on the coffee table. “And if you stop for even a second, the whole thing will come crashing down. It’s exhausting, trying to be everything for everyone. Sometimes I wonder if I even know who I am anymore.”

“Hey,” George said gently, reaching out to touch her hand. She looked up, startled, as if she hadn’t meant to say so much. “You’re not just anyone. You’re Myst. And whether you’re on stage or sitting here barefoot with tea stains on your table, you’re

still you.”

“Tea stains?” she repeated, her lips twitching despite herself.

“Big ones,” he confirmed, grinning. “Right there. Pretty sure they’ll never come out. Hotel’s gonna stick you with a bill.”

“Rugby players,” she muttered, shaking her head. “So observant.”

“Occupational hazard,” he quipped. But then his tone softened.

“Honestly, though, I get it. Being captain... it’s not just about the game.

People expect you to have all the answers, to lead, to never falter.

And yeah, it’s rewarding, but it’s also.

..” He paused, searching for the right word. “Lonely, sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Myst said quietly. “Lonely.”

The word hung between them, heavy but not unwelcome. Myst shifted closer, her knee brushing his thigh, and when she looked at him this time, there was no trace of the sparkling pop star or the poised presenter. Just Myst—open, raw, real.

“Thanks for saying that,” she said. “Most people just assume I’ve got it all figured out.”

“Most people don’t pay attention,” George replied. “But I’m not most people.”

“Clearly,” she teased, the light returning to her eyes. “Most people wouldn’t survive a

night in those cameras.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, leaning back with a dramatic sigh. “Not all heroes wear capes. Some of us just wear green and gold.”

“Rugby hero,” she said again, but this time her tone was different, softer, almost tender. She reached up, tucking a stray strand of dark hair behind her ear, and smiled at him in a way that made his chest tighten. “You’re full of surprises, George Dennis.”

“Right back at you,” he murmured, unable to look away.

The air between them shifted, charged with something unspoken but undeniable.

Myst’s hand lingered on the cushion between them, close enough that George could feel its warmth.

For a fleeting moment, he thought about closing the distance, about what it would mean to take that step.

But instead, he stayed where he was, waiting, hoping, for her to make the call.

Myst’s laugh was soft, almost a whisper against the quiet hum of the suite.

She leaned back into the plush couch, her knees tucked beneath her, watching George with that half-smile that had undone him from the moment they met.

“Alright, rugby hero,” she said, tilting her head, her dark hair spilling over one shoulder like silk.

“What’s it gonna take to get you to stop looking at me like that? ”

“Like what?” George asked, his voice low and gravelly. He was perched on the edge of the couch, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped like he was bracing for impact. He wasn’t entirely sure when the room had started feeling smaller, or warmer, but it had.

“Like I’m some kind of mystery you’re trying to solve,” Myst replied, her pale blue eyes narrowing playfully. But there was something else there too, something quieter, more vulnerable, tucked just beneath the surface.

“Maybe you are a mystery,” he shot back, his lips curving into a slow smile. “And maybe I like solving things.”

“Careful,” she warned, leaning forward just enough to close an inch or two of the space between them. Her voice was teasing, but her gaze held steady, locked onto his as if daring him to look away. “You might not like what you find.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

The words came out softer than he intended, and the weight of them hung in the air between them, heavy but not uncomfortable.

George felt his pulse quicken, the steady thrum of his heart suddenly louder than it had any right to be.

He should’ve looked away, or laughed it off, but instead, he stayed where he was, rooted in place by the sheer pull of her.

She moved first, closing the distance in a way that felt effortless, natural.

One moment she was sitting there, her hand resting lightly on the cushion between them, and the next, her fingers were brushing his arm, tentative but warm.

The contact sent a shiver up his spine, and before he could stop himself, he reached for her, his palm sliding over hers, holding it like it was something delicate.

“George,” she murmured, her voice barely audible now. It didn’t sound like a question, or even a statement. More like a name she was still getting used to saying, testing how it felt on her tongue.

“Yeah?” His throat felt tight, his voice rougher than usual. She was so close now that he could see the faintest freckles across her nose, the way her lashes cast tiny shadows on her cheeks.

“Nothing.” She shook her head slightly, her smile softening as her free hand found its way to his chest. Her fingers curled around the fabric of his shirt, tugging gently. Not enough to pull him closer, but enough to let him know she wanted him to be.

“That doesn’t seem like nothing,” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. But the humour in his voice was fleeting, quickly replaced by something deeper as he leaned in, just enough for their foreheads to brush.

“Don’t ruin it,” she whispered, her breath warm against his cheek. And before he could respond, she closed the gap completely, pressing her lips to his.

The kiss was slow at first, tentative. A careful meeting of worlds neither of them fully understood yet.

But it didn’t stay that way for long. George’s hand slid up her back, his fingers tangling in the waves of her hair as she shifted closer, her body molding against his.

The taste of her lingered on his lips: something sweet and unexpected, like honey and citrus.

“God, Myst,” he muttered against her mouth, his voice breaking slightly as she climbed into his lap.

Her weight settled against him, light and grounding all at once, and the feel of her small hands roaming across his shoulders sent heat coursing through him.

One of her hands slid down to the hem of his shirt, and without thinking, he helped her yank it over his head, fumbling the cufflinks free before tossing it somewhere behind them.

“Rugby hero indeed,” she teased, her words breathless as her fingertips traced the lines of his chest, lingering over old scars and the taut muscle beneath.

But her smile faltered slightly as her eyes flicked back up to meet his.

There was still laughter there, but also hesitation; just enough to remind him that this was new territory for both of them.

“Am I supposed to say thank you?” he joked, though his tone was softer now, matching hers. His hands rested lightly on her hips, and he couldn’t help but marvel at how perfectly she fit there, like she’d been made to sit exactly where she was.

“Maybe later,” she replied, dropping her forehead to his shoulder with a quiet laugh. For a moment, they simply stayed like that. Her arms draped loosely around his neck, his hands steady against her sides, as the intensity ebbed and flowed between them.

“Hey,” he said after a while, his voice quieter now. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, lifting her head just enough to meet his eyes again. Her smile returned, smaller but no less genuine. “I just... I don’t want to mess this up.”

“Me neither,” he admitted, his thumb brushing idly along the curve of her waist. And it was true, he didn’t. Whatever this was, whatever it could be, he wanted it to matter.

For now, though, they didn’t need to figure it all out. For now, they had this, the quiet, messy, beautiful in-between, and neither of them was ready to let it go just yet.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Chapter Four

Myst stirred, the soft weight of a woolen throw slipping from her shoulder as a low groan escaped her lips. Her body felt stiff, her neck bent at an awkward angle, and it took her a few seconds to orient herself. The couch. She was on the couch.

A warm, steady pressure against her side brought everything rushing back.

The passionate make-out session, her in George's lap, kissing him until she could barely breathe.

George taking her hands, slowing the pace gently when she, perhaps, would have rushed things.

And then, apparently, they'd fallen asleep right there together.

She turned her head slightly, her cheek brushing against something solid.

George. He was still here, stretched out beside her, his long legs nearly hanging off the end of the couch.

His head rested against the cushion, tilted towards her, his features softened in sleep.

Even with his mouth slightly open, he looked absurdly handsome, ruggedly so, like the kind of man who belonged on the cover of some wilderness survival magazine.

"Morning," George mumbled, his voice heavy with sleep, his accent thicker than

usual. One of his eyes cracked open, the vibrant blue startling even in his half-conscious state. A crooked smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he fully registered her face. “Reckon I’m crushing you yet?”

“Not yet,” Myst replied, a nervous laugh bubbling up before she could stop it. Her cheeks flamed. She sat up a bit straighter, trying to ignore how her heart thumped like a drum. “Although my left leg’s gone completely numb, so maybe don’t move too fast.”

“Right.” He chuckled, low and gravelly, and shifted his arm away, leaving a surprising chill in its absence.

He pushed himself upright, his broad shoulders taking up what felt like half the room, his hair sticking up in an unruly mess.

It was entirely unfair how good he looked first thing in the morning.

“How’d we manage this?” he asked, rubbing the back of his neck. “I thought I’d be out the door by midnight.”

“Guess we’re not as young and resilient as we used to be,” she teased, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her voice was light, but the truth lingered between them like a ghost. They’d both chosen this.

“Mm,” he hummed, glancing sideways at her. His gaze lingered for just a beat too long, his expression unreadable. Then, as though compelled by some unseen force, he reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair from her face, his rough fingers barely skimming her cheek.

Myst froze, her breath catching. For a moment, the world seemed to narrow to just them, the hum of the city outside muffled by the quiet intimacy of the room. George’s

hand dropped, and he cleared his throat, suddenly looking sheepish.

“Sorry,” he said, his ears tinged pink. “You had...uh...a bit of hair in your eye.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, her voice quieter now. She wasn’t sure if she imagined it, but her skin burned where he’d touched her.

They sat there for a moment longer, neither quite meeting the other’s eyes, until Myst couldn’t help herself. A small giggle escaped her lips, breaking the tension. George raised a brow, his own grin slowly forming.

“Something funny?”

“Just...” She gestured between them, her laughter growing. “This. Us. Falling asleep like teenagers watching a movie or something. It’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous, huh?” He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. “I dunno. Feels kinda nice, actually.”

“Nice?” she echoed, her laughter fading into something softer. She glanced at him, and in his eyes, she saw something unspoken that sent her stomach flipping.

“Yeah,” he said simply. “Nice.”

Their gazes lingered, and for a fleeting second, she thought he might lean in and kiss her again. But then George shifted, stretching his arms above his head with a dramatic yawn that broke the spell.

“Any chance of a coffee?” He flashed her one of those devastatingly charming smiles. And just like that, the awkwardness melted into something easy and familiar, a rhythm they seemed to have found without even realizing it.

Myst's heart swelled. Whatever this was, she wasn't ready for it to end. Not yet.

Myst balanced her mug of tea in one hand and leaned against the kitchenette counter, watching as George, still gloriously rumpled from sleep, stood by the window, squinting at the London sky like it had personally wronged him.

"Does it ever not look like rain here?" he asked, his voice gravelly with the remnants of morning.

"Welcome to England," Myst teased, taking a sip of her tea. "Grey skies and tea are kind of their thing, I've found."

"Tea," he muttered, shaking his head. "I'll stick with this." He raised his own mug, black coffee steaming inside.

They'd been like this for the past few minutes. Quiet, warm, lingering in the bubble they'd somehow created. Myst wasn't sure how long they could keep it up before reality intruded, but she wasn't in a rush to find out.

"Jessie's going to kill me," she murmured after a pause, mostly to herself. "I was supposed to send her my schedule last night, and I..." She trailed off, glancing toward George, who raised an eyebrow.

"Fell asleep on your quality sofa with some world-class company? Yeah, tragic excuse," he said, smirking.

"World-class, huh?" she shot back, narrowing her eyes. "Getting ahead of yourself."

"Just calling it like I see it."

She rolled her eyes but bit back a smile. Of course, that was when Jessie burst

through the door, clipboard in hand, looking every inch the harried assistant.

“Okay, we’ve got...” Jessie froze mid-step, her sharp blue eyes darting between Myst and George. “Oh. Didn’t realize you still had... company,” she said, her tone carefully neutral.

“Good morning to you too, Jessie,” George said, unbothered, flashing her one of those disarming smiles that made Myst want to both roll her eyes and melt on the spot.

“Morning,” Jessie replied curtly, then turned her attention to Myst. “We need to move. You’ve got interviews booked all day and a photoshoot at three. The car will be here in thirty.”

“Right,” Myst said, already feeling the familiar tug of guilt pulling at her chest. She glanced at George, who was now leaning casually against the windowsill, his coffee still in hand, watching the exchange like it amused him.

“Sorry,” she said quietly, stepping closer to him. “I didn’t mean to drag you into my chaos. I’ll be free for dinner, around eight maybe?”

“Sure,” he said, his tone easy and reassuring. “It’s fine. Really. I’ll keep myself entertained. Maybe wander around, see what London’s got to offer.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed, searching his face. “I feel terrible leaving you like this.”

“Don’t,” he said firmly, his sincerity cutting through her worry. “You’ve got stuff to do. I get it. Go do whatever it is rockstars do.”

“That’s very generous of you,” she said dryly, though her lips twitched upward.

“Just don’t make me regret it,” he teased, finishing his coffee and placing the mug in the sink. “Text me if you need me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she replied softly, her heart giving a small twist as Jessie ushered her toward the door. She looked back once, catching George in the golden light of the kitchen, his tall frame relaxed but his gaze steady on her.

“Go,” he mouthed, grinning. And just like that, she did.

George wandered the busy streets of London aimlessly, slipping easily into the rhythm of the city. The cold nipped at his cheeks, but the bustle of people warmed something in him. He ducked into a café near the Thames for lunch, finding Zoe already waiting for him at a corner table.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she said as he slid into the seat across from her. Her bright smile was as sharp as ever, and there was a knowing look in her eye that told him she already had a read on his mood.

“Needed someone to talk me down from whatever mess I’m tangled in,” he admitted with a shrug, running a hand through his hair. He’d sent her a text after leaving Myst’s hotel, hoping she’d still be in London.

“Ah,” Zoe said, leaning forward with interest. “This wouldn’t happen to involve a certain singer-slash-international-sensation, would it?”

“Maybe,” he allowed, smirking half-heartedly.

“Thought so.” Zoe grinned, crossing her arms. “Alright, spill it. What’s eating at you?”

“Honestly?” He hesitated for a moment, glancing out the window at the grey river

before meeting her gaze again. “It’s just... weird. Dating someone like Myst. Everything feels bigger with her, like it’s under a microscope. I don’t know how to navigate that.”

“Ah, the joys of fame,” Zoe said, her tone wry but not unkind. “Let me guess, you’re worried about being ‘just another celebrity boyfriend,’ right?”

“Exactly,” he said, frustration creeping into his voice. “I don’t want to be a footnote in her life, you know? But I also don’t want to hold her back. She’s got this whole universe built around her. Where do I fit into that?”

“George,” Zoe said, leaning forward and softening her voice. “You’ll fit because she wants you to fit. It’s not about being a role model or dodging tabloids. It’s about showing up for her, the same way you show up for your team-mates when the whistle goes to start the game. That’s what matters.”

“Yeah,” he said, exhaling slowly. “I just hope I’m enough.”

“Trust me,” Zoe said with a wink. “You’re more than enough.”

And for the first time that day, George felt like maybe, just maybe, she was right.

The low hum of the restaurant wrapped around Myst like a familiar tune, soothing in its simplicity.

She glanced across the small table at George, who was studying the menu with the kind of intensity she imagined he reserved for analysing game footage.

His brow furrowed slightly, and she had to bite back a smile.

“George,” she teased, her tone lilting, “it’s a pub menu, not a playbook. You don’t

have to strategize your order.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“Hey, this is serious business,” he shot back, his gravelly voice laced with mock indignation.

“You can’t just throw a bloke into a new city and expect him to know the difference between steak and ale pie and shepherd’s pie.

There are stakes here. Literally.” He raised an eyebrow and smirked, clearly pleased with his pun.

“Terrible,” Myst replied, laughing softly.

The sound settled something in her chest, loosening the tension that had wound itself tightly there throughout the day.

Her schedule had been relentless, a whirlwind of meetings, interviews, and rehearsals, but now, here, in this dimly lit corner of London, it was as though the world had slowed down just for them.

“Fine,” George said, setting the menu down with a dramatic sigh. “You choose for me, then. Show me what the locals eat.”

“Brave move,” she quipped. Her pale blue eyes sparkled as she scanned the laminated pages, tapping her finger against her lips in exaggerated contemplation. “Alright, you’re getting the bangers and mash. Classic, hearty, and no risk of you butchering another food pun.”

“Deal,” he said, leaning back in his chair, his large frame somehow managing to look

relaxed despite the cramped space.

As they waited for their meals, the conversation drifted effortlessly, like a melody finding its rhythm.

Myst found herself opening up in ways she rarely did, certainly not to anyone outside her inner circle.

She told him about growing up in western Sydney, the tiny studio apartment she'd shared with her mum after her dad left.

How music had been her escape, her salvation.

"Some nights," she said, tracing the rim of her glass absentmindedly, "we'd sit on the floor with the radio on because we couldn't afford much else. I used to close my eyes and pretend I was the one singing those songs, like if I sang loud enough, the whole world would listen."

"Sounds like they finally did," George said softly, his voice carrying a weight that made her look up. His eyes, those warm, steady blues, were fixed on her, and for a moment, she felt completely seen.

"Yeah," she murmured, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "But sometimes, even when you've got everything you dreamed of, it still feels..."

"Lonely?" he finished, surprising her.

"Yeah," she admitted. "Exactly."

He nodded, staring at the candle flickering between them.

Then, as if sensing it was time to shift gears, he launched into a story about his sisters and how they'd once conspired to dye his hair neon green while he slept as revenge for eating the last Tim Tam.

Myst laughed so hard she nearly spilled her drink, her cheeks aching from the effort.

"Four sisters," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "No wonder you're so tough. They trained you well."

"More like terrorized," he corrected, grinning. "But yeah, they're the best. And don't even get me started on my nieces and nephews. They're absolute menaces, but I wouldn't trade them for anything."

"That sounds..." Myst hesitated, searching for the right word. "Nice. Grounded."

"Chaos is probably the better word," George joked, but there was an unmistakable tenderness beneath his tone.

Their meals arrived then, briefly interrupting the flow, but the warmth lingered.

As they ate, Myst realized how easy it was to be with him, to let down the walls she had spent years carefully constructing.

He wasn't trying to impress her or solve her problems; he was just there, present and real in a way that felt rare and precious.

After dinner, they stepped out into the crisp evening air, the distant murmur of the River Thames guiding their steps. The city lights shimmered on the water's surface, casting everything in a soft, golden glow. Myst pulled her coat tighter around herself, her breath visible in the cold.

“Do you ever stop to think how weird this all is?” George asked suddenly, gesturing vaguely at the world around them.

“Define ‘this,’” Myst replied, tilting her head.

“All of it,” he said, his hands stuffed into his pockets. “Fame. Fans. People knowing your name when you don’t know theirs.”

“All the time,” she admitted. “It’s surreal. But it’s also... I don’t know, beautiful? Like, connecting with strangers through music, it’s why I do this. Even if it means giving up a bit of privacy along the way.”

“Still seems like a lot to handle,” George said.

“Some days more than others,” she agreed, but before she could elaborate, a voice called out behind them.

“Excuse me! Are you... Myst?”

Myst turned to see a young woman clutching her phone, her cheeks flushed with excitement. “I’m sorry to bother you,” the fan continued, “but I’m such a huge fan. Could I get a photo? Please?”

“Of course,” Myst said warmly, stepping closer. She posed patiently as the girl took a selfie, asking her name and thanking her for her support. When the fan finally walked away, practically floating with joy, Myst sighed softly but smiled.

“Does that happen a lot?” George asked, his expression a mix of admiration and curiosity.

“More often than you’d think,” she replied, glancing at him. “But it’s part of the job,

you know? If someone's brave enough to come up and ask, the least I can do is say yes."

"Even when you're tired?" he pressed gently.

"Especially then," she said simply.

George didn't respond immediately, but the way he looked at her, like she was something rare and luminous, spoke volumes.

And as they continued walking, side by side, Myst couldn't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, this connection they were building was worth all the complications that came with it.

Chapter Five

Back at the suite, Myst kicked off her boots with a sigh of relief, wiggling her toes against the plush carpet.

The buzz of the city below hummed faintly through the windows, but the room itself was quiet, save for George's low chuckle as he collapsed onto the couch.

He looked entirely too comfortable there, his long legs stretched out and his arm draped lazily over the backrest like he'd been born to lounge in hotel suites.

"Don't get used to that," she teased, tilting her head toward him. "I might start charging rent."

"Fair enough," George replied, flashing her that easy grin. "Reckon it's worth it if you throw in the view." His gaze lingered on her just a little too long, making her stomach flutter.

Before she could respond, playfully or otherwise, a sharp knock at the door cut through the moment. Myst frowned slightly, already knowing who it would be. Sure enough, Jessie breezed in without waiting for an invitation, her clipboard tucked under one arm and a no-nonsense look firmly in place.

"Sorry to crash your cosy little scene," Jessie began dryly. She motioned for Myst to step aside, away from George, who was now flipping through the channels on the TV with enviable nonchalance.

“Give me a sec,” Myst murmured to George before following Jessie into the kitchenette and leaned against the counter, arms crossed. “What’s up?”

“That’s what I should be asking you,” Jessie said, her voice hushed.

“Look, I like George! He seems solid, which is more than I can say for most people we meet in this business. But...” She paused, tapping her fingers against the clipboard.

“You’re not just anyone, Myst. You know how this works.

If word gets out about the two of you, it won’t just be your private life on display, it’ll be his too.

And fans? They’re... unpredictable. Some will love it; some won’t.

And the media?” She raised an eyebrow. “They’ll tear it apart for sport. ”

Myst sighed, dragging a hand through her hair. “Jessie, I get it. But I can’t keep living my life worrying about what everyone else thinks. I’m allowed to have something for myself, aren’t I?”

“Of course you are,” Jessie said gently, her expression softening. “But just... think about it, okay? Protect yourself. Protect him.” Her pale blue eyes, so much like Myst’s own, held a flicker of concern that made it hard to stay defensive.

“Fine,” Myst relented, though the words tasted bitter. “I’ll think about it.”

Jessie gave her a small nod, satisfied enough, before leaving with a quiet goodnight. Myst stayed behind, staring at the backsplash tiles like they held the answers to questions she couldn’t even articulate.

“Everything alright?” George’s voice broke through her thoughts, warm and steady like the first notes of a favorite song. He stood in the doorway, hands shoved casually into his pockets, but his eyes were all focus.

“Yeah,” she said, forcing a smile. “Just Jessie being Jessie.”

“Ah,” he replied knowingly, stepping closer. “The tough-love type, huh?”

“Something like that.” Myst reached up, pushing a stray lock of hair out of her eyes.

George noticed the movement, his gaze softening.

Without a word, he crossed the small space between them and gently tucked the same strand behind her ear, his fingertips grazing her cheek.

The touch was impossibly light, but it sent a shiver down her spine.

For a moment, the world shrank to just the two of them. Myst reached up, tracing the faint scar above his eyebrow with delicate fingers. “How’d you get this?” she asked quietly.

“Rugby, of course,” he admitted with a sheepish grin. “Took a bad hit during a match a few years back. Lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Guess toughness runs deep, huh?” she said with a teasing lilt, though her touch lingered longer than necessary.

“Depends,” George murmured, leaning ever so slightly closer. “Some things make you want to be careful instead.”

“Careful, huh?” Myst echoed, her lips curving faintly. But before he could respond,

she closed the gap between them, her kiss slow and deliberate, testing and tasting all at once. His hand slid to her waist, steadying her as if she might float away.

When they finally pulled apart, both breathless, Myst smiled, genuine and unguarded. She took his hand, threading her fingers through his as she started toward the bedroom.

“Come on,” she said simply, glancing back at him with a spark in her eye. “No interruptions this time.”

The soft glow of the bedside lamp painted warm tones across the room, casting long shadows that danced with their movements. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, a heady mix of anticipation and nerves swirling in her chest as she turned to face him.

George was watching her, his towering frame somehow both imposing and endearingly uncertain. His hands rested lightly at his sides, but his intense blue eyes held hers as if anchoring himself. She could tell he was trying to read her, searching for some unspoken signal.

“You’re staring,” she teased.

“Can you blame me?” he replied, his lips tugging into a crooked smile that made her stomach flip. He stepped closer, his large hands finding her waist with such gentleness it was almost hesitant. “You’re... delicate,” he murmured, his voice softer now, reverent even.

“Delicate?” Myst raised an eyebrow, cocking her head with mock offense. “You say that like I might break.”

“Not break,” George corrected, his thumbs brushing absent circles against the fabric of her dress. “But... I don’t know.” He exhaled slowly, his brow furrowing. “You feel

fragile, like I've got to be careful or I'll..."

"Stop right there." Myst cut him off with a laugh, her hands sliding up to rest on his broad chest. Beneath her fingers, she could feel the steady drumbeat of his heart. "I'm tougher than I look. You don't play to arenas full of screaming fans without learning how to handle yourself."

"Still," he said, looking down at her with that earnest gaze of his, "you're different. And I don't want to mess this up by being too..."

"Too what?" she interrupted again, smirking now as she slid her arms around his neck. "Too careful? Too sweet? Too scared?"

"Maybe all of the above." He chuckled, though it was tinged with self-consciousness. "You make me nervous, Myst."

"Good," she shot back, her grin widening. "Keeps you on your toes."

Before he could respond, Myst shifted her weight, pushing him gently backward until the backs of his knees hit the edge of the bed.

He sat instinctively, his surprised expression drawing a laugh from her throat.

Climbing onto his lap, she looped her arms more securely around his neck, her dark waves slipping over one shoulder as she leaned in close.

"Listen," she said, her voice dropping to a low murmur, "if you're afraid to take the lead, then I guess I'll have to do it for you."

"Is that so?" George asked, his tone teasing but his breath catching slightly as her lips grazed the line of his jaw.

“Mm-hmm,” Myst hummed in reply, pressing another kiss just below his ear. She felt him tighten beneath her, his hands gripping her hips like he wasn’t sure whether to pull her closer or hold her steady.

“You’re full of surprises,” he muttered, his voice turning huskier with each passing second.

“Guess you’ll just have to keep up,” she whispered, her pale blue eyes sparkling as she met his gaze. Then, deliberately slowly, she pushed him back fully onto the mattress, her small frame pinning him despite the obvious size difference.

“Challenge accepted,” George murmured, his hands finally pulling her flush against him.

Passion consumed them as they tumbled back together onto the king-sized bed, the soft sheets molding to their heated bodies.

George’s hands roamed the curves of Myst’s body, as if he were memorizing every inch of her, while she pulled him closer, craving his touch.

Their mouths fused together, their kisses hungry and demanding.

George rolled them over so that Myst was beneath him, his strong arms bracing his weight.

He looked down at her, his blue eyes darkened with desire but also filled with something softer, a kind of reverence that made her heart flutter.

He trailed his fingers along her cheek, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear again, his touch tender despite the fire burning in his gaze.

“You’re incredible,” he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. “I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I’m not going to question it.”

Myst smiled up at him, her own eyes reflecting the same mix of passion and affection. “You didn’t do anything,” she whispered. “You’re just you, George. That’s enough.”

He leaned down to kiss her again, this time slow and deep, savouring the moment.

