



# BULLLEY

*Jade C. Jamison*

**Bullet**  
**An Epic Rock Star Novel**

**Jade C. Jamison**

## ***Bullet***

What if you discover the man you want is toxic?

She'd tasted a little bit of heaven with him, and now they've gone through hell and back, but can their relationship take anymore?

Valerie Quinn is a naïve college freshman when she meets on-the-rise rock star Ethan Richards. He's an idealistic, handsome, reckless young man, but he's captured her heart. She doesn't give up on him and eventually his walls crumble down. By the time Valerie has given herself to him completely, she discovers he's damaged and may be beyond help. Can she save Ethan and their relationship before he implodes, or will he self-destruct and take her with him?

Brad's face got serious again, and he stroked my cheek. "Sorry about earlier. I guess we put you in an uncomfortable position. I didn't know you didn't smoke pot."

"I was accused of being prude in high school more than once."

He placed his hand on my thigh. "Oh, I don't think you're prude, Val. You just haven't met your drug of choice, and you definitely haven't met the right guy."

His hand was warm. I was staring at it and deciding if I wanted to push it off my leg or not. As usual, though, I couldn't resist Brad...flirting with him or anything else. So I said, "Meaning you're the wrong guy?"

He smirked at me, and I wished I could figure out what he was thinking. "Yeah, I'm sure I'm the wrong guy, but I can feel like the right one if you let me try."

I don't know why, but his words were exactly what I needed to hear in that hazy state, and I felt like the most special girl in the world then. Brad had that effect on me, and I think it's because I'd never seen him with another female...ever. It allowed me to believe him. Someone like Ethan, though...it was evident that he loved women, but he loved *all* of them. Whether Brad had designs on other girls or not, I didn't know, because I'd never seen him hit on other girls when I was around. It was like he only had eyes for me. And I don't have any idea why, because—even though that sexual attraction was there—I didn't feel like I was encouraging him at all. He knew I was hung up on Ethan. He'd known that from the first day I'd met him.

"Did I tell you already how much I like this skirt?"

In spite of my muddled emotions (or because of them), I liked his hand on my thigh and a deep, dark part of me that I would never admit to thought I wouldn't mind if he moved his hand even higher. But I struggled to maintain control. Still, I couldn't stop myself from flirting. "Your eyes did."

He took his hand off my leg and placed it on the back of my neck while his lips touched mine. The passion—yes, it was still there, murky and bottomless, threatening to consume us both...

## **Advanced praise for *Bullet*:**

Zoe, The Book Lovers, 5 stars: "[I]f you're looking for smoking hot Rockstars, smoking hot sex, love triangles and a metal rock band then *Bullet* will be and is the book for you. It's about growing up, finding love, dealing with damaged souls, succeeding and finding true happiness."

Crystal, Cricket's Chirps Romance Blog, 5 stars: "The story as a whole wowed me. I laughed, fumed, swooned and even felt awkward at times. It was such a roller coaster of events, and just when I thought I could finally predict what was going to happen next, I found out I was wrong. This really is *An Epic Rock Star Novel*."

Jennifer, 5 stars on Goodreads: "[T]he first word i can think of is WOW!! Loved this book. I was pulled in to this story and couldn't let go."

Sue, 5 stars on Goodreads: "Jade C. Jamison...has a way of writing that holds you from the first word to the very last. If you love Rock Star books you will love this one. It will grip your heart, make you laugh, make you cry as you following these amazing characters through their journey in love, loss, success, pain and true happiness. This book has it all. I highly recommend this book!!!!!!!"

Leigh, 5 stars on Goodreads: "What can I say about *Bullet*??? Let's see.....Wow & Perfect are the two words that come to my mind first! I'm in love with the characters in this book....I laughed, cried & at times I was fighting mad!!!! The story sucks you in and you never want it to end!!!! I felt like i was experiencing the Journey with them!"

Keri, 5 stars on Goodreads: "I must say if you have not read any of Jade's books yet you need to start with this one! This is Jade's best book to date. *Bullet* takes you on a roller coaster ride of emotions from love and lust to friendship and more. If you love Rockstar books you will love this one."

Heather, 5 stars on Goodreads: "*Bullet*...ABSOLUTELY ROCKS! It is a true epic rock novel and has you captivated from the first chapter and keeps you guessing throughout the entire novel. Jade has created a truly heartfelt story with such wonderful character development that leaves you screaming for a sequel just for more of this wonderful story. You will definitely not be disappointed in this read."

Amy, 5 stars on Goodreads: "Loved following Valerie as she grew and changed throughout this story. Loved the boys she met along the way. A must read!!! Hard to put down, but when it's over, you just want more!"

Sarah, 5 stars on Goodreads: "*Bullet* is gritty, real and believable. I liked how/where the story starts, with the journey through the book being (as others have said too) an emotional rollercoaster....If you love Rock Stars read *Bullet*. ROCK STARS RULE!"

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*Finger Bang*

*Quickies: Sexy Short Stories and Other Stuff*

*Old House*

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*As an independent author, I respect and love the independent spirit.  
I also wish to nourish it.  
To that end, I want to dedicate this novel about independent musicians  
to three of my favorite indie bands:*

*[Fighting the Phoenix](#)*

*[The Last Savior Of God](#)*

*[Half Past My Sin](#)*

*I wish these talented musicians all the good luck and fortune in the world  
and may the rest of the world discover you soon!!!  
ROCK ON!*

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## Foreword

Once upon a time, there was a quiet eighteen-year-old college student who was a budding writer. It just so happens that she also loved metal music.

Yes, that eighteen-year-old was yours truly.

When I was eighteen, I wrote most of my first novel. I didn't quite finish it, because I was writing it in the summer between the spring and fall semesters of my freshman and sophomore years in college, and school started before I reached the end of the story. But when I went back to school, one night in September, four of my girlfriends/ roommates wanted to read it. So we popped some popcorn and lay on my bed and the floor of my room while I read to them my almost-finished first (kind of) romance book called *Bottom of My Heart*. Yes, it had some clichés and some juvenile writing, and I didn't finish writing the last two chapters until six years later, but I had my girlfriends giggling and tittering, oohing and ahing, gasping with delight and wondering how it ended. The sex scenes were tame, and some of the dialogue was so bad, it was downright embarrassing. But I was a writer. Oh, yes, I was, and I had a small audience who were rooting for the heroine.

That heroine's name was Valerie, and that book became the basis of what has become my hugest rock star book ever, the book you are getting to read right now, *Bullet*. My husband had teased me about all the "trunk novels" I had written—mostly finished books and some completed books that I'd never thought were good enough to share. *Bottom of My Heart* was definitely one of those books just not good enough, because I knew the plot. There was no way it would ever work today.

But then...

All it takes is a spark. I kept thinking about that old book, because it had a special place in my heart. I pulled it out of the trunk (yes, I really keep all my old writing in a trunk!) but I still didn't read it. Not yet. But I kept thinking about it, and inspiration hit. I knew *Bottom of My Heart* was more a young girl's fantasy, but I realized there was a great way I could make it a really good book with just a few plot changes.

And that's when I started writing *Bullet*. I knew it was going to be one of my longer books, and when I first started writing it, I even said on Facebook that I thought it would wind up being between 90,000 and 100,000 words...definitely one of my longer books. Well, I bypassed that amount sometime in January, and it kept growing. I know what publishers say—more than 90 and you'll lose your audience. But I'm calling bullshit. This story is epic, and it deserves to be told in a big way.

Out of all the books I've ever written, this is the one I'm most excited to share with my fans. Most of the characters in my books do some growing up, but we get to see Valerie begin life as a college freshman and end up...well, much further down the road. We see Valerie mature from

naïve youngster to a woman who discovers her sexuality and finds love in the end. And, because this is an epic book, following her story for several years, it's not a typical romance. We see Valerie in some serious relationships, and the question ultimately is whom does she end up with? Is he the right guy?

I hope you enjoy the journey as much as I have.

Jade, February 2013

## Chapter One

### Present

ETHAN STUMBLED IN through the front door, a three-fourths empty bottle of Jack Daniels in hand. I awoke from my light sleep on the couch. I didn't even feel like cursing anymore. But the facts were hard to deny. Drunk again.

This had become our nightly ritual. I would doze on the couch waiting for Ethan to come home drunk. Only tonight was different. I had to break the news to him.

He clomped across the room and I said, "Ethan, would you sit down for a minute, please?"

Usually, I would just stare at him, my eyes full of hope, but he would just go to the bedroom and pass out on the bed with his clothes still on. Things had changed, though...and he had to know.

With a look of confusion (or irritation—I wasn't sure which), he trod across the floor and fell into the chair next to the couch. His words were slurred. Big surprise. "Are you mad at me, Val?" He set the bottle on the coffee table with a little more force than he'd intended. It was loud, but he just blinked.

No, I wasn't mad at him. I had grown used to Ethan coming home in this condition. For months now, he'd been coming home this way. Only occasionally would he come home early (and sober) as the Ethan I'd grown to love. Those few precious nights were the nights when he'd hold me in his arms all night long and remind me that he really *did* love me.

"No, Ethan, but I want you to listen to me carefully." His glazed, bloodshot eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. He slowly lifted his shaky hand to run through his long, tousled reddish-brown hair. I'd spent hours earlier thinking of exactly what to say, but now it felt like a struggle to force the words out of my mouth. "I really don't know how to say this, so I'm just gonna spit it out." I inhaled a deep breath and forced myself to look him in the eyes. "I'm pregnant."

He looked confused again and then sat back in the chair. His eyes had changed from the slits they'd been to wide open; they looked full of disbelief. "You're *what*? But how?"

Hmm...well, how could I explain it to him? It wasn't his fault, but I didn't feel like it was mine either. No sense lying about it. I swallowed and found the courage to just say it. "Well, since we hardly...have sex anymore, I stopped taking the pill." I really couldn't call it *making love*, since love hardly seemed involved lately. Anymore, when we bothered, it was simply out of need. The love, the passion...it was gone, and I didn't know if we could ever get it back.

He just stared forward for what seemed like hours. He didn't look at me, just looked ahead. I could hear the clock in the hall tick-tocking and Ethan's heavy, erratic breathing. I had feared he would react this way—angry—but I wouldn't give up my child. I had always wanted to be a mother. But *was* he angry? I couldn't tell. In all the years I'd known Ethan, I still had problems telling what he was thinking. In fact, it was that mystery that used to intrigue me, keep me excited, on my toes. Now it just made me nervous as hell.

The minutes ticked away. Was he taking so long because of his drunken stupor (and was he on the verge of falling asleep), or was he searching for how to put his thoughts into words? And would his words make me angry too?

How much simpler my life would be if I had never met Ethan Richards. I wouldn't have to worry about my husband's response to when I had to confess I was pregnant, if he would come home sober, if he had been faithful...but that was all wishful thinking. I couldn't have married

another man. I loved my Ethan way too much, even though he'd been fucked up beyond recognition for quite some time. I loved his heart, his soul. I loved the way his full lips turned up in a smile when I caught his hard green eyes. I loved the way he'd grown out his hair, how it flowed past his neck, his rock hard arms—I loved it all. No matter what had happened between us, I knew I would always love him.

And now, I guessed, was the time I'd find out how much he loved me. I'd lost a lot of sleep the past few nights wondering when I should break the news. Even now I wondered if I'd chosen the right time. But it was too late to wonder. It was already done, and I just had to wait for him to respond.

Finally, he broke the silence. I was happy to see a twinkle penetrate his eye, his mouth crack open in a smile. "That's fucking fantastic, Val." His response, much to my surprise, was positive. Of all reactions, this was the one I had hoped for the most but expected the least. After I recovered from my initial shock, he continued. "You know I've always wanted to be a father. I'll be a great dad." He sucked in a deep breath, but his smile hadn't faded. I could tell he wanted to believe what he was saying. "I'll quit drinking, smoking, partying. I'll act like a real father should." He stood up. "I can't believe we're having a baby." With that, he fell back into the chair.

I hadn't expected him to say anything that good. I had thought he'd be angry, frustrated, and upset at the thought of a baby. We had talked about children in the vaguest way, as a future far-off, someday dream, and we had agreed we wouldn't have children until we'd both felt we were ready. So the fact that he not only accepted the idea but even liked it was hard for me to believe. Ethan had never wanted to be *tied down*...and here he was with a wife and soon-to-be-born baby. His happiness was incredible.

"Ethan...are you serious?"

He didn't blink. "Valerie, I've never been more serious in my life."

I guessed I would soon find out just how serious he was.

## Chapter Two

### Past

THE STORY OF Ethan and me is a long one. We met when we were both eighteen, much too young to make decisions about love or marriage. It was hard enough deciding about college.

As a teenager, I guess I was what you might consider *cute*. I had shoulder-length brown hair, sparkly blue-green eyes, slightly overweight (I'm talking ten pounds—just enough to give me cushion, you know?). I was also what my mother had called a *social butterfly*—I found it easy to make new friends, and I wasn't shy.

I'd decided to attend college at...well, maybe I shouldn't say. I was moving from my hometown of Winchester, Colorado, to one of the smaller universities located in a small, sleepy college town far away from home. If you've ever visited Colorado schools like Adams State, Fort Lewis, or Western State, then you know the kind of town and the kind of college I'm talking about. But...well, this story has needed to be written for a while, and I'm changing some of the names and the places to protect the innocent...and the guilty too. And, bottom line, I suppose it doesn't really matter *where* I went to college, only that I did, and that's where Ethan and I met. The town where I went to college really wasn't much different from Winchester, but it was my first time living away from home, over two hundred miles away. I was homesick at first but soon got swept up in the pace of college life.

I lived in the dorms and got stuck with a roommate who thought she was God's gift to teenage boys. Charlotte Edwards's only gift to men was her free favors. And, lucky me, I got to experience them all. I was a young, naïve virgin, raised in a strict Christian atmosphere, sheltered from a lot of real life, so Charlotte was hard for me to take at first.

I was sure she was trouble the minute I moved in. Above her bed hung a poster of a close-to-nude man, something that—at the time—had made me blush. The guy was clean shaven but with a little bit of stubble, dark brown bedroom eyes, huge muscles, no shirt on, his jeans unzipped, his hand snaking down into his underwear, suggesting that he was all hot and bothered for whatever woman walked into his gaze. Yeah, that poster made me uncomfortable...even if I had to admit later that the guy was hot as hell.

Worse, though, was her blatant advertising of who she was and what she wanted, now that she was out from under her parents' roof. On the desk lay a compact of birth control pills. And she danced around the room in a lacy red teddy with some kind of *mood music* on her boom box, some R&B tune I hadn't heard before.

I was grateful that my mother, father, and brother were waiting outside in the truck for me. They'd sent me inside to find the resident advisor, affectionately known as our RA, who in turn gave me a map of campus and a key to my room. I wanted to locate the room first and then get my family so we could start hauling in all my things.

I hid my initial horror and became the always polite girl I tended to be. "Hi. I'm your roommate, Valerie Quinn."

"Hi. I'm Charlotte Edwards. Where you from?"

"Winchester. What about you?"

She gave me a funny look and tossed her long black hair behind her shoulder. "Where the fuck is that?"

Well, *that* was rude. "Do you know where Colorado Springs is?"

“Duh.”

“Winchester’s about an hour away, to the west.” I still wanted to play nice. “Where are you from?”

“Denver.”

“So why’d you decide to come here to college?” I knew there were already some good schools in and around Denver, so I was curious why she wanted to go so far away from home. Maybe she’d earned a scholarship or something.

But, in a matter-of-fact voice, she said, “Change of scenery.” And she decided to leave it at that.

“Well, this is definitely a change of scenery. Anyway, my parents and brother are going to help me drag all my stuff in here. You don’t mind, do you?” I was hoping she’d take the hint and change into something a little less comfortable.

“It’s your room, too.” Luckily for me, she reached in one of her dresser drawers for a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and pulled them on.

“Be right back.” As I walked down the hall, I thought, *Everything’s going to be all right. She seems nice. First impressions aren’t always right.* I guess I was too young to know I should follow my intuition.

My parents, brother, and I started taking boxes out of the back of the truck and placing them on my side of the dorm room. When everyone had set down the first load, I said, “Mom, dad, Danny, this is my roommate, Charlotte Edwards. Charlotte, this is my family.”

Danny, a good-looking junior in high school, could hardly keep from drooling on his shirt. Charlotte’s long, shiny black hair draped over her t-shirt, the little piercing in her nose flashing every time she tilted her head in that way she thought made her look cute, and her brown eyes smoldered with continual lust...*for my little brother?*

My graying parents seemed neutral—they showed nothing positive or negative toward my new roommate, but they did notice the poster above her bed and seemed dismayed. Did I already mention my parents were deeply religious?

“Hello, Charlotte.” My father put out his hand to shake hers. Maybe that’s where I got my politeness—from my dad.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Quinn, right?” She accepted my father’s handshake and then shook my mother’s hand. “Danny.” She extended her hand to his, a smirk on her face. *Well, I thought, this is one boy she won’t get.*

But she too was polite as we carried in my boxes. She even offered to help with a few.

When the truck was entirely unloaded, I walked with my family to where it was parked so we could exchange goodbyes. “Valerie,” my mother said, “I hope everything works out. Charlotte seems nice, but...I don’t know about her. I hope you can get along with her.”

“That makes two of us.”

My mother was having a hard time seeing me in this environment, leaving her nest for good. Out of Danny and me, I was the oldest child, so she’d never gone through this before. Tears welled up in her eyes as she hugged me. “Keep your grades up, honey. Have fun. And remember we love you.”

My father kissed me on the cheek. Then Danny, *Mr. Cool*, said, “Bye, sis. Don’t miss me too much.”

“Come here, you little twerp, and give me a hug.”

He did and then whispered, “I’m gonna miss you, ya know.”

“Yeah, I’ll miss you, too.”



They got in the truck, and I stood there for a few minutes after they'd left. I'd waved goodbye to my family, my home, my friends...and my childhood.

\* \* \*

I set the last box on my bed and started sifting through its assorted contents, deciding where to put them (not that there were a whole lot of choices). Charlotte lay on her bed, once again clad in just her little red teddy. She thumped her hand on her bed to the beat of the music she was playing, some Lady Gaga song I'd never heard before. "Hey, Valerie, why don't you invite your little brother up to visit for a weekend?"

My back was turned from her face as I continued sifting through my box. I was glad, because I'm sure my expression was one of shock at the very least. This girl wasn't trying very hard to make a friend. "Why? He's busy." I suspected I knew why she was interested in my brother, but I figured she was just asking to get under my skin.

"Busy? Doing *what*?"

"For one thing, he's on the football team." I pulled some pencils out of the box and put them in my desk drawer. Once again, I repeated my question, "Why?"

Her lips curled up in a half smile. "He's awfully cute, you know."

"He's in high school."

She raised her eyebrows, the smirk still firmly affixed to her face, making her tiny upturned nose look pug-like. I was starting to not like this girl. "So? He's probably still had a little experience."

I started laughing, unable to help myself. "You don't know my family very well." Our parents had us on tight leashes, so, while my brother might have had a *little* experience, that was likely *all* he'd had. "Sorry, Charlotte, but he can't come up."

"Oh, I get it. I guess I'm just not good enough for your brother."

The last thing I wanted was an argument with my new roommate on my first day away from home. "No, that's not it. I don't know you well enough to make that call. But I can tell you he wouldn't be able to make it. It's a long drive and he has a lot on his plate."

"It's not *that* long of a drive." She sat up. "I'm going to the restroom. Excuse me." Her tone of voice was nothing like the sickly-sweet purr she'd used earlier. She stomped across the room and walked out the door to find the restrooms down the hall. I started to suspect this school year would be a long one.

\* \* \*

Good-looking guys roamed every part of the campus. A girl could get lost just looking at all of them—well, this girl, at least. But the ones I got to know during my first month on campus were either taken already or not the guys a father would want his daughter to date. And, since I'm inherently a people pleaser, especially when it came to my parents, that made them off limits...while my guard was up, anyway.

Needless to say, in spite of Charlotte, I enjoyed my first few weeks of college. It was tough, but the professors and other students were friendly and helpful, and that meant a lot to this small town never-been-away-from-home girl. I soon became familiar with the campus and the surrounding college town. I loved the weather (so far) and the surrounding countryside. I began to feel like this place might be a nice home for the next four years.

I was a happy freshman the first month and a half. But October rolled around to eventually change the entire course of my future: I met *him*.

I walked into a building full of stuffy classrooms from the beautiful crisp outside. The sun had been shining brightly as leaves were beginning to fall. I was a little disappointed because I

had to sit in a dull history class instead of walking on campus, listening to the soft crunch of dead leaves beneath my feet.

I set my books on the desktop, and I slid into its cramped seat. As I waited for the professor to walk in, I glanced around the room...and saw him. I wondered why I'd never noticed him before, but I knew why. I'd pretty much kept to myself for the most part the first month or two as I adjusted and tried to find my way around this new world. But as I became more relaxed, more comfortable with my environment, I felt that I could stretch my legs a little.

So I spotted him. And he was probably one of the best-looking guys on campus. How had I never noticed him before? I immediately became intrigued by this handsome stranger. He appeared to be close to my age, and I fell in love with his shoulder-length reddish-brown hair, his light-emerald green eyes, his firm, strong jaw. He didn't appear to be overly tall sitting in that desk, but he didn't look short either, and—even from where I sat—I could see his biceps were nicely sculpted. One plus—he wasn't talking to anyone either...that is, a *girl*. But even on that first day, I saw a look of anger in his eyes, a look of hate, of revenge—from where I sat, it was barely noticeable, but it was there, just the same, and it would always be there. I think that attracted me the most. It made him mysterious. I should have known then to stay away from him. But I've always been the kind to take on a challenge. I decided then and there that I would sit beside him the next time our class met.

\* \* \*

I shut the door to my tiny dorm room behind me and placed my books on my desk. I sat down in the chair and finally muttered *hi* to Charlotte. She was lying on her bed reading and didn't move her eyes from her book to mumble *hi* back.

I decided I should make an effort to get along with her. If I had to spend an entire school year with her, I needed to talk to her once in a while and make the effort to connect. So, when she set her book down on her bed with a bored look on her face, I told her about the guy in my history class and how I had decided to sit by him in the next class period. Her response was "So what?"

No, my jaw didn't drop and keep in mind I was young. I should have realized that maybe I needed to make a few attempts to get on her good side. Instead, I felt my ire stir a little. I figured she was unimpressed because here I was, *Virginal Valerie*, a girl who'd primly dated the occasional boy, and there was Charlotte, sexually wise beyond her years, bringing a different boy to her bed every weekend. She probably thought I was stupid (not true), naïve (yeah, that was right on), and not worth her time. I didn't think, though, that it gave her the right to be rude and offensive, especially when I was trying to make nice. But, no matter what I thought, I *did* at least *try* to continue to be nice, even though overtones of anger and impatience surely showed through it. "*So what?* He's cute!"

Charlotte's voice was clipped. "You said that before." She threw her books off her bed with a sweep of her forearm onto the floor. Then she crawled under the covers and snuggled up with her pillow. "I really don't care."

I was angry. Yeah, I know...I should have just blown her off and figured *good riddance*, but what can I say? I was young and idealistic. I don't know—maybe I thought my words could help her see the world wasn't such a bad place. Maybe I could help her see the error of her ways and she'd realize I was just trying to make a connection. Of course, the words I said wouldn't necessarily help out with that. She was getting on my nerves, and I'm afraid I was getting emotional. "You wouldn't. All you really care about is sleeping." And...that wasn't entirely untrue. The girl was in bed more than not.

She acted offended. “*Sleeping?*”

“What are you getting ready to do right now?”

Charlotte glared through her dark eyes. “You’re just upset because I don’t care about this guy you’re lusting after, and I don’t want to listen.” She rolled over on her side so I didn’t have to look at her.

“I’m not upset. I’m angry. Whenever *you* like a guy, I hear about him all the time until you find the next one.” She bolted upright. “But when *I* like a guy, I say two sentences and—”

“Valerie, you’re a—”

“Shut up.” I slammed the door behind me as I left the room. Now, more than ever, I was determined to meet this guy. Then Charlotte would become curious. And when she asked questions, I wouldn’t answer her.

As my blood pressure cooled storming down the hall, I realized how childish that was. And stupid. Of course, Charlotte wouldn’t instantly become interested if I started dating someone just because I was dating him. I had hoped, though, to prove to my roommate that a girl could date a guy without sleeping with him.

A few days later, I was in my history class again, this time sitting on the cute guy’s side of the room, ready to put my plan into action. I thought I’d come up with a good conversation starter. I hoped it would work.

He sat on the left side of the room, about the third row, so I sat in the desk directly behind him. Gently, I tapped on his shoulder. He turned around and took out the earbuds that were attached to a hidden iPod. I started getting nervous but tried to hide it.

I took a deep breath, flashed the sweetest smile I could, and asked, “Sorry to bother you, but did you take good notes during the last class period?”

He grinned back at me through his full, sensuous lips. Oh, yeah...I would love to kiss them. I tried not to be distracted by them. He said, “Not really. This class is so boring, I hardly take notes.” He glanced to the side as though to make sure the prof wasn’t nearby to overhear him. “I hope reading the book will help me pass the midterm.”

I nodded. “I hope you’re right. I was having a hard time concentrating last class.” Yeah...watching this cute guy. I wasn’t going to mention that.

“I wasn’t concentrating either.”

Perfect time for an introduction, I thought. “I’m Valerie Quinn.”

“Ethan Richards.” I allowed his name to flow through my head several times because I didn’t want to forget it. He leaned toward me with a conspiratorial air. “So...do you suppose we’ll take shitty notes again this period?”

I giggled. “Probably.” I pointed toward his earbuds. “So what are listening to on your headphones?”

He shrugged. “Just some metal.”

He acted like he didn’t expect that I would be interested. So when I said, “Who?” he smiled and handed me one of the earbuds. He hadn’t paused the music when he’d taken them out of his ears, so I could hear loud music blaring through as I held it up to my ear. It sounded familiar and I could tell right away that it was metalcore or deathcore. And then I recognized the tune...and I suspected he didn’t expect me to know I was listening to Suicide Silence. So I said, “Oh...‘Disengage.’ I *love* this song.”

“You like these guys?”

“Love ‘em.” That was cool. Charlotte, probably the person I knew best on this campus, mostly listened to pop tunes, so to find someone else who listened to music other than top forty

excited me. I loved heavy metal music, so to find someone else who liked it (and someone I was already crushing on was an added bonus) was comforting somehow.

But then it really hit me. I'd struck up a conversation with this really cute guy, and I'd found out in the space of just a few minutes that we had something in common. That was a great start. So meeting him hadn't been as hard as I'd thought it would be. I moved my head to the beat of the music. I couldn't help it. That's what we headbangers do. But I wasn't going completely crazy. I was in a classroom, for heaven's sake. Before I could listen to much more, the history professor walked in, so I grinned and handed the earbud back to Ethan. I whispered, "We can see if we take the same notes, okay?"

He laughed, not enough that the professor noted it while he pulled his texts out of his attaché case. "Deal."

Well, that class was not any more memorable or noteworthy than it had been the class before. In fact, it was probably less so because nothing could distract me from replaying in my head what had just happened. The event was more important than a lot of people might think. I might not have been a shy girl, but I'd never really "put myself out there" when it came to guys. I didn't have much confidence when it came to the opposite sex, so for me to have just decided to go for it—and for it to have worked—was huge. So...notes? Nope. Maybe Ethan would have a few, though.

After class, we wound up walking out together and just naturally started heading toward the community of dorms on the other side of campus. We never said it nor acknowledged it; it just happened while we were talking. We started talking about metal music in general, but by the time we were out of the building, he said, "Hey...there are some Colorado bands from out of town playing here next month. Do you get into local bands?"

I hadn't, but it wasn't because I wasn't interested. It would be more because I'd been under my parents' watchful eyes. So I said, "I don't know any, but if they're good, I could." Did that sound as stupid as I thought it did in retrospect?

"Well, the two bands I'm going to see are called Last Five Seconds and Name of My Killer. They're both extreme metal, and I figured if you like Suicide Silence, you'd like them too. I know the guys in Last Five Seconds, so I'll be there supporting them, but...I have an extra ticket and thought you might like to come along."

Seriously? That fast? And would this be considered a date? I could hardly keep my breathing steady. It had definitely been worth my time to sit by this gorgeous guy and to strike up a conversation. "Yeah...if you really want me to."

He shrugged and smiled. "It'd be more fun to take someone with me who likes the music as much as I do."

"Thanks, Ethan." That was the first time I'd actually said his name. Ooh...I liked the way it felt on my tongue. "Yeah, I'd love to go." We programmed each other's number into our cell phones and then went to our separate dorms.

I was convinced I'd met the cutest, nicest guy on campus.

We didn't hang out during the time before the concert, but we did talk regularly in history class for the entire month before the concert. As far as I was concerned, the first week of November couldn't arrive fast enough.

## Chapter Three

### Present

I SAT UP and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I looked over at Ethan. He was snoring, but it was soft, and if I hadn't been in the same room, I wouldn't have heard it. I looked over at him, feeling happier than I had in a long time.

Ethan's hair was tousled, black eyeliner smeared under his eyes. The sheet lay around his waist so I could look upon his muscular arms and chest. I ran my fingers up the soft, smooth, hairy skin on his arm, just gazing upon his beauty. Ethan had always been good looking, but I hadn't appreciated it in a long time. He'd been so distant and I'd been so angry that I hadn't just taken him in and enjoyed him in a long time. Rubbing his arm must have awakened him, because he stirred and then turned on his side to face me.

"Morning." He grinned through the at-least-three-day growth on his face. "How do you feel?"

"The same as usual. Why?"

A grin spread across his face. "You're pregnant."

I couldn't help but smile. When Ethan was happy, his mood was infectious. "I've been pregnant for two months, Ethan. I don't have morning sickness anymore. I feel fine." I hoped he wouldn't ask why I'd put off telling him for so long. I smiled as he sat up in bed. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"What do *I* want for breakfast? I'm making breakfast this morning because you're in no condition to."

Okay, so right now this was cut and funny, but it would grow annoying pretty damn quick if he didn't chill. "Ethan, I'm pregnant, not disabled." I bounced up off the bed and put on my robe and slippers. "Would you rather have eggs or pancakes?"

"Babe, you relax. Take a shower while I make breakfast."

"Ethan—"

"I insist. So...eggs or pancakes?"

"You're the chef. You decide." I walked into the bathroom and turned on the water so I could take a warm shower. Ethan really was going to change; I could tell already.

\* \* \*

In the following weeks, Ethan and I enrolled in a natural childbirth class, but we wouldn't be attending until it was closer to my due date. He came with me to my next monthly OB/GYN visit and asked the doctor dozens of questions and even offered to pay him more if he'd be more patient while Ethan went through his list. He even bought books. I told him I wanted to have the baby at home, and I was going to start interviewing midwives, and he freaked out. He didn't like the idea of our baby being born "the way third world babies are delivered." I interviewed them anyway, but he wasn't happy about it.

Ethan was a guitarist for a heavy metal band, and each afternoon they would get together and practice. They were close to laying down all the tracks for their newest CD, but they wanted to perfect each song and make any changes they felt were necessary. Before Ethan knew I was pregnant, he'd been in a rut—he would party with the other willing band members till morning or until he was too drunk to drink anymore. Now, though, he'd quit partying after each session as he had been. He was home a lot more. He started making meals, and he liked shopping for

the baby. He quit drinking and smoking like he'd promised. He occasionally had a beer or a few cigarettes, but I'd never expected him to quit completely anyway. That would have been too much to ask of him. I was just glad he was making the effort. I was overwhelmed by those efforts, because I'd never expected Ethan to quit; I'd thought he was just speaking through his drunken and overly enthusiastic stupor.

So...as I started to show a little in my tummy, I was cautious yet optimistic. Ethan Richards might turn out to be a great dad after all. I couldn't give up hope.

## Chapter Four

### Past

WHEN I FIRST met Ethan, he seemed to be one of the nicest guys I'd ever met. And we had a common bond—our mutual interest in and love of heavy metal music. I hadn't met many people like myself who knew the names of every person in the rock groups I listened to; Ethan was one of those few. And as the days progressed, I found myself more and more attracted to him.

And November arrived. By then, Ethan and I had become pretty good friends, even though our interactions mostly took place right before and after history class. We texted a little and walked back to the dorms after most classes, but we didn't spend much time with each other aside from that. It didn't matter, though, because the time we *did* spend together was exciting for me. He was a guy friend whom I was also attracted to, and that was a bit of a thrill.

The local bands were playing in our sleepy little college town. Ordinarily, I walked everywhere, but Ethan had his truck with him at school, and he was going to drive to the concert. He stopped by my dorm room to get me, and I was so glad Charlotte was already gone. I didn't want her putting the moves on my hot friend. When I opened the door, though, I got a lot more than I'd bargained for. Yep, we were going to attend a metal concert and I should have expected it, but I hadn't. So I had to pick my jaw up off the floor before I could say *hi*.

Jeez, did the guy know how to clean up...or *metal up* might be a better description. He *was* metal standing in my doorway. He was poured into black leather pants that—*holy shit*—made me start salivating, and he wore a black mesh shirt ripped halfway down the middle. The effect? He could have been naked, because my mind was able to fill in the blanks. Well, *almost*. Remember...I was still a virgin at this point in the game. But the effect almost made me blush.

That wasn't all, though. He also had a black leather jacket draped over his shoulders and was wearing black leather spiked wristbands. Yeah, he was a little metal. I also saw he was wearing silver hoop earrings in both ears. I don't know why I hadn't noticed the piercing holes in his ears before, but maybe it was just because I hadn't actually seen him wearing earrings. And, as I caught my breath, I also noticed the tiniest bit of eyeliner and black nail polish on his fingertips. Yeah...not many guys could pull off guyliner, but Ethan was one of them. Somehow, it made him look sexier.

I'd dressed for the concert too, but compared to him, I felt dreadfully underdressed, and I hoped he was okay with that. I wore black jeans, black boots, and a black Anthrax t-shirt. Yeah, all in black. It was a metal concert, for goodness sake, so black was *the* color. My makeup was darker than usual and I had on more than Ethan did, so I thought I was okay there. I wore my medium-length light brown hair down, but I ran a little mousse through it so it looked a little messy. And I should have worn a coat, but I thought my jean jacket looked a lot cooler.

God, I was excited. Much as I'd wanted to go to concerts (and my parents didn't have too much of a problem with them, in spite of being super religious), I hadn't attended many in high school. It was usually a problem with money, but oftentimes it was also because I didn't want to go to a concert by myself. A lot of my friends weren't into the music I was, and at that age, I would have felt self-conscious attending a concert alone. So, walking out to his truck, I tried not to act giddy and silly. Hot guy by my side (maybe a future boyfriend?), going to an awesome heavy concert...could life get much better?

When we climbed in his shiny black truck, he turned the ignition switch. The engine didn't purr; it roared. It was loud and bad and mean. I could feel the power without taking the wheel. And then he turned the stereo on. He was playing some Ozzy, but it was old Ozzy. I recognized "Crazy Train" just from Randy Rhoads's opening licks. I loved that song and then wondered how broad Ethan's musical scope was. We'd only talked about newer metal, focusing a lot on things like metalcore and thrash, but here he was playing some early straight-up metal from the eighties. The music was cranked, just like it should be, so I knew we couldn't and wouldn't engage in conversation on the way to the concert. But as soon as he'd parked the truck and we got out and started walking toward the...well, I guess you could call it an *arena*, but it was a small venue with a nice stage and great acoustics called The Cave. They didn't serve alcohol, probably so they could get a younger crowd in, because we'd spend money, drunk or sober.

Anyway, as we started walking from the gravel-lined parking area toward the building in the dark, I asked Ethan, "So...it seems like you love all metal...new and old and of all kinds of intensity. Anything you *don't* like?"

"Oh, hell, no. You got it right. I love it all." I liked that, but I just smiled. He probably couldn't see it in the dark. "But my biggest influences are probably eighties metal and metalcore."

Influences? I couldn't ask him what he meant because we walked inside the big doors at the front of the building and were immediately blasted by loud, heavy music. Ethan handed our tickets to one of the guys at the door, and we stepped into what really did look like a big, dark cave the size of a small gymnasium. There were laser lights and other small lights here and there so we wouldn't trip or fall, but it was dark. There was a huge stage at the back, but there was also a large open area in front of it for moshing, then tables and chairs all along the sides, and we walked through an aisle between some of the chairs to get closer to the stage.

I realized the music that was playing was a recording—a CD, maybe, but the song wasn't familiar to me, so I wondered if it was a song of one of the bands playing. I felt Ethan's hand on the small of my back, as though he were guiding me forward. It caused an electric charge to buzz up my spine, and I almost wanted to stop walking and press into him. He got closer to me and shouted so I could hear, "Do you like to mosh?"

I stopped walking as we neared the moshing area and turned to face him. "Depends. You?" He shrugged. "Whatever you want."

Yeah, well...suddenly, I wanted to go back to his truck and make out with him. No way was I gonna say that, though. "Can we kind of hang back for a bit and see how crazy it gets?" He nodded. "Either that or can we get close up so we can headbang without getting jostled all over?"

He smiled and repeated himself. "Whatever you want."

The venue was filling up quickly, lots of bodies behind and around us, so I made a judgment call. His hand was no longer on my back, so I grabbed it and pulled him closer to the stage. It wasn't as dark there because of all the lights spilling on the band and its equipment. One of the bands was already up there, doing mike tests and scales on their axes. When we first got there, Ethan gave me a look, something I couldn't quite identify. His eyes were dark and stormy, but a small smile began to creep up on his face. Then he looked up on the stage to watch the band get ready to play.

Two gigantic monitors hung above the stage so people at the back of the room could still catch the action, but we'd decided we wanted our metal up close and personal. This particular band had five members—two guitarists, a singer, a drummer, and a female bassist (which I



personally thought was badass). While women in metal weren't unheard of, they were rare, so I celebrated inside at seeing her up there playing with the boys. The monitors were flashing ads for local businesses, upcoming concerts, and info about the two bands playing that evening, but I caught the words *Name of My Killer* on the bass drum that faced the audience.

Ethan shouted, loud enough so I could hear, "Someday soon I'll be on a stage like that."

"That would be awesome. I fantasize about stuff like that too."

"*Fantasize?*" His brows furrowed. "I have a rock band. We just need to get our shit together."

"*You're in a band?*" Holy crap. I'd liked Ethan before, but that just made him an even more desirable commodity as far as I was concerned.

"Yeah. My band's called Bullet." His eyes scoured mine. "I never told you?"

I shook my head. "What do you play?"

"Guitar...but I do some of the vocals too."

Don't ask me where my sudden forwardness came from. "Wow...guitarists and vocalists are my favorites. You're setting yourself up to be a girl magnet." As soon as I'd said it, I felt the warmth and redness from blushing crawl up my neck to my cheeks. Good thing it was dark in there.

He didn't seem embarrassed at all...or even shocked. Instead, he said, "You have class, Ms. Quinn."

"As you, Mr. Richards." I giggled.

But then our smiles faded, and I would almost swear the volume of the music decreased too. He ran his hand over the side and then the back of my hair, resting his palm on the nape of my neck.

Oh...this was it, wasn't it? Feeling his hand brush over my hair and the top of my ear had sent electric chills down my spine. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his, and I figured my gaze was dreamy, as though I were looking through rose-colored glasses, my head tilted, my lips slightly parted in an innocent yet desirous fashion. And as his head tilted toward mine, I felt my heartbeat increase, and I awaited the touch of his lips on mine.

It never happened, though, because the frontman of the band started talking, announcing their first song. Right after, one of the guitars screeched, and they began to play—a hard, driving, heavy yet melodic song. Ethan kept his eyes on me still, though, and smiled. He moved his hand over so that his arm was now draped over my shoulder, and then he turned to watch the band.

His arm didn't stay there long, though, because we had some serious headbanging to do.

And that was okay, because we'd had a great moment, and I knew there would be more of them. The music, of course, would always take precedence.

\* \* \*

When it was time to leave, we were exhausted and shouting at each other because we couldn't hear a thing. The music had been so loud. It had been an awesome show, and I was so glad I'd gone with Ethan. "Thanks for inviting me," I said on the way back to his truck.

"Yeah. No problem." He unlocked the truck and opened the passenger door for me. "You hungry?"

"Starving." He closed the door and walked to the other side. I felt some relief that he wasn't—so far, anyway—talking about the second band, because—even though I was a little naïve and unworldly—I was pretty sure the guitarist for the second band was making eyes at me. He was pretty damned good looking, too, but my heart was set on Ethan. It had started before

they even got onstage. He'd stood beside me for the last three songs Name of My Killer performed, getting a little too close, but that was okay because we were in a moshing area and that kind of thing is expected, especially with more people. He smiled at me more than once. Problem was, aside from not being Ethan, he had to be in his mid- to late twenties, and that was a little out of my comfort zone. At first, though, I just thought he was being friendly. But as soon as his band had set up onstage, he made sure to make eye contact with me before the house lights went down again. Yeah, the guy was hot. His arms were covered in tattoos, and he was pretty cut. He was a bit too extreme for me, but it worked on him. He had snake bite piercings that ordinarily I didn't go for, but not only did it work for him, it made him even cuter. And his dark brown hair was longish, in his eyes until he'd flick his head to the side.

I didn't even know the guy's name. I only knew he was the guitarist of a kickass awesome local band named Last Five Seconds, and for some reason, the guy had taken a shine to me.

But...that didn't matter. I was with Ethan, and he was the guy I wanted. "McDonald's okay with you?"

Had to pay attention. "Yep. Sure. That's great."

The drive to the fast food restaurant only took a few minutes, and even though Ethan was playing the music loudly in his truck, my ears felt like they were getting a rest. When we got there, I was surprised at how empty the place was, although there were a couple of cars in the drive-through. When we got up to the counter, Ethan said, "I got yours."

I shook my head. "You don't have to. You already paid for my ticket."

He scowled. "I *want* to."

I sucked in a little breath. "Okay." Didn't want to argue with that and besides...if it helped him feel more comfortable getting closer to me, then I definitely didn't want to stop him. So we ordered, and they made our food quickly. We found a booth next to a window and sat down. I took my jacket off and set it on the seat next to me. As Ethan unwrapped his burger, I asked, "The name Bullet's awesome for a band, but are you sure it's not already taken?"

He looked up at me, sandwich not quite to his lips, and said, "What do you mean?"

"Well...I mean...look. There are thousands of bands out there, lots of 'em unsigned, right? And I was just thinking—you've got Bullet for My Valentine, right, and they're really famous. Why didn't *they* just use the name *Bullet*? Was it because it was already being used by somebody else?"

Ethan's brows furrowed, and he almost looked angry, but then he said, "That would totally fucking suck if someone already took that name. We tried all kinds of names and Bullet just fit, you know? And it encompasses the attitude we have—we're lethal, deadly, but only in the right hands. We're the ammo for your anger, your pain." He took a sip of his Coke. "Goddammit. That's gonna piss me off if it *is* already taken."

"Sorry..."

"No, Val, don't be. That's something I probably should have already thought about."

I forced a smile, but I know it was weak. "We can Google it."

"Yeah, I'm not ready to find out yet." I smiled and squeezed ketchup out of a packet onto the paper covering the tray. He said, "So how'd you like the bands?"

No way was I going to talk about the hot guitarist of the second band making me feel all warm and gooey. I'd focus on the music. "They were awesome. Thanks again for inviting me."

"Did you like 'em?"

"Yeah. The first one was raw and angry, and the second guys were too, but they felt more polished."

“That’s kind of what I thought, too. I’ve seen ‘em before. They’re good.” We ate in silence for a few moments until Ethan said, “So...you know one of my secrets now.” I looked at him with a confused look on my face, I’m sure. He grinned. “You know about my band. But, you know, we don’t really know a whole lot about each other. I mean...where are you from? What’s your major?”

I nodded. “I’m from Winchester.”