Her hands explored his broad back, feeling the play of muscles beneath his shirt.

She tugged at the fabric, wanting to feel his skin against hers.

He obliged, breaking their kiss just long enough to pull his shirt off and toss it aside.

Her breath caught at the sight of him, all hard muscles and rough edges. She ran her hands over his chest, tracing the lines of his tattoos, each one telling a story she wanted to learn. He shivered beneath her touch, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Your turn,” he said softly, reaching for the hem of her dress. She lifted her arms, allowing him to slip it off, leaving her in just her bra and underwear. His gaze swept over her, taking in every detail, making her feel both vulnerable and cherished.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, his hand cupping her cheek before sliding down to her neck, her collarbone, her shoulder, as if he couldn’t stop touching her.

She arched into his touch, her own hands reaching for his belt. He helped her, slipping out of his jeans until they were both bare, their bodies pressed together in a tangle of limbs and heated skin.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Their movements became more urgent, their breaths coming faster.

Myst could feel his heart pounding against hers, their rhythm matched as if they were made for this moment.

He kissed her deeply, his hand sliding between her legs, making her gasp.

George paused, looking into her eyes, seeking permission.

Myst nodded, her breath hitching as she whispered, “Don’t stop.”

He continued, his touch gentle yet firm, drawing out a soft moan from deep within her.

She clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as waves of pleasure coursed through her.

He watched her, his eyes never leaving hers, adjusting his rhythm to her responses, learning her body as if it were a song they were writing together.

Myst reached for him, her hand wrapping around his cock, drawing out a low groan from his chest. She explored him, her touch growing bolder with each stroke, each gasp she elicited from him.

“Myst,” he growled, his voice strained with restraint. “I need you. Now.”

She guided him to her, her legs wrapping around his waist as he slowly, carefully

entered her.

They both gasped, their bodies fitting together perfectly, like two puzzle pieces finally finding their match.

He began to move, each thrust deliberate and deep, building a rhythm that had them both clutching at each other, their breaths mingling, their hearts pounding as one.

Every touch, every kiss was a testament to the connection they shared. They moved together, their bodies slick with sweat, their moans filling the room like a symphony.

Myst felt her climax building, a wave of pleasure that started at her core and radiated outwards. George sensed it too, his pace quickening, his thrusts becoming more urgent. He reached between them, his thumb finding her most sensitive spot, circling it in time with his movements.

“George,” she gasped, her voice barely a whisper as the wave crested and crashed over her. Her body convulsed, her back arching as she cried out his name, her eyes locked onto his. He followed her over the edge, his own climax ripping through him, leaving him shaking and breathless.

George collapsed beside her, his chest heaving, his body damp with sweat. Myst curled closer to him, her breathing just as ragged, a soft, sated smile playing on her lips. They lay there for a moment, their bodies pressed together, their hearts pounding in sync.

“Wow,” Myst whispered, her voice barely audible. “That was...”

“Yeah,” George agreed, his voice gruff. He turned to face her, his blue eyes soft and tender. “It was.”

He reached out, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her cheek. Myst leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed. When she opened them again, she found George watching her, his expression serious.

“Myst,” he started, his voice hesitant. “I... I don’t know how to do this. Any of this. But I want to figure it out. With you.”

Myst felt her heart swell. She took his hand, threading her fingers through his. “Me too, George. Me too.”

They lay there, their bodies entwined, their hearts beating as one. The world outside could wait. For now, it was just the two of them, lost in their own little bubble of happiness.

“I need to shower,” she murmured at last, pressing a kiss against his shoulder.

He hummed thoughtfully. “That sounds good. Would you mind if I joined you?”

She was very far from minding. Levering herself off the bed, she held out a hand to him. “What are you waiting for?”

Under the steady cascade of the shower, they resumed their exploration, water sluicing over their entwined forms as George pinned Myst against the cool tiles.

His touches, once tentative, now became bolder, more confident, as if he couldn’t get enough of her.

And she, in turn, revelled in the sensations he evoked, the way his strong hands seemed to know exactly where to touch, how to pleasure her.

“That feels so good,” she gasped, arching her back and pressing herself more fully

against him .

“I know,” he breathed against her neck, his voice gruff with desire. “I can’t even tell you...”

Their movements became more urgent, their passion mounting as the water enveloped them in its liquid embrace.

George caressed her curves, his fingers mapping every inch of her slick skin as if he were memorizing her body.

The steam from the hot water billowed around them, enveloping them in a private world of their own making.

Myst moaned softly, her head tilting back in ecstasy as George’s lips trailed down her neck, his tongue flicking against her racing pulse.

“George,” she gasped, her voice shaking with desire. “I want-”

“I got you,” he murmured, claiming her lips again in a searing kiss before trailing his way down her damp form, going to his knees at her feet and pressing her knees apart gently.

His tongue and lips danced against her sensitized skin, leaving a blazing trail in their wake.

Myst clutched at the cool tiles, her nails scraping the smooth surface as he brought her to the brink of ecstasy, hot tongue tracing over her clit until she broke.

“Oh, God, George,” she gasped, her eyes screwed tightly shut as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her. Dimly, she was aware of him standing again, lifting her up

effortlessly and pressing her against the wall.

Myst wrapped her legs around George, her arms circling his neck as he entered her with a slow, deliberate thrust. Their moans mingled, echoing off the slick tiles, as he began to move within her, his pace matching the steady rhythm of the water cascading over them.

She opened her eyes, meeting his intense blue gaze, now darkened with desire.

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her securely as he drove into her, each stroke sending waves of pleasure coursing through her body.

She clung to him, her fingers tangling in his wet hair, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Myst,” he growled, his voice low and primal. “You feel incredible.”

She could only nod in agreement, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Their connection was raw and intense, a primal dance as old as time itself. She felt herself building towards another climax, her body tensing as he drove deeper and deeper into her.

George must have sensed her approaching peak, as he increased his pace, his thrusts becoming more urgent.

“George,” she gasped, her voice barely a whimper. “I’m... I’m going to...”

“Come for me, Myst,” he commanded, his voice thick with desire. “Let go.”

And she did. Her body convulsed, her scream of pleasure echoing off the tiles as she rode out her climax, her nails digging into his shoulders. George followed her over

the edge, his body shuddering as he found his own release, his arms tightening around her as if he never wanted to let her go.

They stayed like that for a long moment, their bodies still joined, their hearts pounding in unison. The water continued to rain down on them, its steady rhythm soothing their heated skin. Myst rested her forehead against George's, her eyes closed as she tried to catch her breath.

Eventually, he gently set her down, her legs unsteady as she found her footing. She opened her eyes to find him watching her, his expression soft and tender.

"That was..." she started, but words failed her. She settled for a simple, "Wow."

George chuckled, a low rumble that vibrated through his chest. "Yeah, wow," he agreed.

They stood there for a moment longer, their bodies still pressed together under the steady stream of water, neither wanting to break the connection. Eventually, George reached past her to turn off the shower, the sudden silence filled only with their soft breaths and the dripping of water.

He stepped out first, grabbing a towel from the rack and wrapping it around his waist before holding out another for her. Myst stepped into it, allowing him to envelop her in the soft cotton. He rubbed her arms gently, drying her off with a tenderness that made her heart ache.

"Thank you," she whispered, looking up at him.

George smiled softly, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to her lips. "Thank you," he echoed.

They padded back into the bedroom, the cool air a stark contrast to the steamy warmth of the bathroom.

Myst slipped on a plush robe while George pulled on his boxers.

She watched him as he moved around the room, his muscles flexing beneath his tattoos, his hair damp and disheveled.

He was ruggedly handsome, yes, but there was also a comforting presence about him, a solidity that she found herself drawn to.

George caught her staring and raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. "See something you like?" he asked.

Myst laughed, feeling her cheeks flush slightly. "Maybe," she admitted, crawling onto the bed and sitting cross-legged.

He joined her, stretching out on his side, propping his head up with one arm. His eyes traced patterns over her face, as if he were trying to memorize every detail. "You're beautiful, Myst," he said softly. "Inside and out."

She felt her heart flutter at his words, her cheeks flushing slightly at the compliment. "And you're not so bad yourself, George Dennis," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She reached out, tracing the line of his jaw with her fingertips, feeling the rough stubble against her skin.

George captured her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm before entwining their fingers together. "You know, when I first met you, I never imagined we'd end up here," he admitted, his thumb absently rubbing circles against her hand.

"Neither did I," Myst confessed. "But I'm glad we did."

They shared a soft smile, their eyes locked onto each other, the connection between them palpable. It was more than just physical attraction; it was a meeting of souls, a recognition of something deeper and more profound.

“So, what now?” George asked, his voice tinged with both hope and uncertainty.

Myst took a deep breath, her gaze never leaving his. “Now, we take it one step at a time. We explore this... whatever this is between us. And we see where it takes us.”

George nodded, his expression serious. “I like the sound of that. But... what about your life? Your career? I don’t want to complicate things for you.”

Myst’s expression softened, and she leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. “You’re worth the complication, George. And as for my career... I’ve always been private about my personal life. We’ll figure it out. Together.”

George’s face broke into a wide grin, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Together,” he echoed, pulling her down beside him. Myst snuggled into his embrace, her head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

Chapter Six

Myst hopped off the ferry dock onto the cobblestone path outside the Tower of London, her black boots clicking against the stone as she spun around to face George. She clasped her hands behind her back, narrowing her eyes in mock seriousness as he approached.

“Welcome, sir, to the illustrious Tower of London,” she declared, her voice lilting with theatrical pomp. “I’ll be your tour guide today. Prepare to marvel at my encyclopaedic knowledge of... well, absolutely nothing.”

George grinned, his hands stuffed casually into the pockets of his coat. The brisk winter wind had tousled his sandy hair, and the faintest flush coloured his cheeks. “Nothing, huh? Sounds promising,” he teased, arching a brow. “I hope the price of admission isn’t too steep.”

“Oh, it’s free,” Myst replied with a dramatic wave of her arm, leading him toward the entrance. “But I do accept tips in the form of compliments. Something like, ‘Wow, you’re so incredibly talented and humble, Myst,’ or, ‘My life is better when you’re around.’ You know, standard stuff.”

“Right,” he said, chuckling as he followed her through the arched gate. “You drive a hard bargain, but I think I can manage that.”

Inside, the ancient stone walls loomed around them, carrying whispers of history and shadows of intrigue.

Myst tilted her head and squinted up at one of the towers.

“Did you know this place used to be... uh... some kind of mega-prison?” she guessed, gesturing vaguely.

“Pretty sure kings locked up all their enemies here. Or maybe just people who annoyed them.”

“Is that right?” George folded his arms, clearly enjoying her wildly inaccurate commentary. “And what about that building over there?” He nodded toward another structure.

“That?” Myst waved dismissively. “Oh, that’s the... er... dragon stables. Where they kept their pet dragons, obviously.”

“Obviously.” George’s deep laugh echoed against the stone walls, and Myst couldn’t help but grin at the sound of it; rich, unguarded, and entirely infectious.

They meandered through the exhibits until they reached the Crown Jewels. Myst pressed her face closer to the glass case, her pale blue eyes wide. “Look at that sparkle! Who even needs that many diamonds?”

“Reckon you could pull it off,” George said, leaning slightly over her shoulder. His voice dropped into an exaggerated stage whisper. “Should I ask if you can borrow something? Maybe a tiara for your next gig?”

“Don’t tempt me,” Myst murmured, biting back a smile. “Although my crown would probably have to come with a microphone attachment.”

“Very on brand,” George quipped. “What about me? Think I could rock the royal look?”

“Absolutely. A sceptre would really complete your ‘rugby royalty’ aesthetic,” Myst shot back. She turned to him, her eyes sparkling nearly as brightly as the priceless jewels behind the glass. “Who needs fame when we can just steal these and live out our days on the run, Bonnie and Clyde style?”

“Tempting offer,” he said, smirking. “But I think I’ll stick to rugby for now.”

Later, perched on a riverside bench, Myst balanced a paper tray of fish and chips on her lap, trying not to let any stray grease touch her coat. George was beside her, sitting back with one long leg casually stretched out, his own tray already half-empty.

“Okay,” Myst began, breaking off a piece of battered cod. “Teach me some rugby lingo. If I’m gonna date Australia’s Player of the Year, I should at least sound like I know what I’m talking about.”

“Fair enough,” George said, brushing a few crumbs off his jeans. “What do you want to know?”

“Start with the basics,” she said, taking a fry and popping it into her mouth. “Like... what’s a scrum? That’s a thing, right?”

“That’s a thing,” he confirmed. “It’s when the forwards from both teams pack together and try to push each other off the ball. Kind of like a wrestling match with more rules.”

“Sounds intense,” she mused. “What else?”

“Okay, here’s a fun one: What’s a ‘dummy pass’?” he asked, leaning toward her with a playful gleam in his eye.

“Uh...” Myst scrunched her nose, thinking hard. “Is it when someone pretends to

pass the ball but doesn't?"

"Exactly!" George exclaimed, pointing a chip at her like it was a gold medal. "You're a natural."

"Clearly," she said with faux modesty. "See? I'm ready to join the team."

"Sure, we'll just need to bulk you up a bit first," he teased, giving her a sidelong glance. "Not sure how you'd fare in a tackle drill."

"Hey, don't underestimate me," Myst shot back with a grin. "I'll have you know I'm scrappy. And fast."

"Fast, huh?" George's expression softened as he paused, staring out at the river for a moment before speaking again. "You know, my dad always used to say speed was the most important skill in rugby. He used to take me and my sisters out to the park and make us race each other when we were kids."

"Really?" Myst asked, her voice quieter now.

"Yeah," George said, his tone warm with nostalgia. "He'd line us up, blow this little whistle he kept in his pocket, and we'd sprint as hard as we could. No prizes, no pressure, just fun. I think that's where I learned to love the game. It wasn't about winning; it was about playing."

Myst felt something tug in her chest at his words. She reached out and nudged his elbow lightly. "Your family sounds amazing."

"They are," George said simply, turning back to her with a small, genuine smile. "Guess I got lucky."

“Or maybe they did,” Myst replied softly, her gaze lingering on him a beat longer than intended.

The light danced on the rippling surface of the Thames, and a gentle breeze tugged at the ends of her wavy hair. George was beside her, balancing the last few chips precariously on the edge of the paper tray like he was setting up some kind of tiny rugby formation.

“Right,” he said, pointing a chip at her. “Ruck or maul? Quick, what’s the difference?”

“Ugh, I just learned this,” Myst groaned dramatically, pinching the bridge of her nose for effect, though her lips quirked into a smile.

She turned to him, narrowing her pale blue eyes as if deep in thought.

“Okay. Ruck is... when the ball is on the ground, and players are trying to push each other off it?”

“Not bad,” George said with a grin, tossing the chip into his mouth. “And a maul?”

“Uh...” Myst hesitated, tapping her chin. “When the ball’s still being held, but everyone’s shoving around like they’re in a mosh pit?”

George laughed. “Close enough. Wouldn’t want to be stuck in a mosh pit with you, though. Sounds dangerous.”

“Hey, I’m small, but I can hold my own,” she shot back, giving his arm a playful shove. She felt lighter than she had in weeks, the weight of schedules and expectations kept at bay by the simple joy of being here with him.

Her phone buzzed on the bench between them, cutting through the moment.

Instinctively, Myst grabbed it, already dreading what the screen might show.

Sure enough, Jessie's name glared back at her, followed by a string of emojis that hinted at urgency.

She unlocked it with a swipe, her stomach tightening as she read the message.

"Big media push for the single release next week. Need you at the gala Friday night. Remember: no dates. Focus has to be on you."

"Everything alright?" George asked, his tone casual but laced with curiosity. He'd noticed the way her posture stiffened, how her easy smile faltered just slightly.

"Yeah," Myst said quickly, locking the screen and slipping the phone back into her bag. "It's just Jessie being Jessie. Nothing important." She tried to inject some levity into her voice, but even to her own ears, it sounded forced.

George studied her for a moment, his sharp blue eyes searching hers. "You sure? You went from scrappy mosh-pit warrior to... I don't know, someone who looks like they just dropped the ball during a World Cup final."

"That bad, huh?" Myst laughed lightly, deflecting. She didn't want to bring this up now, not when the day had been so perfect. "I promise, it's nothing."

But George didn't look convinced. She could see the faint crease forming between his brows, and it made her heart sink. She hated keeping things from him, but how was she supposed to explain the impossible tightrope she walked every day between authenticity and image?

“Alright,” he said finally, his voice measured. But there was a shift in his tone, subtle but unmistakable. Less playful, more reserved. It stung in a way Myst hadn’t expected, sharper than any critique or headline she’d ever faced.

They sat in silence for a beat too long, the earlier warmth between them fraying at the edges. Myst reached down to fiddle with the strap of her bag, wishing she could rewind a few minutes and leave the phone untouched.

“Look,” she started, her voice softer now. “It’s just... work stuff. You know how it is. People have certain expectations, and sometimes I have to play along. But it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Doesn’t it?” George asked quietly. His gaze was steady, but there was something vulnerable beneath it, a flicker of doubt she wasn’t used to seeing in him.

“I get that your career’s a big deal. And I’m not saying it shouldn’t be.

But... sometimes it feels like there’s always going to be something more important than us. ”

“That’s not true,” Myst said quickly, shaking her head. She reached for his hand, her smaller fingers curling around his. “George, you’re important to me. This,” she gestured between them, “is important.”

“Is it?” he pressed gently, though his grip on her hand was firm. “Because I’m not sure your world thinks so.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but the words wouldn’t come.

Not because she didn’t believe what she wanted to say, but because she couldn’t ignore the nagging truth in his question.

Her world, the relentless machine of fame, didn't leave much room for anything else.

And as much as she despised it, she couldn't pretend it wasn't real.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“George...” she began, her voice barely above a whisper. But before she could find the right words, he let out a breath and gave her hand a quick squeeze.

“Forget it,” he said, forcing a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ve had a good day. Let’s not ruin it.”

Myst nodded, though the knot in her chest only tightened.

They sat there, side by side, watching the river flow by as the sun dipped lower in the sky.

The air between them wasn’t heavy exactly, but it wasn’t light anymore either.

And for the first time all day, Myst felt the weight of the distance between their worlds pressing down on her shoulders.

The gentle hum of the elevator was almost hypnotic as Myst leaned against George’s shoulder, his arm casually draped around her.

The day had worn them out in the best way possible.

She could still taste the salt from the fish and chips on her lips and hear his laughter as she’d fumbled a rugby term.

“Scrum” still sounded like something out of a pirate novel to her.

“Bet you didn’t think your tour guide skills would be this bad, huh?” she teased,

nudging him with her elbow.

“Bad? They were abysmal,” George shot back with a grin. “I reckon those Crown Jewels are still shaking from the nonsense you spouted about them.”

“Hey! I said they were probably cursed. That’s valid speculation.”

“Sure it is,” he drawled, voice dripping with sarcasm, though his smile softened the jab.

The doors dinged open, and they stepped into the plush hallway leading to her suite.

Myst fiddled with the keycard in her hand, trying to push away the creeping dread that had been threatening to resurface since that call earlier.

This was supposed to be their escape, wasn’t it?

A stolen day in London where she wasn’t Myst, international pop star, but just a woman enjoying time with a man who made her laugh until her stomach hurt.

“How much do you wanna bet Jessie’ll be waiting for us?” Myst joked lightly, though her heart wasn’t quite in it.

“Wouldn’t put it past her,” George replied. His tone was light, but there was a flicker of something else in his expression, concern, or maybe weariness. Myst couldn’t tell anymore.

As soon as the door swung open, her cousin’s unmistakable figure was revealed, pacing the living room rug like a coiled spring. Jessie’s pixie-cut hair with its signature blue streak caught the dim lighting, and she stopped mid-step when she saw them.

“Well, speak of the devil,” Myst muttered under her breath, plastering on a smile. “Jess, you’ve got impeccable timing as always.”

“Don’t start with me,” Jessie shot back, her voice clipped. Her phone was clutched tightly in one hand, and the look on her face set off alarm bells in Myst’s chest. “We need to talk. Now.”

“Hello to you too,” Myst deadpanned, shrugging out of her coat and tossing it onto the couch. She glanced at George, who gave her a questioning look, but she tilted her head toward the bedroom door, a silent signal for privacy.

“Give me a minute?” she asked softly.

“Yeah, sure.” George hesitated, then stuffed his hands into his pockets and wandered toward the floor-to-ceiling windows. He didn’t press, but she felt the weight of his gaze on her back as she followed Jessie into the adjoining room.

“Okay, what’s the crisis this time?” Myst asked, crossing her arms as Jessie practically shoved the phone into her face.

“Look at this,” Jessie snapped. The screen displayed a glaring headline from CelebNation: “Pop Princess Myst Spotted with Mystery Man—Her Bit of Rough?”

“Below it was a gallery of photos, clearly taken without their knowledge.

One showed George laughing mid-bite of fish and chips, another captured Myst leaning into him on the bench by the river.

They looked... happy. Which only seemed to make the headline sting more.

“Are you kidding me?” Myst groaned, pushing the phone away like it physically

burned her. “They’re making it sound like he’s some... random fling or something.”

“That’s exactly my point!” Jessie hissed, lowering her voice but not her intensity.

“This is already everywhere. By tomorrow, every outlet will be running with it, spinning God-knows-what stories about you two. And if you keep parading around like this...” She trailed off, gesturing vaguely but urgently, “It’s just going to get worse. ”

“Parading around?” Myst repeated, her voice rising before she reeled herself back in. She pinched the bridge of her nose, willing herself to stay calm. “We were literally having lunch, Jess. It’s not like we announced an engagement.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Jessie’s tone softened slightly, though her concern remained razor-sharp.

“You know how this works. Your ‘single’ image is part of the brand, Myst. Whether we like it or not, this could blow up in ways we can’t control.

You need to lay low for a bit. Maybe stop being seen with him in public altogether. ”

“Of course. Just... hide him away somewhere, right?” Myst’s words dripped with bitterness even as she knew Jessie wasn’t wrong. The walls felt like they were closing in around her, and suddenly, all she wanted was to rewind to earlier that afternoon when things had felt so simple.

“Please don’t make this harder than it has to be,” Jessie urged, placing a hand on her arm. Her pale blue eyes, so much like Myst’s own, were filled with worry. “Just... think about it, okay?”

“Fine,” Myst muttered, though it felt anything but fine. She forced herself to nod,

even as her heart sank under the weight of what she'd have to say next.

Dinner in the suite was quiet at first, the clinking of silverware filling the space as Myst pushed her food around her plate.

George sat across from her, his broad shoulders hunched slightly as if he could feel the storm brewing between them.

The tension was subtle but palpable, like the faint pressure in the air before a downpour.

"Alright," he finally said, setting down his fork. "Out with it. What's going on?"

Myst looked up sharply, startled by his bluntness, though she should've expected it. George wasn't one to dance around things, part of what she liked about him, even if it made moments like these harder.

"Jessie saw some pictures of us online," she began cautiously, each word feeling like it might tip the balance of their fragile peace. "She's worried about how it's going to affect... everything."

"Everything?" George repeated, his accent curling around the word. There was no anger in his voice, but the hurt was there, threaded through his typically steady tone.

"She thinks we should avoid being seen together for a while," Myst admitted, her voice barely above a whisper now. "At least until the attention dies down."

"Right." He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. His jaw tightened, and for a moment, he didn't say anything.

When he finally spoke, his words were measured, careful.

“So, what? We just pretend this,” he gestured between them, “isn’t happening whenever we’re outside these walls?”

“George, it’s not like that...”

“Isn’t it?” He let out a short breath, shaking his head. “Look, I get it. Your world’s complicated. But it’s hard not to feel like... like maybe I’m just something you’re trying to keep out of sight.”

“That’s not true,” she insisted, leaning forward, her hands gripping the edge of the table.

“Maybe not you,” he conceded quietly. “But this whole... machine around you. I get the feeling it’s going to grind me in the gears.”

She had no answer to that.

The balcony door slid open with a soft scrape, letting in the crisp London night air.

Myst stepped out first, barefoot and wrapped in an oversized cardigan that swallowed her delicate frame.

George followed quietly, his broad shoulders nearly filling the doorway as he ducked slightly to step outside.

He carried two mugs of tea, steam curling upward into the chilly darkness.

“Figured this might help,” he said, handing one to her.

“Thanks.” Her fingers curled around the warm ceramic, grateful for the excuse to hold onto something steady. The tension from dinner still sat between them like an

unwelcome guest, neither of them sure how to ask it to leave.

They settled onto the cushioned bench tucked against the railing, their knees brushing as they adjusted to fit.

Below them, the Thames shimmered under the city lights, its surface restless and alive.

For a moment, neither spoke. It was easier to focus on the world beyond, on the hum of distant traffic, the glow of passing boats, than on the fragile quiet growing between them.

“London’s pretty at night,” George said finally. “Makes you forget all the chaos for a bit.”

“Yeah,” Myst murmured, tracing the rim of her mug with her thumb. “If only it were that easy to forget everything else.”

His gaze shifted to her, searching her profile as she stared out at the water.

Her long hair spilled over her shoulder, catching faint silver highlights from the moon above.

She looked otherworldly, like someone who belonged to the stars rather than sitting beside him on a borrowed balcony chair. And yet, here she was. With him.

“Can I say something?” His tone was careful, almost too careful.

“Of course,” she said, turning toward him. The sincerity in her pale blue eyes made his chest tighten, though he wasn’t sure if it was from comfort or fear.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, the tea forgotten in his hands.

“I’m trying, Myst. I really am. But...” He hesitated, jaw working as he searched for the right words.

“Your world, it’s just so... loud. Cameras, headlines, people constantly watching.

It’s not like anything I’ve dealt with before.

And sometimes, I wonder if I’m cut out for it. ”

“George...” Her voice softened, but he shook his head gently, needing to finish.

“I don’t mean I want to walk away or anything,” he clarified quickly, his accent thickening with his urgency.

“It’s just, I’ve spent my whole life on rugby pitches, where things are simple.

You train hard, you play hard, and what matters is what you bring to the field.

All this other stuff... I feel like I’m fumbling every day, and I hate it. ”

“Fumbling?” A small smile tugged at her lips despite the weight of his confession.

“That doesn’t sound like the George Dennis I know. You’re practically rugby royalty back home, remember?”

“Yeah, well,” he said dryly, “turns out being able to tackle blokes twice my size doesn’t help much when it comes to dodging paparazzi.”

She laughed softly, the sound lightening the tension just enough to let her lean closer, close enough for her knee to press more firmly against his.

“You’re doing better than you think,” she said, her voice gentle now.

“Trust me, this world isn’t easy for anyone.

Half the time, I don’t know if I’m handling it right either. ”

“Could’ve fooled me.” He gave her a sidelong glance, lips twitching into a reluctant smile. “You make it look effortless.”

“Effortless?” She snorted, shaking her head. “George, I spend most days terrified I’m going to mess it all up. My career, my relationships... you. Especially you.”

“Me?” His brows furrowed, genuinely surprised.

“Yes, you,” she said, meeting his gaze directly.

There was no hiding behind humor now. “You have no idea how scared I am that all of this,” she gestured vaguely to the skyline, the invisible pressures hanging over them, “is going to push you away. That I’ll lose you because of... because of who I have to be out there.”

“Hey.” He set his mug down on the ground before reaching for her hand. His fingers closed around hers, warm and grounding. “You’re not going to lose me, alright? I’m stubborn, remember? Takes more than a few tabloid headlines to scare me off.”

“Even if they call you my ‘bit of rough’?” she teased lightly, though her voice wavered.

“Especially that.” His grin broke through then, lopsided and endearing. “I’m not exactly polished, am I?”

“Not even close.” She laughed again, the sound softer this time, but real.

For a while, they sat like that, their hands entwined, the river below carrying their silence like a melody. It wasn't perfect, not by a long shot, but it was enough. Enough to remind them why they were here, despite everything pulling at them.

“One day at a time?” she asked quietly, her thumb brushing over his knuckles.

“One day at a time,” he agreed, squeezing her hand. Still, as they turned back to the view, both felt the weight lingering in the background, the understanding that love, however strong, wouldn't erase the challenges ahead. But tonight, they'd chosen to try. And for now, that was enough.

Chapter Seven

The plane touched down smoothly on the tarmac at Charles de Gaulle, and George barely had time to take in the towering glass windows of the airport before Myst was whisked away.

A swarm of people awaited her just past customs, their voices overlapping in a chaotic symphony: her manager barking updates about interviews, a stylist waving a garment bag as though it held the answers to life itself, and Jessie with her ever-present clipboard rattling off times like she was conducting a military operation.

George stood slightly behind Myst, his duffel slung over one shoulder, feeling more like an afterthought than a boyfriend.

“George,” Myst said, turning back to him with an apologetic smile. Her pale blue eyes softened, even as her hands clutched the edge of the itinerary Jessie had just thrust into them. “I’m so sorry, love. They’re... intense.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, forcing a grin. “I’ll be fine. Go be brilliant.”

“Promise you’ll explore? Paris is magic if you let it be.” She squeezed his hand briefly before being pulled into the current of her team, disappearing like a speck of glitter caught in the sunlight.

George sighed, adjusting the strap of his bag. He’d meant what he said, he’d be fine, but standing there alone in one of the most romantic cities in the world while Myst was swept into her whirlwind of fame left him feeling oddly untethered. Still, he

wasn't going to waste the chance to see Paris.

By mid-afternoon, George had checked off more landmarks than he thought possible for one day.

The Eiffel Tower stood regal and unbothered against the grey winter sky, but as George stared up at its intricate iron lattice, he felt.

.. small. Without Myst beside him, the city's famed romance fell flat.

He wandered along the Seine next, snapping photos he wasn't sure he'd ever look at again. Couples strolled by arm-in-arm, laughing as though they'd stepped straight out of a postcard. George shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, feeling like an outsider peering through a frosted window.

"Right," he muttered under his breath. "Paris, magic, all that."

The next day, George arrived at Le Zénith Paris early, stepping into the vast auditorium with its high ceilings and rows upon rows of empty seats. Myst's voice, warm and electric, echoed through the space as she rehearsed on stage. George leaned against the sound booth, arms folded, watching her.

She was incredible. There wasn't a better word for it.

Myst commanded the stage like it was an extension of herself, her voice soaring effortlessly above the quiet strums of her band.

Even without an audience, she shone, her energy palpable from where George stood.

He couldn't help but feel a swell of pride, and maybe something deeper, as he watched her move from one song to the next.

“Again, Myst,” called her manager from the front row, cutting through the applause of the band. “You’re dragging the tempo on the bridge. It needs to be tighter.”

“Her phrasing’s off too,” chimed in someone George didn’t recognize, a wiry man with a clipboard who looked like he hadn’t slept in years. “Myst, can you try bringing more energy into ‘Wildfire’? It feels flat.”

“Flat?” Myst repeated, her voice laced with exhaustion, though she hid it well. “Okay, sure. I’ll give it another go.”

George frowned, his admiration warring with concern. He knew Myst was used to this level of scrutiny, but even he could hear how sharp and vibrant her performance already was. Yet she nodded without complaint, flipping the mic in her hand and diving back into the song as though nothing phased her.

“Excusez-moi?” came a voice from George’s right. He turned to find the venue manager, stocky, balding, with a clipboard tucked under one arm, studying him skeptically.

“Je ne parle pas francais,” George said apologetically, about the only words he knew in French, but the man cut him off with a wave of his hand and switched smoothly to English.

“No problem. We’ve got some VIPs coming in later; make sure security’s tight near the green rooms.”

“Security?” George blinked, confused for half a second before realization dawned. “Oh, no, I’m not...”

“Thanks,” the man interrupted, clapping George on the shoulder before walking off.

“Brilliant,” George muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “Now they think I’m her bodyguard!” He glanced toward the stage, where Myst was powering through yet another round of critiques, her determination unyielding despite the strain etched into her posture.

For the first time since they’d landed in Paris, George wondered if he truly understood what being part of her world meant. Magic, Myst had called Paris. But right now, it just felt complicated.

The Seine shimmered under the golden glow of streetlamps, its rippling surface reflecting the lights of Paris in an ever-shifting dance.

George walked beside Myst, their steps falling into an easy rhythm on the cobblestone path.

The air was crisp but not biting, and her hand felt small yet warm in his as she leaned lightly against his arm.

“See? Magic,” she said softly, glancing up at him with a smile that tugged at the corners of her pale blue eyes. Her dark hair spilled over her shoulders, catching the light like silk as they passed beneath another lamp.

“Alright, I’ll give you this one,” George replied. “It’s got a bit more charm than Brisbane River.”

“‘A bit’?” Myst gasped in mock indignation, halting mid-step and pulling him to face her. “George Dennis, are you comparing this, “ she gestured dramatically at the river, the skyline, the distant silhouette of Notre-Dame, “to... what? Muddy waters and mangroves back home?”

“Hey now, don’t knock the mangroves,” he countered with a grin. “Plenty of romance

in dodging mozzies and watching mud crabs scuttle about.”

She laughed, a sound like wind chimes caught in a breeze, and it made something deep in his chest ache in the best way. He wanted to keep that laugh close, bottle it somehow for the moments when her world felt too far from his.

“Fine,” she relented, tugging on his arm to continue their stroll. “But Paris still wins.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, though he couldn’t disagree. Not with her here, wearing that soft black coat that flared slightly at her waist, the edges brushing against his leg every so often. Not with the way Paris seemed to bend itself around her, as if even the city knew how extraordinary she was.

They found a tiny café tucked away on a quiet side street, its entrance framed by flickering fairy lights.

Inside, the space was cosy and intimate, the walls lined with shelves of dusty books and old records.

A waiter greeted them with a knowing smile—one glance at Myst and he had clearly recognised her—but thankfully, he said nothing.

Whether it was professionalism or Parisian indifference, George didn’t care; he was just relieved they weren’t being swarmed by cameras or fans.

“Deux cafés et... oh!” Myst paused, scanning the menu with a furrowed brow before pointing to something. “Crème brûlée. Trust me, you’ll love it.”

“Do I have a choice?” George teased, settling into the chair across from her.

“Not really.” She smirked, folding her arms on the table and leaning forward. The

candlelight between them cast shadows that softened the tired lines he'd noticed earlier in the day. "I'm making it my mission to broaden your horizons."

"Ambitious," he said, lifting a brow. "What's next? Teaching me how to sing?"

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Oh, absolutely. Can you imagine? My next album featuring George Dennis on backup vocals."

"Yeah, no chance." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I'd clear the room faster than a fire alarm."

"Don't sell yourself short! You've got the rugged athlete vibe, it could work. Like... rugby rock ballads." She mimicked strumming an invisible guitar, her playfulness infectious.

"Right. And what would we call this groundbreaking genre?"

"Ruck and Roll, obviously ." She grinned so wide he couldn't help but laugh out loud, the sound echoing off the café's low ceiling.

For a moment, everything else fell away, the chaos of her schedule, the weight of his own insecurities, and it was just them, two Aussies sharing a joke halfway across the world.

But then her phone buzzed, shattering the bubble.

Myst's smile faltered as she pulled it from her pocket, glancing at the screen.

Even in the dim light, George could see the tension creep into her shoulders as her thumb hovered over the screen.

Three missed calls. Five unread messages. Her jaw tightened.

“Ignore it,” he said quietly, reaching across the table to cover her hand with his. “This is our night.”

She hesitated, then nodded, turning the phone facedown on the table. But the shadow didn’t leave her expression, and George hated that he couldn’t do more to take it away.

“Sorry,” she murmured after a beat, her voice softer now. “I know things have been... overwhelming.”

“Hey,” he said firmly, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “I get it. Really. You’re doing what you love, and I wouldn’t want to get in the way of that.”

Her eyes searched his, as if trying to gauge whether he meant it. He did, but part of him wondered if she could see the cracks forming beneath the surface; if she could sense just how out of place he sometimes felt in her glittering, fast-moving world.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her lips curving into a faint, grateful smile. Then, as if determined to lighten the mood, she added, “But I’m serious about the rugby rock thing. We’ll start rehearsals next week.”

“Not a chance,” he shot back, but his grin betrayed him.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

The next morning, sunlight streamed through the hotel curtains, warming George's face and coaxing him awake.

He blinked groggily, reaching for his phone on the bedside table.

What greeted him wasn't the weather app or his usual sports news feed, but a headline plastered across social media: "Myst Sparks Romance Rumours with Antoine Delacourt: Is This Paris's Hottest New Couple? "

Below it were photos of Myst and some bloke, tall, sleek, classically handsome, with a sharp suit and a sharper smirk.

They were seated on what looked like a talk show couch, leaning toward each other as they laughed.

Another photo showed him holding her hand as she stepped down from the stage, Myst flashing that bright smile George had somehow come to believe was only for him.

"Bloody hell," George muttered, sitting up straighter.

His stomach twisted uncomfortably, though he tried to tell himself it was ridiculous.

It was just the tabloids doing what they always did, spinning stories out of nothing.

Still, the images stuck in his mind, needling at the insecurities he thought he'd buried.

“Morning,” came Myst’s voice from the doorway. She was already dressed, her hair swept into a loose braid. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat and setting the phone down screen-first. “Didn’t sleep much.”

“Something wrong?” she asked, crossing the room with a concerned frown.

“Uh...” He hesitated, then sighed, picking up the phone again and turning it toward her. “This.”

Her expression darkened as she scanned the article. “Oh, for...!” She cut herself off, exhaling sharply through her nose. “That’s rubbish. Antoine was just being polite. He helped me off the stage, and suddenly we’re soulmates?”

“Didn’t say I believed it,” George muttered, beginning to feel foolish and wishing he hadn’t called her attention to the article.

“Good.” She leaned down to give him a smacking kiss, and one of those smiles, before turning back to the door. “I’ve put the coffee on.”

George leaned on the edge of the balcony railing, staring out at the Paris skyline.

The city sprawled before him in a haze of pale morning light and soft grey shadows, its beauty undeniable but strangely distant.

He turned the coffee cup in his hands, the ceramic warm against his palms, though the drink had long since gone cold.

Behind him, Myst moved around the suite, humming absently as she packed her bag for the day’s busy schedule.

“Hey,” he said finally, not turning around. His voice sounded rougher than he intended, like gravel scraping over asphalt.

“Mm?” Myst answered, distracted.

“Do you ever...” He stopped, frowning down at the rooftops below. “I dunno...do you ever feel like you don’t belong somewhere?”

That got her attention. Her footsteps softened as she crossed the room and came up behind him. He felt the gentle press of her hand on his back, between his shoulder blades. A small touch, just enough to anchor him.

“Where’d that come from?” she asked, her tone careful now, layered with curiosity and concern.

He exhaled slowly, setting the cup down on the railing.

“Your world, Myst. This whole thing.” He gestured vaguely toward the city, as if it represented every stage, every flashing camera, every whirlwind schedule he’d been swept into since they’d arrived.

“I mean, bloody hell, look at me. I’m just some bloke who plays rugby. What am I doing here?”

“George...” She moved to stand beside him, her pale blue eyes searching his face. “You’re not ‘just some bloke.’”

“Feels like it,” he muttered. He rubbed the back of his neck, the memory of that tabloid headline still gnawing at him. “I know what you said about Antoine and all that, it’s just tabloid nonsense, but...it’s more than that. Your life, your career... it’s huge. It’s glamorous. And I’m...not.”

Myst tilted her head, studying him, her expression a mix of frustration and tenderness.

“You think I’ve got it all figured out? That I wake up every day feeling like I belong in this so-called glamorous world?”

” She laughed softly, but there was no humour in it.

“Half the time, I’m faking it just to keep up. ”

“Doesn’t look that way from where I’m standing,” George said, the corner of his mouth twitching upward despite himself. “You’re like a bloody rockstar superhero out there.”

“Yeah?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “And you’re Captain Australia, leading your team onto the pitch like some kind of gladiator. You think that doesn’t intimidate me?”

“Intimidate you?” He blinked, caught off guard.

“Of course!” she said, throwing her hands up.

“You’ve got this whole other world I’ll never fully understand.

Rugby’s more than just a sport to you; it’s.

..it’s part of who you are. And I see how much pressure you’re under, how everyone expects you to be perfect all the time.

Do you really think I fit into that world any better than you think you fit into mine? ”

George frowned, her words sinking in deeper than he wanted to admit. “Guess I never thought about it like that.”

“Well, maybe you should,” Myst said gently, placing a hand on his arm.

“Maybe,” he murmured.

They stood in silence for a moment, the weight of unspoken doubts hanging thick in the air between them. George could hear the faint hum of traffic below, the distant shrill of a siren. For once, even Myst didn’t seem to have the right words to fill the quiet.

“Anyway,” she said eventually, her voice softer now, almost fragile. “I’ve got to get to soundcheck. We can talk more later, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, though he wasn’t sure what else there was to say.

Later that evening, George stood near the back of Le Zénith, tucked into the shadows while the crowd pulsed and roared around him.

The stage lights burned bright, cutting through the dark haze of the arena, and there she was, hisMyst. A firecracker wrapped in glitter and velvet, commanding the stage like she was born for it.

Her voice soared, raw and electric, wrapping itself around every note. The audience couldn’t get enough of her, cheering and singing along like their lives depended on it. George watched, unable to tear his eyes away, pride swelling in his chest despite the ache that had taken root there earlier.

“Elle est incroyable!” someone nearby shouted over the music, clapping George on the back.

He nodded stiffly, managing a polite smile before turning his attention back to the stage.

Yeah, she was incredible. But watching her like this, from a distance, surrounded by thousands of strangers, only made him feel further removed, like he was staring at something he could never truly be part of.

When the final song ended, the crowd erupted into deafening applause, and Myst flashed them one last dazzling smile before slipping backstage.

George lingered near the wings, waiting as photographers and fans swarmed the area, all clamoring for her attention.

She handled it with practiced ease, laughing and posing like it was second nature.

“George!” Her voice cut through the din, and she appeared suddenly at his side, her face glowing with exhilaration, a thin sheen of sweat glistening on her brow. “Wasn’t that amazing?”

“Yeah,” he said, forcing a smile as he pulled her into a brief hug. “You were brilliant out there.”

“Thanks,” she said, pulling back to beam at him. But then her expression shifted, her brows knitting together as she studied his face. “Hey...you okay? You seem...quiet.”

“Just tired,” he lied, shaking his head. “Long day, you know.”

“Right,” she said slowly, though he could tell she didn’t quite believe him.

“Come on,” she added after a pause, tugging lightly at his hand. “Let’s get out of here. I need to breathe.”

“Sure,” he said, following her reluctantly, though he couldn’t help but wonder: no matter how close they were, would he always feel this far away?

The bass from the party thumped through George’s chest as they stepped into the glittering ballroom, its crystal chandeliers throwing light across sleek black suits and shimmering evening gowns.

He adjusted the collar of his jacket, a loaner Myst’s stylist had thrown his way with a quick, “This’ll do” and tried not to feel like an overgrown kangaroo in a penguin suit.

“Just stick close,” Myst murmured under her breath, her hand slipping into his for a moment before she was whisked away by one of her team.

George stayed frozen in place for a beat, watching her navigate the crowd with effortless grace; laughing, shaking hands, leaning in conspiratorially with people who all seemed to talk far too quickly.

“Ah, Monsieur Delacourt!” someone exclaimed nearby, and George turned just in time to see a tall, rakish man stride into the room, his perfectly tailored suit looking like it cost more than George’s entire wardrobe.

The man’s gleaming white smile practically reflected the chandelier overhead.

Antoine Delacourt, George realized grimly; the French actor he’d seen plastered across tabloids next to Myst earlier that morning.

“Bloody brilliant,” George muttered under his breath, shoving his hands into his pockets. The universe clearly wasn’t pulling any punches tonight.

“Excuse me,” a sharply dressed woman interrupted, tapping him on the arm. “Could you fetch another bottle of champagne for the table? Over there.” She gestured

vaguely toward a corner of the room.

“Uh...” George blinked, glancing down at her. “I don’t...” But she had already turned away, apparently assuming he’d comply.

“Bodyguard,” someone else said behind him, nodding approvingly. “That makes sense.”

“Fantastic,” George muttered, dragging a hand down his face. He caught Myst glancing his way, her pale blue eyes lighting up when they met his. She waved him over, but he shook his head once, pretending he hadn’t noticed. This wasn’t his world. It never would be.

“George!” Myst came over, reaching out to put a hand on his arm, but before he could react, Antoine Delacourt had appeared beside her, draping an arm loosely around her shoulders in a way that made George’s jaw clench.

“Ah, so zis is ze boyfriend you mentioned!” Antoine declared, his French accent slicing through the air like a butter knife. His gaze swept over George appraisingly, lingering on his broad shoulders. “You are... how you say... imposing, no?”

“Good to meet you,” George replied stiffly, forcing himself to extend a hand. Antoine ignored it, flashing Myst a grin instead.

“Zey love us together in ze papers, non?” Antoine teased, earning a laugh from Myst that sent a pang of something sharp through George’s chest.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” Myst said lightly, though her fingers tightened subtly around the flute of champagne in her hand.

“Of course, of course,” Antoine replied, raising his hands in mock surrender. “Je

plaisante! Only jokes!”

“Right,” George said, his voice coming out rougher than he intended. Myst glanced at him again, concern flickering briefly across her face.

“Hey,” she murmured, stepping closer to him. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he grunted, though the word tasted bitter on his tongue. “Look, I think I’m gonna head back to the hotel. It’s been a long day.”

“George...” Myst hesitated, her brow furrowing. “Are you sure? We can leave if you want...”

“Stay,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “This is your night. Enjoy it.” He pressed a quick kiss to her temple and turned before she could say anything else, weaving through the crowd toward the exit. The sound of laughter and clinking glasses followed him out into the cool Parisian night.

Back at the hotel, George sat slouched on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the city lights outside the window. His tie hung loose around his neck, and the collar of the borrowed shirt felt suffocating despite being unbuttoned.

He rubbed his palms against his thighs, trying to work through the tangled mess of thoughts swirling in his head.

Was this what his life looked like now? Standing awkwardly in corners while Myst dazzled everyone around her?

Being mistaken for hired help or, worse, feeling like little more than a bystander in her story?

“Pull yourself together,” he muttered aloud, running a hand through his hair.

But the knot in his chest only tightened.

No matter how much he wanted to fit into her world, it felt like every step forward mirrored two steps back.

And worse, he couldn't shake the ugly fear that eventually, she'd realize it too.

The soft click of the door startled him, and he turned to see Myst walking in, her heels dangling from one hand, her expression stormy.

“Why did you leave like that?” she demanded, shutting the door behind her with more force than necessary.

“Because I didn't belong there,” George shot back before he could stop himself. He stood, towering over her, but she didn't flinch. Instead, she squared her shoulders and glared up at him.

“That's ridiculous!” she said, exasperation creeping into her voice. “I've told you a hundred times, you don't have to know everything about my world to...”

“To what, Myst?” George interrupted, his voice rising. “To stand there like some idiot while everyone talks circles around me? To watch blokes like Antoine wrap themselves around you and joke about headlines like it's nothing?”

“Antoine doesn't mean anything to me,” she snapped, her cheeks flushing pink. “And if you trusted me, you'd know that!”

“Trust isn't the issue,” George countered, pacing away from her. “It's...” He paused, struggling to find the words. “It's your whole world. It's too big, too fast! I don't

even know how to keep up. And honestly? I don't think I ever will."

"Do you think it's easy for me to understand your world?" Myst shot back, her voice cracking slightly. "Rugby culture? The pressure of leading a team? Do you think I've got it all figured out? Because I don't, George. But I'm trying."

"And maybe that's the problem," George said quietly, turning to look at her. "Maybe we're both trying too hard to fit into something that doesn't work."

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. Then, without another word, Myst turned on her heel and stormed into the adjoining bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

George stared after her, his heart pounding in his chest. He sank back onto the bed, letting his head fall into his hands.

"Bloody brilliant," he muttered. For the first time since they'd arrived in Paris, he wasn't sure they'd make it out of this city together.

Chapter Eight

The morning sun filtered through the hotel curtains, casting long golden streaks across the plush carpet.

Myst adjusted the strap of her silk camisole and pulled her hair into a messy bun, her movements quick and practiced as she rummaged through her wardrobe for something professional yet chic.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand with another reminder from Jessie about the interviews lined up for the day.

She glanced toward the bed, where George lay sprawled beneath the white duvet, one arm draped over his eyes. His dark hair was a ruffled mess against the pillow, and his usual energy seemed dulled by invisible weights. Myst hesitated, a pair of earrings clutched in her hand.

“Are you planning to stay there all day?” she asked lightly, though her voice lacked its usual teasing edge.

“Just need a bit more sleep,” came George’s muffled reply, his tone neutral, distant. “Late night, you know.”

“Right.” Myst slipped the earrings on, her fingers trembling slightly. She wanted to say more, to ask if he was okay, to explain herself, but the words stuck in her throat like stones. Instead, she busied herself with zipping up her bag, the sharp sound filling the silence between them.

“Breakfast’s in the lounge downstairs if you’re hungry,” she added, forcing a polite smile that he wouldn’t see.

“Thanks,” he said without moving, still shielding his face from the sunlight.

And that was it. No further words, no lingering looks. Just an aching emptiness that filled the room as Myst grabbed her blazer and left. The soft click of the door closing behind her felt heavier than it should have.

“Enchantée, Myst! You are magnifique, as always!” The French journalist’s greeting was effusive, but Myst barely registered it.

She sat at the centre of a semi-circle of reporters in a sleek conference room, the table gleaming under bright artificial lights.

Cameras clicked rhythmically as she fidgeted with a silver ring on her finger, twisting it back and forth until her skin turned pink.

“Your latest single has been such a succès énorme! Tell us, what inspired it?” another journalist asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“Um,” Myst began, her voice faltering. What had inspired it?

Normally, she could wax poetic about the layers of emotion and creativity behind her music.

But now, all she could think about was George’s quiet, closed-off expression that morning, and the way her chest tightened every time she pictured it.

“Love,” she stammered finally, her accent slipping into Australian despite her best efforts. “It’s, um... complicated, isn’t it?”

“Complicated love! Très romantique!” The journalist scribbled furiously in their notebook while the others nodded, seemingly satisfied. Myst forced a smile and pushed her chair back slightly. The air felt stifling, and the questions blended into a blur of chatter she struggled to follow.

“Excusez-moi,” Jessie’s sharp voice cut through the noise. Myst looked up to see her cousin standing at the edge of the room, arms crossed and eyebrows raised. “We’ll need just a moment, s’il vous pla?t.” Without waiting for permission, Jessie motioned for Myst to follow her out into the corridor.

“What’s going on with you?” Jessie demanded the second the door swung shut. Her green eyes narrowed in concern, offset by her impeccable eyeliner. “You looked like a deer in headlights back there.”

“I’m fine,” Myst said automatically, but her voice cracked on the last word. She pressed her palms against the cool wall, steadying herself. Jessie didn’t move, didn’t buy the act for even a second.

“Don’t give me that,” Jessie pressed, softer this time. “Is this about George?”

Myst exhaled shakily, her shoulders slumping.

The hall felt quieter than it should, save for the occasional clink of cutlery from a nearby catering station.

“It’s just... I don’t know if he gets it.

My world, I mean. All the chaos, the cameras, the constant pressure to be.

.. this version of me.” She waved vaguely at her designer outfit, her perfectly curated image.

“What if it’s too much for him? What if I’m too much for him? ”

“Hey.” Jessie stepped closer, putting a gentle arm around her. “First of all, you’re not ‘too much’ for anyone who actually deserves you. Got it? And second... he wouldn’t be here, dealing with all this circus, if he didn’t care about you, Myst.”

“Maybe.” Myst chewed her lip, doubt clouding her eyes. “But caring doesn’t make it easy. He looked so... closed off today. Like I’d already lost him, Jess. And I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Start by talking to him,” Jessie said simply. “Really talking.”

“Yeah,” Myst murmured, though her heart clenched at the thought. Talking meant opening wounds, admitting fears, and she wasn’t sure she was ready for that.

Myst shifted the takeout bags in her arms as she fumbled with the hotel keycard, her forehead crinkled in concentration.

The sleek, black card refused to cooperate on the first swipe, or the second.

“Come on,” she muttered under her breath, blowing a loose strand of dark hair out of her face.

On the third try, the lock beeped and clicked open. Victory.

“Room service!” she called out, stepping inside with an exaggerated chirp that echoed off the pristine walls of their hotel suite.

The scent of garlic and roasted vegetables wafted through the air as she set the bags down on the small dining table by the window.

She had gone all out with Italian from a fabulous little place just down the street, complete with tiramisu for dessert.

If this didn't thaw the proverbial iceberg between them, she wasn't sure what would.

George was sprawled across the couch, his tall frame nearly swallowing it whole. He glanced up briefly from his phone, his face unreadable, before his attention flicked back to the screen. "Hey," he said flatly, his voice low and distant.