“Winchester...that’s over by Colorado Springs, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yep. Where are *you* from?”

“A podunk shit town about an hour from here. Nothing even worth talking about.” He crumpled up the wrapper from his first burger and began unwrapping a second. “So...major?”

Hmmm...okay, so he didn’t want to talk about his home. I wondered why but didn’t want to force the issue. “I’m undecided.”

“Me, too.”

“It’s not that there isn’t anything I’m interested in. In fact, it’s the opposite. I’m interested in a *lot* of things. Too many, I guess. So...I can’t really decide what I want to do.”

“They say it’s okay to be undecided your first year. You kind of get a feel for what you want to study and then you decide.”

We spent the rest of time at McDonald’s comparing our first semester experiences with each other. We talked about the classes we didn’t have in common, as well as professors and different students we’d met in classes. We also talked about other interests outside of music, and I mentioned that I liked to write poetry. So he made me promise to share my poetry with him sometime. I told him I’d love to as long as he also promised to share his music with me in the near future. He winked and said he would soon.

We arrived back at the college a little while later, and he walked me up to my dorm room. It was after eleven, but it was Friday night, and since I wasn’t worried about losing any sleep, I invited him in. We’d talked about Googling to see if his band’s name was already taken. I liked the name *Bullet*, especially since I felt like he’d penetrated my heart already, much like a bullet would have, but I feared that name would be too common to not have been taken already.

When we walked in the door to my room, I was surprised to see Charlotte. I had expected her to be on a date or spending the night somewhere else. For her to be in our dorm room so early on a Friday night was odd. Ethan sat backwards in the chair at my desk, and I sat on the edge of my bed across from him. I said, “Ethan, this is my roommate, Charlotte Edwards. Charlotte, my friend, Ethan Richards.”

“You guys went to a concert tonight, right?”

I couldn’t contain my enthusiasm. “Yes. And it was awesome!”

“So *all* you guys dress that way for your way-out concerts. What’s with all the black? Not that I don’t like black; I love it...” She eyed Ethan from head to toe, even though the back of the chair covered his torso. “Especially on men. But you two look like you went to a funeral, not a concert. Actually, Valerie, you look like a little girl going to a funeral.”

What was she trying to do, aside from upset me? Well, she wasn’t going to get the satisfaction. I was going to keep my cool if it killed me. “Charlotte, you are entitled to your opinion, but I happen to think both Ethan and I are appropriately dressed for the concert we attended. We didn’t look out of place. And, here on campus, I always dress appropriately for classes. I’m sorry you can’t quite understand metal culture.”

Ethan was silent. Maybe he sensed a heated battle. I glanced over at him, and he just grinned in that cocky way of his. Maybe he *wanted* to see a catfight.

Charlotte raised her pencil-thin eyebrows. “Oh, I *understand* it. I just don’t get the appeal.”

I shrugged, trying to maintain the peace. “That’s cool. It’s not for everybody.” She rolled her eyes. “And I wouldn’t dress like this every day. I wouldn’t totally metal out for class.”

“Thank goodness.”

I was tired of her bitchiness, and I was pretty irritated that she felt the need to do it in front of my friend and love interest. She was embarrassing. I was going to call her on her rudeness. “What’s that supposed to mean anyway?”

She sneered at me. “You look *awful*.”

Ethan didn’t let me get in the next word. He said, “She looks fuckin’ awesome.”

That didn’t stop Charlotte. “Only because she’s the exact replica of you.” Ethan raised his eyebrows, as though questioning her sanity. She continued, “Was this planned?”

I was tired of being insulted by the little...*bitch*. Yes, that’s what she was, and—even though at that point in my life I didn’t use foul language much (believe me when I tell you that’s changed)—I was angry. I was going to say something—*anything*—as rude and as out of character as possible, hoping to get her attention and make her think about how mean she was. “At least I’m not so desperate for attention that I walk around campus in Victoria’s Secret lingerie when it’s snowing outside.”

Her disinterested look turned into a glare, and she jumped off her bed. “You little bitch!” she spat. “You’ve got nerve. That’s a low blow.”

“Oh, and your cracks about being a little girl and dressing poorly weren’t?”

I guess I’d struck a nerve, although I couldn’t see how. I wasn’t being any ruder than she was. But she lunged at me with her sharp red fingernails anyway. I hadn’t noticed Ethan beside me until he caught her wrists in time. He just looked at her for what seemed like forever, as though to burn something into her brain. He said, “You touch her...or any of her stuff, you’ll have to answer to me.” He still didn’t look at me when he said, “Come on, Val. Let’s go.”

He let go of Charlotte’s wrists, and she started rubbing her left one. As I started following Ethan to the door, she said, “Don’t bother. I won’t stay in this room with this tramp one more minute.”

I stopped and took a deep breath. “Tramp?” I let out a breath and decided just to shut up. I turned around to see what she was doing. She’d slid a small suitcase out from under her bed and opened it on top of her blanket. She really *was* packing. That was weird. I hadn’t done anything to make her want to leave, had I?

She packed a few things and said, “I’ll be back tomorrow for the rest of my stuff. Can’t wait to have your sicky-sweet cheerful shitty self out of my hair.” She shoved past Ethan to the door.

Once the door slammed, Ethan put his hands on my shoulders and pulled me into an embrace. What a strange evening. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, but I’m wondering what the hell just happened.”

“You guys fight a lot?”

“No, not really. And I didn’t realize I drove her that crazy.”

Ethan chuckled. “Guess you killed her with kindness.” I didn’t want to think about Charlotte anymore, especially since having my head up against his chest and his arms around my back was distracting the hell out of me. He was quiet when he said, “I wonder where she’ll go.”

Why did he even care? I shouldn’t have let that bother me, but it did. Still, I didn’t plan to say anything about it. “She’ll probably go to one of her boyfriends’. I really don’t care.”

“I should probably go.” He pulled back a little to look me in the eye. “You sure you’ll be all right?”

Without even thinking, I said, “Yeah. I’ll probably have the best night’s sleep I’ve had since I got here. I feel pretty good actually.” But I felt like the worst was not yet over between Charlotte and me. I knew that down to my bones.

“If you need anything, call me. And I’ll call you tomorrow.” He kissed me on the forehead, but why wouldn’t he just kiss me full on?

“Good night, Ethan,” I said, and I wondered if I sounded as dreamy to him as I did to myself.

He left and the room felt empty and lonely, even if it did feel nice without Charlotte. Adrenaline was still pumping through my veins when I put on pajamas and crawled into bed. At first, I was worried that Charlotte would come crashing back into our room and pull me out of bed. And then I realized maybe I had been stupid and lost my opportunity with Ethan. Maybe he needed encouragement. Maybe I should have just done the kissing myself, planted my lips on his full ones and cut loose. Or maybe I should have told him I didn’t feel safe and that I wanted him to stay with me. But...being virginal me and wanting to protect my virtue, I didn’t even consider it until later as I lay in my bed, wondering what misstep I had taken.

Aside from that, though, I’d had a great night with Ethan and thought maybe...*maybe* I might have a chance with him.

## Chapter Five

CHARLOTTE MOVED OUT all right, just as she'd promised. She did it over the weekend, and while I lay on my bed studying, listening to one of As I Lay Dying's albums on my iPod, she didn't say a word. Sure enough, there was a guy helping her haul her stuff out. I smiled at them both, but Charlotte wouldn't even make eye contact with me. Well, it was her decision, and I wasn't too upset about it, but I didn't want to be a total jerk about it. Twice when she was walking through the room, she "accidentally" bumped my things, like a bottle of cologne and a picture, knocking them to the floor, probably hoping they'd break. I felt nervous enough that I asked our RA if the girl had turned in her key to our room, and I didn't sleep well until I'd verified it. The RA assured me she had moved to another floor with another poor soul to torture.

And in the following weeks, Ethan never even came close to laying a hand on me and his lips didn't get near mine again. But we did attend basketball games together, eat together, and study together (although we talked more than we studied). We started spending so much time together, I began considering him my best college friend. And if that meant nothing else would ever happen between us, I'd be okay with that. We had an understanding, a common bond, and our friendship was growing stronger every day. I'd be okay with just friends.

I was becoming more and more anxious to see his band Bullet. Ethan talked about it a lot, and I told him I was excited. One afternoon, we were in the library, both logged onto computers because we'd been doing research for papers, and I reminded him about the fact that I suspected Bullet was a name that had already been taken. And while Ethan might have been okay with that, I just wanted him to be aware. So we looked it up, and sure enough, *Bullet* was taken by more than one band. Ethan was bummed and then started searching for other names for bands having to do with ammo, like *Full Metal Jacket* (which he didn't want anyway, because it belonged to a movie), and other things. He was shocked at all of the names that were taken. "Don't worry, though, Val. I'll figure something out. Except I don't know how I'll tell the guys." I looked at him, perhaps with a little too much eagerness. He started laughing, then realized his voice was probably too loud. "Yeah, yeah...I'll introduce you to the guys, okay?"

I started giggling and lost myself, wrapping him in a hug that I think made him blush. And why he couldn't get a clue, I didn't know. I knew he wasn't gay, so what was the problem? Maybe I *would* have to find a way to be more forward.

But he gave in to my incessant demands to introduce me to "the guys." His roommate, Zane Carson, was the band's bassist. I didn't say anything but wondered why he hadn't introduced me to him long ago, even if it *had* been just as a roommate. He and Ethan had gone to high school together and decided to give higher education "the good old college try," Zane said. Zane had chin-length black hair and striking blue eyes, made all the more astonishing because of his dark pupils. His skin was an olive color and his dark eyebrows made his eyes somehow look more seductive. He was tall and muscular but not bulky. Damn, he was a gorgeous specimen of college man, but I was so hung up on Ethan, I hardly noticed.

Unlike Ethan, though, Zane was quite talkative. We were all hanging in the Student Center one afternoon, the second time I had a chance to chat with Ethan's roommate, and he was talking about the band. He liked to talk about the formation of their band, how—even though they'd known each other their entire lives—they'd become friends because of the desire to make music. He talked about their town, high school, and their other two bandmates. According to Zane, the

other two still lived in their hometown and worked, waiting for whatever opportunities they had to get together and play. Zane was...well, he was a truly beautiful guy. The dark shoulder-length hair, baby blue eyes. He and Ethan were about the same height and build. Zane, though, was more carefree, a bit of a jokester, whereas Ethan hugged the dark side. Just based on his words, I could tell that Zane was a loyal and sweet young man. And, yeah...he was easy on the eyes. Zane and I got along well, and I could tell from the short time we'd known each other that we could become good friends.

And just a few days later, Ethan invited me to take a trip home with him the following weekend. Then, he said, I'd be able to meet the other half of Bullet.

Well, Bullet wasn't going to last much longer. The name, at any rate. I found that out soon enough. I should have been responsible and stayed in my dorm room, because it was the weekend before final exams. I should have spent that time studying. But this was Ethan asking, and I agreed without hesitation. I did decide, though, to take my notes and textbooks so I could study when I had a few spare moments.

Friday afternoon, Ethan drove Zane and me through a blustery snowstorm to their hometown. I hoped my luggage stored in the back of his truck would survive the wind, snow, and ice. We stopped at a convenience store where Ethan gassed up, and I got a coffee while the guys got sodas. I wanted something hot because I was chilled to my bone. Once we got back in the truck and on the road, I was tense because of the accumulating snow. But it didn't take me long to realize Ethan was just fine. The snow on the roads didn't bother him at all. After a few minutes, he started talking. He had a smirk on his face when he said, "So, Zane, Val completely fucking ruined our band."

Zane's brows furrowed but then he smiled. "She *did*, did she? And exactly what are we gonna have to do about that?"

Ethan kept his eyes on the road, but he raised his right eyebrow and glanced over quickly. "Someday I think we might have to thank her. For now, though, I'm gonna choose to be pissed at her for a while."

"Why? What'd I do?"

"Oh, yeah, acting like little Miss Innocent. Fess up, Val. Tell Zane what you did."

I was aghast. I really had no idea what he was talking about, and I was at a loss for words. I just shrugged my shoulders and looked over at Zane. My head felt like a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth between the two guys. Zane was genuinely enjoying the repartee, but I was starting to feel frustrated.

Ethan let out a long sigh. "Turns out that Bullet has been taken as a band name...over and over and fucking over. Apparently, we weren't the only guys to think that was just the sickest name ever."

"Well, *shit*, that sucks."

"Yeah, and even though I was pissed to find that out, I *am* glad to find out *before* we got a big following or tried to get signed to a label." I saw the look on his face change. Now he looked satisfied, and when he talked, I knew why. "But what do you think about *this*?" He took a second to glance over at us again when he said, "*Fully Automatic*?"

Zane's brows bore down on his eyes as he tried the name out on his tongue. "Fully Automatic..."

I was holding my breath without even realizing I had been. I thought the name was fantastic, but I didn't want to jump in yet. Zane said it again. "Hmm...Fully Automatic..." He nodded his head. "Yeah. I think that's pretty cool."

“Good. Problem solved. And I checked. There aren’t any bands that go by that name.”

“Ours now.”

I smiled. “I think it’s great too. It’s still evocative of a gun.”

“That it is. So...*thanks*...I think.” Ethan looked over at Zane. “I’m gonna need your help convincing Brad and Nick.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that hard, do you?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. When we first came up with our lists of names, Brad pushed for Bullet. He loved that name.”

“Yeah, but he’ll feel like I did. It kinda sucks if it belongs to other people.”

Ethan nodded and bumped me with his elbow. “Maybe we’ll make Val tell him.”

I started giggling and waving my hands in front of myself as though to ward off trouble. Zane said, “I think she could definitely soften the blow.”

“Then it’s decided,” Ethan said.

“I didn’t agree to any such thing.”

Ethan looked over at Zane, an earnest look of confusion on his face, but he was teasing me. “Zane, did you hear something?”

“Nope. Not a thing.”

“I didn’t think so.” He grinned at me and winked, then leaned over and turned on the CD player, cranking it, and Slayer came through the speakers. I leaned my head against the back of the seat. The roads might have been bad, but I was having fun. Although I didn’t know it, it was one of the last innocent fun times I was going to experience in my young life.

After some time, though, we drove through a sleepy little town. Ethan turned off onto a side street and pulled his truck to a stop in front of a large white ranch-style house. Zane opened the door and Ethan said, “See you in a while.” Zane bobbed his chin in agreement at Ethan and smiled at me, then reached in the bed of the truck for his bag. He shook off the snow and started walking down a path to the front door. A woman with short brown hair opened the door and pulled Zane into an embrace. I was fairly certain the woman was his mother.

But before he was fully in her hug, Ethan was already driving down the block where he turned the corner. A few more blocks and we reached his house, a two-story brick home that had to be decades old. It didn’t appear to be rundown, just older. Once we got out of his truck, I enjoyed the feeling of stretching my legs a bit. Ethan reached in the back of the truck and grabbed both his luggage and mine. He said, “I guess mom’s not back from work yet.” I followed his eyes to the driveway and figured out his mother’s car was missing.

He handed me my suitcase, and we walked up to the door. Once inside, I looked around and fell in love with it. Just seeing the house made me love his mother. The place was decorated in warm, rich earth tones and velvety furniture. The wood used for end tables and the coffee table was probably mahogany, polished to a gleaming shine, and the sofa and chairs were a deep rich burgundy. I stood in the doorway for a few seconds just taking it all in when Ethan said, “Come on. I’ll show you around.” We walked through the kitchen and he asked, “Want something to eat?” I shook my head and followed him up a stairway at the back of the kitchen.

We walked down a hall into his bedroom. I dropped my suitcase just inside the doorway, not sure where to put it but definitely tired of carrying it. “Like it?” *Like it?*—I loved it because the room felt like Ethan. It wasn’t as big as our dorm rooms, but it was decent sized (and made for one guy). There were posters of some of my favorite rock bands on the walls, but also one with cars, and another two with nameless girls in bathing suits trying to look sexy. There were so many posters, I could hardly see the walls. A double bed took the back and center position



right below a large window, a television directly across from it, and an electric guitar in a corner. My eyes riveted on that guitar and everything else in that room became background. I could only nod my head to Ethan's last question. I knew he had a guitar at school too, a red-toned beauty, but this one was understated. It was shiny and black, completely black, from the strap pin on the body all the way to—and including—the head stock. It was one of the loveliest guitars I'd ever seen. Of course, I realized it was also because it appeared to be Ethan's pride and joy. I walked over to it and squatted down on my haunches so I could really appreciate it.

Ethan was right behind me. "She's a beauty, isn't she? Want me to play you a few chords?" I nodded, excited, but then I heard his cell phone ringing, and he pulled it out of his pocket. He smiled. "Hold on a sec." He answered the phone. "Hey, dude. How's it going?" He paused, and I felt a little uncomfortable just watching him talk on the phone. I needed to find the restroom too, so I walked over to the doorway and peeked out. I knew there had to be a bathroom up there somewhere, so I walked down the hall toward the mostly likely area. I could hear him talking and his voice moved with him, probably curious about what I was doing. He said, "You know that friend I told you about?" There was another pause on the line, and I didn't plan to hear anymore as I'd found the restroom. By the time I was done, he was off the phone. I found him in his room again, and this time he *was* cradling that guitar on his lap, striking its strings. It was electric, though, and there was no amp nearby, so I could barely hear what he was playing. "That was Brad on the phone. He's part of the band, and we'll be going to his house tonight."

I nodded. I didn't want to seem too eager but, God, was I.

He got some sandwich supplies out of the fridge, and we made ourselves a couple of sandwiches. Then he switched on the television and started flipping through channels. "Mind if I do a little studying?" I asked. I was going to kick myself if I failed all my exams, just because I had to follow Ethan.

"Go ahead," he said, and I set up shop at the kitchen table where I was less likely to be distracted by either the TV or the boy. And I studied hard until a while later, when Ethan came in the kitchen and asked to borrow a piece of my notebook paper. He wrote a note to his mom since she still hadn't returned from work, and then we left so I could meet the band.

\* \* \*

"Valerie, right? Ethan's told me so much about you. I feel like I already know you." Well, if that wasn't flattering and didn't just make me feel like the belle of the ball, nothing would. Brad Payne, Ethan's best friend, was a sweet guy who had an eye for the girls (at least that's how Ethan had described him long before I had the chance to meet him and make a judgment for myself). He was taller than Ethan, though not much, with shiny black hair, longer than any of the other guys in the band. And his eyes were dark, full of secrets...but those secrets didn't feel sinister, not at all. The way his lips looked like they were going to twitch up in a smile at any given second made me feel like his secrets were fun...and like he wanted to share them with me. Brad...he could almost make me forget about Ethan. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt, so I was able to see he had half a sleeve of a tattoo on his right arm. He was already working on looking like a rock star. And he probably worked out. That much I could tell. He grabbed my hand to shake it and said, "Like the ink?"

Oh, God. I could feel the red heat rising from my neck as it spread to my cheeks. But I'd already been caught staring. "Yeah." Might as well be honest, right?

Ethan had already plugged his guitar into the desk-sized amp and was tuning it, and Zane wasn't far behind. So Brad, not letting go of my hand, mind you, led me over to the drums

where Nick already sat. But he was on his phone, watching a video or something. He was a quiet guy but nice. Dark brown hair, blue eyes, and an almost shy demeanor. But I could tell even then that he was just as enthusiastic about the band as the rest of them, maybe even more so, because his work on the drums could speak for itself. He didn't need to say a word, instead having to simply beat out a rhythm that anyone's primal self could enjoy and get lost in.

I didn't understand at first how they all fit together, but Brad had already strapped on a guitar as well, after finding me a lawn chair to sit on in the chilly garage. They had a couple of space heaters working double time, and I figured that was what kept the space bearable, but it certainly wasn't cozy. Brad was determined to keep a conversation going with me, even if the other guys were already drowning in their own little rock worlds. "Ethan and I both play guitar, and he does a lot of the lead vocals, but I sing some too." He winked. "It's good for me." He leaned over, ready to spill one of his secrets. "Ethan's voice is probably better than mine, but we both suck...at least when it comes to clean vocals. The good music makes up for it, though. We're a great team on guitars." Brad started tuning his guitar as well, but instead of not paying attention to me, he faced me. Yeah, he was focusing on his guitar, but I could tell he wasn't completely ignoring me either.

I looked over at Ethan. Yeah, right now, I didn't exist to him. Only his guitar held any meaning in that moment. So I'd let Brad give me all the attention he wanted. He said, "We started out by doing mostly covers, but we've written four or five of our own songs. We've played small places, but I think once we have a big repertoire of music, we'll feel better about booking bigger venues." I nodded as though I knew exactly what he was talking about.

But I also knew I could get away with a lot with this guy standing in front of me. I already sensed that, and I planned to test my theory. "So do you guys actually *play*, or do you just stand around talking about it?"

Brad raised his eyebrows, a playful look spreading over his face, and he said, "Oh..." until the *oh* turned into laughter. Then he turned to his bandmates and said, "I think we have an impatient wannabe fan. Shall we, gentlemen?"

Ethan had a serious look on his face, and he nodded his head at Nick. Nick slid his phone in his pocket without hesitation and then tapped his drumsticks over his head, counting out loud, and then they began. I listened intently to the music, trying to identify if I knew the song or not, and concluded that this one must be original.

And I sat back and enjoyed the show. They played a few covers of songs I knew (from Trivium, Marilyn Manson, and Judas Priest), but I focused on their original music. Brad was right...neither he nor Ethan had honed their singing skills enough (and Ethan's voice probably *was* better than Brad's), but I thought they had potential. They *could* sound great. Music-wise, though, they were already incredible. They had a unique sound, driving and hard, relentless, and I knew they needed to be heard by a lot more people than just little ol' me in Brad's mom's garage.