"Wow." Myst placed a hand dramatically over her heart. "Try not to overwhelm me with enthusiasm there, mate."

His lips twitched, but then his expression settled back into something guarded. "Sorry. Just tired."

"Right. Tired." She tilted her head, studying him for a beat longer than necessary. His jawline looked sharper than usual beneath the dim glow of the room's floor lamp, tension etched into every line of his face. "Well, I brought carbs and sugar, so... you're contractually obligated to perk up now."

He didn't reply, but he put the phone down, which felt like progress.

Myst took that as her cue to keep going.

She unpacked the containers with deliberate care, the clinking of lids filling the silence.

The quiet weighed heavy, pressing against her chest like a too-tight corset.

She hated this; this version of them, where every word felt like walking a tightrope over a canyon of unresolved emotions.

“Look,” she began, her voice softer now.

“I know things got messy last night. And I hate how we left it. I’ve been thinking about it all day, actually.

” She turned toward him, clutching the edge of the table like it might anchor her.

“I... I just wanted to say I’m sorry. For how I handled it. Or didn’t handle it, I guess.”

“Yeah?” George’s eyes lifted to hers, searching. They were such a deep blue tonight, like the ocean just before a storm.

“Yeah.” She swallowed hard, her throat dry despite the glass of water she’d chugged earlier.

“It’s just... this life I live, George, it’s madness.

You’ve seen it. And balancing all of it, my career, my team, the press, it’s like juggling flaming swords while blindfolded.

Half the time, I don’t even know if I’m doing it right. ”

“You’re doing fine,” he said, almost too quickly. But there was no warmth behind the words, no conviction. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “But what about me, Myst? Where do I fit in all of that?”

Her stomach twisted. She’d known this was coming, hadn’t she? Known it from the moment she said goodbye to Jessie at the interviews earlier. Still, hearing it out loud felt different. He sounded... lost.

“Of course you fit,” she said, crossing the room to sit beside him on the couch. The

leather creaked softly under her slight weight. “You’re here, aren’t you? With me. That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” His tone wasn’t sharp, exactly, but it cut all the same.

He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it mussed in a way that made her want to reach out and fix it.

“Because sometimes it feels like I’m just...

tagging along. Like I’m some bloke who got lucky enough to ride shotgun in your world, but I don’t really belong here.”

“That’s not true.” Her voice came out firmer than she expected, tinged with a desperation she couldn’t quite mask. “You belong with me, George. I wouldn’t have asked you to stay if I didn’t think that.”

“Then why does it feel like I’m always two steps behind?

” He looked at her then, really looked at her, and there was so much raw vulnerability in his expression that it nearly broke her.

“Like you’re running this race, and I can’t keep up.

What happens when I fall too far behind, Myst? Do you just leave me there?”

“God, no!” The thought alone sent a shiver down her spine.

She reached for his hand, curling her fingers around his larger ones.

“I’m scared too, okay? Scared of how fast this is all moving.

Scared I'll screw it up, or that maybe I already have.

But I want this. I want us .“ Her voice cracked on the last word, and she blinked furiously to keep the tears at bay. “I don't know how to make you believe that, but it's the truth. ”

For a long moment, he didn't respond. Then he sighed, pulling his hand away gently but deliberately. “I believe you,” he said quietly. “But that doesn't make it easier.”

“Nothing about this is easy,” she agreed, her voice barely above a whisper.

The silence that followed wasn't hostile. It wasn't even uncomfortable, exactly. It was just... heavy. Full of things unsaid and fears unspoken. Myst stared down at her lap, feeling the sting of defeat settle in her chest. She'd tried. God, she'd tried. But maybe trying wasn't enough.

“Let's eat before it gets cold,” she said finally, forcing her voice into something light, though it cracked under the weight of everything else. George nodded absently, reaching for one of the containers without meeting her eyes.

The next morning, Myst stood in the middle of her dressing room, surrounded by a whirlwind of stylists and assistants. Jessie handed her the schedule for the day, her expression carefully neutral.

“Last-minute addition,” Jessie said, tapping a manicured nail against the paper. “Photoshoot with Antoine Delacourt. Shouldn't take more than two hours.”

“Antoine?” Myst groaned, rubbing her temple. Just what she needed, a photoshoot with the infamous flirt. “Fine. Let's just get it over with.”

“Should I...” Jessie hesitated. “Do you want me to let George know?”

“No.” Myst shook her head quickly, avoiding her cousin’s gaze. “I’ll tell him later. It’s nothing. Just work.”

“Right,” Jessie said, the single word loaded with meaning Myst chose to ignore.

Chapter Nine

George slouched deeper into the hotel room's oversized armchair, his phone balanced precariously on his knee.

The half-empty cup of coffee on the table next to him had long since gone cold, but he hadn't noticed.

His thumb hovered over the screen as if it might somehow change the image staring back at him.

There she was, his Myst, radiant as ever, the thick waves of her dark hair arranged just so, her pale blue eyes angled toward the camera with that signature mix of vulnerability and fire that had first drawn him in.

But she wasn't alone. No, she stood beside Antoine Delacourt, the French actor-slash-heartthrob whose face could probably sell ice to a polar bear.

The two of them were laughing, their heads tilted together like some glossy magazine's idea of perfection.

"Antoine Delacourt," George muttered under his breath, the name tasting bitter even as he said it. His jaw tightened reflexively. The caption wasn't helping either: "Aussie pop princess Myst and French cinema's golden boy heat things up in Paris! Is this Europe's newest power couple?"

The comments section below was already a feeding frenzy, fans speculating wildly,

dissecting every glance, every smile.

“Heat things up,” George repeated, his voice loud in the empty room. He tossed the phone onto the couch beside him, running a hand through his hair as frustration bubbled in his chest.

He’d stayed back at the hotel all day, giving her space, trying not to dwell too much on last night’s awkwardness.

He wanted to believe they were on the same team, even if it didn’t always feel that way.

But seeing this, the photoshoot she hadn’t mentioned, the easy chemistry she seemed to have with someone who fit so effortlessly into her world; it scraped against every insecurity he thought he’d managed to shove down.

Had she really thought she could keep this from him? Did she think he wouldn’t care?

The door clicked open, and George straightened reflexively, his broad shoulders stiffening as Myst stepped inside.

She looked tired, her delicate frame wrapped in a loose cardigan, a bag slung over one shoulder.

For a split second, the sight of her softened something inside him.

But then the memory of the photo resurfaced, sharp and stinging.

“Hey,” she said lightly, setting her bag on the desk. She glanced at him, her pale blue eyes searching his face, but his expression didn’t shift, nor did he get up to greet her.

“Long day?”

“Not as long as yours, apparently.” The words came out colder than he intended, clipped and sharp.

Myst paused, frowning slightly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

George leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I saw the photos, Myst,” he said, his tone carefully measured but still laced with accusation. “You and Antoine. Nice of you to give me a heads-up.”

Her brow furrowed, confusion flickering across her face before realization hit. “Oh,” she said softly, almost to herself, as she dropped her gaze to the floor. “The photoshoot.”

“Yeah, the photoshoot,” George echoed, standing now. “The one you conveniently forgot to mention.”

“George, it wasn’t...” she started, but he cut her off, the frustration he’d been bottling up spilling over.

“Do you know what it’s like to find out about your girlfriend’s day from strangers on the internet?

To see everyone else talking about her life before she even bothers to tell you?

” His voice was rising, though he fought to keep it steady.

“And don’t even get me started on the whole ‘power couple’ thing.

Do you have any idea how...” He stopped himself, shaking his head as he turned

away, pacing toward the window.

The glass reflected his own scowl back at him, distorted by the city lights beyond.

“How what?” Myst’s voice was quiet but steady. There was no trace of defensiveness, only genuine curiosity, or maybe concern. It made him pause, his anger easing and his shoulders sagging slightly, though he didn’t turn around.

“How it feels,” he said finally, his voice lower now, “to feel like I’m just... standing on the sidelines of your life, waiting for you to let me in.”

Myst crossed the room slowly, stopping a few feet behind him. “It wasn’t like that,” she said gently. “George, it was just work. A last-minute shoot. And I didn’t tell you because...” She hesitated, biting her lip. “Because I knew you’d be upset.”

“Well, congratulations,” he said dryly, turning to face her. “Mission accomplished.”

She flinched at that, and for a moment, guilt twisted in his chest. But then he remembered the photo again, the way Antoine had looked at her like he belonged there, like it was so easy for him to be part of her world.

And suddenly, the guilt was drowned out by that familiar ache of not-enough-ness.

Of feeling like he’d never quite measure up.

“George,” she tried again, stepping closer, her voice softening. “You know this isn’t about...”

“Do I?” he interrupted, his eyes locking onto hers, searching for answers he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear. “Because right now, Myst, it doesn’t feel like we’re on the same page. Hell, sometimes it doesn’t even feel like we’re in the same book.”

Annoyance began to bloom on her face. “Am I supposed to run every work obligation by you now? Every photoshoot? Every meeting? Is that what you want?”

“Don’t twist this,” he countered. “You didn’t tell me about Antoine because you knew it’d look bad. You knew it’d hurt me, and you still went ahead and did it. That’s the part I can’t get past!”

“Because I’m trying to protect us!” Her voice cracked on the last word, and she crossed her arms over her chest as if to steady herself. “Do you think I enjoy walking on eggshells, worrying about how every single thing I do will affect us? Do you know how exhausting that is?”

“Exhausting?” George laughed, but there was no humour in it.

“Try being the guy who has to watch his girlfriend’s life play out in tabloids and Instagram posts, wondering where the hell he fits in all of it!

Try being the guy who feels like a ghost when she walks into a room because everyone else sees her first, and no one gives a damn about him! ”

“Jealousy,” Myst said sharply, her voice cutting through his like the crack of a whip. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? You’re jealous. Of my career. Of my world. And instead of figuring out how we can make this work, you keep punishing me for it.”

“Punishing you?” He stepped closer, wanting to reach for her but afraid to while he was this angry.

“I’ve been nothing but supportive. But maybe...

” he stopped himself, jaw tightening before he finally finished.

“Maybe I just can’t handle it anymore. Maybe I’m not cut out for this public circus of yours. ”

“Maybe you’re right.” Her words came out quieter, but no less sharp. The anger had drained from her voice, leaving behind something raw and hollow. “Maybe we are too different. Maybe trying to bridge this gap between us is asking too much.”

George stared at her, his hands clenching and releasing at his sides. Her gaze didn’t waver, but he saw the flicker of pain in her eyes. It mirrored his own.

“Fine,” he muttered, the word landing like an anchor between them.

“Fine,” she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

The silence roared louder than their shouting had.

She looked away first, swallowing hard before she grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, her hand resting on the handle, but then she yanked it open and walked out.

The door slammed shut behind her, the sound reverberating through the quiet room.

George stood frozen in place, staring at the spot where she’d been moments ago. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, the anger giving way to a hollow ache in his chest. Alone again, the silence pressed in on him, suffocating and unrelenting.

George sat slumped on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the muted TV.

The neon lights of Paris blinked through the curtains, mocking him with their

brightness.

He replayed the fight in his head, dissecting each line, each accusation, each regret.

His frustration had boiled over, sure, but it wasn't just anger.

It was fear. Fear that she didn't need him the way he needed her.

Fear that he would always be a step behind in her world, never quite catching up.

"Bloody idiot," he muttered under his breath, scrubbing a hand over his face.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand and he picked it up to look at it, hoping against hope it was Myst, saying something that would magically make everything better.

No. Just a message from an old friend, who'd reached out to connect on hearing he was in Paris. Mate, come to Toulouse. Could use your help with some drills. Plus, Elisa misses your terrible jokes.

George exhaled, the corners of his mouth tugging into the faintest of smiles. Maybe some space was exactly what he needed, to clear his head, to figure out what he really wanted, and how to stop this spiral of insecurity before it swallowed him whole.

The next morning, he found Jessie in the hotel lobby, nursing a coffee that smelled strong enough to wake the dead. She raised an eyebrow as he approached.

"Come to grovel already?" she asked dryly, sipping her drink.

"Not yet," he said, his tone subdued but firm. "I need to take some time, Jess. Heading to see a friend in Toulouse for a few days. Can you... can you let Myst know?"

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Jessie studied him for a long moment, her sharp gaze softening slightly.

“Sure,” she said finally. “A few days’ space might be for the best right now.

But for what it’s worth, George, she’s been happier these past few weeks than I’ve seen her in years.

Don’t let this thing between you two go down without a fight. She’s worth it. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, nodding. “I do.”

“Good.” Jessie stood, dusting croissant crumbs off her jeans. “Now go sort yourself out, mate. And come back ready to fix this mess.”

“Working on it,” George replied, grabbing his bag. As he walked out of the lobby, the weight of the city seemed to lift slightly off his shoulders. There was still a storm brewing between him and Myst, but maybe he could find a way to weather it.

The rugby ball spun lazily in the air, arching high above the green expanse of the park before landing with a satisfying smack against Tommy Raedecker’s broad palms. George stood a few feet away, his hands on his hips, squinting up at the French sky that seemed unnaturally blue, as if it had been painted on.

The shouts of children echoed around them, mingling with the distant clink of café cups and the occasional chirp of birds darting between the sycamore trees.

“Still got that throw,” Tommy said with a grin, tossing the ball back to George. “But I reckon you’ve lost a step or two since I last saw you. Getting soft, are we?”

“Soft?” George snorted, catching the ball easily despite Tommy’s jab. “You’re one to talk. When was the last time you ran more than ten meters without wheezing?”

“Oi, careful now.” Tommy raised an eyebrow, mockingly offended. “Assistant coach, mate. Strategy’s my game these days.”

“Strategy,” George repeated, shaking his head. He rolled the ball absentmindedly along his forearm, the familiar texture grounding him for a moment. It felt good to be out here, under the open sky, surrounded by something simple. Something real.

“Alright, alright, break it up, you two,” Tommy’s wife Elisa called from where she sat on a picnic blanket nearby.

Her blonde hair gleamed in the sun as she leaned back on her hands, watching their twin boys dart around the playground like two little whirlwinds.

“George came here for a break, not for you to relive your glory days, Tom.”

“Glory days? She makes it sound like I’m ancient,” Tommy muttered, but there was no heat in his words as he jogged over to join Elisa, plopping down beside her with a contented grunt and leaning in for a kiss.

George followed more slowly, tucking the ball under one arm as he approached.

The scene in front of him felt like it belonged in one of those picture-perfect ads for wholesome living; a laughing couple, their kids bounding around, a breeze ruffling through the park.

It was so different from the chaos of tour buses and flashing cameras that had become his reality lately. So different from Myst's world.

"Sit, mate," Tommy said, patting the empty patch of blanket next to him. "I can see the gears turning in that big head of yours."

"Yeah, come on," Elisa added warmly, offering George a water bottle. "You've been brooding all morning. Let us help you unpack whatever's weighing you down."

"Brooding," George muttered, taking the bottle but not sitting just yet. "Not sure that's the word I'd use."

"Would you prefer sulking?" Tommy teased, earning a playful swat from Elisa.

"Alright, alright." George chuckled despite himself and sank onto the blanket.

He stretched his legs out in front of him, his long frame sprawling awkwardly compared to Tommy's compact, casual ease.

For a moment, he just watched the twins, one climbing the monkey bars, the other chasing a pigeon with wild abandon.

"How do you do it?" George asked suddenly, his voice quieter now. "All of this. Balancing it, I mean. Your career, your family..."

Tommy exchanged a glance with Elisa before responding. "It's not easy, mate. Never is. You think we haven't had our fair share of arguments about priorities? About time? Hell, there were weeks— months —when I was playing that Elisa barely saw me except to hand me the laundry bag."

"True story," Elisa chimed in with a light laugh. "But we worked through it because

we both wanted it to work. That's the thing, George, you've got to want it enough to fight for it. Both of you."

"Both of us," George echoed under his breath, twisting the cap off the water bottle.

His thoughts drifted unbidden to Myst; her determined expression when she talked about her music, the way her laugh lit up a room, how she always smelled faintly of jasmine, even after hours under stage lights.

He wondered what she was doing right now. If she was thinking about him too.

"Look, I get it," Tommy continued, leaning back on his elbows.

"Being with someone like Myst, someone who lives her life in the spotlight... It's not the same as being with Elisa here, who's happy to stay out of the headlines.

But that girl clearly means something to you, otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here asking these questions. "

"She does," George admitted, the words feeling heavy on his tongue. "But sometimes it feels... impossible. Like we're speaking different languages half the time."

"That's normal," Elisa said gently. "Relationships are messy, George. They're not supposed to be easy. But they're worth it if you're willing to put in the effort. The question is..." she paused, looking at him pointedly, "is she worth it to you?"

George didn't answer right away. He tipped his head back, staring up at the crisscrossing branches overhead and the clear blue winter sky, almost the same shade as Myst's eyes.

Somewhere in the distance, a child squealed with laughter.

He thought of the way Myst's eyes softened when she looked at him, and then of the argument; the anger, the hurt, the door slamming behind her. His chest tightened.

"Come on, Dad!" one of the twins shouted, waving enthusiastically from the swings. "Push us!"

"On my way!" Tommy called back, rising with practiced ease. He gave George a pat on the shoulder as he passed. "Think about it, mate. And don't take too long. Life doesn't wait."

Elisa studied George for a moment, her expression curious. "How's the deep thinking going?" she asked after a moment.

He laughed without humour. "Exhausting," he admitted. "Trying to figure out if I'm cut out for this. For being with someone like Myst."

"Someone like Myst?" Elisa repeated, arching a brow. "You mean someone amazing, talented, and completely smitten with you?"

"Someone whose life is chaos," George clarified, though her description made his chest ache in a different way. "Someone who's constantly on the move, surrounded by people, always in the spotlight..."

"Sounds like someone else I know," Elisa said pointedly, nudging him lightly with her elbow. "You're not exactly living a quiet life yourself, George."

"Yeah, but it's different," he argued weakly. "Rugby's... structured. Predictable, in its own way. Myst's world..." He shook his head, struggling to find the words. "It's like trying to hold onto smoke."

Elisa was quiet for a moment, watching her husband and children.

“You know,” she said softly at last, “when Tommy took this job in France, I wasn’t sure how we’d make it work.

I worried about the distance, the changes, schooling the kids, being away from our families, the language, so many uncertainties.

.. but at the end of the day, I realized something.

It’s not about having all the answers. It’s about choosing each other, every single day.

Even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard. ”

George stared ahead, watching the twins shriek with joy as Tommy pushed them higher on the swings. The simplicity of their joy felt like a world away from the complications he and Myst faced.

“Do you think...” He hesitated, his voice quieter now. “Do you think Myst and I could ever have this? A family, a normal life?”

“Normality’s overrated,” Elisa replied with a smile.

“But if you’re asking if you two could have a future together?

That’s up to you. Just remember, love doesn’t have to fit into a box to be real.

Sometimes it’s messy and chaotic and nothing like you imagined.

But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth it. ”

Her words settled over him like a blanket, warm and heavy with truth.

“The thing is,” Elisa continued, “Love isn’t enough on its own. You’ve got to meet her halfway.”

“Halfway,” George repeated softly, almost to himself.

As Elisa got up and went to join Tommy and the boys, George stayed rooted to the blanket, his gaze fixed on the idyllic scene in front of him.

He couldn’t help but wonder, could this ever be his life with Myst?

Or would the demands of her world always keep them apart?

He sighed, picking up the rugby ball again. It felt solid in his grip, dependable. Unlike the mess of uncertainty swirling in his head.

Chapter Ten

The whistle sliced through the crisp morning air, sharp and commanding.

George stood on the sidelines of the Toulouse rugby club's practice field, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket.

The players moved like a well-oiled machine, their boots pounding against the damp turf as they executed drills with laser-sharp focus.

The cadence of their movements—the thud of the ball, the barked calls—was a language George knew so well it was practically etched into his DNA.

He itched to join in, but this wasn't his place, not his club. He was here as a guest only, and just the presence of the Australian captain had some of the young players wide-eyed and eager to impress; he didn't need to risk injury if one of them got too big for their boots in a reckless tackle.

“Still got those restless feet, mate?” Tommy asked, appearing beside him like some kind of scruffy oracle. His battered face was lit with quiet amusement, brown eyes crinkling at the edges.

George exhaled a laugh, though his gaze stayed fixed on the field. “Reckon I'll always have 'em.”

“Thought so.” Tommy crossed his arms over his chest, his posture easy but deliberate. He watched the players for a moment before continuing, his tone

seemingly casual. “What are you thinkin’ about these days? Beyond the next game, I mean.”

“Beyond rugby?” George echoed, almost startled by the question. It hung in the air between them, heavier than he expected.

“Yeah. Beyond rugby,” Tommy said with a knowing glance. “You’re not gonna play forever, you know. This,” he gestured at the field, “coaching was my choice, but somehow I don’t see that for you. What are you gonna do?”

George frowned, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

He hadn’t really allowed himself to think too deeply about that, about what came after this life he’d built with blood, sweat, and more injuries than he cared to count.

“Dunno,” he admitted finally. “Haven’t really thought about it much. ”

“Well, maybe it’s time you did,” Tommy replied. “You’ve got more in your life than just the game now, don’t you?”

George’s chest tightened slightly. Myst . The thought of her sent a pang of something sharp and aching through him. He nodded absently, still watching the players, though his thoughts were far away.

“Look at ’em,” Tommy said, gesturing toward the field. “They’re working their arses off, chasing something bigger than themselves. That’s what makes it worth it, yeah? Putting everything into something you love.”

“Yeah,” George murmured, his voice faint. His eyes followed a young winger who darted forward, quick as lightning, catching a pass and bolting past the defence. The boy’s sheer determination struck a chord deep inside him.

It reminded him of Myst, the way she carried herself on stage, her presence electric and unshakable.

She chased her dreams with the same fire these players had, pouring herself into every note, every lyric.

And hadn't he admired that about her from the start?

Her grit, her passion, her refusal to settle for anything less than extraordinary?

"She works just as hard as I ever have," he muttered under his breath, barely aware he'd spoken aloud.

"What's that?" Tommy asked, turning to him with a raised brow.

"Nothing," George lied quickly, though his jaw clenched. It wasn't a conversation he was ready to have, not yet, anyway. But the truth was swirling in his chest, undeniable now: he'd been unfair to Myst.

And the absolute truth was, his career had an expiration date.

Hers didn't. In three years, or five, or seven, or whenever he hung up the boots, did he want to find himself alone?

Was he going to look around and realise that if he'd just tried, he could have shared the life that came after with Myst?

Tommy, thankfully, didn't push him further. Instead, he gave George a hearty clap on the back. "Just think about it, mate. You're allowed to want more than one thing, you know."

As Tommy strode off toward the coaching staff, George stayed rooted in place, watching the players with fresh eyes. They weren't just training, they were building something, brick by brick, with every pass and tackle. A career, a team, a future.

And maybe he could, too. If he was willing to fight for it.

The pen hovered over the page, trembling slightly in Myst's small hand.

The journal rested on her lap, its leather cover worn soft from years of use, pages filled with half-songs and scribbled thoughts.

Her fingers tapped restlessly against the pen, a staccato rhythm that hinted at the chaos inside her.

"Ugh," she groaned, tossing her head back dramatically and letting out a sigh loud enough to rival any diva meltdown. "This is impossible."

"Nothing about you being dramatic is impossible," Jessie quipped from across the room, not looking up from her phone. She was sprawled out in an armchair, legs slung over one side casually. "But please, do go on. I'm captivated."

Myst shot her cousin a glare, though it lacked any real venom. "I'm serious. I can't... I don't know what to say." She gestured helplessly to the blank page. "It's all just... stuck in here." She tapped her chest with the pen, her voice cracking on the last word.

Jessie finally looked up, her pale blue eyes narrowing. "Well, maybe if you stopped sulking and actually said something to him instead of writing another tragic ballad, you'd get unstuck."

"Not helpful," Myst muttered, but her cheeks flushed pink.

Jessie wasn't wrong, not entirely, anyway.

Still, the thought of reaching out to George made her stomach twist into knots.

What would she even say? Hey, sorry for being a hot mess of a girlfriend.

Please forgive me and also ignore the tabloids blaring about me and Antoine, he's actually a creep?

No. She couldn't do it. Not yet.

"Okay, fine," Jessie said, swinging her legs off the chair and standing up in one fluid motion.

She crossed the room with purpose, snatching the journal right off Myst's lap before she could protest. "If you're not going to call him, at least finish the damn song.

You've been moping around this apartment for days!

Either write your feelings down or go scream them at him in person.

But pick one, because I can't take much more of this energy. "

"Jess!" Myst lunged for the journal, but Jessie held it just out of reach, smirking like the menace she was. "Give it back!"

"Not until you admit that I'm right."

"Fine! You're right, okay?" Myst huffed, crossing her arms and pouting like a child.

"Happy now?"

“Ecstatic,” Jessie replied dryly, handing the journal back. “Now, get to work. And don’t make it too sad, we’ve got enough heartbreak songs in the world already.”

Myst rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress the small smile tugging at her lips. As much as Jessie’s tough-love approach grated on her nerves, it was exactly what she needed. Taking a deep breath, she settled back into the couch, pen poised over the page once more.

This time, the words came easier. They spilled out in a rush, raw and unfiltered: regret, longing, love, all tangled together in a melody that felt like it had been waiting for her to find it.

She hummed softly to herself as she wrote, the tune taking shape in her mind.

It wasn’t perfect, not yet, but it was honest. And that was enough.

“Okay, that’s better,” Jessie said after a while, listening to Myst hum the notes under her breath. “Still a bit mopey, but I’ll allow it. So, are you gonna send it to him or what?”

Myst froze, the pen slipping from her fingers. The idea of sending anything to George, let alone this deeply personal, painfully vulnerable song, sent a shiver down her spine. “I don’t know,” she admitted quietly. “What if he doesn’t want to hear from me?”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Jessie said without hesitation. “But you’ll never know unless you try.”

Myst chewed her bottom lip, her heart thudding loudly in her chest. Jessie made it sound so simple, but it wasn’t. It couldn’t be. What if she reached out and it only made things worse? What if...

“Stop thinking,” Jessie interrupted, as if reading her mind. “You’re gonna spiral, and then we’ll be back to square one. Just... I don’t know, sleep on it or something. But don’t wait too long, okay? Life’s short, babe.”

“Yeah,” Myst murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “Okay.”

But as the night wore on and the Paris lights outside her window blurred into a hazy glow, Myst realized that she couldn’t wait. Not anymore. Fear had kept her frozen for too long, and if she wanted to fix things with George, she had to act now. Before it was too late.