What shocked me, though, was my personal response to their show. Ethan was totally into his performance. It was almost as though he was only physically present. His mind was in some big arena or hiding in the recesses of his mind, but he wasn't there with us. Fortunately, his physical self knew what to do. But Brad...holy cow. There was something about him, and he ignited a spark between us that night. He had a stage presence, a charisma that I didn't think Ethan would ever have. Brad was charming, cute, and *sexy as hell*. And, since I was the only audience member, I was treated full on to his stage persona. And that's what I mean about Ethan not being there. It was like he didn't even notice while Brad seduced me from a couple of yards

away. I almost wished I was the mike he was cozying up to. At first I didn't give it much thought as I got lost in his enticing eyes and he pulled me in. I let him. I was drawn to him and immersed myself first in his voice, and then I couldn't get the image out of my head of him and me making out in the backseat of a car somewhere. It was like Brad was a vampire, and he was in glamour mode. I was the helpless victim, willingly drawn to my demise.

But when I realized what I was feeling, I swallowed the saliva pooled in my mouth and sat up straight. A shiver raced through my body, and I didn't know if it was from the cold air or from Brad's piercing gaze.

I managed to get hold of myself before anyone noticed...or so I thought. Brad *did* notice, but he didn't say a word.

After they'd completed their set and set their instruments down, Ethan reemerged in the regular world. He looked at me and asked, "So, Val, what do you think?"

I was feeling more like my old self, and I wanted to tease my friend. "Well..." I acted like I was worried and afraid to speak, and then I continued. "I don't know how to tell you this, but—" Ethan didn't quite hang his head in disappointment, but I saw a shadow move over his eyes. The other guys didn't seem too pleased either, but they were better able to hide their disappointment. Time to let them off the hook, especially as hard as Ethan seemed to be taking my supposed bad news. "You guys are—*fucking fantastic!*" I was smiling until I realized I'd dropped an F-bomb. My eyebrows bolted up my forehead, and I covered my hand with my mouth. I might have legally been an adult, but sometimes I felt like a kid, particularly when I did something like that.

I started laughing and so did the guys. Ethan was in front of me in a split second and picked me up in a hug, twirling me around. When he let me down, he said, "You little shit. You had me fooled there for a second." He chuckled, but then I saw a glimmer of insecurity, something I'd never seen in Ethan before. "Are you serious, though? Do you really like our sound?"

I finally recovered from my slip-of-the-tongue moment. "Of course, I do. You guys will go so far if you keep playing like that. And you can play for *me* anytime."

Brad let out a whoop, suddenly a nineteen-year-old young man again instead of the tempting guy he'd been just minutes earlier. "Good. I told my mom and dad someone would like our stuff. My dad asked what mom said and before I could even answer, he said it was a sound even a mother couldn't love. Thanks for proving him wrong, Val."

I smiled at him and then began to doubt that he'd even had that effect on me earlier. Zane played a bassline and then said, "*We* like it, and that's all that counts."

Brad said, "Hey, Valerie..." Something was up his sleeve, and I immediately grew nervous again. That furtive smile and the secret silent exchange now hung between us. I took a deep breath. There was no way I'd be able to be around this guy for too long...not if I wanted to remain faithful to Ethan. Yeah...like we were really in a relationship. "I saw you mouthing the words to all the covers. Would you like to sing one?"

I laughed and waved my hands in front of me. "No, that's okay."

"I'm serious. You could give our vocal cords a rest."

"Besides," Ethan said, now a conspirator, draping his arm around my shoulders, "you said you'd always fantasized about being on stage."

I felt that warmth start crawling up my neck again. God...he'd actually *remembered* that? "Well, I don't know." I took a deep breath. "Both your voices are a lot better than mine."

"No excuse, Val. Come on," Brad said, teasing me with his eyes. In the short hour or two since I'd met Brad, I already felt as though I'd known him most of my life. So, naturally—and, perhaps, stupidly—I trusted him.

All the guys were pleading at me with their eyes. I sighed. "Okay." Brad and Ethan high fived. "But only one song."

"Of course."

Zane asked, "What do you want us to play?"

Oh. That was a difficult question. I had been singing to metal since I'd turned thirteen, and I'd listened to everything from the classics to the most cutting-edge stuff out there. The problem was I had no idea who was actually in my range, which songs I really knew the words to...none of that. I'd lowered my eyes and was concentrating on the design painted on the bass drum, but I was going through a list of artists and favorite songs in my head. I couldn't do any screaming vocals, and I knew I couldn't go too high or too low. As I thought about it, I figured my range was pretty limited. The most singing I'd done outside of my bedroom, car, or the shower was probably in church singing low-key, depressing hymns that were definitely out of my range. Finally, I shrugged. "No idea."

Brad squinted his eyes as though scrutinizing me. "How do you feel about Korn?"

"I like 'em."

He grinned. "Name anything you could sing off one of their first four CDs." Ethan scowled at him. "What? I can play any one of 'em."

The look Ethan had been giving him turned into a glare. "I can't." He looked at me. "Know 'Moon Baby' by Godsmack?"

"Yeah."

"Would you feel comfortable singing it?"

"I think so."

"You know the words?"

"Yep."

"You heard the woman." Ethan positioned his guitar and started playing. Zane's eyes widened and he darted back to get his bass, while Nick rushed back to his set of drums. Even I wasn't ready. Brad slid the mike out of the stand and handed it to me. Then he propped his guitar against the wall and sat in the chair where I'd been just moments before.

*Oh, shit.* I'd just fueled some sort of testosterone contest, and Brad had lost. This was a one-guitar song. Brad had been suggesting songs that required two guitars. And I was stupid enough to have completely missed it.

But Brad acted like it didn't bother him at all. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the fact that he would get to watch *me* performing. God, I was nervous, but I was excited too. One thing I'd planned to do the day I turned twenty-one was go to a bar—not to get drunk, but to sing karaoke in front of a crowd. So today I got to perform for an audience of one.

I almost missed my cue but started singing at the right time, right about the point where Zane and Nick joined in. I had thought I would be embarrassed, but I wasn't—not even a little. And I loved the emotions pouring through me and out through the words. I thought of both Brad and Ethan when I sang the song and tried to dismiss the little battle that I'd just witnessed, hoping that was a normal thing between them and not something potentially disastrous. But even those worries disappeared as I continued singing. My voice was more powerful than I'd thought, and after the first line of the song, I was in my element.

Maybe the stage *was* the place for me...but where the hell did that fit into college?

No, it was all fantasy, just like I'd said to Ethan not long ago. Maybe he could make it, and having seen them perform that night, I thought they all could, but not me. Yeah, I'd fantasized about being in a rock band, but only because I was such a hardcore fan. I had my chance right

then and there in Brad's garage for three minutes, and now it was time to return to reality and the fact that I needed to settle on an academic major, not decide to be a vocal major as this newfound fantasy urged me.

And when the vocals ended, I realized Ethan had been doubly selfish. I'd forgotten the long guitar solo at the end of the song, but I remembered as soon as I had to slide the mike back in the stand.

The solo was impressive, though, even when Ethan went "off script." He was doing stuff in that solo that Godsmack would probably cringe hearing, but it was kind of cool. Definitely Ethan...mysterious, unwarranted but badass, in your face and ballsy. I moved to stand beside the chair and watch, and Brad smiled and patted his knee...inviting me to sit on his lap? Oh, no, I didn't think so. He and I had already gotten a little too chummy in the few short hours I'd known him. If I sat on his knee, I knew all chances I had with Ethan would be lost forever.

He grinned and stood. "Seriously, go ahead and have a seat." He waved his hand at it as though inviting me.

"No, really, I'm good."

He shrugged and the two of us stood to watch Ethan finish the solo. Brad stood close enough to me, though, that I imagined I could feel his body heat radiating over to mine. It had to be my imagination. But that vibration inside, the one shaking me to the core? Yeah...that *was* Brad, and if Ethan had sensed any of the insane, unexpected chemistry between me and his best friend, this would be the last time I ever saw Brad.

Ethan was good. From what I'd seen of the two of them, they were both incredible guitarists but they played differently. The biggest difference? When Brad played his guitar, he remembered I still existed. For Ethan, his whole world became that damned guitar...and nothing else.

## Chapter Six

EITHER ETHAN HADN'T noticed, or he just didn't give a shit. That was okay, I supposed, because nothing would ever come of whatever weird chemistry Brad and I had. That was my guess, anyway, because as soon as we were in his truck to head back to his house, Ethan said nothing about it and instead asked, "Did you really like our band, or were you just being nice?" I looked over at him, my brows furrowed, but I doubted he could see my face. The street lamps in this town were few and far between, and what little he could see inside the truck would be coming from the dash. "I know you have a tendency to be polite, but coming from a guy who trusts you, who's putting *all* his trust in you, please be totally honest. Brutally honest. I'll get plenty of fan gushing later on. I need criticism right now."

Was this a trick question? Ethan didn't seem the type to take criticism well...not that it mattered in this instance. I smiled at him. "Everything I said back there was true. You guys were fantastic, and I'm so glad I finally got to see you play."

I'd managed to plaster a smile on his face that remained all the way to his house. He leaned over and cranked the radio. And that left me alone with my thoughts. Once Ethan had finished the "Moon Baby" solo, he'd rushed us out of there. He'd used the excuse that because his mom hadn't been home by the time we'd left, he wanted to see her before she went to bed. That was what had made me think maybe he'd had issues with what I thought had been obscenely obvious flirtation or *something* between Brad and me. Before we'd walked out the door, Ethan asked if I'd enjoyed singing, and I'd given some goofy answer, but they all knew I'd liked it...a lot more than I maybe should have.

And when we'd left, all the guys said goodbye, but Brad especially told me it had been a *pleasure* meeting me. His eyes said more, but I pretended not to register it. Then he'd slapped Ethan on the back, promising to see him Saturday afternoon.

We got back to Ethan's house after nine o'clock. The house was bathed in shadow, and as we walked to the door from the truck, I could see our breath hanging in the air. Ethan muttered, "Mom's still not back? Where in hell could she be?" We walked into his house, and in the space of a few seconds, he seemed so lost, so vulnerable. He was worried about his mother. And right then and there, I realized it. Brad who?

I loved Ethan.

I had fallen hopelessly, madly in love with him. Was it a cliché? Hell, yeah, but it had happened nonetheless. My interest in him had waned before, and even tonight, under the intense scrutiny—no, *admiration* of someone else—I had doubted my feelings. But Brad had no hold over me when he wasn't around. When it was just Ethan, I was overpowered with emotion for him. But it had seemed as though I'd allowed my interest to dwindle to just friends instead of...this intense, overwhelming feeling. Why, all of a sudden, was I overcome with it, especially after the evening I'd experienced?

While I was swirling in an emotional eddy, Ethan was in one of his own...but at least he was talking out loud. His forehead puckered up into worry, and concern clouded his green eyes. "Where is she?" He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and looked at me. "Go ahead and turn the TV on if you want, Val." He started dialing.

I shook my head. "That's okay." I was too worried about *his* worrying to concentrate on a television program. Really, though, I should have been studying for finals. But there was no way I could do that either, not while Ethan was so stressed out.

"Hey, gramps. This is Ethan." He glanced over at me and forced a smile but then turned around and started pacing. "I'm here for the weekend." There was a pause. "Yeah, I'll be home in a week, but I have a friend here visiting. Look...do you know where mom is?" His eyes grazed over me as I sat on the overstuffed couch that tried to swallow me up. "No, she's not here. That's why I called you. Is she maybe working late?" He continued to pace, and he ran a hand through his hair that I just noticed was getting a little longer. "Yeah...I can call there. Bye." The expression of worry on his face grew. He walked into the kitchen and came back with a phone book. He sat on the couch next to me while leafing through the pages of the small book. "She works at a restaurant, and her usual shift is from eight to five, but sometimes she trades shifts with other waitresses." His finger held his place on a phone number, and he dialed it with his right hand. Then he brought the phone up to his ear and waited. "Maybe she traded a shift today." His expression changed as someone on the other side answered the phone. "Is June Richards there?" I saw him mouth *fuck*, but he said out loud, "I don't suppose you know where she is." Another pause until he said, "Okay. Thanks." He pressed *end* on the phone. "What the fuck is she doing?" He started pressing buttons on his phone again, the expression on his face communicating so much. Yes, he *should* have called his mom's cell first. He didn't say a word but just held the phone to his ear. "Mom...where the hell are you? I'm here at home and you're not. I'm worried about you. Please call me and let me know you're okay." He hung up but a cloud hung over his head, and he clenched his jaw. "Maybe she's on a date or something."

He stood up again and started pacing. "Sorry if I'm upsetting you too, Val. I guess maybe we can just watch TV until she gets home." I could tell he watched over his mother very carefully. I knew he called her several times a week from school. I wondered if his father was dead or just divorced from his mother, but I didn't want to ask him about it.

He switched the television on and started surfing through channels, never staying on any one show for very long. I thought of grabbing one of the books I had in my suitcase, but I decided against it, knowing I wouldn't retain much of what I studied anyway. So I tried my best to relax.

Ethan finally settled on CNN, and I thought that was probably the worst choice out of all the possibilities. He'd be witnessing the dregs of humanity, the world at its worst—murder, arson, government scandals. If it were me, that kind of television would just make me more anxious.

And then something happened. He slid his arm around my shoulders. An electric thrill ran through my body, just under the surface, and suddenly I was aware of everything. After a long time, though, nothing more happened, and Ethan even shifted a little to redial his mother. But he just left another message, asking her to call.

After the emotional day, sitting still next to Ethan's warm body, I dozed off and stirred later when he called his mother again, but then I fell completely under sleep's heavy spell. In the back of my mind, I wondered if he felt comforted holding me or if he was starting to feel like I mattered to him. I didn't know, but I wasn't complaining about being close to him. I wasn't sure when I drifted off, sometime early morning, I thought.

I awoke early the next morning with a stiff neck and sore muscles, still in the same position, still in Ethan's arms. I was surprised neither he nor I were sweating, but the house was cold. I noticed my hands were chilly as I started to stretch. The television was still on, CNN in its

never-ending cycle of news reports. I spotted the remote next to Ethan's right hand and reached over his lap for it. Then I switched the TV off.

Ah, sweet silence. That felt good.

I stood and stretched again and decided to let Ethan sleep longer. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I did know he'd been up a good chunk of the night. He needed some rest, especially if we were going to have to spend the rest of the weekend figuring out what had happened to his mom. Now *I* was really worried about her.

I decided to go ahead and take a shower so I'd be prepared for whatever Ethan decided to do. I went upstairs and got a fresh change of clothes out of my luggage, as well as all the other toiletries I thought I'd need. I went in the bathroom and couldn't see a closet where there might be towels stored, nor any shelves, so I went back in the hallway. There were shelves between Ethan's room and the bathroom and, sure enough, there were towels and washcloths on them. I grabbed one of each and went in the bathroom where a warm shower was beckoning me.

I needed it and it felt great. By the time I was out and dressed, Ethan was up and at the kitchen table, thumping his fingers. He looked up at me. Oh, no. Why hadn't I bothered with fresh makeup? And I'd combed out my hair but hadn't done anything else with it. I was sure I looked like crap. But Ethan was too preoccupied to notice. "She's not in bed, not at work. I tried calling her again and nothing. Where could she be?"

I knew it was stupid, but I felt like I had to say something. "Did she maybe take a vacation? Maybe she's staying at a friend or relative's house, just enjoying some new scenery." He scowled, and that's when I knew my suggestions weren't working. Ethan decided to shower as well, and I made sure to be looking more presentable when he came out, putting on some makeup. But he got some cereal out of the cupboards and made some coffee so we could eat a little breakfast. He called his grandfather again—no luck. And he left his mother at least three more messages.

At ten o'clock, she walked in the door.

Ethan didn't miss a beat. He'd been pacing in the kitchen again but made a beeline for the older woman when she walked through the door. "Mom, where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick about you. You weren't answering your phone; you didn't call me back..."

She took him in and pulled him into a warm embrace. "I didn't know you were coming home this weekend, honey, or I would have made sure I was here." She kissed him on the cheek and smiled. "I lost my phone. I thought maybe it was in the car. That's where I usually find it when it's lost, but no. I haven't located it yet." And that's when she noticed me. I liked her right away. She was sincere, kind, and sweet. "Who's your friend?"

Ethan was calm and, for him, I no longer existed. "Don't avoid my question, mom."

The woman tried to be stern, but her admonition fell flat. "Ethan, where are your manners? Introduce your friend first." I saw a twinkle in her green eyes that looked just like her son's. I guessed she was in her late thirties, because she looked a lot younger than my parents. Her brown hair was pulled up in a ponytail, and her eyes seemed alert but tired. And, while I wasn't the best judge, she appeared to be too thin. Maybe she'd been working too hard or hadn't gotten much sleep. "And why don't we go have a cup of coffee at the kitchen table? You're making me nervous."

His jaw clenched but he acquiesced. "This is a friend from school, Valerie Quinn."

Well, this was awkward. There was some weird tension growing between Ethan and his mother, and here I was, right in the middle of it. I just smiled as sweetly as I could and said *hi*. Then I tried to find some unobtrusive way to just blend into the background.



His mother led Ethan by the elbow and even grabbed my hand on her other side, urging us to the kitchen. She hadn't even removed her coat yet. Once we were in that dark but cozy room, she set her purse on the counter and then slid her long brown coat off her shoulders, draping it over a chair. She walked over to the coffee pot and pulled out a cup from the cabinet above it. "I see you're meeting *nice* girls for a change." His mother's laugh was nervous. I couldn't quite figure that one out.

"Mom." Ethan was pressing.

She turned around, coffee in hand and said, "Would you sit down, please? Good grief. You're making me feel like a hen being scoped out by a wolf."

And I wasn't helping. I knew that much. I sat down, though, and I did it quickly, because there was some weird dynamic going on between him and his mom. I started to think better of it, though, and thought maybe I could use this moment as an excuse to study. "I can give you some time alone."

Ethan gave me a look and then shook his head. "You can stay." His gaze moved to his mother again.

She was nervous and jumpy. She took a sip of her coffee and then sat down. Ethan joined her. She took a deep breath and said, "You remember Jason?"

I could tell this question upset Ethan, but he managed to rein it in. "Yeah. You were dating him last summer."

His mother looked down at her cup of coffee as though it would understand her better than her son. Both her hands were wrapped around it as she looked into the warm brown liquid. "I was with him last night." She took a deep breath and forced herself to look in her son's eyes. "I love him, Ethan. He's going to move in here."

I couldn't tell what Ethan was thinking. He had a poker face the likes of which I'd never seen before. He was cool when he said, "At least you're falling in love with *nice* guys for a change."

His mother started laughing. She seemed relieved. "Have you had breakfast?"

He nodded. "Val and I are going to Brad's later."

"But I haven't even seen you."

His visage didn't change. His eyes were cold, even since making the joke he had with his mother. Something was going on and I wasn't sure what it was. He didn't apologize or explain, and I didn't know how good an idea it was for the two of us to return to Brad's house. But I wasn't going to say a word. He stood and looked at me. "Val, I have to see some old friends, and I don't want you to be bored. If you're still tired, you can sleep in my bed."

What? So he was just going to leave for a while? Hadn't we seen some of his old friends the night before...and weren't we going to do it again later? He didn't answer the questions in my eyes, instead bending over and kissing his mother on the cheek. "Be back in a while." Before either of us could say another word, he was in the living room putting on his jacket and then walking out the door.

That was...bizarre, to say the least. I wasn't sure how to take that, but his mother seemed to just blow it off. "Silly boy." She got up to freshen her coffee, but I knew it was an excuse to avoid eye contact...not that I blamed her. "He'll be back in a week and can visit all his old friends then." When she sat back at the table, she asked, "So, Valerie, how did you and Ethan meet?"

Well, Ethan might not have cared enough about his mom to stick around and make her feel loved, but I liked her right from the start. Sure, she seemed a little...broken, but she seemed kind

and thoughtful, and I was beginning to wonder why those qualities hadn't rubbed off on her son. But I also knew something was eating at Ethan having to do with something going on with his mom, and maybe since I was his guest, he didn't want to make a bigger scene than he already had and decided to leave and cool off. I had no problems talking with his mother, though. "In our history class." No way was I going to tell her I'd *planned* the meeting. I would have been too embarrassed with that revelation.

Ethan's mother stared into the black coffee mug in between her hands. "You probably think Ethan and I have a strange relationship." She looked up to make contact with my eyes. "But I love him so much. He's my only child..." Her voice got quieter. "Looks just like his father."

I sucked in a quick breath. How I wanted to ask about his father, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I figured if Ethan had wanted me to know, he would have already told me. Otherwise, it was probably none of my business, no matter how nosy I felt. The poor woman looked like she needed some good news, though, something to make her feel better. "He loves you too. I can tell. He worried about you and called all over trying to find you."

"He's a sweet boy." She rolled her neck as though trying to get the kinks out of it. "Is his band going to play for you?"

"They did...last night. They're great. Ethan really knows his way around a guitar. I'm so glad we met. He's become my best friend."

She got up and pulled the carafe off of the warmer base of the coffee maker. She brought it to the table to refill her cup. "You love him too, don't you?" It was as though she could see my soul. How did she know? Or was it that Ethan just had that effect on young women? "Would you like some more?"

I shook my head. "No...no, thank you." I felt stunned. She turned around and replaced the carafe. As she sat down, I asked, "How could you tell?" Or had it just been a lucky guess?

She smiled and acted like she was going to place her hand on mine, but she didn't. "By the way your eyes light up when you talk about him." She took a sip of her coffee. "It's hard to explain." Her smile widened again. "I'm glad, though. Ethan has never really found a girl to love him. He needs that."

Whoa. First of all, I found that hard to believe. Ethan was absolutely gorgeous, mysterious, smart, and funny. He downplayed it, but I was convinced he already had a legion of fans, no matter what his mother thought. And then there was the problem that I often wondered that he didn't feel the same way about me. So I said, "Yes, but we're only friends."

She smiled, a gentle, tender look that just touched the corner of her eyes. "Are you so sure? Ethan has never even bothered to introduce me to the girls he's dated in the past."

I grinned back, sure I was right. "Well, we're just friends, and I'm sure that's why he did."

She chuckled. "You're right there. I just hope you're a good influence on him." She let out a long sigh. "Last year in high school, he hung around with the wrong crowd, if you know what I mean. He and Brad have been good friends for a long time, and I like Brad, but forming this band was Ethan's saving grace. He and Brad hooked up with Zane and Nick around spring break last year, and suddenly Ethan cared again. It was such a relief." She took another sip of coffee. "All those kids are basically good kids. And I can tell you're a nice girl." This time she *did* pat my hand. "I hope he decides to stay *friends* with you."

I giggled, unable to help myself any longer. "That makes two of us."

She kept talking; why, I didn't know. "Ethan really didn't want to go to college at first. But I asked him to go for one year, and then if he didn't like it, he could quit. He barely made it through high school, but college is so important nowadays, and...well, his college is paid for, as

long as he wants to go, and my father is giving him spending money now and then. I know he wants to see Ethan succeed in college. I never went, except for one summer when I got my CNA certification.” She was getting close to something uncomfortable, so she switched gears. “What made you decide to go to college, Valerie?”

I nodded. “My parents wanted me to go. My grades in high school were pretty good, and I have no idea what I want to do for a living. Right now, my major is undecided, and I have no idea what I want to major in, but my mom and dad think I’ll figure it out in school. Dad said if I don’t go to college, I’ll have no focus and won’t be able to get a decent job.”

“He’s probably right there.” She took another sip of her coffee. “You look pretty tired. Did the two of you get *any* sleep at all last night?”

She was right. I *was* tired. “Maybe I *will* take a nap...if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Mrs.—is it Miss or Mrs.?” I didn’t want to be presumptuous. I’d barely met the woman, and Ethan’s introduction hadn’t exactly been stellar.

“Which sounds better?” *That* was weird. I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

“Just call me whatever’s easier for you. You can call me June if you’d like. Or even *mom* if you’re comfortable with that. Brad and Nick call me *mom*.”

Maybe she didn’t like being called by a title at all, so if she wanted me to call her that, I would. “Okay, mom.” I giggled.

“Sleep tight, Valerie.”

I felt a little awkward calling her *mom*, but she seemed happy that I’d made that choice. I thought maybe after a little while, it would feel like second nature to call her that. And, if not, I could always call her by her real name. As I drifted off to sleep, my head buried in Ethan’s pillow, I felt myself unable to fully grasp all the surreal happenings of the last twenty-four hours. Little did I know, it wasn’t over yet.

\* \* \*

“Wake up, sleepy head.” Ethan greeted me from his bedroom doorway. “Ready to go to Brad’s?”

How long had I slept? It was still light outside, so it couldn’t have been too late. “Let me at least sit up. What time is it?”

“Two o’clock. You awake enough to go?”

“Well, yeah, but can I at least do my hair?”

He rolled his eyes, but I could tell he was just giving me a hard time. “How many hours will that take?”

I slid out from his bed and slipped into my shoes. “Ten minutes, tops.”

“I’m timing you.”

I stuck out my tongue and then started rifling through my suitcase for my brush. I still couldn’t believe I’d let him see me without makeup earlier. Granted, a lot of it was still on because I hadn’t washed it off the night before, but still... Now I wanted to touch it up, make sure my hair was okay, and I wanted to brush my teeth too. I had a new case of morning breath.

Less than ten minutes later, I was bounding down the stairs. I slid my coat on and said goodbye to *mom* as we walked out the door.

After we were in the truck, Ethan said, “My mom likes you. That’s good. She doesn’t always like my friends. She never says anything, you know, but I can tell when she doesn’t like one of my friends.”

"I like her too, Ethan." I left it at that. I could tell Ethan's mom was a little insecure, and I wasn't sure why, but she was a nice, loving person, and I couldn't help but like her back. I didn't want to discuss his mom with him, though, especially when I wasn't quite sure what the dynamic of their relationship was.

"And don't ask what I was doing when I left."

I felt confused. "I already *know* what you were doing. You said—"

"I know what I said." And then I saw that bitter look he'd always had in his eyes surface again. I just shut my mouth. He didn't want to talk about it, but I wondered why he'd even brought it up now.

A few minutes later, we got to Brad's house. I steeled myself, hoping my memories of the night before had been exaggerated in my mind. *You can do this, Valerie.* Yes, I could do it.

\* \* \*

"Hey, guys, I can't believe I didn't show you this shit already." Yeah, Brad was still as hot as he'd been the night before. Only this time, he was *literally* hot, little beads of sweat forming on his forehead from two hours of playing in the band. It wasn't as cold in the garage as it had been the night before, but I still could barely understand how he could be that overheated.

He walked across the garage and moved a couple of boxes. Then he opened one and pulled out a bottle of rum. "And I've got two twelve-packs of Coke chillin' in the fridge." He lowered his voice and got closer to the group. "Mom's working tonight...leaves around six-thirty, so we can get fuckin' wasted."

Ethan slid his guitar so it hung on his back. "Wait a minute. Do you even drink, Val?"

Uh-oh. He'd already figured out my goody-two-shoes nature, and I thought I'd hidden it so well. "Umm..." God, I was going to sound so uncool. "I can be your designated driver."

"Perfect." Well, maybe that wasn't so hard after all.

Brad hid the bottle back in the box and returned to the group. Then Ethan said, "Guys, there's something I've been meaning to tell you." Zane nodded but said nothing. "There's a reason why Val's our designated driver. She's fucking brilliant. And I hate to even admit it, but she figured out something none of us other numbnuts did. The name *Bullet*? Fucking cool, right?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Yeah...and it's taken."

Brad snarled. "So? I've never heard of 'em, so what?"

"Do you *really* want somebody's sloppy seconds?"

Brad started laughing. "Fuck...not when you put it that way."

"Exactly. So...close your eyes and tell me...what do you think of *Fully Automatic*?"

Brad and Nick were quiet, so quiet. *No.* I was sure that meant they hated it. But then Nick nodded his head. Brad was the wild card, though. After a few moments, he said, "Yeah...that'll work."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I just need some time to try it on...know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Ethan said, "that's cool, man."

Brad slapped him on the back. "Damn straight."

"So let's work out this next song." They spent the next two hours perfecting a song they'd been working on. I hadn't really noticed any of their lyrics before, but I was able to hear these in scrutinizing detail. And, because their sound was so rockin', there was no way I was going to criticize their lyrics...but they weren't deep, and they sounded pretty cliché. There weren't any

sentiments in the words I hadn't heard dozens of times before. I had gathered from what Ethan had told me before that usually he and Brad wrote their own lyrics to the songs they sang, but this one wound up being a collaboration. I just sat back and listened to them work things out. They got the music down first—solo included—and then started writing the lyrics.

"Down on my knees...how's that?"

Ethan said, "Yeah, yeah...that's good, and it rhymes with *me* too."

Brad nodded. Zane and Nick were working on percussion, trying to perfect the rhythm of the song while Brad and Ethan sat on two other lawn chairs. I sat next to them both, keeping my mouth shut.

Then Ethan said, "Oh...this is better: 'I'm begging you please'."

"Yeah."

Oh, God...I couldn't help it anymore. I'd been quiet long enough. "Um...guys...can I give you a suggestion?"

Oh, shit. It had come out of my mouth. I hadn't been able to stop it. Both of them grew quiet and looked at me. Ethan said, "Uh...sure."

I took a deep breath. They were my friends, and there was nothing wrong with constructive criticism, right? Especially if it was given with care. At least that's what I told myself, so I moved forward. I didn't want to be harsh or mean, so I just said, "Your music is awesome. It's so original. Some of the words here, though...they're kind of..."

"Generic." Thank goodness Brad said it before I had to. I just nodded my head. "Yeah, you're right." He looked at Ethan and then back to me. "Any ideas?"

Oh, double shit. I couldn't think on the fly. I just knew unoriginal when I heard it. I felt like a ladybug under a magnifying glass. But then it came to me. "Your words are a knife that twist with every breath."

Ethan smiled. Then he looked skeptical as he started to say, "That's—"

"Wow. Not perfect, but...I like the metaphor."

Oh, great. Like Brad needed to look even better to me than he already did. But it couldn't be helped. He scored points with me—not because he liked my words, but because he knew what a metaphor was.

"Do you care if I use it...even if we change it a bit?"

"No...please." Ethan didn't seem too thrilled about it, but he and Brad started working around the knife metaphor and wound up completely changing the words. Suddenly, though, with just that one little suggestion, the words became riddled with meaning, and not just superficial dribble. It was no longer a bunch of words I'd heard a million times before. It went from being okay to being pretty special. And by the time they were done, even Ethan was happy.

Brad's mom popped in the garage to say *goodbye*. Brad introduced me to her. I guessed she was a nurse because she was wearing scrubs. She kissed Brad on the cheek and then she noticed me. "I thought it was just the boys tonight."

"Oh, mom, this is Ethan and Zane's friend from college—Valerie Quinn." Wow. He'd remembered my last name too.

"Nice to meet you, Valerie. I'm Barbara. Now, Brad, there's some leftover turkey and mashed potatoes in the fridge. I wouldn't complain if you all ate it. Just put the dishes in the dishwasher, please."

"Thanks, Mrs. P."

"I need to hurry. Apparently, there are already three women checked in who will probably give birth tonight during my shift. So don't worry if I'm home later than usual."

"I won't, mom."

"Have fun. Oh, and there are some DVDs in the living room if you want to watch a movie."

Well, the guys were all over having some chow and watching a horror movie, so we went to the kitchen where everyone pitched in. We sat at the table and ate, and I almost thought they'd forgotten about the bottle of rum in the garage. But as we were rinsing plates and loading the dishwasher, Brad snuck off, returning shortly after with the bottle. Ethan had only been helping half-heartedly and was off in the corner. It looked like he was texting something. If he was interested in me at all, he wasn't doing a very good job showing it. Brad, on the other hand, wasn't doing a good job staying off my radar.

We retired to the living room, and someone put in a horror movie. It looked like just another horror movie, and none of us were really watching. Brad had brought out one of the twelve-packs and the bottle of rum. He'd had Nick help by bringing in five glasses filled with ice. Brad poured rum in four of the glasses and then looked at me. "Sure you don't want just a little? Just enough to get a little buzz?"

His eyes were so warm, so persuasive. Ethan sat up straight on the couch and leaned over, so close I could feel him. As though challenging Brad, he said to me, "You don't have to if you don't want to."

But I trusted Brad, and there was something in his eyes that made me want to say yes. So I said, "Sure...just a little, though. I'm the driver, remember?"

He chuckled. "Okay." So he poured just a tiny amount in my glass, at least two-thirds less than what he'd poured in everyone else's cup. Then he poured Coke in each one until the liquid almost touched the rim.

Brad slid the glasses to a position in front of each person. "Bottoms up." All four of the men drank half of their glass in one gulp.

"You shouldn't have put ice in 'em, Bradley. It's harder to drink." Ethan smirked at his friend.

"I thought, since we were in the company of a lady, that we should show a little restraint." I felt myself blush a little.

"Yeah. Whatever. Top me off, pussy."

Brad's sense of humor seemed to be dissipating. He handed Ethan the bottle. "Do it yourself, cocksucker."

"Don't mind if I do."

At that point, we *did* start watching the movie. I'd felt a little tense at the exchange between the two alpha males in the room, but as they downed their drinks, their emotions seemed to die down as well.

It didn't escape my notice that Brad moved to the other side of me on the couch...and he sat close enough that his leg touched mine.

But Ethan kept talking to me, just making fun of the movie, making me laugh. Nick was on the floor in front of the coffee table, and once in a while, he'd catch a snippet of Ethan's jokes and bust out laughing. He was getting pretty wasted. Zane was in a chair on the other side of the room.

I hadn't had much of my drink. I guessed I just wasn't much of a drinker. And that was okay. Ethan sat up and grabbed a Coke, popping it open. He sat back on the couch and whispered. "How about you trade me your drink for a straight Coke?"

I felt a little relief, and my heart warmed to my sweet Ethan. He must have just sensed that I wasn't comfortable drinking, and he was going to rescue me. I smiled and switched with him. All the ice in my glass had melted, so he slammed it in just a couple of gulps. He licked his lips and looked me straight in the eye. "Best one I've had all night."

Was he just teasing me? He winked and then leaned forward again, this time pouring more rum in his glass but foregoing the Coke.

Nick started giggling. "Oh, shit. This girl's gonna get killed."

Zane said, "Yeah...we saw her tits five minutes ago. Of course, she's gonna die."

The girl in the film had been jogging through the woods but then discovered she was being followed by the slasher in the movie. It was the same old tired scenario we'd all seen in horror movies, a formula beloved by the many. The girl tripped and started screaming, panicking, and just being stupid in general. I sat up. "Why is it that they always make these girls so dumb? Why does she have to trip and act stupid? Instead of going back the way she came or following the trail, she's disappearing deeper into the woods where she's going to die."

Normally quiet Nick was now Obnoxious Nick. "You have a problem with that?"

Zane said, "I don't, as long as I get to see her goodies."

I rolled my eyes. "Real girls aren't like that."

Brad sat up next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. "Know what, Val? You're cool. Ethan has class when it comes to women."

I wasn't sure where he was coming from, but I couldn't believe he was putting his arm around me right in front of Ethan.

"Correction," Zane interrupted. "Remember Mary...*the mouth?*"

"Oh, fuck, yeah!" Nick broke out into laughter and fell on his back.

Ethan said, "Can we change the subject?"

"I kinda liked her mouth," Zane said.

"I just wanted to say Val was cool. I didn't want to get you guys started talking about Ethan's old girlfriends."

Ethan slammed his straight rum and poured another. Zane said, "I want a girlfriend like that."

"Shut the fuck up, man."

Zane sighed and shrugged, then downed his drink. Brad seemed to be in his own little world. I'd tried to ignore his arm around me, and I certainly didn't want to draw attention to it nor encourage it. But he started talking quietly, so no one else could hear. "I'm glad you and Ethan are friends." I couldn't ignore him anymore, and I turned my head to look at him.

Holy Christ. The look in his eyes was undeniable. He wasn't drunk, no. He might've been loosened up, but he wasn't trashed. He looked...sexy, and I had no idea why he liked me so much, but the feeling was mutual.

I heard Nick laughing at something on the TV, and Zane said, "Holy shit! That bitch can *bleed!*" I hoped no one else was paying attention to me.

Brad asked, "So...are you and Ethan dating or not? Are you boyfriend and girlfriend? He won't say dick about it, and I can't tell."

God...how should I answer that? Honesty...always the best way. "I...uh...don't think he considers us that."

Still...I really cared for Ethan, and nothing was set in stone. Until I knew for sure, I didn't want to encourage Brad's behavior. I took a deep breath and tried to smile. Then I stood up.

"I...um...need a glass of water. Can I get anyone anything?"

Brad shook his head, and everyone else ignored me, so I walked to the kitchen.

I was so glad I hadn't had anything to drink. In the past, I'd been around friends who'd lost all their inhibitions too quickly thanks to alcohol, and I knew I'd just escaped a precarious situation.

I'd come to the kitchen to get my bearings. I stood at the refrigerator for a good two minutes, just staring at the handle. Finally, I opened the door so I wouldn't look pathetic and lost, but that's really what I was. I was confused. I didn't know what I wanted, and it made me angry. No, that wasn't entirely true. My head wanted one thing, my heart another. I needed a few minutes alone to just think.

A few deep breaths and I was starting to feel normal again. I shut the refrigerator door and turned around, ready to go back to the living room. But just as I did that, he appeared in the doorway. Brad...the man who'd made me question everything. And he just stared at me with those smoldering eyes as if to say he knew everything I was thinking.

Like a deer caught in headlights, I froze. I was paralyzed. I felt my heartbeat speed up, as though a locomotive were driving it. Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump. I could hear it in my ears and nothing else. And then he started moving across the kitchen, closing the gap between us until it was nonexistent. I could hear as each one of his boots hit the floor step by step, but I was helpless to move. I felt a jolt in my bloodstream as my brain flooded it with chemicals, and yet I still couldn't move.

Brad stopped just millimeters away from my body, and my eyes stayed locked on his. The thudding in my chest hadn't receded, and there was no way I was getting away. I drew in one deep breath through my slightly parted lips, then another. Neither of us said a word. And then I felt something inside decide that it would be okay. Honestly, I knew there was nothing between Ethan and me, just some stupid stalkerish emotion that made me feel like I loved him. And that's when I decided I wanted to give in to whatever had gripped me, whatever it was inside me that was drawn to Brad. My breathing slowed just a little, and I noticed his head tilt down as though he was going to touch my lips with his. Yes. It was okay. Maybe.

*No.* I wasn't ready for this. Not yet. I closed my eyes as though in slow motion and tilted my head to the side. That would be okay, right? But deep inside I knew it wouldn't be, and I didn't care. If he had been a vampire, I would have been offering my jugular to him. Still I didn't care—he could have it.

I drew in another slow, deep breath, anticipating the touch of his lips. Instead, I felt his breath on my neck, and everything in my body tightened. First, my breath caught in my throat, and then every single muscle in my body clamped down, but where I felt it the most was in my feminine parts, a part of my body that I'd religiously avoided like the plague. But the sensation didn't feel as sinful as I'd been led to believe. Oh, no. It was a foreign feeling, yes, but it was not unwelcome. On instinct, my hands moved to his neck, and I shoved my fingers into his thick, soft hair.

His breath on my neck was warm and delicious. He brought his lips to my ear, and they barely grazed the tender skin there. He said, "I know you're into Ethan, and as long as you are, nothing's gonna happen between us. But I want you to know I'll wait."

I didn't know what to say. There really wasn't anything I *could* say that would make it okay. He had to know I was physically attracted to him, or why else would he even feel confident enough to make a move like that? It was in that moment that I realized how intuitive and worldly Brad was. He picked up on things that others usually just overlooked. He knew...he *knew* how I felt about him, about Ethan. How could he know that?



Either that or he was just drunk.

No...it wasn't that he'd been drinking. He stepped back as I loosened my grip in his hair. His eyes stayed locked on mine as he just continued backing up, and then, as he got close to the doorway, he turned around and left the room.

I was breathless again. And I was even more confused than when I'd come in here.

\* \* \*

Something had gone wrong in my absence, but I was too stupid to figure out what it was. All I knew is I had come back in the living room with the glass of cold water I'd supposedly wanted, and Ethan was ready to leave. The other guys told him we should stay, that it was still really early, the movie wasn't over, there was still plenty of booze. But he wouldn't listen. He was ready to leave. Brad hadn't said and didn't say a word.

Zane did, though. "Man, we could stay here all night. We could even crash on the floor. Brad's mom won't be home till morning, and she'll be ready for bed when she gets here. Don't bail now."

"We're leaving in the morning, Zane, so unless you have another ride back to school..."

Zane looked a little pissed but shrugged. "Fine. What time you comin' by my house?"

"Ten. And if you're smart, you'll make sure you're not hung over."

Nick was already passed out on the floor. Zane said, "See you in the morning."

Brad nodded at Ethan. "Take care, man. See you when you get back."

It was subtle, but I saw Ethan's jaw clench. He nodded. "Yeah." Then he looked at me. "Let's go." I found my coat and purse on the bench by the front door where Brad had shown me to set them earlier. I told both Zane and Brad goodbye, and I couldn't see any of the heat coming off Brad then as I had just minutes earlier. It was like a well-kept secret.

It was cold outside, so I zipped up my coat. When we got to his truck, he walked toward the driver's side. I said, "Didn't you want me to be your designated driver?"

He just opened the door. "I got this."

I hadn't seen how much he'd had to drink, but I was going to trust him. If his driving scared me, I'd ask him to stop and hope I could either find my way back to his house or Brad's in the dark in this unfamiliar town.

Ethan was silent all the way back to his house. He drove okay, and I was grateful for that. I tried not to be upset, but I was growing tired of Ethan's continual moodiness. He'd never seemed this out of sorts at school, but ever since he'd gotten home, he'd been a rollercoaster of emotions. I couldn't keep up.

When we got to his house, he waited for me to get out of the truck before walking to the front door, but he didn't say a word. I just followed him inside. There was a light on in the kitchen, and I could see two people sitting at the table, but I couldn't make out more than that. I took off my coat and set it and my purse on the edge of the couch and continued following Ethan to the kitchen.

His mom and a man were sitting at the table. The man had black hair with a little gray. He looked a little older than Ethan's mother. He was slightly overweight. I didn't notice until he stood that he was tall. His blue eyes appraised me, and I could tell he was kind and gentle, just like Ethan's mother.

"Hi, kids," June said. "Why are you home so early? I wasn't expecting you until much later."

Ethan shrugged. "We're leaving early tomorrow. Next week is finals week."

June looked at the man across from her. "Jason, you've met Ethan. This is his friend, Valerie Quinn."

"Nice to meet you, Valerie."

I said, "You, too," not knowing what else to say.

"C'mon, Val," Ethan said. He walked out of the kitchen and toward the stairs. Why was he acting so strangely? Of course, he'd been doing nothing *but* act strange for the last twenty-four hours.

I said *bye* and hurried up the stairs to catch up. By the time I joined him in his room, he was already sitting on his bed taking his shoes off.

I sat next to him. "What's wrong, Ethan?"

"Nothing."

I took a deep breath. "Does it have anything to do with what you didn't want to tell me earlier?"

His voice was cold, and he wouldn't look at me. "No."

"Don't you want to talk about it?"

"No." His jaw clenched. "Let's just say I needed to leave Brad's when I did, or Fully Automatic would already be disbanded." He blinked a few times and turned on the bed. "Next weekend when I come back, it'll all be cool." I nodded but didn't know what else to say, so I chose to say nothing. And in the back of my mind I wondered if he had seen Brad's near kiss. Well, I guess I really didn't wonder. His reaction and his words were confirmation. He grabbed a guitar pick off the nightstand and fingered it, still avoiding eye contact. "I guess I've been kind of pissy. Sorry. You come home with me, and I'm probably not showing you a good time. I, uh...after mom told me Jason was moving in here, I had to think things through. So I had to leave for a while." He sighed and his voice was quieter, but he looked at me. I'd never seen Ethan looking that vulnerable. "She must love him a lot. She's never asked a man to move in with her before. Jason's an all right guy, but...I didn't know if he'd treat her right."