“Jessie,” she said suddenly, startling her cousin, who had dozed off on the couch. “I’m going to Toulouse.”

Jessie blinked groggily, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. “Wait, what? Like, right now?”

“Yes. Tomorrow. First flight out,” Myst said, her voice steady despite the butterflies swarming in her stomach. “I have to see him. I have to make this right.”

For once, Jessie didn’t argue or tease. She just nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. “About time,” she said. Then, after a beat, “Want me to pack snacks?”

Myst laughed, a bright, genuine sound that felt like sunlight breaking through the clouds. For the first time in days, she felt like she could breathe again. And as she closed her journal and set it aside, she knew one thing for certain: she wasn’t going to let fear win.

The doorbell rang, its cheerful chime cutting through the clatter of plates and the hum of conversation in Tommy’s dining room.

Sunlight streamed through the windows, catching the gleam of silverware and the half-empty glasses scattered across the table.

Tommy's youngest was in the middle of an animated attempt to steal chips off his twin's plate, setting off a chorus of protests and laughter.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“George, mate, see who that is, would ya?” Tommy called from his spot at the table, reaching for a napkin to wipe the smear of ketchup off his youngest’s cheek.

“Yeah, sure,” George muttered, pushing his chair back. But before he could rise, Elisa swept in from the kitchen with the bowl of pasta she’d made for him and Tommy.

“I’ve got it. Relax,” she said, putting the bowl down and heading past them to the hallway door. Her eyes flicked toward George. “Expecting someone famous, George?” she teased lightly, her tone playful but sharp enough to make him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“Not bloody likely,” George mumbled as he leaned back, his hand curling around his glass of water. Jessie knew where he was, but Myst? She wouldn’t show up here. Still, a peculiar tightness gripped his chest; hope, fragile and unwelcome.

Then, faintly, from the hallway came a voice. A soft, familiar voice.

“Is George here?”

George froze mid-breath. The chatter around the table dimmed, but he barely noticed. Every muscle in his body locked up, like the aftermath of a nasty tackle. That voice. It couldn’t be her. It couldn’t be real.

“George!” Tommy barked, snapping him out of his daze. “Mate, you’ve got... uh... company. Want me to...?”

But George was already rising, his pulse pounding in his ears as he crossed the room in long, hurried strides. He rounded the corner into the hallway, and stopped cold.

Myst stood in the open doorway, framed by the sunlight spilling in around her.

Her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders, tousled slightly by the midday breeze.

The pale blue of her eyes searched his, wide and uncertain.

She looked... small. Nervous. Like she wasn't sure if she belonged here or if she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life.

"Hi," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. She swallowed hard, her fingers tightening around the strap of her bag. "I..." She hesitated, her gaze faltering, before snapping back to his. "I needed to see you."

"Bloody hell," George breathed, his voice faint, forgetting entirely about Elisa standing just behind him, or Tommy, who had followed him from the dining room.

"Well," Elisa interjected gently, folding her arms. "This feels... important." She glanced at Tommy, who gave her a knowing nod, before turning to their two kids, who were peering curiously around the corner.

"Alright, everyone," she said, clapping her hands.

"Let's give these two some space. Back to the table, now. "

"But..." one of the twins started, but Elisa silenced them with a firm look.

"No arguments," Tommy added, shooing them back into the dining room. He gave George a subtle nod before disappearing after his family, leaving the hallway

suddenly, achingly quiet.

It was just the two of them now. Myst shifted her weight, her fingers clenching and releasing on the strap of her bag as her eyes darted away from his and then back again.

“Can we talk?” she asked, her voice trembling just enough to betray the effort it took to say the words.

“Yeah,” George managed, though his mouth felt dry and his tongue thick. “Yeah, we can... uh, out back. Garden’s probably best.”

“Okay,” Myst said, exhaling like she’d been holding her breath for hours. She followed him silently as he led her through the cozy home, passing the lingering scent of just-cooked chips and sausages in the kitchen, until they stepped out onto the patio.

George stopped by one of the chairs near the table, turning to face her.

“Here’s good,” he said, though the words felt stiff. He shoved his hands into his pockets, unsure what to do with them, or with himself.

Myst sat down on the edge of the garden chair, her hands knotted together in her lap as though they might otherwise fly apart.

She glanced up at George, who hadn’t moved from where he stood a few feet away, his broad shoulders taut.

The silence between them stretched like a rubber band about to snap.

“Right,” she said softly, breaking it first, her accent curling around the word. “I guess I’ll just... dive in then.”

George gave a stiff nod, the muscles along his jaw working as if he were chewing over every possible response and finding none that fit. He shifted his weight but stayed rooted in place, his hands still buried deep in his pockets.

“Look,” Myst started again, her voice growing steadier now, “I know I’ve been rubbish at...” She paused, her lips twitching into a wry smile that didn’t quite reach her pale blue eyes. “Well, at explaining myself. At letting you into my world. And that’s not fair to you. Not even a little bit.”

George frowned slightly, his gaze narrowing but not unkind. He opened his mouth, maybe to counter her, but she held up a hand, delicate and trembling just slightly, to stop him.

“Let me finish,” she said, her words almost pleading. “Please, George, I need to get this out before I lose my nerve.”

He nodded again, slower this time, his expression softening as he finally sank into the chair opposite her. The scrape of metal legs against brick was loud, but neither of them flinched.

“I’ve spent so much of my life chasing this dream,” Myst continued, her fingers twisting the hem of her sweater now instead of each other.

“Music is everything to me; it’s how I make sense of things, how I connect with people, how I keep moving forward when everything else feels too big or too messy.

” Her eyes flicked up to meet his, their usual brightness dulled by the weight of what she was saying.

“But somewhere along the way, I got so used to protecting that part of me, to keeping it separate, that I didn’t realize I was shutting you out. ”

“Yeah,” George murmured, his gravelly voice low. “I felt that.”

Her throat tightened at the quiet acknowledgment, but she forced herself to keep going.

“And I hate that I made you feel like that. Like you weren’t important enough to see it all, the good bits and the ugly ones too.

Because that’s not true, George. You’re.

..” She faltered, searching for the right words, the ones that wouldn’t sound too small or too grandiose.

“You’re the only person who’s ever made me think there might be more to life than just music.

And losing you, even the thought of it..

..” Her voice broke slightly, and she looked down at her lap, blinking hard.

“It scares me more than anything else ever has.”

For a long moment, George didn’t say anything, and the silence pressed down on her chest like a weight. When she finally dared to look back up at him, she saw something shift in his expression. Something raw, unguarded in a way she wasn’t sure she’d ever seen before.

“Bloody hell, Myst,” he muttered, leaning forward now, his forearms resting on his knees. “You think I don’t get scared too? That I haven’t been completely messed up over this?”

Her brow furrowed, confusion flickering across her face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, exhaling sharply, “that I’ve been a bloody idiot about us.

I let my insecurities get the better of me, and I didn’t trust you the way I should’ve.

I was jealous.” He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it mussed in a way that made him look even more vulnerable.

“And I kept expecting you to bend over backward to make this work without thinking about how impossible that is.”

“George...” Myst whispered, her voice barely audible.

“No, let me finish now,” he said, his tone firm but not harsh.

His intense blue eyes locked onto hers, unwavering.

“You’ve worked your arse off for everything you’ve achieved, and I am so bloody proud of you for it.

But I let myself get caught up in how hard it all felt; how different our lives are, how impossible it seemed to fit them together. And that’s on me. Not you.”

Myst stared at him, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. She wanted to say something, anything, but the lump in her throat had grown too thick.

“I’m sorry, Myst,” George said quietly, his voice softer now. “I’m sorry for making you feel like you had to choose. For not being better. And for not telling you sooner how much you mean to me.”

“George,” she finally managed, her voice cracking but resolute, “you don’t have to apologize alone. This isn’t just on you. It’s on both of us.” She reached across the small table, her fingers brushing the back of his hand tentatively, like she wasn’t sure she’d earned the right to touch him again.

His hand turned, palm up, and closed gently around hers, calloused and warm. The connection was small but steady, grounding them both in the middle of the fragile moment.

“Maybe,” George said after a beat, his lips curving into a faint, tentative smile, “we’ve both been a bit rubbish at this.”

“Maybe,” Myst agreed, a glimmer of light returning to her eyes. “But we’re here now. That’s got to count for something, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he said, squeezing her hand lightly. “Yeah, it does.”

Chapter Eleven

George huffed out a breath as he let the feel of holding Myst's hand again sink into him, his lips quirking into a faint, self-deprecating smile.

"This is ridiculous, you know. I mean, look at us. You're this...

superstar!" He gestured vaguely at her with his free hand.

"With a million people screaming your name every night, and I'm just some bloke who chases an oval ball around a field for a living. "

"Just some bloke?" Myst raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into the barest hint of a smile. "You're the bloke, George Dennis. Captain of your country. Australian Player of the Year. Pretty sure you've got a decent number of people screaming your name too."

"Not quite the same," George said, shaking his head.

"No one's writing stories about what I'm wearing to training or speculating about who I'm dating.

" His smile faded slightly, his gaze dropping from hers.

"And no one's tearing apart everything I care about just because it doesn't fit their idea of how my life should look. "

“George...” Myst gripped his hand. “I don’t care what they say. Not the tabloids, not my PR team, not anyone. You’re the one I want to be with. You . Not the guy they think you are, not the version of you they might write about someday. Just you.”

Her words hit him like a shove to the chest, knocking something loose inside him that he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding onto. He met her gaze, his throat tightening. “You say that now, but what happens when the headlines get worse? When being with me makes things harder for you?”

“Let them,” she said fiercely, her small frame practically vibrating with determination.

“I’ve spent years letting other people dictate how I live, always trying to strike this impossible balance between being myself and being what they want me to be.

But I can’t do that anymore, not when it comes to you. I won’t.”

“Bloody hell, Myst.” George ran a hand through his hair, scrubbing at the back of his neck as if he could ease the tension building there. “You deserve better than this, better than me. Someone who doesn’t come with all this baggage.”

“Stop it.” She reached out, her fingers curling gently around his wrist, grounding him. “You don’t get to decide what I deserve, George. That’s my choice, and I choose you. Complicated, messy, perfect ... you.”

For a moment, he couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move.

All he could do was stare at her, this tiny, brilliant force of nature who had somehow chosen him despite all the reasons she shouldn’t.

And then, slowly, he brought his free hand up to cover hers, his grip firm but careful,

as though she might slip away if he held on too tightly.

“Alright,” he said quietly, his voice thick with emotion. “But I need to do better. For you, for us. I’ll work on it. The jealousy, the insecurities... all of it. I’ll figure it out. Even if it means stepping out of my comfort zone.”

“Good,” she said simply, her smile softening. “Because I’m not going anywhere. Not unless you tell me to.”

“Never,” he murmured, his heart thundering in his chest as he leaned forward, closing the space between them. Their foreheads touched first, the contact delicate yet electric, and then his lips were on hers, tentative at first but quickly deepening as the weight of the past weeks melted away.

In that moment, nothing else mattered, not the tabloids, not the schedules, not the impossibly high stakes of their lives. It was just them, tangled together in a quiet garden in Toulouse, choosing each other despite the chaos swirling around them.

George wasn’t entirely sure how they’d made it back inside.

One moment, they were in the garden, her lips soft and insistent against his, her small hands fisting into the fabric of his shirt as though she could pull him closer just by sheer will.

The next, he found himself stumbling backward through the hallway of Tommy’s house, Myst’s laugh spilling into the quiet air like music played just for him.

“Careful,” she teased as his shoulder bumped against the doorframe, her voice carrying that lilting melody that always managed to undo him.

Her fingers curled around the collar of his shirt, tugging him down for another kiss

before he could find a response.

Not that he minded, words seemed wholly unnecessary when she was this close, her presence filling every corner of his focus.

“Your fault,” he muttered between kisses, his own hands finding the curve of her waist, fitting there like they belonged. “You’re distracting.”

“Good,” she murmured against his mouth, her breath warm and sweet as her fingers tangled in the short hairs at the back of his neck. “I’m aiming for completely irresistible.”

“Mission accomplished,” George said, his voice low and unsteady, before he finally managed to maneuver them up the stairs and through the doorway to his room.

His hand fumbled behind him to push the door shut, and then they were alone again, the world outside retreating to some far-off place neither of them cared to think about.

Myst was on him in an instant, her arms looping around his neck as she pressed herself flush against him.

He bent slightly to meet her height, his larger frame enveloping her delicate one, a contrast that somehow felt as natural as breathing.

The scent of her, something floral with just a hint of spice, wrapped around him, intoxicating, grounding.

“Still think we’re too different?” she asked softly, her lips brushing the corner of his mouth, teasing.

“Not here,” George replied, his grin breaking through as his hands slid up her sides, his thumbs grazing the edge of her ribs.

“Never here.” He dipped his head closer, his lips almost on hers again before he paused, his voice shifting into something lighter, teasing now.

“Actually, I don’t think we’ve ever had any differences here.

Might be the only place we’ve always agreed. ”

Myst pulled back just enough to look at him, her pale blue eyes sparkling with amusement, her lips curving into a smile that was both mischievous and utterly disarming.

“Oh, is that right?” she asked, tilting her head in mock consideration.

“Well, at least we’ll always have this, huh?

” And before he could come up with a clever retort, she tugged him forward with surprising strength, pulling him down onto the bed with her.

His laughter rumbled low and unrestrained as they landed in a tangled heap of limbs. “You’re trouble,” he said, but the grin splitting his face betrayed how little he meant it.

“Maybe,” Myst admitted, her voice softer now, her teasing replaced by something warmer, deeper. She reached up to cup his cheek, her thumb tracing the line of his jaw as her expression softened. “But you seem to handle me just fine, George Dennis.”

“More than fine,” he whispered back, leaning down until there was no space left

between them.

It felt different, this time, as he undressed her, taking his time and kissing every inch of skin he exposed.

Almost like the first time between them all over again, but without the awkwardness, the fear of getting things wrong.

Full of wonder and tenderness and passion...

like a fresh start, George thought, at least until Myst lost her patience with him going so slowly and wrapped her legs around his waist, dragging him down to her, and then he had no brainpower left for any thoughts at all.

George's fingers traced lazy patterns along Myst's back, the tips of them barely skimming over her skin like he was memorizing every curve, every dip.

Her dark hair spilled across the pillow and onto his chest, a cascade of waves tangled from where his hands had been gripping it not so long ago.

The room hummed with the kind of quiet that didn't need filling, their breaths slow, their bodies still pressed close, fitting together like they were made for this exact moment.

"Stop looking at me like that," Myst murmured, her voice muffled against his collarbone but warm with amusement.

"Like what?" George asked, his lips twitching upward as he tilted his head to glance down at her.

"Like you're trying to figure out if I'm real or not," she teased, lifting her face just

enough for him to see the faint smirk playing on her lips. “I promise, I am.”

“Jury’s still out,” he replied. He reached up, brushing a strand of hair away from her face so he could see her more clearly. Her pale blue eyes met his, and something in his chest tightened, not unpleasantly, but in a way that made him wonder how he’d ever thought he could live without her.

“Well, if you keep staring, you might scare me off,” she joked lightly, though her own gaze didn’t waver.

“Not a chance,” George said, his voice dropping lower, rougher. He let the words hang there between them, unspoken promises and everything else they hadn’t yet figured out. And then he kissed her again, slow and lingering, like he had all the time in the world.

The smell of coffee hit him first when George wandered into the kitchen the next morning, barefoot and still tugging on his shirt.

Tommy was already seated at the table, a mug in hand and a knowing grin plastered across his battered face.

Elisa, stood by the stove flipping pancakes while their two kids giggled over something incomprehensible at the far end of the table.

“Morning, lover boy,” Tommy said, his grin widening as George froze mid-step.

“Don’t start,” George warned, though the corner of his mouth quirked up despite himself.

He glanced over his shoulder just as Myst appeared in the doorway, her hair piled messily on top of her head and one of his oversized rugby shirts hanging loosely off

her petite frame.

She looked completely out of place in the humble chaos of Tommy's kitchen, and yet somehow like she belonged.

"Good morning!" Myst chirped cheerfully, sliding past George to grab a mug from the counter. When she turned to flash a bright smile in Tommy's direction, George swore his old teammate nearly choked on his coffee.

"Is that your shirt she's wearing?" Tommy asked, his tone mock-serious as he pointed at George.

"Looks better on her, doesn't it?" George shot back smoothly, earning a delighted laugh from Myst and a groan from Tommy.

"Alright, alright, settle down," Elisa interjected with a good-natured eye roll, setting a plate of pancakes on the table. "Let them eat before you start grilling them like it's an interrogation."

"Thank you, Elisa," Myst said sweetly, taking a seat beside George and nudging him playfully under the table. "And I'm sorry for, ah, disappearing on you yesterday afternoon."

George couldn't help but admire the way she handled herself, effortlessly charming, even when thrown into the deep end.

As breakfast continued, the teasing softened into easy conversation.

Tommy's kids peppered Myst with questions about her music ("What's your favourite song you've ever written?

” “Do you know Taylor Swift?”), and George found himself watching her again, marvelling at how seamlessly she fit into this little pocket of normalcy.

It wasn't glamorous or staged, but it was real.

And maybe that was why it felt so important.

“Hey,” Myst said softly, nudging him out of his thoughts. Her expression shifted, more serious now, though her eyes still sparkled with the warmth that had drawn him to her in the first place. “So, I’ve got a few days before my next concert... Rome, actually. Would you come with me?”

“Rome?” George repeated, raising an eyebrow. “You mean, like... Italy?”

“Yes, George,” she said, laughing. “Italy. You’ve heard of it, right?”

“Funny,” he deadpanned, though a smile tugged at his lips. He leaned back in his chair, considering her for a moment. “You really want me to come?”

“Of course I do.” Her voice softened, her hand reaching for his under the table. “I want us to have more than just... stolen moments, you know? Even if it’s just for a few days.”

He stared at her for a beat longer, then nodded, his decision feeling as natural as breathing. “Alright. Let’s go to Rome.”

Her grin lit up the entire room, and George couldn’t help but feel like he’d just made the best choice of his life.

Chapter Twelve

The train hummed steadily beneath them, carrying them through southern France towards Italy.

Myst leaned against the window, her legs tucked under her, scrolling absently through her phone as George stretched his long frame across from her, one leg angled into the aisle.

He had a paperback rugby memoir in one hand and a bag of gummy bears in the other.

“Do you ever not think about rugby?” Myst teased, when he paused to fish another gummy bear out of the bag and pop it in his mouth. Her pale blue eyes sparkled mischievously as she gestured at the book. “Even on a romantic train ride through the French countryside, you’re strategizing.”

George looked up, pretending to be scandalised, his deep voice laced with mock offense. “And do you ever not think about Instagram? You’ve been glued to that thing for half the trip. What are you doing, checking if your followers approve of your snack choice?”

“First of all,” Myst said, holding up a finger as she tried not to laugh, “I was answering an email. Second, my fans love knowing what I’m snacking on, thank you very much.

And thirdly,” she dramatically dropped the phone face down on the table, “I am now

fully present for this riveting discussion about gummy bear tactics.”

“Good.” George popped a green gummy bear into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully before leaning forward. “Because I could use some advice. Which flavor is the best team player, the red or the yellow?”

“Neither,” Myst said without missing a beat. “It’s the orange ones. Everybody underestimates them, but they always come through in the end.”

“Interesting theory,” he mused, nodding solemnly. “You’d make a decent coach, you know. If this whole music thing doesn’t work out.”

“Ha!” Myst rolled her eyes, but there was warmth in her laughter.

She reached for her messenger bag, tugging it onto her lap.

“Speaking of music... here.” She pulled out a worn leather notebook, its edges frayed from years of use, and flipped it open to a page filled with handwritten lyrics and tiny doodles in the margins.

“What’s this?” George asked, swapping the bag of gummy bears for the notebook. His tone shifted, softening as he saw the vulnerability in her expression.

“Just something I’ve been working on,” she said lightly, though the way her fingers lingered on the page betrayed her nerves. “A song. About you, actually.”

“Me?” George’s brows shot up, his rugged face lighting with both surprise and cautious delight. “Now I’m intrigued. Go on then, sing it.”

“Not a chance,” Myst said, laughing as her cheeks turned pink. “It’s still rough. But you can read it, okay?”

She'd gone from teasing to serious, and George could tell this was important to her. She wanted his approval, perhaps, to put their relationship in her music, to put it out there for the world to see? He swallowed, nodding, and lowered his eyes to the page.

I saw you standing in the glow of the crowd, A beautiful stranger, but somehow allowed
To break past the walls I'd been holding so tight, It wasn't just a glance, it was love at first sight.

And when the world got loud, you didn't say a thing, But somehow, your silence could still make me sing.

You were my beautiful stranger, but you're not anymore,

Love hit me like lightning, shook me to the core.

You're the calm in the wild, the spark in my fight,

Now I'm singing your name to the stars every night.

"Wow," George said, his voice barely above a whisper. He looked up, staring at her like he was seeing her for the first time, or maybe just understanding her in a way he hadn't before. "That's... I don't even know what to say, Myst. It's beautiful."

"Really?" she asked softly, grabbing the notebook back and clutching it to her chest.

"Really." He reached across the table, his large hand enveloping hers. "I didn't realize I meant that much to you."

"Well, you do," she said, her smile shy but genuine. "So don't let it go to your head, Mr. Player of the Year."

“Too late,” he said, grinning, but the emotion in his eyes gave him away.

“And... you’re okay with me writing and singing about it?”

“I am very okay with it.” He squeezed her hand, finding a certain smug satisfaction in knowing she’d be singing about him to the whole world. “As long as you don’t mimic Taylor Swift any harder, yeah? I’ll be less okay with a breakup song.”

She burst out laughing, and George felt his heart swell with happiness.

Rome welcomed them with open arms, the city’s golden light casting everything in a romantic glow. For the next few days, they wandered hand in hand, losing themselves in cobblestone streets and hidden piazzas.

“Wait till you see this place,” Myst said one afternoon, leading George down a narrow alley lined with ivy-covered walls.

She stopped in front of a tiny café with wicker chairs spilling onto the sidewalk.

A chalkboard menu listed espresso drinks and pastries in looping script. “Best coffee in the world. Trust me.”

“Big call from an Aussie coffee snob,” George said, raising an eyebrow. “But I trust you.” He smiled as she pulled him inside, her excitement contagious.

That evening, the golden glow of the setting sun bathed Rome in a warm, amber light, softening the edges of its ancient rooftops.

Myst stared at her reflection in the mirror of their hotel room, fussing with the cascade of dark waves framing her face.

She tugged at a strand absently before turning to George, who was leaning casually against the doorframe, watching her with an expression that made something flutter in her chest.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going, or do I have to bribe you with more espresso gelato?” she teased, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Nice try,” George replied. He stepped closer, tucking his hands into his pockets like he was holding back some grand secret. “But you’ll just have to trust me for once, won’t you?”

“Trust you?” Myst raised an eyebrow dramatically, though the corner of her mouth betrayed her amusement. “This is coming from the guy who tried to convince me Vegemite on toast was fine dining.”

“Hey now,” George said, hand over his heart as if wounded. “You didn’t even give it a proper chance. Uncultured palate, that’s what it is.”

“Uncultured!” Myst gasped, feigning offense, but her giggle gave her away. “Fine. Lead the way, Mr. Sophistication.”

George offered her his arm with a crooked grin, and they headed out into the Roman evening together.

The streets were alive, buzzing with chatter and laughter, the occasional accordion music drifting from distant corners.

Myst felt herself relax as they walked hand in hand, the bustling world around them fading, leaving only the quiet warmth between them.

When George finally stopped in front of an old stone building without even a sign

above the door, Myst tilted her head, curious. “This doesn’t look like your usual rugby pub.”

“That’s because it isn’t,” George said, his grin widening as he pushed open the door and led her inside. They climbed a narrow staircase lit by flickering candles, each step creaking under their weight until they emerged onto a rooftop terrace.

Myst froze, her breath catching as she took it all in.

A single table sat at the centre of the terrace, dressed in crisp white linen and surrounded by the soft glow of lanterns.

Beyond it, the skyline of Rome stretched endlessly, domes and spires silhouetted against the fiery hues of dusk.

A violinist stood off to one side, playing something gentle and achingly romantic.

“George...” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She turned to him, her eyes wide. “You did this?”

“Well,” he began, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, “I might’ve had some help. But yeah, thought you deserved a night that wasn’t about schedules or crowds. Just us.”

“Just us,” she repeated, her voice softer now. She reached for his hand, squeezing it as if to ground herself. “It’s perfect.”

They sat down, the conversation flowing as effortlessly as the wine poured into their glasses.

Myst found herself laughing, genuinely laughing, at George’s recounting of a

particularly disastrous team dinner back home.

For a moment, it felt like Rome disappeared entirely, leaving them in their own bubble of light and laughter.

As dessert arrived, some sort of decadent chocolate creation Myst could barely focus on, her smile faltered slightly. She traced the rim of her glass with one finger, her thoughts suddenly heavier.

“George,” she began, her voice quieter now, “do you ever... feel like you’re losing yourself? Like everyone else has a say in who you are, and you’re just... there, trying to keep up?”

George leaned forward, his brows knitting together in concern. “What do you mean?”

She hesitated, then let out a shaky laugh.

“Sorry, that sounded dramatic.” She shook her head, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I guess I mean... with my career, sometimes it feels like I’m more ‘Myst’ the brand than Myst the person.

Everything’s so... big. Loud. Everyone wants a piece of it, and I forget what it’s like to just be me. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” George said softly. “It does.” He reached across the table, taking her hand in his. His touch was warm, steady. “But you’re not just a brand, Myst. You’re you. And when it gets too loud, I’ll remind you of that, okay? Every single time.”

Her throat tightened, and she nodded, biting her lip to keep her emotions in check.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Anytime,” he said simply, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before pulling her back into the moment with another one of his easy smiles. “Now, finish your dessert before I eat it.”

Their day culminated on a quiet bridge overlooking the Tiber River on their route back to the hotel, the water shimmering under the moonlight. They stood side by side, leaning against the railing, the distant hum of the city fading into the background.

“Sometimes I can’t believe this is real,” George murmured, his voice low and thoughtful.

He turned to look at her, his intense blue eyes searching hers.

“Us. Being here together. It feels... fragile, you know? Like we could lose it if we’re not careful.

But I don’t want to lose it. I want to make this work, Myst. No matter how hard it gets. ”

Myst’s breath caught, her chest tightening with an ache that was equal parts joy and fear. But when she met his gaze, she knew her answer. “I want that too,” she said firmly, reaching for his hand. “I’m all in, George. Whatever it takes.”

“Whatever it takes,” he echoed, squeezing her hand as they turned back to the view. And for that moment, with the river flowing steadily below them and the stars scattered like promises above, it felt like enough.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, reality came knocking or buzzing, rather. Myst's phone wouldn't stop vibrating as message after message popped up from her management team. She groaned, burying her face in the pillow while George chuckled from the armchair by the window.

"Looks like someone's missed," he teased.

"Missed? More like hunted," Myst mumbled, reluctantly sitting up. She scrolled through her messages, her shoulders sinking. "I've got a meeting. Last-minute. Of course."

"Want me to come along and glare at them for you?" George offered with mock seriousness.

"Tempting," she said with a small smile. "But no, I'll handle it. You enjoy Rome without me for a bit. Just don't get lost, big guy."

"Who, me?" George grinned. "Never."

She kissed his cheek and headed out, summoning her professional armour as she made her way to the meeting.

It was held in a sleek conference room, all polished wood and glass, a painful contrast to the ancient city sprawled out beyond the windows.

Myst struggled to keep her attention on the agenda, wishing she could be out there with George, visiting the Vatican or driving to Pompeii or something infinitely more interesting than a long list of upcoming appearances and interviews.

She started paying attention suddenly when her manager made a comment about her relationship.

“I beg your pardon?” Her head snapped around. “Say that again.”

“Look, Myst,” her manager said, adjusting his glasses, “we know George is important to you. But these distractions, they can take a toll not just on you, but on your career. You need to stay focused.”

“George isn’t a distraction,” Myst said sharply. She folded her arms, her petite frame radiating defiance. “He’s part of my life, and I’m allowed to have one outside of all this.”

“Of course,” her manager replied smoothly, though the tension in the room was palpable. Myst pressed her lips together, frustration bubbling beneath her calm exterior.

After the meeting, Jessie caught up with her in the hallway. “Don’t let them push you around,” she said quietly, her eyes concerned. “There’s no show without you, Myst. Remember that. Put yourself first.”

Myst exhaled slowly, Jessie’s words settling deep in her chest. “You’re right,” she said quietly. “I need to remember that.”

George leaned against the wrought-iron balcony of their hotel room, his phone buzzing insistently in his pocket.

The late afternoon sun bathed the Roman skyline in amber and gold, but George hardly noticed.

Tugging his phone free, he glanced at the screen and instantly recognized the message thread; his coach back home on the Gold Coast.

“Hey, Dennis. Pre-season starts next week. Hope you’re keeping fit. We’ll need you sharp this year.”

His jaw tightened as he reread the text, the familiar weight of obligation settling across his broad shoulders.

He stared out at the city below, its chaotic beauty a far cry from the regimented world of rugby drills and playbooks.

The realization struck him like a shoulder to the ribs; this time with Myst was slipping away. A week? That wasn’t much time at all.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket, but the thoughts lingered like an opponent he couldn’t shake.

What happens when I leave? How do we make this work?

Her life was all glittering stages and flashing cameras, while his revolved around muddy fields and gruelling training sessions.

He rubbed a hand over his face, the coarse stubble there grounding him for a moment.

Long-distance relationships weren’t just tough, they were brutal. Could they survive it?

The sound of the door opening pulled him from his spiralling thoughts.

Myst stepped inside, her heels clicking softly against the tiled floor.

She looked stunning, as always, but there was a tension in the set of her shoulders, the way she dropped her bag onto the nearest chair without her usual grace.

“How’d it go?” George asked, straightening up.

“Fine,” she said quickly, brushing past him toward the window. Too quickly. She crossed her arms, staring out at the rooftops like they held the answers she needed.

“Uh-huh.” George wasn’t buying it. He took a step closer, his voice softening. “Myst, come on. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” she snapped, then sighed, pressing her fingers to her temple. “I’m sorry. It’s, it’s just work stuff. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Work stuff, huh?” he echoed, watching her carefully. She was clamming up, shutting him out like she sometimes did when she didn’t want to seem vulnerable. But he wasn’t having it, not today. “You sure about that?”

She hesitated, her lips parting as if to brush him off again. Then, she stopped herself. Her shoulders slumped, and she turned to face him fully, her blue eyes searching his face as if weighing whether she could let him in. Finally, she exhaled, long and slow, and began to speak.

“Jessie said something after the meeting,” she started, her voice quieter now, more thoughtful. “She reminded me that there’s no show without me. No music. No tours. None of it works unless I say it does.”

“Smart woman, your cousin,” George said, nodding. Encouraging her to keep going.

“Yeah, she is,” Myst said with a faint smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“But it’s hard, you know? They... they think they can tell me what’s best for me.

Like my personal life isn’t mine to decide.

Like...like you’re some kind of liability instead of...

” She trailed off, shaking her head, and then gestured vaguely at him. “Instead of you .”

“Liability, huh?” George smirked, trying to lighten the mood even though the word stung. “I didn’t know dating a rugby player came with so many risks.”

“Apparently, it does,” she muttered, but her tone softened as the corner of her mouth twitched upward.

“But Jessie’s right. I need to be firm with them.

My personal life is mine , and I’m not going to let anyone pressure me into giving that up.

Not even for...this.“ She waved a hand vaguely, indicating the fancy hotel room, the sparkling stage outfits hanging on a rail, her career.

“Good,” George said simply. His gaze softened as he studied her. “You deserve that, Myst. To call the shots. And for what it’s worth, I’m still going to be here. Liability or not.”

Her laugh was quiet but real, and it eased the tightness in his chest. “Thanks,” she said, stepping closer and resting her hands lightly on his forearms. Her touch was grounding in a way he hadn’t realized he needed until now. “It’s been a day, huh?”

“Yeah,” George admitted, his mind briefly flickering back to the message from his coach, still sitting unanswered in his pocket.

But he pushed the thought aside for now, focusing on the woman standing before him, the one who made the chaos of both their lives feel a little steadier.

“But you handled it. And tomorrow’s gonna be better. ”

“Tomorrow’s the concert,” Myst said with a small groan, though the glimmer of excitement in her eyes betrayed her. “And you’re coming, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” George replied with a grin. “Front row seat for my favorite rock star.”

“Better be,” she teased, leaning up to kiss him lightly on the cheek. “Now, let’s find something to eat before I collapse. Deal?”

“Deal,” George said, his worries momentarily fading as he followed her out the door. “You’ve found a restaurant?”

“Yep, it’s not far away. They’re holding a table for us.”

The narrow, cobblestone street hummed with life as George held the door open for Myst, the low murmur of conversation and the faint clink of glasses spilling out from inside the jazz club.

A warm, golden light bathed the room, flickering off mismatched tables and casting

soft shadows on exposed brick walls.

The air was thick with the rich swirl of saxophone notes and the occasional smoky laugh from the crowd.

It felt miles away from the glossy arenas Myst had grown used to, a world stripped back, raw, and unpolished.

“Well,” George said, ducking slightly under the low-hung string lights as they stepped inside. “This is...cozy.”

“Cozy is a polite way to say tiny,” Myst teased, nudging him playfully with her elbow. “You sure you’ll fit in here? Ceiling looks like it’s got a bone to pick with your head.”

“Guess we’ll find out,” he shot back with a grin.

Their table was in the corner, close enough to feel the pulse of the upright bass but far enough to avoid the sharp glare of the stage lights.

Myst slipped into her seat, leaning her chin on her hand as she took in the scene; the trumpet player softly adjusting his mute, the singer swaying gently with her eyes closed, the pianist hunched over the keys like he was sharing secrets only the music could understand.

It was intimate, imperfect, and utterly captivating.

“Look at you,” George said, his voice cutting gently into her thoughts. He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching her with a smirk that was both amused and fond. “Haven’t seen you this starry-eyed.”

“Forgive me if I’m having a moment. This,” she gestured vaguely toward the stage, where the drummer was tapping out a heartbeat rhythm on his snare, “this reminds me why I fell in love with music in the first place.”

“Not the pyrotechnics and screaming fans?” George teased, earning him a mock-glare. “Kidding, kidding. But seriously, you look at home here.”

“That’s the thing.” Myst exhaled, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the edge of the table.

“I miss this. The closeness, the connection. When you’re performing in a stadium, it’s like yelling into the void sometimes.

But here...” She trailed off, her pale blue eyes shimmering with something almost wistful.

“Here, you can feel people breathing with you. It’s different. ”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

George studied her for a moment, his expression softening. “So why don’t you do more of this?”

“Ha!” Her laugh was short but genuine. “Do you know how impossible my schedule is? Between the tours and the press junkets and everything else, it’s like running downhill with no brakes. There’s no time to stop and think, let alone change direction.”

“Maybe it’s time to find the brakes,” George said simply, his deep voice steady and calm. “You’ve earned that, haven’t you?”

“Easy for you to say, Mr. Off-Season,” she quipped, though there was no bite in her words. “But...yeah. Maybe.” She glanced down at her hands, her fingers suddenly still. “It’d be nice to breathe again. To remember what it feels like.”

“Then do it,” he said, leaning forward slightly, his elbows resting on the table. “Myst, you’ve got the kind of talent that doesn’t just disappear because you take a break. If you need time to figure things out, you should take it. People will wait for you.”

“Will you?” she asked, the words slipping out before she could stop them. Her gaze lifted to meet his, and for a moment, the noise of the club seemed to fade, leaving only the quiet weight of her question hanging between them.

“Of course I will,” George said without hesitation, his tone as direct and unwavering as the man himself. “But I’m not the one you need to convince.”

“Right,” Myst murmured, a small, bittersweet smile tugging at her lips.

“Management. Contracts. Expectations. It’s all so...big. Bigger than me.”

“Nothing’s bigger than you, Myst,” he said, the earnestness in his voice making her throat tighten. “Not when you’re the one standing in the spotlight.”

The music shifted, the tempo slowing into something achingly tender, and Myst blinked rapidly, willing herself to stay present.

They sat in silence for a while, letting the melody wrap around them like a shared secret.

She reached across the table, her delicate hand finding his, and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed back.

“Thanks,” she said softly, the word carrying more weight than she could explain.

“Anytime,” George replied, his thumb brushing lightly against her knuckles. And for the rest of the night, they didn’t talk about schedules or distance or anything else that might make this moment feel smaller than it was.

The stage lights dimmed to a sultry amber glow, and the crowd roared as Myst took her final bow.

Her cheeks flushed with exhilaration, she waved one last time before disappearing offstage, her heart thrumming harder than the bassline that had shaken the stage floor beneath her feet minutes earlier.

Backstage was a chaotic blur of hugs from her team, high-fives, and Jessie shouting over the din, “That’s how you close out Rome, girl! ”

“Not bad, huh?” Myst said, grinning as she swiped at the sweat trickling down her

temple. Her body buzzed with that familiar post-show buzz that always left her feeling equal parts electric and exhausted.

“Not bad? You killed it,” George’s deep voice cut through, standing tall in the doorway of her dressing room. He wore his signature crooked smile, hands stuffed casually into his jeans pockets. Even now, amidst the bustling backstage frenzy, he looked completely at ease.

“Yeah? Wasn’t too much glitter for your rugby sensibilities?” she teased, collapsing onto the couch as Jessie handed her a bottle of water.

“Don’t know about the glitter, but I reckon the ‘Myst-mania’ chant during your encore might’ve been a bit overkill,” he replied, stepping closer, his eyes alight with humour. “I mean, who needs an ego boost like that?”

“Shut up.” She threw the nearest object, an unopened granola bar, at him. He caught it mid-air without effort, laughing.

“Alright, superstar,” George said, sitting on the armrest beside her. “What’s next? Celebratory gelato? Or are we going full tourist mode and hunting down midnight pizza?”

“How about both?” Myst asked, leaning back with a satisfied sigh. She tilted her head toward him, her dark hair spilling across the cushion like a cascade of ink. “If you’re buying.”

“Always,” he said softly, his playful tone ebbing into something gentler. His hand found hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. For a moment, they just sat there, the chaos of the concert fading into the background.

Unspoken between them was the bitter truth that tonight was the last night.

Tomorrow morning they'd catch planes heading in different directions and everything would get infinitely more complicated, but tonight... well, tonight Myst didn't plan to waste a minute.

Morning came too quickly, the Roman sun casting soft golden rays through the airport windows where Myst and George stood side by side. The soft hum of announcements overhead and the shuffle of travelers rolling luggage felt oddly distant, like white noise against the palpable silence between them.

"Budapest for you, Gold Coast for me," George said, his Australian accent making the farewell sound more casual than it felt.

"Funny how that works," Myst murmured, tugging her oversized scarf tighter around her neck. Her pale blue eyes flickered up to meet his, and for a fleeting second, she almost hated how steady and comforting his gaze was. It made leaving even harder.

"Hey," George said, tilting her chin up gently with his finger. "None of that sad stuff now. We've agreed that distance is just a number, right?"

"True," she admitted, letting out a small laugh. "But let's not pretend this doesn't suck."

"Alright, it sucks," he conceded with a grin. "But I'll call you the second I land. And I don't care if you're mid-encore or halfway through a power ballad, you better answer."

"Deal," she said, her voice catching slightly on the word. She leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his waist as his strong arms folded over her shoulders, holding her tightly. She inhaled the familiar scent of his cologne, something crisp and

woody that somehow always reminded her of home.

“Take care of yourself, angel,” he whispered into her hair. “And don’t let those suits push you too hard, yeah?”

“Only if you promise not to get tackled too hard,” she shot back, her words muffled against his chest. She pulled back just enough to look up at him. “You’re kind of important to me, you know.”

“Good,” he said simply, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Because you’re everything to me.”

“Ugh, stop. You’re gonna make me cry in an airport,” she groaned, though her teasing tone couldn’t mask the shimmer in her eyes.

He kissed her then; soft and lingering, as if trying to memorize the taste of her. When they finally pulled apart, neither moved for a long moment, reluctant to break the fragile bubble around them.

“Go on, then,” he said gruffly, stepping back. His hands fell to his sides, clenched briefly into fists before relaxing again. “You’ve got Budapest waiting.”

“And you’ve got pre-season training,” she said, trying for a smile but falling short. Still, she nodded, steeling herself. “Take care of yourself, yeah?”

“Always do,” George said, but the cockiness in his tone didn’t quite land.

Jessie was waving frantically; their flight was on final call. Taking a deep breath, Myst tore herself away, though she felt like she was leaving a part of herself behind. And though she didn’t turn around, she felt the weight of his gaze until she disappeared beyond the gate.

Chapter Fourteen

The salty tang of the ocean hung in the air as George pulled into the driveway of his parents' house on the Gold Coast on Christmas Eve.

The late afternoon sun stretched long golden streaks across the pavement, and the familiar sound of cicadas chirping in the gum trees brought a small smile to his face.

Home. It felt good to be back. He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and took a steadying breath before heading inside.

"Georgie!" His sister Ellie bounded down the hallway like they hadn't seen each other in years instead of just six months. She flung her arms around him, nearly knocking his breath out.

"Ellie!" he managed with a laugh, ruffling her hair. "Still incapable of subtlety, I see."

"Not when you show up looking like that." She stepped back, eyeing him with exaggerated suspicion. "You're all broody. What's wrong? Did your team lose a secret scrimmage or something?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said too quickly, brushing past her toward the kitchen. "I'm fine."

"Uh-huh." Ellie followed, clearly unconvinced.

The house was alive with the kind of chaos he'd missed while traveling for games and training camps.

His mum was at the stove, humming along to an old Crowded House tune crackling from the radio.

Another sister, Kate, sat at the counter peeling an orange, her phone propped up against a stack of cookbooks as it blared a makeup tutorial.

Kids were shrieking as they threw a ball around in the backyard.

George dropped his duffel on the floor with a thud, which made everyone look up.

"George!" Kate grinned, her face lighting up. "Merry Christmas! And what's this?" She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. "Is that... love I see written all over your face?"

"Don't start," he warned, pointing at her as he grabbed a glass from the cupboard. His sisters exchanged knowing looks, which only made him groan inwardly.

"Come on, Georgie," Ellie teased. "You can tell us. Who's got you looking like someone stole your favorite rugby boots?"

"Nobody," he muttered, filling the glass at the sink. "I'm just tired, alright?"

"Sure, sure." Kate popped a slice of orange into her mouth. "Tired of missing Myst, maybe?"

"Kate!" George turned sharply, his ears burning. "Who said anything about Myst?"

"Your face did." Ellie leaned against the counter, smirking. "And the fact that you've

checked your phone three times since walking in here. Subtle, mate.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” their mum interrupted, turning away from the stove. Her voice was firm, cutting through the teasing like a referee’s whistle. “Go set the table, you two, and then call the young’uns in and make them wash up before dinner. Let your brother breathe.”

“Fine,” Kate said, sliding off her stool with a dramatic sigh. “But we’re not done with this conversation, George.”

“Looking forward to it,” he replied dryly, watching them shuffle off with forks and napkins in hand to the formal dining room which was the only one that could accommodate his whole family.

“Now,” his mum said after a moment, wiping her hands on a tea towel and gesturing toward the patio doors. “Come outside with me, love. We need to have a chat.”

“Do we?” George asked warily, though he followed her out onto the deck anyway. The breeze off the ocean was cooler now, rustling the palm trees in the backyard. His mum settled into one of the wicker chairs with a quiet grace that always seemed to command attention.

“Sit,” she said, nodding to the chair opposite hers. He obeyed, sinking into it with a heaviness he couldn’t quite shake.

“Alright,” he began, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “What’s this about?”

“About you,” she said simply, folding her hands in her lap. “And why you’re pretending everything’s fine when it’s obviously not.”

“Everything is fine,” he insisted, though he knew his voice lacked conviction.

“George.” She gave him that look, the one that could peel back layers of bravado like they were tissue paper. “I wasn’t born yesterday. Now, do you want to tell me what’s going on with you and Myst?”

“Why does everyone assume it’s about Myst?” he muttered, staring out at the horizon. “Maybe I’m just stressed about pre-season.”

“Because I know my son,” she said, her tone softening. “And because I see the way your eyes light up when you talk about her.”

George exhaled slowly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “It’s complicated, Mum. She’s... amazing. But her world is so different from mine. I don’t know if it makes sense.”

“Since when has love ever been about making sense?” she asked gently. “It’s about effort, George. About being willing to fight for something that matters. Does she matter to you?”

“Of course she does,” he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “But what if it’s not enough? What if it’s too hard?”

“Hard doesn’t mean impossible,” she said firmly. “It just means you have to decide whether it’s worth it. And if you’re asking me, I think you already know the answer to that.”

He looked at her then, his chest tightening. She was right, he did know. He just didn’t know if he had the courage to act on it.

“Oi, Dennis! You might wanna check this out.”

The training pitch buzzed with the usual pre-session banter; teammates ribbing each

other, the slap of rugby balls against palms, and the faint whistle of the wind carrying salt from the nearby ocean. George had come in early to clear his head, not to get dragged into whatever nonsense was brewing.

“Sod off, Lachie,” he said without even looking up.

“Seriously, mate,” came the voice again, this time accompanied by a smirk George could feel without even looking. “Your girl’s got herself some company .”

“She’s not my girl,” George muttered automatically, tugging the knot tight on his bootlace.

“Right, right.” Lachie’s voice dripped with mock sympathy. “Just thought you’d like to know Antoine Delacourt’s getting cosy with her. Again.”

That made him pause. George looked up sharply, his heart sinking as he saw Lachie holding up his phone, the screen glowing with an image that felt like a kick to the gut.

There it was: Myst, radiant as always, stepping out of some sleek car, her dark hair cascading down her back like a waterfall.

And beside her, Antoine Delacourt, all smug jawline and perfect teeth, leaning in just a little too close.

“Bloody tabloids,” George grumbled, trying to swat the phone away as heat crept up his neck. But Lachie wasn’t giving up so easily.

“Relax, mate,” Lachie said, laughing. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Just a couple of ‘colleagues,’ yeah? Or is she keeping her options open?”

“Yeah, George,” another teammate piped up, grinning. “You sure she’s not still on

the market?”

“Shut it, you lot,” George snapped, grabbing the ball nearest to him and tossing it hard into the chest of Lachie, who caught it with a grin. He forced himself to chuckle, to play along, but he could feel the weight of their words settling somewhere deep in his chest.

By the time they hit the field, the teasing had died down, replaced by drills and scrimmages, but George couldn’t shake the image of Myst and Antoine from his mind.

He told himself it didn’t matter, it was just PR rubbish, same as always.

And yet, as soon as training wrapped, he found himself pulling out his phone and firing off a message before he could overthink it.

“Photos of you and Delacourt are everywhere. What’s going on?”

The reply came quickly but did little to soothe him.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. Just work stuff.”

‘Work stuff’ felt like a brush-off, like a wall going up between them. He stared at the message, thumb hovering over the keyboard, unsure what to say next. Finally, he typed back, “ If you say so “ and left it at that.

Thousands of miles away, in a recording studio in the heart of Istanbul, Myst stared at her phone, biting her lip. She hated how curt her response sounded, but there wasn’t time to explain. Not now.

“Are you listening, Myst?”

Her manager's voice cut through the haze of her thoughts. She looked up to see her PR team assembled around the table, all sharp suits and sharper opinions.

"Sorry," she said quickly, though she wasn't sorry at all.

"About the Antoine story," one of them began, flipping through a folder of glossy prints featuring her and Antoine. "We think you should lean into it. The narrative is good for visibility..."

"Visibility?" Myst interrupted, her pale blue eyes flashing. "I don't need visibility. I need people to focus on my music, not... this circus."

"Your fans love a good romance, Myst," another added, trying for a placating smile. "And if we can keep the speculation alive, it'll drive more engagement for your upcoming shows. It's harmless."

"Harmless?" Myst repeated, incredulous. She rose from her chair, pacing the length of the room. "Do you have any idea what this does to my actual life? To the people I care about?"

"Antoine doesn't seem to mind," someone quipped, earning a round of quiet chuckles. Myst stopped dead in her tracks, her jaw tightening.

"Because Antoine lives for this kind of attention," she shot back. "But I'm not Antoine, and frankly, I don't give a shit whether he likes it or not."

There was a brief silence and shocked faces as Myst swore, something she rarely did.

"Look," her manager interjected, attempting to calm the rising tension. "We're not saying you have to confirm anything. Just... let the story breathe. Don't deny it outright, and the buzz will handle itself."

“Absolutely not,” Myst said firmly, crossing her arms and sticking her chin out stubbornly. “I won’t do that. I’m not going to jeopardize something real for the sake of a few headlines.”

“Real” hung in the air like a challenge, and for a moment, no one spoke. Then the meeting broke apart, murmurs of irritation trailing behind as the team filed out one by one, leaving Myst alone with her thoughts.

She sank back into her chair, pressing her fingers to her temples.

The pressure was relentless, a constant tug-of-war between maintaining her public image and protecting what little privacy she had left.

And then there was George. Sweet, steady George, whose text still lingered on her screen, unresolved.

Her thumb hovered over George’s name on her screen, the little green call button taunting her.

“You’re not busy for once,” she muttered to herself, taking a sip of the too-sweet tea. “Just call him.” It was morning here, which meant late afternoon there.

Before she could second-guess herself, Myst hit the button, the dial tone humming in her ear.

She leaned back into the cushioned chair, ready to hear his gravelly Australian accent cut through her homesickness.

But after three rings, it wasn’t George’s voice that greeted her, it was an automated message.

“Hey, this is George. Leave a message, mate.”

“Ugh.” Her shoulders slumped. She hesitated briefly, then ended the call without saying anything.

What was the point? He’d probably just finished tackling someone or running drills.

She pictured him in his training gear, all sweat and focus, oblivious to the way her stomach twisted when their schedules misaligned yet again.

“Fine. No big deal,” she said aloud, standing abruptly. But even as she steeled herself to get back behind the microphone and carry on laying down the demo vocals for the song she’d written about him, the weight of disappointment settled over her like a stubborn storm cloud.

George tossed his mouthguard into his bag, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his arm.

Pre-season training was supposed to be tough, but today had been brutal, starting with a long run and then endless drills under the punishing Queensland summer sun.

His legs felt like lead, and every muscle in his body screamed for reprieve.

“Oi, Dennis, you look like you’ve been run over by a truck,” one of his teammates joked, clapping him on the shoulder as they headed toward the locker room.

“Feels about right,” George replied, forcing a grin he didn’t quite feel. Inside, he wasn’t just tired, he was drained in every sense of the word. The relentless pace of training camp was one thing, but his mind kept wandering elsewhere, to Myst.

As soon as he reached his locker, he checked his phone. A missed call from her

flashed on the screen, and his chest tightened. There was also a text: “Had some time earlier. Was hoping to catch up. Call me when you can x”.

“Shit,” he murmured, guilt bubbling up. He quickly tapped her number, leaning back against the cool metal of the lockers as it rang. He needed to hear her voice, to feel that electric buzz that came whenever they talked, no matter how brief.

“Hello?” Myst’s voice came through, muffled and rushed.

“Hey, sorry I missed your call. How are you?” George asked, his tone softening instantly.

“Can’t really talk right now,” she said, her words clipped. In the background, he could hear shouts and the faint thrum of music. “We’re mid-rehearsal. Timing’s a bit rubbish, huh?”

“Yeah, seems to be our specialty,” he tried to joke, but it came out weaker than he intended. “All good. Just wanted to... I don’t know. Check in.”

“Same here.” Her voice softened slightly, but then someone yelled her name in the background, and she sighed. “I’ve gotta go, George. Rain check?”

“Of course,” he said, even as disappointment coiled tight in his chest. “Talk later.”

“Bye!” And then she was gone, the line cutting off with a sterile beep.

George stared at his phone for a moment longer before shoving it back into his bag. The hollowness he’d tried to ignore all day seemed to expand, filling every inch of him. He knew Myst wasn’t to blame, her schedule was insane, just like his, but damn, it was hard. Harder than he’d expected.

“Come on. Shower, food, sleep. Reset tomorrow,” he muttered to himself, grabbing his towel. But as he trudged toward the showers, exhaustion dragged at him, heavier than any tackle he’d taken that day.

Chapter Fifteen

George slumped onto his couch, debating whether he wanted to take a shower or run a long bath to soak in.

His body ached from training, muscles taut and screaming for rest, but it wasn't just the physical exhaustion weighing him down.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table, vibrating against an empty glass, and for a moment he debated ignoring it entirely. But habit won, as it always did.

He reached over lazily, thumb swiping at the screen, only to freeze mid-motion.

There it was: Myst's face plastered across the homepage of some tabloid website.