His eyes returned to the guitar pick. "My mom has been through hell. Let me just say this." His eyes clouded with that never-ending look of hatred, the one I'd seen in his eyes way too many times before. "My father was a real son of a bitch. He treated my mom wrong. I don't ever want her hurt again. So...after mom told me about Jason, I drove around town for about an hour, just thinking about the situation. And then, after I cooled down, I went to see Jason. I just talked to him. I wanted to see if he loved her. And I told him if he ever hurt her, he'd have to contend with me. He said he loved her more than anything. But I don't know if I believe him. I mean...my mom's the marrying kind. She's said it herself. One time she told me she wouldn't share herself with a man who wasn't willing to marry her, and yet Jason doesn't seem like he does. What gives?"

"Maybe he's not emotionally ready for that kind of commitment yet, Ethan. Give him time." Kind of like Ethan seemed to be too. He should be able to relate to that. But I didn't say it. I felt a little uncomfortable, trying to give Ethan advice, and I had barely met Jason, but he seemed like a nice enough guy. I touched Ethan's forearm with my hand.

It didn't bother Ethan, but he didn't really seem to notice either. "That's what he hinted at. And I figure as long as mom's happy, she can do what she wants. But if he ever hurts her..." His knuckles turned white, and his teeth clenched. Finally, he said, "He'll have hell to pay."

The silence returned. Ethan's eyes eventually returned to normal, with only a mild look of anger dwelling in them. What had his father done to June that made Ethan so overprotective of

her? I wanted to ask, but I wasn't about to push it. Ethan had already bared his heart for me and it made me love him more.

I fell asleep in his arms again that night, right there on his bed, surprised that neither his mom nor Jason separated us. Nothing happened, but I felt like I was the comfort Ethan had needed on that cold, dark night.

## Chapter Seven

### Present

MY SECOND TRIMESTER was rough. Ethan was on the road with the band while I was left at home. My doctor had told me I could travel, but I knew the road was stressful. That wouldn't be the right place to be pregnant. So I did what I imagined most expectant moms did—I went shopping. I bought baby clothes, bottles, a crib, blankets, and every little thing the *expecting your first baby* books recommended. I bought neutral baby clothes, because—unlike all other women I knew—I wanted the baby's sex to be a surprise. I didn't want to know what I was having until he or she entered the world.

Ethan and I were on Skype several nights a week. He wanted to keep up to date with the baby's progress. And it gave me hope. If Ethan was going to fall off the wagon anywhere, it would be on the road. But he was fine. He was sober every time we talked—alert and happy.

With his blessing, I converted one of our spare bedrooms into a nursery. I found a local artist who painted the room in rainbows, birds, chipmunks, and fun little forest scenes. That room was so heartwarming, and it made me even more eager to hold my baby in my arms. I'd stand over the crib for minutes at a time, imagining our little baby sleeping in that bed, his little haven from the cold world.

Ethan asked me what it was like when the baby kicked. I wished he could be there to feel it. It was so weird at first, feeling one of the baby's limbs poking out of my belly. Ethan promised to be home before I gave birth, and I hoped he'd be able to feel the baby's movements. I was so afraid he wouldn't get home until it was time to give birth.

But he got back in time. He arrived home weeks before my due date, and then he got to experience all that he'd been missing. We'd be watching TV, and I'd grab his hand when I felt the baby moving, pressing it on my tummy where I'd felt the movement. He'd get an expression of joy and awe every time he felt the baby move. And we got in our natural childbirth classes, just in the nick of time.

As my due date approached, he stayed with me day and night. He might have had an antiquated idea of what pregnant women should and shouldn't do, but I was enjoying being pampered a little bit. I couldn't remember the last time (if ever) I'd been doted on like that. Granted, I'd still do a few things when he wasn't around, but overall he let me do no housework, although both my obstetrician and I assured him it would be all right. I took walks in the afternoon and slept more than I usually did, because I'd been told sleep would be a rare commodity once the baby came along. But I was bored out of my mind. We even had the band over once a week for barbecues and just hanging out. I did a lot of reading and catching up on TV series I'd missed over the last few years. But nothing was satisfying enough. I wanted the baby here.

Early one morning around two o'clock, I woke up. I realized I was cramping. I just lay there, unable to sleep, but I suspected something was going on. A while later, my belly tightened. Yes...it was a contraction, all right, but was it the real deal? Less than ten minutes later, I had another one, and that's when I touched Ethan's shoulder and asked him to get up.

He was tired and groggy at first, but then it registered with him. I knew what to do, because I'd been studying it for months. I had him use his cell phone's stopwatch feature, and I had him time my contractions and the time between, and after half an hour, if the pain hadn't become

more intense and convinced me to go to the hospital, the time between contractions would have. I looked at Ethan. "It's time to go."

He tried to look excited, but I could see the worry in his eyes. He grabbed my prepared bag from the closet by the front door and then helped me up from the couch. I rubbed my belly, eager because I knew I'd finally see our baby soon.

## Chapter Eight

### Past

FINALS WEEK WAS an intense whirl, but I made it through. Between having a good chunk of that Sunday to study as well as a quiet empty dorm room, I felt prepared.

Before I knew it, though, finals were over, and I was at home, caught up in the spirit of Christmas, probably my favorite time of year. Ethan and I hadn't talked much that week, and I felt almost like maybe I'd done something to cause his sudden coldness. But he said he had finals to worry about and, even though we'd spent some time together studying for our history exam, there was a definite coolness in the way he treated me.

Had I been older and wiser, I might have just written him off, but even now I wonder if that's true. I cared deeply for Ethan and worried about his well being. I wanted him to be happy and satisfied. I would have planned on never seeing him again, except the day I was ready to leave for home, he brought me a small present.

"Open it."

I smiled and looked at him. "You didn't have to get me anything. I didn't get you anything."

"Oh, hell, Val. Christmas is about giving, not getting. Just open the goddamned present."

My eyes grew wide. "Well, when you put it that way..." It was a small gold foil box, and I remembered a time when my mother had bought me a necklace that fit in a box that size. Could it be jewelry? I unwrapped the pretty red ribbon tied around it. The gift surprised me, all right, but it wasn't unwelcome. It was a CD, and Ethan had even made cover art for it. It was a picture of the four of them standing on a dirt road somewhere. Whoever had taken the picture had understood rock band poses, because it looked professional. But the artwork on it had been more recent, because the name on it was *Fully Automatic*, not *Bullet*. I knew Ethan had a pretty powerful computer in his dorm room with a slick printer, and after talking to his mother, I figured Ethan's grandpa had purchased it for him for college, not knowing that his grandson used it to mix music more than to write essays. But what did I know? Maybe his grandpa *did* know.

But as I looked at that gift, I felt my heart swell up with newfound emotion for the young man in front of me. He'd trusted me enough to let me into his world, and now he was sharing it with me on a whole new level. He'd been around me enough by this point to know that I listened to the music I liked over and over and over, and that's how it either grew on me or I would decide it wasn't my thing. It was a visceral response to music, but I had never discovered a way to be intellectual about it. Either I loved it at the most basic level of who I was or I didn't. And I already liked their music. I felt overwhelmed when I realized first how much trust he had in me to give himself and his art to me that freely, and then it hit me that he had that much confidence in himself and his band.

I loved that confidence. That was part of what continually drew me to Ethan.

So, when my lips had turned up into a smile and I'd gushed a *thank you*, Ethan pulled me into a tight embrace and kissed me on the cheek. "Have a nice Christmas, Val." I'm not sure what idiotic thing I said after that, but the kiss made me feel loopy the rest of the day until my dad arrived to pick me up later that afternoon.

It was weird how much I'd changed and how much the world around me at home had too. It had only been a few months since I'd left for school, but things were different. I met up a couple

of times with my old friend Jill, and I just didn't feel as close to her. We were worlds apart now, even though we'd chatted on Facebook once or twice and texted off and on over the semester. We were now different people...adults, maybe? And then I realized that maybe Ethan really *was* my best friend now, for all intents and purposes.

And over Christmas break, I talked about him...*a lot*. So much so that my mother insisted on meeting him. After all, she said, if he was my friend, the family should meet him. I promised her she would soon. How, I didn't know.

And then my little brother...he was in a steady relationship with a girl named Marcy, a cheerleader at my old high school. My brother had never been serious about anyone before, so I was a little shocked. *Ha!* I thought. *Take that, Charlotte.*

But Christmas break was soon over, and I was back at college. It felt strange returning there too, and looking back, I think I was having a bit of an identity crisis and just didn't know it. I didn't really fit anywhere anymore. College didn't feel right; home didn't feel right. And that Sunday when I returned, the day before classes, I felt out of sorts. I considered tracking Ethan down and then decided against it. I didn't want to seem desperate. So instead I put his CD in my laptop and played it. I hadn't had as many opportunities to listen to it over break as I had wanted to, so now would be a good time to listen. After hearing the CD multiple times, I was able to start distinguishing different elements between Ethan and Brad's songs. I was pretty sure they sang the songs they wrote. They both had good voices, no matter what self-deprecating thing Brad had said about their singing.

The more I listened to the handful of songs, though, the more differences I could identify. It wasn't a bad thing, and it wouldn't hurt the band, but I wondered if there would be a way they could collaborate more on the music, like they had that night I was there. They'd collaborated on everything that evening, and I felt like that song was better than any of the ones on the CD I was listening to. It had more polish and...well, more heart. I wondered if there was a way I could gently suggest that to Ethan without hurting his feelings. Really, the two men's styles complemented each other. Brad's playing was pretty thrash and hardcore with some death metal, groove, and even industrial influences, while Ethan's was more traditional, if you could call it that—classic heavy metal with a lot of nu metal and alternate metal feel. And you might think they were too different, but they had no problems adding their own thing to each other's songs (which I was more easily able to identify the more I listened to that CD), and I knew from that afternoon with the band that they could mesh even better when they worked it out on the spot.

So the more I listened, the more I loved them.

And then I felt better about being in my own skin. I thought maybe the semester would be a fresh start. Now that I'd realized I didn't quite fit at home anymore, it was time to find my place in the world. My RA gave me some pleasant news when she told me I still wasn't assigned a new roommate. Maybe I'd be lucky enough to have the room all to myself for the entire semester.

That first Monday made me feel better. I knew I was going to like my classes, and I hoped that at least one of them would give me an indication of what I wanted to do with my life. I recognized a couple of fellow freshmen, but no one I really knew. So late that afternoon I decided to go to Ethan's dorm and say *hi* to him and Zane. Ethan and I hadn't compared schedules before break, so I had no idea what his class schedule was like. I was hoping he wouldn't have a class the second I'd decided to drop by. Maybe I should have texted him first, but I wanted to surprise him.

As I walked down the hall and got nearer to his room, I felt my blood begin to race. I had missed him a lot more than I would have thought. My hands started to shake, and I knew I had to get a grip on myself. It was then that I realized just how much I'd missed him.

When I got to his door, I just knocked without much thought, and I was glad. As usual, I was overthinking it and stressing out way too much. I could hear pounding music through the door, and I smiled as my mind identified that it was Slipknot. Soon Zane was at the door, pulling me in by the hand. "Val. How the hell have you been?" He embraced me in a big bear hug. "Have a seat. How was your Christmas?"

I sat down on one of the two desk chairs. "It was...great." Oh, that wasn't convincing. Zane lowered his head, giving me a questioning look, urging me to continue. "It was kind of hard. I...discovered that my friends and I just don't have much in common anymore."

Zane sat down, pulling the chair around so he could sit backward in it. "That sucks." He shrugged. "You know, I think the only reason I don't have that problem is that me and my friends are in a band together." I nodded. That and he and Ethan actually went home once in a while to touch base. I hadn't seen my friends since late August. But it might have happened anyway. Maybe my experiences at college were changing me more than I'd realized. Zane said, "Ethan's in class right now. If my guess is right, he should be here in about ten minutes or so. Anyway...what exactly do you mean about not having much in common with your friends anymore?"

I tried to pinpoint exactly why I felt that way. "Well, we just don't talk like we used to. I guess I don't feel like Jill and I are best friends anymore." I wasn't going to tell him that she just didn't get the whole Ethan-Brad thing at all. Of course, that would have meant telling Zane my deepest, darkest feelings, and we weren't going to go there. Zane was easy to talk too, though, and I was glad for that.

"That really sucks. It hurts?" He said it like a question, but it sounded more like a statement. I nodded.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get over it. Jill and I just aren't as close, and I guess I should have expected that to happen. She's going to the community college back at home, and I'm going to school here, halfway across the state. She has her friends now—new ones she's made at college and some of our old ones from high school—and I have mine. She said she'd try to come up one weekend in February or March, and maybe I'll be able to talk more to her then. Maybe we'll be able to reconnect."

He nodded. "I hope things work out." I could tell he wasn't the most comfortable now that we were getting into talking about my feelings, but he was being a good sport about it. "You can consider *me* one of your friends, Val."

Well, of course, I did, and I didn't know if that's what he was getting at or if there was something he was being coy about. I was too naïve to read anything too deep into it, so I just said, "Yes, I do. If I didn't, we wouldn't be talking right now."

"Good." He scooted his chair closer to mine. "You care a lot for Ethan, don't you?"

I felt the need to take a deep breath, but I didn't. How could *everyone* read my thoughts so easily? Everyone, that was, *except* for Ethan. I looked down at my hands but finally worked up the nerve to return my gaze to his. I didn't want to make it out to be something it wasn't, though, because Ethan had made it pretty clear to me that we were friends only. So I said, "Yes. I think he's my best friend now."

His eyes bored into mine. "You sure that's all?"



I wasn't sure what or why he was asking. No way was I going to tell him I thought I was falling in love with Ethan. I would feel ridiculous if I told him I had stronger emotions for Ethan than I should have. After all, it seemed obvious that Ethan didn't feel the same way for me—he only considered us friends. And if he wanted our relationship to remain that way, then I would be comfortable with it. As long as he was a part of my life, I would be happy. So I said simply, “Yes.” It was anticlimactic.

And that made Zane realize that not only was *he* uncomfortable with the subject, so was I, and he changed it to focus on classes. So we both talked about the new classes we'd attended that day and, before I knew it, well more than half an hour had passed and still no Ethan. “Well, I already have reading to do for my classes, so I better get started.”

“Yeah, me too. When Ethan gets back, we'll swing by your room. Maybe we can all do dinner together.”

“That'd be nice.”

When I arrived back at my room, the resident advisor called me and told me I had been assigned a new roommate who would be moving in that evening. Well, so much for peace and quiet. I should have known better than to expect the no roommate situation to last forever. I just hoped my new roommate would be better than my last.

She began moving in from another floor not long after I'd spoken with the RA. Jennifer Manders was a sweet, demure girl, the exact opposite of Charlotte. She seemed polite and friendly. I offered to help her move the rest of her things, but she told me she could get them. She was nice about it but seemed quite set on moving her things herself. Well, it was a little possessive, but I guessed I could understand that. She didn't know me well enough to trust me yet, so I told her to just let me know if she changed her mind. After just a few trips, though, she had all her things in our room, and she started putting them away. I lay on my bed reading my new psychology textbook and tried to give her the breathing room she seemed to need. She seemed to search for the perfect place to put each item, so I wondered how her tidy self would cope with my intermittent phases of sloppiness, mixed with my incessant love of metal. I guessed we'd find out soon enough.

Well, I had to check out a couple of things with her, and the best way to do that would be through an honest, thoughtful conversation. I didn't want to just sit back and let shit happen this time. So, once she seemed completely settled, I asked, “Jennifer, not to pry, but why are you moving out of your old room?”

She looked down at her newly made bed before sitting down on it. She seemed a little reluctant, but I could tell she thought it was important to talk. “You're probably going to think it's my fault. I seem to be hard to get along with. At least my last roommate thought so.” When she said that, I prepared for the worst. *Great.* I'd just survived one crappy roommate and now I had another to contend with. She didn't seem to be the type who would be trouble, though. I was curious and nodded, hoping it would urge her to continue. I had to withhold judgment until I'd heard her entire story. “The first month I was here, I had a single room because the girl who was going to be my roommate decided at the last minute to switch schools. So I was all by myself. I was okay with that, even though it was kind of lonely. But another girl moved into my room in October. She'd been fighting with her roommate and I guess had been kicked out. She called her a conniving little...” She paused, seeming to rethink what she wanted to say. “Well, you know.” I nodded my head and smiled. I might not have been worldly, but I could figure out that much. “Anyway, I know now that she was the troublemaker. She was rude and inconsiderate...and a man-eater, I'm tellin' you.”

Hmm...could it be? "Her name didn't happen to be Charlotte, did it?" Jennifer's blue eyes opened wide. "Charlotte Edwards?"

"How did you know?"

"I was her first roommate. I doubt the problems you were having were your fault."

Her pale face lit up as she flashed a smile of gleaming white teeth. "You don't know how good that makes me feel." Well, that explained her hesitation to trust me at first. She stood up and started arranging clothes in one of the drawers I thought she'd already been done working on. What had seemed like initial shyness now became a light-hearted openness. I could see that maybe I had won a friend, and it would be nice to have a female friend. I'd been missing them.

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"I've got it," I told Jennifer as I crossed our small dorm room to answer the door. I was going to have to get used to having a roommate, so I wanted to let her know I could get the door instead of just pushing her aside to get there.

When I opened the door, Ethan stood there, and at that moment, I thought he was the reason for the saying *a sight for sore eyes*, because that he was. He looked better than I'd remembered from a month ago. His hair was a little longer, and he was growing a goatee. His sleepy eyes took me in and he said, "There's our woman." Unable to hold myself back, I threw my arms around him in an affectionate hug.

"I missed you, Ethan." He laughed as he and Zane came into the room. "Guys, this is my new roommate, Jennifer Manders." The young woman nodded out of politeness, her short blonde hair bobbing with the motion. She had a shy smile on her face. "Jennifer, these are two of my very good friends, Ethan Richards and Zane Carson."

She waved her hand near her hip as though trying not to draw too much attention to herself. "Nice to meet you."

Zane said, "We gonna eat or what? I'm fuckin' starving." Apparently, he felt the need to let my new roommate know right off the bat that he liked strong language and wasn't afraid to use it. I had to give her credit. She didn't even flinch.

Ethan furrowed one brow. "Jesus, man. We just got here."

"We can talk on the way, standing in line, sitting down and eating, right? Am I missing something here?"

"Jennifer, would you like to eat dinner with us? We're just heading over to the cafeteria."

She smiled. "Sure."

So, on our way to eat, Ethan talked nonstop. They'd worked on three fantastic songs over break, he said, and he wanted me to hear them sometime that week. He'd burned them to a CD and wanted me to check them out soon.

We were in line at the cafeteria when I asked, "So when are you guys gonna throw some videos up on YouTube?"

Jennifer spoke up. "Wait...so you guys have a band?" Zane smiled and nodded. "What do you guys play?"

Zane threw up the metal devil's horn sign on both his hands. "Heavy metal, baby!" He stuck his tongue out and rolled his eyes back in his head, making an *agh* sound. If Jennifer wasn't scared off by *that*, nothing would freak her out. That was good.

We got caught up in ordering our food, and then we went out into the dining area carrying our trays. We split up, getting drinks and salads and other accompaniments to our meal. We all met up at a booth near a back corner. Ethan sat next to Zane, and Jennifer sat beside me. It seemed that Zane made a special effort to sit directly across from me. Why I felt that way, I

didn't know, and then I realized it was likely my wild, active imagination working overtime again.

Ethan asked, "How was your Christmas, Val?" He was the one I wanted to talk to. He took a big bite out of his burger, waiting for my answer.

"It was okay." I didn't want to start my whine-fest again. I wanted our meal to be light and happy because, after all, that was the way I was feeling. I was lighthearted, being under the gaze of my friend whom I against wanted as my boyfriend. "How was yours?"

Ethan's eyes moved back and forth, taking mine in. "Come on, Val. I heard you were a little down in the dumps. You can tell Uncle Ethan."

I started laughing. He'd made me feel better already. "Later, *Uncle Ethan*." I wouldn't mind telling him everything if we could just be alone for a while.

"A bad sign, a very bad sign. The patient seems reluctant to speak about the past. I must make a note of that and, I'm afraid, I'll have to recommend shock therapy."

In spite of the subject matter, Ethan continued to make me giggle. "Fine. If you really must know right this minute, when I went home, I felt like my old best friend and I have grown apart. That's all."

Ethan lost his jokey manner and sobered up. His voice was tender, and it was as though the other two in our party no longer existed, even though Ethan and I were at a diagonal. "Sure that's all?"

Well, yeah...aside from feeling a little lovesick, but no way were those words coming out of my mouth. "Does there need to *be* more?"

He smiled again. "Let's catch up later talking about Christmas break, okay? Just me and you." My breath caught in my throat. Maybe finally we could tell each other how we felt...if indeed he felt the same way about me that I did him. I nodded my head. "Promise?"

I smiled back. "I promise."

At that second, all the noise and rambunctiousness of the cafeteria returned, and Ethan brought Zane and Jennifer back into the conversation. He started talking about an action/adventure film he'd seen over the break and proceeded to tell about it in excruciating detail. I enjoyed watching his animated self entertaining me and our friends.

After dinner, though, we found ourselves alone. Zane and Jennifer headed back to the dorms, while Ethan and I decided to take a walk around campus. I felt a tiny surge of adrenaline find its way into my veins. Tonight could be our night. But I needed to quit being stupid about it. What if he really did want me as just a friend...forever? If that was the case, I needed to stop dreaming that it could ever lead to something else.

Once the other two were out of earshot and we were alone on a darkened path heading in the vague direction of the gigantic gymnasium, Ethan said, "What's buggin' you, kiddo? Zane told me what you told him, but is something else the matter?"

What could I say, aside from the secret desires I felt from him that I didn't want to confess? No...those words had to stay as cold as the snow that was starting to fall on the sidewalk in front of us. "Jill doesn't confide in me like she used to. We used to tell each other everything, but it felt like there was this huge fence between us, you know? I guess...she has other friends now."

He shrugged, jamming his hands in his jeans pockets. "Sure, but so do you."

"Yes, but—well, I never thought our friendship would change. We've been friends since grade school. But...that's not what's bothering me." He looked over at me from the sidewalk. "I think there's something she's not telling me."

"Like what?" We stopped walking, and he turned to face me.

He'd asked just the right questions, and there was no stopping the onslaught of words now. "I don't even like to think about it." I bit my lip, but I guessed I was going to charge full speed ahead. "She's had this boyfriend for a couple of years. She didn't say it, and I didn't ask, but...I think she might be pregnant."

Without saying a word, he laid his hand on my neck and brought my head to his shoulder. Oh, God...where the hell were all these tears coming from? And how had he known I'd needed to do that? And the words just kept coming. "I thought before that if she ever had a problem, she could come to me with it. It hurts me that she didn't." I sobbed and wiped my eyes with my hand. It was too damn cold to be doing this outside. I reached inside my coat pocket and grabbed my gloves to slide them on.

He kissed my cheek. Oh...it would have been so easy for me to just turn my head and make my lips meet his, but I froze. I was paralyzed. He looked me in the eyes. "Feel better now?"

I just nodded and Ethan grabbed my hand to lead me back toward the dorms. The bitter cold lashed at my wet face. His hand was firm around mine and gave me comfort. My voice was quieter than I'd expected when I said, "Thanks for listening."

He squeezed my hand. "What are friends for?"

The snow was falling harder now and Ethan released my hand, instead wrapping his arm around my waist. I rested my head against his shoulder and didn't care how much snow fell on my face. Ethan's next words were unexpected. "I think Brad likes you."

Wow. That was weird. And I knew Brad liked me...a lot. But no way would I say that. "Why?"

"Oh...just the way he looked at you and the way he couldn't shut the fuck up about you over break." Had he seen my close encounter with Brad that last night I'd been there? I'd been convinced he had, but now I wasn't so sure. Still...

I didn't want Ethan to think what had happened spoiled his chances with me. Whatever had happened between Brad and me was some weird, animalistic, electromagnetic, primitive thing that I seemed to have no control over. And it certainly wasn't a deep love like I was beginning to feel for the man next to me. Still...I wanted him to feel comfortable with our friendship, especially if that was all it ever wound up being. "Well...I like Brad too. He's a nice guy. And...any friend of yours is a friend of mine." I slowly let out the breath that had filled my lungs as I tried to relax.

"I didn't mean it *that* way." I shrugged and feigned ignorance about Brad's interest, and no more was said on the subject. I wrapped my arm around Ethan too so he'd know he was important to me and hoped this particular topic wouldn't be brought up again.

\* \* \*

Over the next month, Jennifer and I seemed to become close friends. We did everything together—eating our meals, studying at the library, exercising. She seemed to fill in the gap of my lost friendship with Jill, the one I still clung to because it seemed to signify the last vestige of who I was before coming to college.

Jill never did come to visit like she'd promised, and—really—it was no big surprise to me. Instead, she wrote me a long email confessing that she *had* in fact been pregnant, just as I'd guessed. She'd gotten an abortion and somehow her parents had found out. And they were old-school Catholics, so they weren't too pleased. Rather than deal with the arguments and accusations, she moved out of her parents' house and in with her boyfriend to move out of the light of her parents' disapproving glares.

I felt bad for Jill, and I wondered how this would change her life. Did she love Chad, her boyfriend of just a couple of years? She was now a nineteen-year-old wife who had broken ties to her family, and I wondered what kind of emotional scars the abortion would leave her with. That couldn't have been an easy decision, and had anyone been by her side when she'd decided it? When she'd gone through with it? I didn't know that Chad would have been supportive in that way, but I hoped I was wrong. God...if I'd had the chance to talk with Jill, if we'd been able to talk like we had in high school, maybe I could have talked to her, felt her out. Did she really want to be married? Could she have tried to mend the issues with her parents? Did she even try? As her friend, maybe I could have helped her see the rational side. But what did I know? Maybe she'd made the best decision out of all the available options. The email somehow felt final, kind of like a *Dear John* letter, terminating our friendship. But I felt I still had to try to salvage what we had. So I emailed her back, but when she never responded, I took the hint. The email was, perhaps, her last farewell.

Zane...what was up with him in the new semester? It didn't take me long to discover that he was definitely taking an interest in me, and I had no idea why. Maybe he was tired of seeing Ethan piss away one opportunity after another. And, aside from just telling Ethan I was madly in love with him, I didn't know what else to do. I'd never been forward with a guy, and—coming from an old-fashioned family—I thought it was *his* job to make the first move. So I tried to at least create the ideal environment for that first move. I spent time with him; we texted a lot, usually about music or something funny; and he'd caught me multiple times just looking at him with a sappy look on my face.

But Zane...he came over to my dorm room. A lot. Usually uninvited, though not unwelcome. He started walking with me to my classes when he could. At first, I thought he was interested in Jennifer, but he wasn't walking her around, and he was never in my dorm room chatting her up before I got home. And, to quell any doubts I had in my mind, he later invited me to the first dance of the semester.

His dark blue eyes twinkled when he asked me, and at first I thought he was joking. Then I could have kicked myself. When he and I had talked in January, I hadn't confessed the complete scope of the affection I felt for Ethan. That was my fault entirely. Zane had asked, and I'd just told him Ethan was my best friend. I hadn't told Zane my secret desire was to be Ethan's girlfriend, was to snuggle up close to him, was to have him kiss me like I'd never been kissed before.

Zane waited for my answer to his question, and when I gave it, I was slow and cautious. "I'm...not sure, Zane."

He wasn't a quitter. He pushed back his black hair and leaned forward. God, he really *was* gorgeous, and my subconscious started giving him serious consideration. "Why not? We're friends, right?" His eyes searched mine and then he said, "It's Ethan, isn't it?" I couldn't say a word, and my silence told him what he needed to know. "Valerie, you need to forget about him except as a friend." He stared at me. "Trust me on this. Come with me to the dance. I know you care about Ethan a lot, no matter what you say, so don't even try to deny it. But what would it hurt for you to go to the dance with me?"

"Oh, Zane. I know Ethan won't ask me to the dance. That's not it. But it's a Valentine's Day dance. And if I go with you..." I felt the wind leave my sails. Much as I cared for Ethan, I didn't want to hurt the man who'd actually grown a pair to ask.

He knew what I was saying, though. “He’ll think we’re a couple, right?” He paused. “Jesus fuck. Val, I really don’t want to be the dickhead to tell you this...” I could see some kind of emotional struggle in his eyes. “No. Fuck it. Not going there.”

“What?” No way was he getting away with not talking now.

“No. Forget it.” He took a deep breath. “Just...never mind.”

He started to stand up, so I stood too. He was tall, but I still reached for his shoulders. I wasn’t going to be demanding, because that already had gotten me nowhere, but I knew he was withholding something from me, and I wanted to know. “Please tell me.” He looked at me and then above my head at the wall behind me. “Is it something I’ll find out anyway?”

And that’s when I saw the change in his eyes. Yeah...it was something I’d find out later. He looked almost sad. He sighed and then said, “Ethan...uh...is taking another girl to the dance.”

The breath left me just as surely as it would have had someone punched me in the gut and thrown me to the ground, following it up with a few kicks. I couldn’t hide my feelings, because they were too fresh, and I’m sure I looked like a wounded animal. “Oh...”

Wow. That hurt more than I would have expected, because I’d thought I was okay with the best friends/ maybe relationship down the line stance Ethan had taken. But now I knew. Ethan didn’t love me that way, probably never would. I had to grow up and face reality. So I had to accept that the occasional arm around my shoulders, kiss on my cheek, and hand in mine were simply friendly gestures that meant something entirely different to Ethan than they did to me.

And that meant another thing as well. That meant it was time to give other guys their shot. I’d thwarted advances from classmates here and there without the guys ever getting far enough to actually have to be rejected. It was time to accept other guys’ interest in me, and I would start with Zane. Zane, an incredibly good-looking guy who was also a friend—he’d be a great first candidate, and I guessed he was just in the right place at the right time. I nodded. “Okay.” I took a deep breath and Zane didn’t say a word. He looked like he felt guilty as hell. “The dance is tomorrow night, right?”

He looked unsure, as though we were venturing into unknown territory...and, really, we were. “Uh...yeah.”

I took a deep breath and tried to smile, but I’m sure it looked like my cheeks had been injected with Novocain. “What time will you come by?”

Zane tried to appear sober, but I could see the twinkle in his eyes return. “So...you’ll come with me?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He got his bearings back. “Um...eight o’clock sound all right?”

“Yeah...”

He placed his hands on my shoulders. “You okay? Goddamn. I’m sorry I said anything. What an asshole.”

I shook my head. “No. No, Zane. You were just the messenger.” I forced the smile this time. If I really *didn’t* care about Ethan in that way—as I’d been trying to convince Zane—then it shouldn’t hurt at all, right? So I had to make the smile convincing. “No worries. We’re going to have a great time.”

“Yeah, we are.” He hugged me, and I’m sure he sensed he shouldn’t go any further...not yet, anyway. Because he knew. Deep down, he knew. No matter what I said, it was pretty apparent to every fucking person on the planet *except* Ethan that I loved the boy. So Zane was going to try to comfort me or, at the very least, help me save face. And I appreciated that. Sure,

I knew he had an ulterior motive, but I wasn't going to hold that against him. And I'm sure I wasn't doing his ego any favors. He knew he wasn't my first choice. But maybe he cared enough about me that it didn't matter.

When he left my room, I just leaned my back against the door, trying to recover. And I was glad Jennifer had a class, so she wouldn't be home for a while. I would be able to deal with this fresh pain on my own for a while. The wounds were too fresh, and I wasn't ready to talk about them yet.

I threw myself on my bed and cried and cried to the point of exhaustion. I half filled my wastebasket with wadded-up tissues. After I got over my feelings of heartache, I then felt pangs of jealousy against this girl I didn't even know, the girl who'd managed to capture Ethan's heart when I wasn't looking.

And then I thought...maybe going to the dance with Zane would be my form of revenge...not even let Ethan know how much he'd hurt me.

I took a deep breath. No, I couldn't be like that.

But I didn't want to act like a little child either and refuse to go. I'd already promised Zane, and who knew? Maybe I'd have fun after all.

It was another reminder that I really had fallen helplessly in love with Ethan. *And, I told myself, if he doesn't want to go to the dance with me, that's fine, just as long as he's happy.* Oh, yes. I could think those words, but believing them was another thing entirely.

And those feelings? I was having a hard time shaking those too.

I felt so vulnerable, so much in pain that I could be easily destroyed. I needed to bounce back, as had been my nature up to this point. That was when I decided life really does go on, and I was going to enjoy myself at the dance.

## Chapter Nine

“OH, MY GOD, Val, you look so cute,” Jennifer said as I put the finishing touches on my look. My normally straight, shiny brown hair now cascaded in curls down my back over the flaming red strappy dress I’d chosen to wear. Earlier that morning, I’d walked downtown to a consignment store to look at semi-formal dresses and chosen that little number. It wasn’t tight, but it fit like it had been made for me, and red always brought out the color in my cheeks and eyes. Looking at myself in the mirror one last time, I thought that Ethan had never seen me dressed up before.

No. I had to push him out of my head. I had to forget the emotions I had for him and start over. I couldn’t do that if I thought about him every few minutes. I looked at my reflection again. I really *did* look pretty. I’d never been one to obsess over her own looks, but I’d done my makeup in such a way that my eyes stood out and I looked almost...glamorous. And the two-and-a-half inch heels weren’t something I’d normally wear either, but they did something for my calves that were just barely peeking out from under the tea-length skirt.

Jennifer was going to the dance with a guy she’d met in one of her classes. She left when he came by to get her, and then I was left all alone with my reflection. Zane should be arriving at any minute, and I had to get in the proper mindset. I had to plan to have fun. He’d asked the day before if I wanted to go out to eat first, but I knew Zane didn’t have a vehicle on campus, so that would mean either walking downtown or going to one of the eateries on campus. Neither idea sounded particularly fun, so I told him I’d just grab a bite at the cafeteria with Jennifer as planned. Zane might have even planned to spring for a cab, but I knew he was a poor college student just like I was, so I wasn’t even going to ask.

When Zane got to the door, I was surprised. He was wearing a suit, and it shocked me. I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t that. And...he looked damn good. He must have thought the same about me, because he smiled and then peeked his head in my room. “Is Valerie here? If she’s not, I’ll just take *you* to the dance.”

I started laughing. “You look pretty good yourself.”

He grinned. “Thanks, but...” He let out a long whistle. “Jesus. I don’t know how the hell I’ll keep all the guys at the dance off you.”

I blushed and giggled, and I was afraid my cheeks probably matched the color of my dress. “I’m sure they’ll all be plenty tied up with their sweethearts.”

He brought his hand out from behind his back to produce a pink carnation which he handed to me. I smiled as its scent touched my nose. “Oh, Zane...you didn’t have to do that.”

His smile was slight and sweet. “I wanted to.”

“I should have *something* around here...” I thought Jennifer might have an empty water bottle in her trashcan, and I did see one when I peeked. I filled it almost full at the sink and then placed it on my desk with the carnation in it. “It’s really pretty. Thanks.” And I felt a little shy doing it, but I kissed him on the cheek. An unexpected flower deserved nothing less.

I grabbed my dorm key off my desk and then pulled my long black wool coat out of my closet, tucking the key in a pocket. It was perhaps the only coat I’d ever owned that didn’t completely ruin the illusion of a glamorous dress.

We didn’t say much on our walk toward the ballroom located in the student center. I’d only ever seen that room used for banquets and convention-type activities on campus, so I was



looking forward to seeing it used for what it had been designed for. Zane got brave and grabbed my hand. I smiled. After a few more steps, he said, “Bet they won’t be playing the kind of music we usually appreciate, eh?”

“I heard they got a DJ, so we could always request a little Miss May I, don’t you think?”

He started laughing. “Yeah, and I’m sure all the fraternity douchebags would eat it up.”

“They just might.”

He laughed even harder as we reached the outside door, and he pulled it open for me. The student center was always darker at night, but it was just as busy. I knew there was some movie marathon going on in the theater, for starters, but there were bodies buzzing here and there, heading toward different places.

When we got to the ballroom, the dance was well underway. It was dark in there, but there were lots of colored lights bouncing off the walls, and the DJ was lit up against one wall, already playing some slow-moving, sappy song I’d never heard before. Couples were already entwined on the dance floor, swaying to the beat of the music.

There was an untended coat rack by the doors, so Zane slid the coat off my shoulders and hung it up. It might not have been cold inside, but the air made my bare shoulders feel chilly nonetheless. We looked over the sea of bodies, moving as though in tune to a breeze flowing over them. “Might as well get started,” he said and led me to the edge of the crowd. Then he wrapped his arms around my waist.

A slow dance was probably something I was better at. Loving metal music, I’d never had much reason to learn to dance. I could bang my head just as good as anyone else, and even moshing didn’t require rhythm or killer moves. So dancing? Not my thing. But slow dancing...I thought I could handle it. So I placed my forearms on his shoulders as he drew me close, and our motions started resembling those of the rest of the crowd.

Oh, *shit*. He smelled really good, and I hadn’t noticed until I was up close. His cologne was masculine (for lack of a better word) and tempting and made me want to get even closer. And I hadn’t realized how rock hard his body was until I was up against him. What struck me right then was a couple of things—first of all, I hadn’t been kissed since high school and, really, I hadn’t had much experience at it. I’d had a couple of boyfriends in the past, but they were from my church back at home, so I’m sure you can imagine that our kissing was rated PG-13 at best. Second...I was ready to move into rated R territory. With Zane? I didn’t know. But the way I felt in his arms surprised the hell out of me. My emotional response to him was strong, and I never would have expected that.

He said in my ear, “I wasn’t kidding when I said you look nice.”

His breath right there didn’t help the crazy feelings roiling inside my body, just barely kept intact under the surface. What was going on with me? Was it the flower he’d brought me? The fact that I’d been pining for and rejected by Ethan for so long? But here I was, all willing and eager. I was glad it was darkish in the ballroom, because I was sure I was blushing yet again. “You look great too, Zane.” And was that as inane sounding to him as it was to me? But he really did look good. And just as my consciousness acknowledged it, I realized the rest of me started thinking about Ethan, wondering where he was, what he was doing...if he was actually here at this dance or if he was fucking some girl in his dorm room while Zane was conveniently away.

God, I was just torturing myself, and I needed to stop. I was young and vibrant, and Zane had made it clear that he was interested, even if Ethan wasn’t. I leaned my head on Zane’s

shoulder, determined to keep our conversation light and friendly, if indeed we wound up talking at all.

As our bodies turned with the music, my eyes took in the doors to the ballroom. As though fate were mocking me, in walked Ethan with a tall, thin blonde hanging on his arm. Ethan looked cocky and maybe even a little drunk. I wondered if he and the blonde had had a little fun before the dance. I certainly didn't want to know.

I closed my eyes, angry with myself that I was so upset over what Ethan was doing. I didn't even know that girl and I already felt like I hated her, and I was praying that Ethan's relationship with her wouldn't grow serious.

Poor Zane. I was so glad he didn't know what I was thinking. I needed to get control over myself, so when the song ended, I excused myself for a just a moment. I felt a tremendous surge of relief that Ethan and his date were no longer near the doors. The hallway was brighter than the ballroom, so I had no problems orienting myself and walked down the hall toward the restrooms. There were a couple of girls in there touching up their lipstick and chatting about the dance. I just needed a place to get a grip on my emotions, so I walked into a stall and just rested my forearm on the side, then pressed my forehead into my arm. And there I stood for a good several minutes just regaining my composure. I promised myself that I'd have fun, no matter what. Zane was a fun guy, nice and good looking, and he was obviously attracted to me. Just because I'd never considered him before didn't mean he wasn't worth my attention. I tried to just dwell on him, and suddenly I was transported. I remembered how he smelled and how his soft hair felt brushing my hands when we'd been dancing. Yes...Ethan could have his fun, and I could too.

So, when I returned to the ballroom, I was full of hope. And I maintained that hope even when I saw Zane talking with Ethan near the wall where the DJ was stationed. I took another deep breath, praying that I could be polite. As I approached them, Zane's smile reached his ears. I smiled back and then looked at Ethan and said *hi*. I was surprised at his response, because he seemed frozen, as though he couldn't tear his eyes from me. *Oh, shit*. Did he feel the same way I did and I was too stupid to ever realize it till now, or was he as shocked as Zane had been at how different I looked? Ethan looked good too, but he hadn't gone to the same pains Zane had...Ethan was wearing more of an if-a-rock-star-frontman-dressed-up getup. And that was *not* good for me to see. He looked pretty hot—dark tight jeans and a button-down black shirt. I took a deep breath again, trying to clamp down all the emotions ready to fly off inside me. How could I bury this weird emotion, this one pretending to be love for Ethan if he kept doing little things to stir it up? But I couldn't let it bother me. I was going to play nice, hide those feelings, and enjoy my date. Could Ethan or Zane see through my façade? They both knew me better than I'd thought, so I hoped I could pull it off.

As I got there, Zane decided to play alpha male and slipped his arm around my waist. "I was telling Ethan what you said, about requesting something hardcore from the DJ."

I was okay with Zane's display, because it instantly made me feel braver. I was wondering where the tall blonde was who had walked in with Ethan, but she snuck up behind him and snaked her hands around his waist, kissing him on the neck. That green monster inside me grabbed me by the spleen and squeezed. In direct proportion, I fought to keep the smile on my face. I looked at Zane and said, "I could stand some pretty severe headbanging right now. What about you?"

"Hell, yeah."

I grinned. "Hang on." I sauntered over to the DJ's table, knowing I had their full attention and wondering exactly what the DJ could play here that the sweethearts wouldn't freak out too much about.

When I got to his table, he pulled off his headphones. He looked bored. "You have a request?"

"Well, kind of." I raised my voice so he could hear me over the music.

"What'll it be?"

"Um...my friends and I aren't really into this music, and I know there's not a lot you can play with the type of crowd you're catering to right now, but I wondered...how big is your selection of music?"

He still didn't appear to be amused, but he pointed down at a laptop computer. "Name it."

I tried to quickly in my mind think of artists whose music wasn't so raucous it would scare pop lovers off. Something a little more mellow, less gritty. I knew there were plenty of crossover rock bands although I didn't listen to them that much, and I knew even some of my favorites had a few lighter tunes. Still...I was grasping at straws. I said, "My friends and I love to listen to hard heavy metal, but you can't really dance to it, and I don't want to ruin the fun, but I still want to freak my friends out if I can get you to play something a little more up our alley."

He raised his eyebrows as if trying to urge me to hurry the hell up.

I was panicking. "Got any Kid Rock?"

This time he actually cracked a smile. "Name it."

And then a little devil jumped up on my shoulders, just like in the old cartoons. Or at least it felt that way. I could have picked something innocent, and I certainly could have picked something less offensive by Kid Rock, but no. My tongue let it loose before my conscience could wrestle with it. "How about 'So Hott'?"

"You got it. But, just so's y'know, the bad words'll be muted."

"That's fine." Oh, shit, what had I done? "Thanks."

I started to walk away when he said, "Give me five minutes or so."

I nodded and kept walking, ready to crawl into a hole. That little devil was about to get me in a bunch of trouble. I could maybe play innocent and blame it on the DJ, but I wasn't going to do that either. When I rejoined my group, I felt almost giddy. I had a secret, and I was going to shock the hell out of them.

And I figured it would get both men's attention. Zane asked, "So?"

I grinned and was glad to see Ethan's little blonde had disappeared again. "So...you'll just have to wait and find out."

He smiled at me. "Little tease..."

Ethan was quiet, and I couldn't read the look on his face. "You look really nice tonight."

Oh, I should have been nice. I really should have. "Yeah, and the rest of the time I look like shit." Whoa. First off, I was cussing a lot more having hung out with these boys for half a year but then...had that dig really been necessary? Probably not. "Oh, sorry. Um...you look nice tonight too." Hot, really, but I wouldn't have said that, even with the pair of balls I was starting to grow.

"Thanks." Okay...I couldn't take looking into those hard green eyes anymore. That usual glint was there, but there was something else too. Desire? I looked away, over to Zane, trying to think of something to say, but I had to break eye contact with Ethan. Yeah, I knew his eyes were filled with desire, but it couldn't have been for me.