"Myst Steps Out Again: Is Antoine Delacourt More Than Just A Friend?" The headline practically screamed at him, jabbing precisely where he already felt raw.

Below it were glossy photos of Myst draped in a silky emerald gown that clung to her in all the right places.

Her dark hair cascaded like liquid ink over one shoulder, her pale blue eyes catching the light with an allure that seemed almost otherworldly.

And next to her, looking smug and polished, was Antoine Delacourt, whose perfectly tailored suit and easy grin made George want to punch something.

“Bloody hell,” George muttered under his breath, fingers tightening around his phone like it might snap in two.

He tried to rationalize it; Antoine was someone Myst had to schmooze with for work or publicity.

But the photos told a different story, one that whispered insidious doubts into the corners of his mind.

They looked... effortless together. Like they belonged in the same world, all glitz and glamour and million-dollar smiles.

Unlike him, with his broken nose and a crooked tooth in his smile.

The thought hit hard, a sucker punch to the gut. What was he doing, really? Trying to fit into a life so far removed from his own that it felt like trying on someone else's shoes, shoes two sizes too small, at that.

Without thinking, his thumbs moved over the screen, tapping out a message before he could second-guess himself.

“I don't think I'm cut out for this.” Simple.

Honest. Brutal. He hit send before he could talk himself out of it.

As soon as the message disappeared, regret sank its claws in, but he shoved the phone aside and leaned back against the couch, staring blankly at the ceiling fan spinning above him.

Moments later, the phone buzzed again. Myst's name lit up the screen, her call cutting through the quiet hum of the night.

George's heart stuttered, but he didn't pick up.

He couldn't, not yet. Not when everything inside him felt tangled and knotted, like a rugby ball stuck beneath a pile of players, impossible to reach.

Instead, he let it ring out, the sound fading into silence that felt deafening.

"Jessie, what do I do?" Myst's voice cracked as she paced the length of her Istanbul hotel room, barefoot and dressed in sweats that felt entirely out of place after hours spent in stage heels.

She'd called Jessie the moment George hadn't answered, the sharp sting of rejection still fresh and bleeding, and Jessie was there within moments.

"First off, stop pacing. You're making me dizzy," Jessie said dryly. "And second..." there was a pause, followed by a dramatic sigh, "you fight for him, obviously."

"How?!" Myst flopped onto the edge of the bed, burying her head in her free hand.

"He thinks he doesn't belong in my world.

And maybe he's right. Maybe I've dragged him into something he never signed up for.

These stupid photos, these headlines..." Her voice broke again, and she hated how weak she sounded.

"They're painting a picture that isn't true, and I can't stop it. "

"Well, you can't stop it by hiding," Jessie said, sitting down beside her and patting her shoulder. "Look, Myst, if you care about him you've got to show him. Take

control of the narrative. Set the record straight, your way.”

“Set the record straight?” Myst echoed, frowning.

“Yeah. Stop letting these vultures tell your story for you. You’re Myst , for god’s sake. They hang on your every word. Use that. Make them listen,” Jessie urged, her no-nonsense edge returning. “This is your relationship. Don’t let them ruin it before you’ve even gotten a proper chance.”

“You mean go public? But George...” Myst trailed off, biting her lip. “What if he doesn’t want me to?”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Jessie snapped without hesitation. “But I don’t think he is. He loves you, Myst. He’s just scared. So stop giving him reasons to doubt, yeah?”

Myst exhaled shakily, the weight of Jessie’s words settling in her chest. “All right,” she said quietly. “I’m going to do it.”

“Excellent.” Jessie levered herself back to her feet. “I’m going back to bed.”

“Sorry,” Myst said belatedly, but Jessie laughed and leaned down to hug her.

“Love you, cuz. Now don’t stuff this up, okay? George is a good guy, maybe the first one you’ve ever found. Hang on tight with both hands and don’t let go!”

Myst sat cross-legged on the hotel bed, her laptop resting precariously on a pillow in front of her.

The Istanbul skyline glittered beyond the massive window, but she barely noticed it.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, poised and trembling, as if the words she was

about to type weighed as much as the city itself.

“Come on,” Myst muttered under her breath, blowing a strand of dark hair out of her face.

Jessie’s voice still echoed in her mind: “Take control of the narrative.” Easier said than done.

She’d written and deleted this post at least six times already, each attempt sounding either too defensive or too vague.

And then there was George, how would he feel about her putting their lives under an even brighter spotlight?

Did she even have the right to do this when he hadn’t answered her call?

Her pale blue eyes darted to her phone lying beside her. Nothing. No texts, no missed calls. Just silence.

“Okay,” she breathed, steeling herself. “Just... be honest.” That’s what she always told her fans, didn’t she? Be authentic, be real. So why did it feel like baring her soul online was so much harder than singing about it onstage in front of thousands?

She started typing, the keys clicking softly in the quiet room.

“Hi everyone, I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you for all the love and support you’ve shown me these past few weeks. It means everything to know my music connects with you...”

“Ugh, too formal,” she groaned, backspacing furiously. After a pause, she tried again.

“Hey guys. Things have been kind of crazy lately, and I’ve seen some stuff floating around that I wanted to address...”

Better. Honest, but not dramatic. Her fingers moved faster now, the words coming out in pieces, raw and unpolished.

“I love what I do, and I’m so grateful to be able to share it with all of you. But sometimes, being in the public eye can be overwhelming. There are parts of my life I want to keep just for me. For us.”

Myst hesitated, her heart thudding hard against her ribs. This was the part where she could pull back, make it easy on herself. But Jessie’s words came rushing back again: “Stop giving him reasons to doubt.”

She typed the next line slowly, deliberately.

“I’m lucky to have someone who supports me through everything, even when it’s not easy.”

Scrolling through her photo gallery, she selected the picture she had in mind, one Jessie had taken of her and George together.

She was leaning against his chest, looking up at him with a look of adoration on her face, but his face was turned away from the camera.

He wasn’t identifiable except for his size...

but anyone who had seen them together, or perhaps anyone who knew George well, would be sure of his identity.

Her thumb hovered over the “Post” button. The cursor blinked expectantly on the

screen, taunting her. What if this made things worse? What if George saw it and thought she was being reckless, or worse, desperate? What if...

“Do it,” she whispered to herself. Then, before she could second-guess any further, she hit “Post.”

The message went live, and Myst immediately set the laptop aside, hugging her knees to her chest. She stared at her phone, waiting for the first notifications to pop up.

They came in waves, as they always did. Likes, comments, shares.

Her fans were quick. Some responses made her smile; the ones calling her brave, sending hearts and supportive messages.

Others... well, the speculations started almost instantly.

“Who’s the mystery guy?”

“Is it Antoine??”

“No way, that guy’s huge compared to Antoine!”

“She looks happy; whoever he is, he put a smile on her face! Poor Antoine!”

“Poor Antoine, my arse,” Myst muttered sarcastically, rolling her eyes. Still, a small knot tightened in her stomach. Putting herself out there like this felt like stepping onto a wire without a safety net. Vulnerable wasn’t really her thing, not offstage anyway.

But for George’s sake, she’d bare her soul for the world to see.

“Did you see this?” Sophie, George’s youngest sister, shoved her phone across the dining table toward him, nearly knocking over his glass of water in the process. “It’s all over social media.”

“Careful, Soph,” George muttered, glancing down at the screen reluctantly. He was mid-bite of his mum’s roast lamb Sunday dinner, but the photo of Myst’s Instagram post stopped him cold. His fork hovered halfway to his mouth.

“Nice of her to mention you without actually mentioning you,” Sophie teased, her grin wicked. “Very subtle.”

“Leave him alone,” their mother cut in, though even she had a knowing look on her face. “He doesn’t need you stirring the pot.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“She’s not stirring anything,” George said quickly, though his tone lacked conviction.

The words on Myst’s post blurred slightly as his mind raced.

She’d done it for him. She’d taken the risk, put herself out there, and asked her fans for privacy.

For them . Guilt crept in, sharp and unwelcome.

Here he was, brooding and doubting, while Myst was out there fighting battles he couldn’t even begin to understand.

“George,” his mum said softly, as Sophie and Ellie started clearing plates, breaking through his thoughts. “You’ve barely touched your food. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he lied automatically.

“Don’t give me that.” She reached across the table, placing a hand over his. Her touch was warm, grounding. “Talk to me.”

His sisters exchanged looks and promptly excused themselves, leaving George alone with his mum, a setup he recognized all too well. He sighed.

“Myst posted something,” he admitted, gesturing vaguely to Sophie’s abandoned phone. “About us.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” his mum prompted.

“Yeah, but...” George ran a hand through his hair, frustration bubbling to the surface.

“It’s complicated. This whole thing is complicated.

She’s got the world watching her every move, Mum, and I...

I don’t know if I fit into that world. I mean, look at me.

I’m just a rugby player from the Gold Coast.”

“Just a rugby player?” His mum tilted her head, her expression softening. “George, you’ve never been ‘just’ anything. And neither has she, clearly. That’s why you work.”

“Does it, though?” He frowned, leaning back. “What if it’s too hard? What if I ruin it?”

“Or,” she said gently, “what if you stop being so scared and figure out how to make it work?”

Her words hit him square in the chest. George looked away, staring at the framed family photos lining the wall.

One of him as a kid, muddy and grinning after a game.

Another of his parents on their wedding day.

His sister Amanda coming out of the water after completing her first Iron Woman triathlon.

None of them showed anything easy, but they showed love. Effort. Commitment.

“She’s risking a lot for you, George,” his mum added quietly. “If you love her, and I think you do, you owe it to both of you to try.”

The knot in his stomach loosened, just slightly. Maybe she was right. Maybe it wasn’t about fitting into Myst’s world or making her fit into his. Maybe it was about building something new together. Something worth fighting for.

George paced the length of his small balcony outside his apartment, phone in hand, the cool evening breeze sweeping in from the ocean.

The distant roar of waves was no match for the thundering of his own pulse as he stared down at Myst’s contact name on the screen.

He ran a hand through his hair, tugging slightly at the ends.

“Alright, mate,” he muttered under his breath, thumb hovering over the call button. “You’ve played in a World Cup final. You can make one bloody phone call.”

Still, his chest tightened as he thought about his last message, the one sent in frustration, doubt gnawing at his resolve.

I don’t think I’m cut out for this. It had been impulsive, unfair, and cowardly.

And now, after seeing her post, her vulnerable attempt to hold onto what they had despite everything, he owed her more than just a text.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button before he could talk himself out of it. The line rang once, twice, then clicked.

“Hello?” Myst’s voice came through, soft but cautious.

“Hey.” George cleared his throat, gripping the edge of the railing as if the metal could anchor him. “It’s me.”

“George,” she said, and there was something in the way she breathed his name, relief, maybe, or hope, that made him hate himself a little more for the silence between them.

“Yeah. Look, I...” He trailed off, staring out at the horizon where the sky melted into the sea. Words were never his strong suit, not like hers, but he pushed forward anyway. “I saw your post.”

She didn’t say anything, but he could hear her breathing.

“I screwed up, Myst. That text... it wasn’t fair. Or true. I’ve just been...” He paused, searching for the right word. “Struggling. With the distance. With how different our lives are. But that’s not your fault. It’s mine. And I’m sorry.”

His stomach twisted as he waited, every second stretching longer than the last.

“Thank you for saying that,” Myst finally replied, her voice a little shaky. “It’s been hard for me too, George. Really hard. But I get it, I do. Our worlds... they’re not exactly designed to overlap seamlessly, are they?”

“Not even close,” he admitted with a dry chuckle. “But I...” He stopped himself, inhaling deeply. “I don’t want to let that be an excuse anymore. I miss you, Myst. Every day. And I guess I wasn’t ready to admit how much until now.”

Her sigh crackled softly through the phone, warm and familiar. “I miss you too,” she said, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “And you’re right, it’s not easy. But nothing worth having ever is, right?”

“Right,” he echoed, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. For the first time in days, the knot in his chest began to loosen.

“Let’s promise each other something,” she said, her tone brightening slightly. “No more bottling things up. If we’re feeling overwhelmed, we talk about it. Deal?”

“Deal,” he said without hesitation. “Even if it means admitting I’m terrible at keeping my cool when I see tabloids full of nonsense about you and that French bloke.”

“Antoine,” she corrected with a laugh. “And trust me, I’m just as annoyed about those rumours as you are. But I’ll handle it. I don’t want anything coming between us, George. Not him, not the media, not anything.”

“Good,” George said, grinning now, the tension in his shoulders easing. “Because I’m not going anywhere. Well, except training tomorrow morning. But you know what I mean.”

“Speaking of going somewhere,” Myst said, her tone shifting to something lighter, almost teasing. “I’m going to be in Dubai in a few weeks. Think you could manage a quick trip? I hear the city’s pretty romantic this time of year.”

“Dubai, huh?” He leaned back against the railing, already mentally calculating the logistics.

Training schedules, flights, recovery days.

It’d be tight, but he could make it work if he talked to the coach.

He would make it work. “Pretty sure I can swing it. Might even bring you some Vegemite if you’re lucky. ”

“Ah, bribery,” she said with a mock gasp. “How could I possibly resist?”

“Exactly,” he said, the grin widening. For the first time in what felt like forever, he allowed himself to imagine it, seeing her again. Standing in the same room, laughing with her instead of into a phone. It felt like the sun breaking through storm clouds.

“Alright then,” Myst said, her voice softening again. “It’s a date.”

“Yeah,” George replied, the word settling warmly in his chest. “It’s a date.”

Chapter Sixteen

As the plane dipped below a canopy of clouds, George leaned closer to the tiny window.

The city stretched out below him like a glittering treasure chest, its skyscrapers sparkling against the fading blush of the desert sunset.

Dubai wasn't just big, it was opulent. Even from the air, it felt like another world entirely, one he wasn't quite sure how to navigate yet.

A twinge of nervous energy curled in his stomach, but he shoved it aside.

He was here for her, for them. And that mattered more than anything.

"Cabin crew, prepare for landing," crackled the announcement overhead, pulling him from his thoughts.

George exhaled slowly, running a hand through his short, slightly dishevelled hair.

His fingers brushed against the edge of the armrest, tapping out an uneven rhythm, a habit of his when he was restless.

By the time he stepped off the plane and into the warm, perfumed air of the terminal, his pulse had settled into something steadier.

Myst had arranged everything, of course; her attention to detail evident in every step

of the process.

A man dressed in sharp black attire greeted him with a polite nod and led him to a sleek private car waiting outside.

The leather seats practically swallowed George as he climbed in.

The driver eased the car into motion, merging seamlessly onto the well-lit streets.

George watched the city blur past the tinted windows; the impossibly clean sidewalks, and silhouettes of impeccably dressed strangers.

Everything about this place screamed extravagance, and while it was dazzling, it was also daunting.

He couldn't help but think of home, the easy sprawl of the Gold Coast beaches, the salty breeze tangling in his hair after practice.

This, though? This was Myst's world. Glorious. Expansive. A little bit intimidating.

"Alright, mate," George muttered under his breath, straightening in his seat. "You've got this."

The door to Myst's suite swung open before George could knock twice, revealing her petite figure framed by the golden glow of the room behind her.

She was barefoot, dressed in loose, silky loungewear that shimmered softly as she moved.

Her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders, and her pale blue eyes widened when they met his.

“George!” she exclaimed, her voice breaking into a delighted laugh. Before he could respond, she launched herself at him, arms wrapping tightly around his torso. Her head barely reached his chest, but what she lacked in height, she made up for in sheer enthusiasm.

“Hey, hey, easy there,” George teased, catching her effortlessly and laughing as he staggered back half a step. “You’ll knock me flat if you’re not careful.”

“With those rugby muscles? Not a chance,” she quipped, pulling back just enough to look up at him. There was a playful glint in her eyes, but her expression softened as she studied his face. “I missed you,” she said, quieter this time, the words carrying more weight than their simplicity suggested.

“Yeah?” George grinned, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her cheek. “Well, I missed you and the sound of you hyping up my muscles. So we’re even.”

Myst rolled her eyes but laughed, the sound filling the space between them like music.

She grabbed his hand, tugging him inside, and closed the door with a soft click.

The suite was every bit as extravagant as the city itself, with plush furniture, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the skyline, and a marble table adorned with fresh flowers and an unopened bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice.

But George barely noticed any of it. His focus stayed firmly on Myst.

“How do you look this good after weeks on the road?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as she perched on the sofa and patted the spot beside her.

“Magic,” she answered matter-of-factly, patting her cheeks as if to emphasize her

point. “And maybe a little caffeine. Okay, a lot of caffeine.”

“Figures,” he said, sinking down next to her with a sigh. “I’m pretty sure I aged ten years just flying here.”

“Poor thing,” Myst teased, resting her hand lightly on his knee. Her voice softened again, her smile turning wistful. “You didn’t have to come all this way, you know.”

“Of course I did.” George turned toward her, his gaze steady and sincere. “This isn’t just a visit, Myst. It’s us figuring out how to make this work. You and me. And for the record,” he reached out, brushing his thumb along her jawline, “I’d fly halfway across the world for you anytime.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Myst leaned into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed as the tension of the past few weeks seemed to melt away.

Then, without warning, she shifted closer, curling into his side and resting her head against his chest. George wrapped an arm around her instinctively, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“I’ve missed you every day,” he murmured into her hair, his voice low and rough.

“Every day?” she asked, tilting her head just enough to glance up at him, a faint smirk pulling at her lips.

“Every single one,” he confirmed.

“Good,” Myst whispered, settling back against him. “Because I’ve been counting the days too.”

She felt like home, George realised with a sudden, blinding flash of clarity.

He hadn't felt quite right in his own skin since he left Rome; everything had felt subtly off somehow, unfamiliar, even his mum's kitchen and his everyday training routine.

But here, in a room he'd never seen in his life before, home was the slender woman curled in his arms. He held her tighter and closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of her hair and fully relaxing for the first time in weeks.

"Alright, big guy," Myst said after a couple of minutes. "I've got a surprise for you."

"Another one?" George teased, arching a brow as she scrambled to her feet and headed over to the piano in the corner... a piano in a hotel suite! Her management had certainly pushed the boat out for her here. "You keep this up, I might start getting spoiled."

"Please," Myst scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"You're impossible to spoil. Too grounded or whatever."

"She perched on the piano bench, her fingers brushing over the keys without pressing down.

Then her expression softened, a flicker of vulnerability breaking through the mask of confidence.

"But... this is different. It's something I've been working on for weeks. For you."

George froze in the middle of getting up to go over to her, his gaze locking onto hers.

"For me? You mean, that song... the lyrics you showed me on the train?"

"Yeah," she murmured, looking down at the piano now, suddenly shy. Her hands

hovered above the keys for a moment longer before she took a deep breath and began to play.

The first notes were delicate, tentative, like a whisper carried on the wind.

But as Myst leaned into the melody, her voice rose, soft yet rich, every word laced with raw emotion.

The lyrics painted their story in vivid strokes: the shock of falling for each other at first sight, the ache of distance, the weight of expectations, the quiet joy of stolen moments.

It was as if she'd reached into their shared memories and woven them into something tangible, something eternal.

George didn't move. He couldn't. His feet seemed rooted to the plush carpet, his chest tightening with each line she sang. Her voice filled the room, wrapping around him like a warm embrace, and for the first time in his life, he felt utterly unguarded. Vulnerable in the best way.

When the final note faded into silence, Myst looked up at him, her pale blue eyes searching his face. "Well?" she asked softly, almost nervous. "What do you think?"

George blinked, realizing too late that tears had pooled in his eyes. He let out a shaky laugh, swiping at his cheek with the back of his hand. "Myst," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "That's... that's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. I don't even have words for it."

"Good," she quipped, though her own voice wavered slightly as relief washed over her features. "Means I did my job right."

He crossed the room in two long strides, cupping her face in his hands and tilting her head up so she couldn't look anywhere but at him. "You didn't just do your job," he said earnestly. "You gave me something I'll never forget. Thank you."

She smiled, leaning into his touch, and for a moment they stayed like that: her seated on the piano bench, him towering over her, their foreheads nearly touching.

"Guess I've got a knack for making tough rugby players cry," she teased after a beat, her grin turning playful again.

"Don't push it," George shot back, though the corners of his mouth twitched upward despite himself. He leaned down to kiss her, slow and deliberate, as if trying to pour all the gratitude and love he couldn't put into words directly into the gesture.

Myst melted into him, standing to close the distance between their bodies. "Come here," she whispered, tugging him by the hand toward the massive bed draped in crisp white linens. "Tonight isn't about schedules or headlines or anything else. It's just us."

George nodded, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them. Their lips met again, and this time, the kiss deepened, carrying the weight of everything they'd been through and everything they still hoped to build together.

As Myst's song played quietly in the background, looping on the sleek sound system, they lost themselves in each other.

Every caress felt like a promise, every whispered name like an anchor tethering them to this moment.

Beyond the glass, Dubai sparkled with its endless hum of life, but within these walls, it was quiet, just the rhythm of their breaths, the slide of skin on skin, and the music

they'd created together.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“Come on, it’s ringing,” George said, nudging Myst gently with his shoulder as they sat cross-legged on the plush carpet of her hotel suite. His phone was propped precariously on a stack of coasters, the screen showing a spinning circle while the video call connected.

“Okay, okay,” Myst murmured, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in her flowy blouse for the third time. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem as she glanced at George, her pale blue eyes wide with nerves. “What if she doesn’t like me?”

“Impossible,” George said without missing a beat. He reached out and gave her knee a reassuring squeeze, his thumb brushing against the soft fabric of her leggings. “Mum’s gonna love you. Just be yourself.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Myst muttered under her breath, but before she could spiral any further, the screen lit up, and a warm, smiling face appeared.

“George!” The voice was unmistakably Australian, rich with affection.

A woman with sandy blonde hair pulled back into a loose bun leaned closer to the camera.

Behind her, the cosy kitchen of the Dennis family home came into view; warm wooden cabinets, a fridge cluttered with magnets, and the faint sound of a kettle boiling in the background.

“Oh, it’s good to see your face, love! And this must be Myst!”

I have been absolutely dying to meet you, sweetheart. ”

“Hi, Mrs. Dennis,” Myst said quickly, her voice bright but a little shaky. She gave a small wave, her delicate hand hovering awkwardly near her face. “It’s so nice to meet you... well, sort of meet you.”

“Call me Julie, sweetheart,” George’s mum said, her smile widening. “I’ve heard nothing but wonderful things about you. My boy can’t stop talking about you, actually.”

“That’s enough, Mum,” George cut in, his cheeks flushing slightly. He scratched the back of his neck and shot Myst a sheepish grin.

“Don’t ‘enough’ me, George,” Julie teased, waving him off. “Myst, you’re absolutely stunning! And I know you’ve got the voice of an angel. Can’t wait to meet you properly when you come to visit us.”

“Thank you,” Myst replied, her voice softer now, the tension easing from her shoulders. Something about Julie’s warmth felt disarming, genuine, and Myst found herself smiling more easily. “I’m really looking forward to it too.”

“Good girl,” Julie said approvingly. “Now, George, make sure you don’t scare her off before then. Don’t let her eat any of your cooking...”

“Alright, alright,” George interrupted, groaning playfully as Myst giggled beside him. “We’ll chat later, yeah? Love you, Mum.”

“Love you too, darling,” Julie said, blowing a kiss to the screen before the call ended.

“See? Told you she’d love you,” George said, turning to Myst with a triumphant grin.

“She’s amazing,” Myst admitted, her eyes still glued to the now-blank screen. “And your accent gets even stronger when you talk to her. It’s adorable.”

“Oi,” George protested, though his grin only widened. “You better watch it, or I won’t buy you that souvenir at the souk.”

The next morning, Myst and George strolled side by side through the bustling Old Souk.

The air was thick with the mingling scents of saffron, oud, and freshly baked flatbreads.

Vendors called out in melodic tones, their voices weaving through the vibrant tapestry of colours around them, from tacky plastic souvenirs to bolts of silk, intricate lanterns, and rows of glittering jewellery.

“Look at this one,” Myst said, stopping abruptly at a stall displaying delicate silver bracelets. She picked one up, the tiny filigree patterns catching the light as she turned it over in her hands. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Not bad,” George said, squinting at it as if appraising its quality. “But you’re supposed to haggle, aren’t you? Go on, then.”

“Me? Oh, I’m terrible at haggling,” Myst said with a laugh, but the mischievous glint in her eye told another story. She turned to the vendor, her expression suddenly serious. “Alright, how much for this bracelet?”

“Three hundred dirhams,” the man replied with a practiced smile.

“Three hundred?” Myst gasped, clutching her chest dramatically. “I could buy half a plane ticket for that!”

“Half a very small plane,” George quipped under his breath, earning a sharp elbow to the ribs.

“One fifty,” Myst countered, ignoring him. “And I’ll throw in a signed CD.”

“Two hundred,” the vendor said after a moment, clearly entertained by her antics. “No play CDs. Use Spotify.”

George had to laugh at that. Myst elbowed him again.

“Stop it, you’re not helping. One seventy five, final offer!”

The vendor seemed happy with that price, nodding and holding his hand out.

“Deal,” Myst declared before turning to George with a smug grin. “See? Not terrible.”

“Not bad at all,” George admitted, handing over the cash before Myst could reach for her wallet. He clasped the bracelet around her wrist himself, his large hands gentle. “There. A souvenir for when you miss me.”

“Cheeky,” Myst said, but her tone was soft as she admired the bracelet, her fingers brushing lightly over the cool metal. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” George said, dropping a kiss on the top of her head before steering her toward the next stall.

By afternoon, they were drifting along Dubai Creek in a traditional abra boat, the city’s towering skyline reflected in the shimmering water around them.

Myst leaned against George’s side, snapping selfies as he tried, and failed, to keep his

eyes open against the glare of the sun and the jetlag which was beginning to make its effects felt.

“Alright, mate,” he said to the boat operator after a while. “What’s the most authentic dish I should try?”

“Machboos,” the man answered without hesitation. “It’s chicken and rice,” he elaborated when George asked the question.

“Sounds good,” George said, though the moment the plate arrived at their dinner table that evening, he hesitated. “Uh... is it supposed to look like that?”

“Don’t be rude,” Myst chided, laughing as she watched him poke at the fragrant rice and spiced meat with his fork. “At least try it.”

“Fine,” George grumbled, taking a cautious bite. His face twisted immediately, and Myst doubled over in laughter.

“Not a fan?” she managed between giggles.

“Let’s just say my taste buds weren’t ready,” George said, pushing the plate toward her. “Your turn.”

“Gladly,” Myst said, taking a bite and humming appreciatively. “Mmm, delicious. Guess that’s why they call it taste buds, you have to actually have some.”

“Alright, alright,” George said, rolling his eyes but unable to hide his grin. “Just don’t tell Mum, yeah? She’ll never let me live it down.”

They ate slowly, talking and laughing between bites, sharing plates. It was a small restaurant with a little outside courtyard, and after a while it was just the two of them

sitting there, alone in the quiet.

Myst leaned back in her chair and looked up at the skyscrapers towering into the night sky. “Do you ever think about how small we are?” she murmured, her voice almost wistful. “Like, here... none of the noise matters. Not the cameras, or the schedules, or... anything. It’s just us.”

“Yeah,” George said, his gaze fixed on her instead of the sky. “I think about it all the time.”

She turned to him, her expression shifting slightly. “But then the noise always comes back, doesn’t it?” Her words hung in the air for a moment, heavy despite the gentle way she’d spoken them.

“Hey,” George said, leaning forward and resting a hand on her knee. “What’s going on?”

Myst hesitated, biting her lip before finally letting the words spill out.

“Sometimes it feels like my life’s being pulled in a hundred different directions.

The tour, the album, interviews, appearances...

I love what I do, George. I really do. But then I think about you, and us, and.

..” She stopped, exhaling sharply. “I don’t want to lose you because I can’t figure out how to balance it all. ”

“Hey.” His hand slid from her knee to clasp her smaller one, his thumb brushing soothing circles against her skin.

“You’re not gonna lose me, alright? We’ve got our own crazy lives, sure.

But if we want this to work, we’ll figure it out.

I’m not looking for perfect, Myst. I’m only looking for you . ”

Her pale eyes shimmered, catching the glow of the lanterns. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Doesn’t mean it will be,” he admitted, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “But I reckon we’re worth the effort.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Then Myst tilted her head, her lips curving into that familiar, mischievous grin. “You’re annoyingly good at saying the right thing, you know that?”

“Don’t get used to it,” George quipped, though his grin softened into something more earnest. “Seriously, though. I’m in this, Myst. All the way.”

She nodded, squeezing his hand before letting out a soft laugh. “Okay, but there’s something I need to talk to you about.” She looked serious.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Dealing with all the media drama once they find out about us. I’m getting tired of hiding and it’s going to come out sooner or later, and then there’ll be a feeding frenzy, paparazzi trying to get snaps of us together...”

“Then let’s stop hiding,” George said simply.

Myst blinked, caught off guard. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, let’s take control of the narrative.

Go public on our terms, not theirs. If we walk into your afterparty together hand-in-hand, they’ve got nothing left to speculate about, right?

You called it on your Instagram post, let’s go a step further and show my face this time.

Let them take all the pictures they want. ”

“That’s... bold,” she said, her brows drawing together as she considered it. “Are you sure you’re ready for that kind of attention?”

“Doesn’t matter if I am,” George replied steadily. “What matters is whether we are. And I think we are.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

Myst hesitated, her teeth worrying at her bottom lip again. But then she smiled, a little hesitant, but genuine. “Alright, Captain. Let’s give them something to talk about.”

The cameras flashed the moment they stepped through the towering double doors of the afterparty venue.

George blinked against the sudden onslaught of light, his grip tightening slightly around Myst’s hand.

She felt it and gave him a reassuring squeeze, her pale blue eyes flicking up to meet his with a soft smile that seemed to say, “We’ve got this. ”

The room was a swirl of decadence, rich golds and deep blues draped every available surface, shimmering under chandeliers that looked like they belonged in a palace. Industry elites mingled with local royalty, their laughter floating above the low thrum of Myst’s music playing in the background.

Myst, wearing a sleek sapphire gown that hugged her delicate frame just so, was radiant under the spotlight. George couldn’t help but glance at her again, struck by how effortlessly she carried herself here, as though this glittering world was built for her.

“Smile,” she whispered, leaning close enough that her words tickled his ear. “You look like you’re about to tackle someone.”

“Force of habit,” he muttered back, lips twitching into a grin despite himself. He

shifted his broad shoulders, trying to relax, but the tailored navy suit felt like armour, rigid and unyielding.

They moved further into the room, hand-in-hand, and George noticed the subtle shift in the crowd's energy.

Heads turned; whispers flitted from one corner to another.

A few phones discreetly (and not-so-discreetly) angled toward them, but Myst didn't falter.

Instead, she straightened her posture, her smile widening as if to say, "Look all you want, I'm not hiding anymore.

" George admired her for it, that quiet defiance wrapped in grace.

"Over here, Myst!" A reporter swooped in, camera extended like a weapon. "Can we get a quick word? Is this your boyfriend, the guy from your Instagram photo?"

George opened his mouth, unsure of what to say, but Myst beat him to it.

"Yes" She paused, her smile turning softer, more personal, as she glanced up at him. "We're together."

George pasted on a smile as the cameras started flashing, and they stood patiently for several minutes, looking at every camera in turn as the reporters called Myst's name.

"That's all you're getting tonight," she said at last, her tone light but final. Her hand never left George's, even as they wove past a sea of intrigued faces.

"Handled that well, didn't you?" George murmured once they found a quieter corner,

his thumb brushing along hers.

“Years of practice,” she quipped, though her expression softened. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, glancing around. “It’s... different. But not bad.”

“Different is good.” She tilted her head, studying him for a moment before adding, “You’re doing great, by the way. Very stoic. Like a rugby captain should be.”

“Stoic. Right.” He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “Pretty sure I just look confused half the time.”

“Well, then you wear confusion very handsomely.” Her teasing lilt made him chuckle, and for the first time that night, he felt like he belonged, not because he fit into her world, but because she made space for him in it.

As the evening stretched on, George found himself relaxing, even enjoying bits of it.

He even laughed when one of her bandmates jokingly asked if he could teach them how to tackle paparazzi.

Myst stayed close, her presence grounding him, and by the end of the night, George realized something important: he didn’t have to compete with this glittering, chaotic world of hers.

He just had to be part of it, and she wanted him to be.

The next morning, the air between them was quieter, heavier. George stood by the vast window of Myst’s suite, gazing out at the Dubai skyline one last time. The city shimmered under the early sunlight, bold and unapologetic, much like her.

“Your car’s downstairs,” Myst said softly behind him. Her voice was calm, but he could hear the crack in it.

He turned, his chest feeling uncomfortably tight as he looked at her. She was dressed casually now, jeans and a loose blouse, but somehow she still looked like a star. Maybe because, to him, she always would.

“Wish you were coming with me,” he said honestly. His suitcase sat by the door, an unwelcome reminder that their time was up.

“Me too.” She crossed the room, standing in front of him. “But I’ll come visit. As soon as the tour ends, I promise. I need to see where you come from. Meet your family.” Her lips twitched. “I bet your mum’s already planning dinner.”

“She is,” George admitted with a rueful grin. “She’s probably got three menus ready.”

“Good.” Myst reached up, letting her fingers graze his jaw. “I can’t wait.”

The kiss they shared was slow, lingering, and full of unspoken words. When they finally pulled apart, Myst rested her forehead against his, her voice barely above a whisper. “We’ve got this, George. No matter how hard it gets.”

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice rough. “We’ve got this.”

Chapter Seventeen

The final whistle pierced the humid Gold Coast air, and George doubled over, hands braced on his knees, lungs burning as though the match had stolen every ounce of oxygen he possessed.

Around him, the crowd erupted into a deafening roar, their cheers rolling like waves along the stadium stands.

A victorious grin tugged at his lips despite the ache in his body.

They'd done it. His team had pulled off one of the toughest wins of the season.

"Oi, George!" Lachie slapped an arm around his shoulders, nearly knocking him sideways. "You beauty! That try was a bloody masterpiece."

George chuckled, breathless but buzzing with adrenaline.

"Team effort, mate." He clapped Lachie's back and joined the knot of teammates huddling mid-field, arms slung over each other, the exhilaration of victory binding them together more tightly than any game plan ever could.

Sweat dripped down his temple, mixing with the salt of triumph.

"Next round's on you, Captain!" someone shouted through the laughter, and George raised his arms in mock surrender. "Yeah, yeah, I'll think about it," he called, grinning wide. These were his people. His turf. And today, they owned it.

As the group began to scatter, some heading toward the locker rooms, others lingering for interviews, George scanned the edge of the field out of habit.

The stands were still packed with fans waving banners and snapping pictures, a sea of maroon and gold jerseys blending into the sunset hues streaking the sky.

Then, just beyond the barrier separating the crowd from the pitch, something, or rather, someone, stopped him dead in his tracks.

Myst stood there, leaning casually against the railing, her petite frame impossible to miss even amidst the chaos.

Her long dark hair shimmered in the fading light, cascading over her shoulders like silk, and she wore a simple white tee tucked into faded jeans, a bright scarf tucked around her throat.

But it was her smile, bright, unrestrained, and aimed squarely at him, that knocked the wind clean out of him.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered under his breath, blinking as if she might disappear. She didn’t.

“Well, don’t just stand there gawking,” Lachie teased, elbowing him before jogging off toward the changing rooms. George barely noticed. His feet were already carrying him forward, cutting across the grass with purposeful strides.

“Thought I’d surprise you,” Myst called out as he approached, her voice carrying over the din. There was a mischievous lilt to her tone that made his heart stutter. “Figured it was my turn to cheer you on for once.”

“Colour me surprised,” he said, unable to stop the grin stretching across his face.

He reached her and pulled her into a hug without hesitation, lifting her slightly off the ground.

She let out a soft laugh, her arms looping naturally around his neck.

Her warmth, her scent, something faintly floral mingled with the tang of ocean air, it all grounded him in a way nothing else could.

“Careful with the PDA, Captain,” she teased when he set her back down. “You’re going to steal the spotlight from the team.”

“Me? Steal the spotlight?” He arched a brow, stepping back enough to take her in properly. “You’ve got that covered, love. Half the crowd’s probably forgotten we even won.” Everyone around them was staring and pointing, and he could see probably fifty phones pointed in their direction.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Myst shot back, laughing. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with amusement, the kind that always seemed to disarm him completely. “This is your world, not mine.”

“Maybe,” he allowed, his grin softening into something quieter, more private. “But you fit into it pretty damn well.”

For a moment, the noise of the crowd, the flashing cameras, everything faded into the background. It was just the two of them standing there, her presence as natural and steady as the earth beneath his cleats. And for the first time in weeks, George felt like he could finally catch his breath.

George slung an arm over Myst’s shoulder as they walked around the edge of the field. The air still buzzed with post-match energy, his teammates clustered in small groups near the sidelines, their voices rising and falling in celebration.

“Oi, Dennis!” Lachie called out, a grin plastered across his face as he jogged toward them. “So this is the famous Myst, huh? Finally!”

“Famous?” George drawled, tilting his head down toward Myst with a smirk. “I don’t know about that.”

“Please,” Lachie cut in, eyes wide as he looked at her like she’d just descended from the heavens. “You’re Myst . My mum’s a huge fan, would kill me if I didn’t at least say hello.”

“Well, we can’t have that now, can we?” Myst quipped, her pale blue eyes sparkling as she extended a hand to him. “Nice to meet you, Lachie.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Lachie stammered, clearly trying not to trip over his words. He shook her hand a little too enthusiastically before scratching the back of his neck. “Uh... any chance you’d mind a quick photo? For my mum, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Myst echoed with a teasing smile. She glanced up at George, who was valiantly trying, and failing, not to laugh. “Is this what it’s like for you after games?”

“Pretty much,” George said, shrugging. “Except no one ever asks me for selfies.”

“That’s because your skills are on the field,” Myst said smoothly, turning back to Lachie. “Not that I blame anyone for being impressed, it’s pretty incredible watching this guy play.”

“Alright, alright,” George muttered, his ears heating despite himself. “Let’s not inflate my ego too much.”

“Too late,” Myst teased, leaning into his side briefly as Lachie fumbled with his phone. She posed effortlessly for the photo, her charm utterly disarming as she

laughed and gave Lachie's camera a casual thumbs-up.

"Thanks so much," Lachie said, practically bouncing as he backed away. "You're a legend. Oh, and great game, Cap!"

"Yeah, yeah," George muttered, waving him off as Myst stifled a laugh.

"Your friend's adorable," she said once Lachie was out of earshot.

"Adorable wasn't exactly the word I had in mind," George replied dryly, though there was a flicker of amusement in his expression. "Come on, I need to get a shower and change."

The stadium was nearly empty by the time they found a quiet spot high in the stands, the roar of the crowd fading into memory.

George stretched his legs out in front of him, resting one arm along the back of the seat behind Myst. She tucked her knees up, wrapping her arms around them as she gazed out at the field where the floodlights cast long shadows across the grass.

"Can't believe this is your life," she said softly, her voice carrying a note of awe. "Watching you out there... it was like seeing a whole different side of you."

"Different how?" he asked, glancing at her profile. Her hair caught the light, tumbling over her shoulders in dark waves.

"Like you belonged," she said, turning to meet his gaze. "Completely, undeniably. It's not hard to see why everyone looks up to you, on and off the field."

"Guess it's not so different from watching you on stage," George replied after a moment, his voice quieter now. "You light up your world the same way."

She smiled at that, a soft, private smile that made his chest tighten in the best possible way. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely.” He reached over, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Though I reckon you’ve got better lighting.”

“Touché,” she murmured, leaning into his touch briefly before settling back against the seat.

For a while, neither of them spoke, letting the silence stretch comfortably between them. The weight of everything they’d been through, individually and together, seemed to settle lightly in the air, not heavy but present, like a thread connecting one moment to the next.

“Kind of crazy, isn’t it?” Myst said eventually. “How we ended up here. Feels like just yesterday we were trying to figure out if this...” she gestured between them, “could even work.”

“Yeah,” George agreed, his voice warm. “But we’ve done alright, haven’t we?”

“More than alright,” she said, her pale blue eyes meeting his again. “I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Me neither.” He rested his hand lightly on hers, the simple gesture grounding them both. “We’ve come a long way.”

“And we’ve still got more to go,” she added, her tone turning playful again. “Think you can keep up, Captain?”

“With you?” He grinned, squeezing her hand gently. “Always.”

The smell of eucalyptus mingled with the mouthwatering aroma of sizzling sausages as George pulled his ute up the long gravel driveway.

Myst sat beside him, her fingers fiddling with the edge of her sleeve.

She'd been quiet for the last few minutes, her usual flowing conversation replaced by a contemplative silence.

"Relax," George said, glancing at her with a crooked smile. "They're going to love you."

"That's what everyone says right before things go horribly wrong in rom-coms," Myst muttered, though the corners of her lips twitched upward.

"Pretty sure this isn't a movie," he teased, reaching over to gently squeeze her knee. "And if it is, I'm the ruggedly handsome lead who gets the girl in the end."

"Bold of you to assume you're the lead," she shot back, her nervousness briefly forgotten as she arched an eyebrow at him.

"Guess we'll find out," he said with a wink, throwing the car into park. The old Queenslander house loomed ahead, its white weatherboard exterior glowing in the afternoon sun. From the front verandah, George's mum appeared, waving enthusiastically.

"Here goes nothing," Myst murmured under her breath, stepping out of the vehicle.

"Here goes everything," George corrected, slinging an arm around her shoulders as they approached the house.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:34 am

“George!” Julie called, bustling down the steps.

She was shorter than Myst had imagined but had George’s same bright blue eyes and an air of warmth that made her instantly likable.

“And this is the famous Myst.” Without hesitation, she wrapped Myst in a hug that smelled faintly of lavender and soap.

“We’ve been waiting for you, we feel like we already know you! ”

“Thank you so much for having me,” Myst said, her voice soft but genuine as she returned the embrace. “George talks about you all the time.”

“He’s a good boy!” Julie reached up and patted George’s cheek. Myst stifled a laugh at his outraged expression.

“Now come inside, both of you. The barbecue’s already started, and knowing this lot,” Julie gestured vaguely toward the house, where the laughter of children rang out, “they won’t leave anything for us if we don’t hurry.”

The backyard was alive with movement and chatter, the sound of kids shrieking joyfully as George’s nieces and nephews played a wild game of tag among the gum trees.

A long wooden table groaned under the weight of platters filled with fresh salads, bread rolls, and pavlova topped with strawberries.

The grill smoked invitingly as George's brother-in-law expertly flipped steaks.

"Pass me those tomatoes, would you?" one of George's sisters asked Myst as they worked side by side in the kitchen. Ellie, Myst thought. She hadn't quite got them all straight yet.

"Here you go," Myst said, handing them over before slicing another cucumber. It wasn't until she glanced out the window and saw George tossing a rugby ball with one of the kids that she realized how seamlessly she'd slipped into the rhythm of things. Like she belonged.

"Can you really sing?" a small voice broke through her thoughts. Myst looked down to find one of George's nieces staring up at her with wide, curious eyes. "Uncle George says you're famous."

"Really now?" Myst said, shooting a mock glare at George through the window, though he was too busy laughing with the kids to notice. She crouched slightly to meet the girl's gaze. "Do you think I should prove him right?"

"Yes!" came the enthusiastic reply, echoed by several other kids who had magically appeared from nowhere.

"Alright, alright," Myst laughed, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "Let me grab a guitar." She'd spotted one in the front room, though goodness knows if it was in tune.

It wasn't long before she was perched on a low wall, an acoustic guitar resting against her thigh as everyone gathered around.

The hum of conversation quieted as she strummed the opening chords of one of her hits, a slower, stripped-down version that seemed to fit the moment.

Her voice, warm and rich, carried across the yard, blending with the rustle of leaves

and the distant crash of waves.

When she finished, the applause was immediate and heartfelt, the kids cheering the loudest of all.

“Alright, Captain,” Myst said, grinning as she leaned the guitar against the wall. “Your turn.”

“Not happening,” George declared, raising both hands in mock surrender. “Rugby players don’t sing.”

“Shame,” one of his sisters chimed in. “You could’ve been the next Australian Idol.”

“Yeah, yeah,” George muttered, though his grin betrayed his amusement. His eyes found Myst’s, and for a moment, he simply watched her, standing there amid the chaos of his family, the sunlight striking red lights in her dark hair. She was radiant.

“Alright then,” Myst said, brushing imaginary dust off her hands. “Guess I’ll have to carry the musical legacy for both of us.”

“Reckon you’re doing just fine,” George said, his voice low enough that only she could hear.

“Just fine?” she teased. “Better watch yourself, Dennis, or I might start charging performance fees.”

“Fair enough,” he replied, tugging her close enough to press a quick kiss to her temple. “Whatever it costs, you’re worth it.”

The sand was cool beneath Myst’s bare feet, the grains slipping between her toes as she walked beside George.

The rhythmic crash of waves filled the air, a soothing backdrop to the quiet that had settled between them.

Overhead, the stars stretched endlessly, scattered across the inky sky like someone had spilled a jar of glitter.

“Your world’s not so bad,” Myst said finally, her voice soft. She glanced sideways at George, who had his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, his long strides slowed to match her pace. “I could get used to this.”

“Not exactly stadium lights and screaming fans, is it?” he teased, his lips curving into that crooked smile that always made her heart skip a beat.

“Exactly,” she murmured, her gaze drifting back to the ocean.

“It’s... grounding.” She paused, brushing a strand of wind-tousled hair out of her face.

“Thanks for letting me in, George. For showing me all of this, your family, your home. I feel like I’ve been running on adrenaline for years, and now...

” Her voice trailed off, but the contentment in her sigh finished the sentence for her.

“Now you’re stuck with me,” George quipped, bumping her shoulder lightly with his arm.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she shot back with a grin, though her eyes betrayed the depth of her affection. “But seriously, I needed this. I didn’t even realize how much until today.”

“Well,” George began, his tone softening as he stopped walking and turned to face her, “they love you, you know. Mum, my sisters, the kids, they couldn’t stop talking

about you after you sang.

” He reached for her hand, his thumb brushing over her knuckles.

“And honestly? I don’t blame them. You have this way of...

fitting, like you’ve always been part of this chaos. ”

Myst looked up at him, her pale blue eyes searching his face. “It felt like I belonged,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “And I haven’t felt that in a long time.”

“Then you’re right where you’re meant to be,” George said simply, his words steady and sure.

For a moment, neither of them moved, standing there amidst the sound of the waves and the endless stretch of stars above. Then George gave her hand a gentle tug, leading her toward the dunes where they sank down together on the cool, soft sand, the world shrinking to just the two of them.

“Alright,” he said, lying back with his arms folded behind his head. “What’s next for Myst?”

“Big question,” she replied, sitting cross-legged beside him, her fingers idly tracing patterns in the sand.

She let the silence linger for a beat before answering.

“I think it’s time for something different.

I’ve been going nonstop for years... recording, touring, interviews, repeat.

But coming here, meeting your family... it's sparked something.

I want to write an album that feels real .

Something personal. No big producers, no over-the-top spectacle.

Just me and the music. Acoustic, maybe."

"Yeah?" George tilted his head to look at her, his expression curious. "You reckon you can sit still long enough to make that happen?"

"Rude," she said with a mock glare, flicking a handful of sand in his direction. "But yes, I can. I need to. It'll be inspired by this... by you, by your family, by everything I've been too busy to notice lately."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out," he said, his voice low and thoughtful.

"Not quite," she admitted with a small laugh. "But it feels like the first step in a while that's completely mine, you know?"

"Yeah, I get that," he said, nodding slowly. "And hey, if you need a break from all that creative genius, you're welcome at every rugby game from now on. Off-seasons, too; I'll even teach you how to throw a decent pass if you're feeling adventurous."

"Careful," she warned, pointing a finger at him. "I might actually take you up on that."

"Good," he said, grinning as he sat up and leaned closer. "Because you're going to have to get used to rugby being a regular part of your life. Non-negotiable."

"Fine," she said, rolling her eyes. "But only if you agree to be my backup dancer when I go back on tour."

“Deal,” he shot back without missing a beat, though the idea clearly amused him. “But fair warning, I can’t promise I won’t steal the show.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” Myst replied, her voice warm with laughter.

They fell into a comfortable silence then, lying side by side on the sand, their hands loosely intertwined.

Above them, the stars burned bright, as if the universe itself was listening to their promises.

They both knew it wouldn’t always be easy; their lives were complicated, pulled in every direction by fame, schedules, and expectations.

But as Myst rested her head against George’s shoulder and he pressed a kiss to her hair, they also knew one thing for certain: whatever came next, they’d face it together.

A month later, the late afternoon sun cast a warm, golden glow over the verandah as Myst leaned back into her chair, her bare feet resting on the wooden railing.

The hum of conversation and bursts of laughter from George’s family surrounded her like a familiar song, blending with the distant crash of waves against the shore.

In the yard below, George’s nieces and nephews were locked in a chaotic game of backyard cricket, their high-pitched cheers and shouts carrying through the salty breeze.

“That’s a no-ball, mate!” George called out, his deep voice cutting through the racket as he lounged beside Myst, one arm draped casually across the back of her chair.

He grinned when his youngest nephew protested loudly, waving the bat indignantly.

“Don’t argue with the umpire,” he added, smirking as the boy huffed and reset his stance.

“Your umpiring skills are questionable at best,” Myst teased, tilting her head to look up at him. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with mischief, and she reached over to steal a sip of his drink without asking. George raised an eyebrow but didn’t protest, the corner of his mouth twitching upward.

“Careful, love,” he said, leaning closer so only she could hear. “Keep that up and they’ll put you in charge next.”

“Maybe I will,” she shot back, setting the glass down with a confident clink. “I’d be fairer than you, at least.”

“Guess we’ll see,” he murmured, his grin widening as he brushed a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. The simple gesture made her heart skip, though she’d never admit it aloud, not here, where Jessie sat just a few feet away, undoubtedly ready with a snarky comment.

“Oi, Dennis!” Jessie’s voice broke through the moment, sharp and amused as she leaned forward in her chair. “You gonna let her run the show now, or are you too scared to challenge her?”

“Smart money’s on Myst,” Lachie chimed in from across the yard, where he was busy flipping sausages on the barbecue. “She’s got the star power and the brains.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Myst called back, laughing as George groaned dramatically beside her. She gave his knee a playful pat. “See? Even your mates know what’s what.”

“Traitors,” George muttered, shaking his head but unable to hide his amusement.

Jessie had come to a game with Myst and Lachie had taken one look and lost his heart, amusing both George and Myst. Both of them had promptly been adopted into the Dennis family too, and were regular fixtures at the Sunday barbecues.

“Now, now,” came Julie’s voice as she appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

Her tone was light, but the glint in her eye was unmistakable, the kind of look that promised trouble, the fun sort.

“Enough squabbling. Let me ask the real question everyone’s been wondering.

” She stepped onto the verandah, pausing to take them both in: Myst comfortably tucked into George’s side, his hand resting loosely on hers.

“When are you two going to settle down properly?” Julie asked, her smile warm but teasing as she folded her arms. The words hung in the air, drawing a sudden hush from the group.

Myst felt George’s fingers tighten around hers ever so slightly, a silent reassurance. She turned her head to meet his gaze, their eyes locking for a beat longer than necessary. Oh, he was enjoying this, she could tell by the way his lips twitched, holding back a grin. Typical.

“One step at a time,” Myst said finally, her voice soft but steady as she broke the silence. She glanced back at George’s mum, offering a small, knowing smile. “We’ve got plenty of time to figure it all out.”

“Plenty,” George echoed, his Australian accent wrapping around the word like a promise. His thumb brushed gently against her knuckles, grounding her in the moment.

“Fair enough,” Julie said with a wink, clearly satisfied. “But don’t keep us waiting too long, I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

“You’ve got quite enough grandkids to be going on with, Ma!” George said teasingly.

The whole group burst into laughter, the tension dissolving as quickly as it had formed.

Jessie rolled her eyes, muttering something about meddling mothers under her breath, while Lachie shouted something unintelligible from the barbecue.

Myst let herself relax back into her chair, the corners of her mouth lifting despite herself.

As the sun dipped lower, painting the sky in hues of pink and orange, Myst and George sat quietly amidst the happy chaos.

The kids’ laughter echoed across the yard, mingling with the rhythmic sizzle of the grill and the comforting murmur of family chatter.

George’s hand remained in hers, a steady presence.

“Not bad, huh?” he said after a while, his voice low and quiet, meant just for her.

“Not bad at all,” she agreed, her gaze drifting to the horizon. The future stretched ahead of them like the endless expanse of sea and sky, full of possibility, full of hope.

And as they sat there, fingers intertwined, watching the world around them settle into a perfect kind of harmony, Myst couldn’t help but think: they really did have all the time in the world.