Still...I felt a pull toward him. For the first time since the first day I'd met him, choosing to sit by him based solely on his looks, I could admit to myself that Ethan was an attractive guy. He was gorgeous, and he looked great in black. Zane started to say something when the DJ switched to yet another slow pop song. I was hoping the DJ hadn't been lying earlier and would actually play what I asked him to. Ethan said, "Mind if I steal your date for a dance?"

I was looking at Zane when he shrugged. "Up to her." But I could tell he wasn't too happy about it.

I drew in a deep breath. Oh, Ethan. Why? And why now? When I looked over at him, his eyebrows were raised in question. "Dance?"

I felt awkward as hell. "Um, sure." He didn't try reaching for my hand, and I was glad. That wouldn't have been cool. And where the hell was *his* date anyway? He led us right to the middle of the crowd, far away from eyesight, considering it was dark and crowded near the center.

My stomach clenched tightly as Ethan faced me on the dance floor and slid his hands onto the small of my back, pulling me close. But I didn't want to be too close, not after I'd seen the way his eyes had looked at me back there. It wouldn't be fair to the guy who'd actually asked me out. I wrapped my arms around his neck hesitantly, not wanting to get too close. I was afraid my cool exterior would blow away if I got too close.

And his gaze...oh, Lord, I could barely take the heat of it. I couldn't look him in the eyes anymore and dropped mine to look at his neck. "I meant what I said back there...you look spectacular."

Why in hell was my heart speeding up? *Don't look at him!* "I meant it too, Ethan. Black's your color." What? I really said that out loud?

"So why did you come with Zane?"

Oh, I wanted to say *Because someone else didn't ask me*. Instead, I said, "He asked." There. There could be no misconstruing my words.

"Anything wrong, Val?"

Quickly, I said, "Nope."

He lowered his head a little, forcing me to look in his eyes or else risk looking like a real jerk. "You sure?" I just nodded, cautious. "You and Zane look pretty good together. Did you plan the outfits?"

I started laughing. "You've known Zane a lot longer than I have. Does he look like the kind of guy who'd plan outfits with a girl?"

He grinned. "No. Guess not."

"You and...that girl look nice too." I wasn't sure I meant it, but I needed to be polite.

We were quiet for a few moments, and I rested my head against his shoulder. Then he said, "Mercy."

"What?"

"Mercy. Her name's Mercy."

"Your date?"

"Yeah." I was painfully aware of his hands shifting position on my back. Then he moved them up farther, pressing me closer, and I felt like I could barely breathe, simply because I was so nervous. I felt his breath against my ear, and he said, "I'm glad you're my friend, Valerie."

I wasn't quite sure what to say. Did he even mean it? Or did he mean something else entirely? I just said, "I am too," but there was no way I was going to look at him. I felt his lips against my neck. Was I imagining that? The fingers of my right hand tensed against his neck so

that my nails were pressing into the flesh, and I was tempted...so tempted to look at him. I knew if I did...

But then I heard Zane asking to cut in. Ethan let go, and I could tell he was reluctant. "See you later, Val." But it was for the best.

\* \* \*

Zane was still laughing as we walked up to his dorm room. The DJ had waited longer than five minutes to play the Kid Rock song, but he'd done it as he'd promised. I played it off, feeling more like my old self again. Zane thought it was hilarious seeing how some of the more prim girls reacted, although there were plenty of other girls (and guys) who loved the song choice. And I was glad he didn't take it as a signal that *I* wanted to be *fucked*, to use the Kid's word.

He'd wanted to take me somewhere for a soda afterward, but all the on-campus places were closed. I told him that was fine, that I'd had a good time. But then he told me he had a variety of sodas in the little fridge in his room, and he'd been told on good authority that I liked Diet Dr. Pepper and Diet Squirt. "Is that true?"

I grinned as we left the student center. "Is it true you *have* some?"

"Guess you'll just have to find out."

He unlocked the door to his room and turned on the light, then motioned me in. "Hey, thanks for comin' with me to the dance."

"Yeah. Thanks for inviting me. I had fun."

The little refrigerator sat between the two twin beds in the room, and he walked over to it and squatted. He pulled out some cans and said, "Diet Dr. Pepper. Diet Squirt. And a little somethin' else if you feel like it." He pulled out a two-liter bottle of Sprite.

I walked closer and giggled. "Oh, yeah. When I'm feeling edgy, I down the regular Sprite. That's so hardcore."

He laughed and stood, then unscrewed the lid. He held it in front of my nose, and the smell hit me right away. It was liquor, and when I looked again, the liquid in the bottle clung to the sides longer than water as it moved, one of those telltale signs, and it certainly wasn't carbonated. "Vodka."

I nodded. "Oh. Well...I think I'll stick with Squirt for now if that's okay with you."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." He took a swig from the bottle and then put the lid back on. "But if it's okay with you, I'm gonna take this damn tie off. Enough already." He had it off in no time and then he said, "Why don't you take off your coat?"

"I'm a little cold from the walk."

He sat on the side of the bed. "Then come here and I'll warm you up." He pulled his suit jacket off and draped it on the bed.

I took in a slow deep breath. This was a moment of truth. I'd been pushing my earlier encounter with Ethan to the back of my mind ever since it had happened. Why had he felt the need to confuse me so much? It was unfair, unfair to both me and Zane.

Well, I decided, Ethan had had plenty of chances, and putting the moves on me when I was out on a date with someone else—when we were *both* on dates with other people—was completely uncool. And for all I knew, nothing between us would ever happen. Zane was sweet and good looking, and I wasn't going to spurn him for a last minute promise that might lead to nothing. So I walked over to the bed and sat next to him.

God, that cologne still smelled good. It wasn't too strong, but it was so...woody, earthy, yummy. "Did you want your pop?" I shook my head. I wasn't ready for a cold drink yet. "You still haven't taken your coat off."

I smiled slightly, feeling awkward now, but I shrugged the coat off my shoulders. He helped me slide it off the rest of the way, but his lips were on my shoulder beside the dress strap before I even took the coat the rest of the way off my arms, and it just fell to the bed.

I sucked in a breath involuntarily. I hadn't expected my response to be as rapid as it was. I'd been suffering from rigid nipples thanks to the cold anyway, but this time I felt them responding to the touch of his lips. This was dangerous. I could tell that just from one touch of his warm lips. And then his hands were around my waist, and he continued kissing a trail up my neck until he reached my lips and I gladly, almost desperately, took him in. Oh, holy fucking shit. Wow. I had never been kissed like that before. The last kiss I'd had was from a guy who'd been wearing braces and was a little sloppy, for starters. Zane, though...well, his mouth tasted like vodka, and that wasn't bad. I hadn't been expecting it, but I was okay with it. And he was tentative at first, as though teasing me, and then he full on assaulted me with his tongue. He was in command, damn it, and I was his. That tongue of his stroked me and played with me, and my mind wondered how that would feel everywhere else.

I could hardly keep up, and I was breathless. I had wound the fingers of my right hand in his soft hair, while my other hand curled around his warm neck. And I was so into the sensations he was stirring in my mouth that it took a little bit for me to register that his hands had moved up from the small of my back to the middle, and he was tugging at the zipper.

But that pulled me out of it and back to the present. "Wait, Zane."

"Hmm?"

"I...uh, I'm not ready for that yet."

I shouldn't have worded it that way, because he nodded, stopped unzipping my dress, and began kissing my neck again. But as my eyes closed, enjoying his lips back on my neck, I registered the look in his eyes. God...his eyes had been dark and sleepy looking, sexy. And another wow moment. He somehow knew all the right spots to kiss on my neck and throat, because I was feeling like I never had before...*never*. He eased me back on the bed until he was on top of me, but he wasn't trying to unzip my dress anymore. Still...my body was reacting in a way that it never had to a kiss before, and I knew...I just knew if I didn't stop now, I'd likely do something I'd regret, especially since his hand that had been holding me on the hip was inching upwards.

It was in that moment that I sensed a deep well of passion residing within me, something I had little control of and something that could easily take control of me if I wasn't careful. Again, too, my background, my naïveté...I wasn't emotionally ready for sex, especially with someone I didn't love. Lust? Hell, yeah. Zane had it all over most other guys on campus. But I'd promised to myself a long time before this moment that I wouldn't have sex with someone I didn't love.

I must have been pressing against his chest or maybe I was squirming. Maybe I'd stopped responding to his kiss as my brain battled with my loins. But he knew something was up.

"What's wrong, Val? You okay?"

I took a deep breath and tried to sit up. He had to first because half his body was on me, and he did. He looked concerned. I said, "This is getting, uh...pretty hot."

A small smile crossed his face, but those eyes—they were still dark and steamy. "I know. Don't you like it?"

I couldn't help but smile back, but this was serious and I wanted his attention. "That's the problem. I *do*."

"So how's that a problem?" His voice was gravelly, and one of his hands continued to roam my back, much like a runner continuing to jog in place at a red light not wanting to lose his level of intensity—he didn't want to lose the point of passion we'd already hit. But I was getting ready to pour a bucket of water all over us.

"I need to be straight with you, Zane." God, it was hard looking in his eyes, but I had to. "I can't have sex with you."

His brows furrowed, but he acted like my words weren't still fully registering with him through the haze. Still, he was trying to be classy. "Who said anything about sex?"

I felt my mouth open, but there were no words. I hadn't expected him to say that. "Oh."

"Why don't we just see where this leads?"

I would have smiled if it hadn't been so serious for me. "That's what I'm talking about, Zane. That *is* where this is leading."

I can't describe the look that came over his face. It was one of shock and triumph, but that passionate animalistic look in his eyes was still there. "Seriously?"

"Doesn't it feel that way to you?"

He let out a small laugh. "Jesus. You kidding? I'm always ready for sex. Doesn't take much."

I started giggling. Had I awakened a monster? "I...uh...just wanted to make that clear."

His hand stroked my cheek. "I promise I would make you feel better than you ever have before."

My breath caught in my throat. After the way he had kissed me, I had no doubt that he could make me feel like the woman I was becoming. I lowered my head and closed my eyes. "I know you would. But I'm just...not in the right place." I didn't want to tell him about the silly rigid moral code I was living under.

I felt his hand on my chin, urging me to look at him. "It's Ethan, isn't it?"

What the hell was I supposed to say? I'd observed many a time that everyone *but* Ethan was able to see how I felt about the guy. So now I was considering lying to Zane just to be nice, but then I would be insulting his intelligence. No...instead, I was going to skirt the question. But to do that, I'd have to be completely honest about myself. "That's not it, Zane. It's..." I took a deep breath. "A long time ago, I vowed to myself that I would never have sex with someone I didn't love. I came from a pretty religious family, and we would watch TV shows where characters would just have sex because they were attracted to each other, but there was no emotional connection. So my parents stressed that sex is a beautiful thing, but it should be with someone you love." I put my hand on his. "I *do* care very much about you, Zane. I consider you my friend and, I think, with time, we could become even better friends. And who knows? Maybe those feelings would grow. But right now...I only consider you my friend. Please don't take that wrong."

He didn't look angry, hurt, or upset, but I did see something register with him. "Oh, God. You're a virgin, aren't you?"

Was it *that* obvious? I'd been as honest as I could bring myself to be up to this point. I wasn't going to lie now. I felt my cheeks grow pink. "Yeah."

He pulled me into a hug and just held me close. After a while, he said, "Then I'm glad we didn't. Losing your virginity in a tiny bed in a dorm room with paper-thin walls and the chance

that the roommate could show up at any second wouldn't be something you'd want to look back on and remember as your first time."

I giggled. "Probably not."

He pulled my face up gently with his hands so I could look him in the eye. "You ever decide your feelings are enough that I'm the man, I promise I will treat you right."

*Oh.* That knocked the wind out of me. I'd never expected Zane to be so chivalrous, and yet he was above and beyond. It was lame, but I said, "Thanks." And he kissed me again, but this time it was sweet and without his tongue.

"So...you wanna hang and watch a little TV?"

I was getting the weird vibe that maybe Zane wanted to pursue an actual relationship with me. I would need to think about it. I wasn't completely against it, but I wasn't sure if I was ready. I still had the stupid Ethan hang up, and I'd need to dump it before I could fully give myself to someone else. That much I knew. Still...Zane was a nice guy and I respected him. He was sweet and considerate, and he seemed to genuinely care. "I'd like to, but I'm really tired. I should go."

"You wanna take your Squirt with you?"

I laughed. "Maybe."

He kissed me again, this time with less passion, but it was slow and sweet. The door to his room slammed open and made me jump.

Yeah, it was Ethan.

I sat up straighter, realizing in that moment that the zipper on the back of my dress was still gaping open, but there was nothing else amiss. My hair was probably a little out of place, but nothing crazy. "Uh...if I'm interrupting something—"

Of course, he was interrupting something, and he knew it. But Zane, ever gentlemanly, said, "Nope. We were just getting ready to walk back to her dorm room." He stood up and slipped his jacket on, then offered his hand to me. I took it and stood up while he picked up my coat so I could slide my arms in. It would have been so easy for him to make a production out of zipping my dress up, but he didn't. He was calm and matter of fact. "Let's get you home."

"Night, Ethan," I said.

He said *good night* back, but there was something in his eyes...and I hoped Zane wasn't looking, because it wasn't a look he was meant to see. It was only for me.



## Chapter Ten

THE NEXT WEEK, Zane's affections cooled. I wasn't sure why, and I wasn't necessarily against it, but I didn't understand it. So, one of the times he would have normally met me to walk back to the dorms after class, I went down the hall where his class was and waited for the students to get out. When he saw me, he said, "Oh, hey, Val."

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He acted like he was going to blow me off but then he said, "Yeah, okay...we can talk."

It wasn't going to become any more comfortable. We just had to talk it out. So I said, "What's going on?"

He shrugged as he walked beside me. "Look, Val. I really like you, and I know you like me back, but let's be honest here. I had the entire weekend to think about it, and...as long as you harbor feelings for Ethan, I won't stand an ice cube's chance in hell." I didn't say anything. "Am I right?"

Yeah, he probably was. But I'd been willing to give it a shot. I respected Zane enough for that. The idea made me sad, but I wanted to be up front with him. "I don't know. I guess."

He stopped walking, and we stood under a tree with bare branches overhanging the sidewalk. The sun was trying to shine through the clouds that were making their lazy way across the sky. He brushed my cheek with his thumb and held the side of my face. "You're a sweet girl, Val. You'll make someone happy someday. If you decide I'm that guy down the road, great. But I don't want to spend my time competing with some idealized version of Ethan in your head." Did I look as pained as I was starting to feel? I must have been because he pulled me into his arms. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Val, but do you understand where I'm coming from?"

My voice was quiet. "I guess."

"Am I just imagining it? Do you have feelings for Ethan, or am I just reading way too much into it?"

No...he was right. Absolutely right. And I understood where he was coming from. He didn't want to play second fiddle, nor should he have to. Zane was a good guy, and any girl who snagged him would be damn lucky. Just the way he'd treated me during our short time together told me he'd be a find. But he was right. If Ethan so much as snapped his fingers, I would forget Zane in a heartbeat. And that wouldn't be fair to him. I shook my head. "I don't think you're reading too much into it." I wasn't going to break his heart further and talk about those feelings, and I wasn't going to lie.

He let go of me and held out his hand. "Then friends?"

God, he was being so cool about the whole thing, and I wondered in the back of my mind if he and Ethan had had a similar conversation. I shook his hand as well. "Yeah. Friends."

We continued walking back to the dorms. "Maybe it's too soon, but...is your roommate seeing anyone?"

"Jennifer? I don't think so. She went with a guy to the dance, though, so maybe."

He nodded and we continued walking. "No biggie. Just figured I'd ask."

And somehow, Zane and I made it through that awkward phase to become solid friends. Ethan, though...after expressing newfound interest in me at the dance, he was nowhere to be

found. Zane and I wound up eating meals alone, sometimes with Jennifer, other times without, but Ethan often had reasons not to be there. Cold again.

That Thursday at dinner, Jennifer, Zane, and I sat at a table, and I noticed Zane *was* starting to get friendlier with her. I was okay with that. He wanted a relationship, and I wanted him to be happy, so I didn't intend to stand in the way. Jennifer seemed distracted, though. Halfway through our meal, she said, "Val, I can't stand it anymore. I have to tell you something."

I set down my fork. The girl was really upset, and that's when I noticed she hadn't really eaten much. "What?"

"You know Charlotte?"

I almost started laughing. "As in *the roommate from hell*?"

"Yeah."

I nodded. She said, "I saw her walking in the library with Ethan, and they were holding hands."

She could have gotten the same reaction from me by kicking me in the stomach with steel-toed boots. It took me a few moments to catch my breath. "Ethan and *Charlotte*?"

"Yeah..." Her voice grew weak. "And...I can't tell you anything else."

"Oh, no, Jennifer, you can't do that. What else did you see?"

"Uh...crap. They...were kissing."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. No, that was okay. That was fine. Yeah, it was. Maybe it was the kick in the teeth I needed to finally move on from the stupid obsession I had with Ethan. Knowing that he had no interest in me aside from toying with me as though I were a mouse to his cat...that was a revelation I needed. "Okay." I picked my fork back up and started scooting the green beans around that side of the plate.

"You okay, Val?" Zane lowered his head, trying to catch my eye.

I looked up. I wasn't going to force a fake smile, but I *was* going to do my best to sound optimistic. "Yeah. I'm fine."

He took in a breath, and I saw him clench his jaw. "Okay."

"Wait. What? What are you hiding, Zane?"

He looked shocked. He hadn't expected me to be able to catch it in my state. "Nothing you want to know, Val."

"Yeah, I do."

"You don't. You think you do, but you don't."

"Damn it, Zane, haven't we been completely honest with each other about everything?"

"Don't play that card, Val." I just stared him down. I could sense Jennifer wanting to get up to avoid what would happen next, but she stayed. Zane sighed. "They...uh...they've been pretty hot and heavy this week."

"What about Mercy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mercy—the girl he took to the dance."

"I have no idea. All I know is he and this girl Charlotte hooked up Sunday at the library and have been inseparable ever since." He pointed the tines of his fork at me. "Don't ask me to tell you anything else, Valerie Quinn."

In spite of (or maybe because of) the heavy emotions I'd been experiencing, the way he said it made me laugh...as though I'd been torturing a confession out of him, one that would get him into some heavy shit with Ethan. Maybe, though, he was wanting to spare my feelings.

Whatever the case, I'd respect his wishes.

And I didn't say another word, but I was growing angrier and angrier. Fine if Ethan didn't want me, but why did he have to pick Charlotte? He knew about the bad blood between her and me. Hell, he'd even defended me against her the night after the concert. Was he trying to become my enemy?

On our way back to the dorms, Zane asked, "You okay?"

I shrugged. "Yeah."

We got to our building, and Zane said to Jennifer, "Do you mind if I steal her for a few minutes?"

She smiled. "Of course not. I have a huge test to study for anyway."

We stood outside while Jennifer went in through the glass doors. "What?" I asked.

"Seriously—you gonna be okay?"

I shrugged. "Hell if I know. I'm just wondering what the hell is wrong with Ethan."

He chuckled. "I've often wondered that myself. But...in all seriousness, Val...I think what's wrong with Ethan is...*you*."

"*Me*?"

"Yeah. He has...some fucked up notion about wanting to keep you pure and innocent."

"What?"

"Yeah...he calls you his *muse*."

Now I was floored. "*What?!*" He just nodded and shrugged his shoulders. "So exactly what the hell does Charlotte Edwards have to do with anything?"

Zane smiled, closed his eyes, and shook his head. "The guy's got needs, Val, and when little Miss Mercy didn't exactly put out and Miss Edwards offered to polish his knob, how could he say *no*?"

"But...of all people..."

"Hey. I never said he was smart."

I couldn't help the glare I knew was forming on my face. "Or loyal."

"Hey...I'm not gonna make apologies for him. I think he's being stupid, frankly. But I really do think he's fucked in the head when it comes to you. I think he's doing this shit out of a misguided attempt to keep you on a pedestal."

"That *is* fucked up."

"Not as much as you'd think." He put his arm around my shoulders and started leading me toward the door again. "But let's get you inside. You're shivering."

Yeah...but I was feeling colder inside.

\* \* \*

Later that night, I decided I just needed to talk to Ethan. I couldn't stand this anymore. Ethan Richards had put a bullet through my heart, and I wanted some resolution. So I texted Zane and asked him to let me know if or when Ethan was there. He texted back: *Not here yet. Will let u no.*

So I tried to focus on reading my Art Appreciation textbook. Later on, though, I got another text: *He's here and she's leaving.*

That was my opportunity. Jennifer had already fallen asleep, so I wouldn't have to explain where I was going. I just grabbed my key, tucked it into my jeans pocket, and raced down the hall to the stairs. Our buildings, along with one other, were connected through a glass walkway at the ground level, and I ran down the stairs of my building on the far side where the walkway was. Just as I got to the ground floor, Charlotte was starting to walk into our building. She spotted me and stood in the doorway, blocking my way out.

I tried to keep my voice calm when I said, "Excuse me." It was icy, but it wasn't hostile.

Charlotte wore a clingy blue satiny dress with a low neckline. It didn't take much imagination to see the curves of her body, and she seemed confident showing off her cleavage. Her lips curled into a sneer. "Planning to see Ethan?"

God, how'd she know? That pissed me off. "That's really none of your business." I got closer to her. "Excuse me." This time I stated it more as a demand than a request.

"Why? You think if you go up there now, he'll accept you with open arms?"

"Why do you care?" I could feel a fury building inside me, the likes of which I'd never felt before.

She smiled and leaned against the doorframe. If it had been during the day, she wouldn't have been able to get away with blocking the doorway, but this late at night, there weren't many girls in a hurry to get back to their rooms. "Ethan and I have had a little bit of fun together. He's tasted me and, believe me, he'll be begging for more."

So...was she trying to tell me she and Ethan had slept together? Whether or not it was true, I knew she was trying to make me angry. I had to try to keep my cool. But I couldn't help myself. "If you're so *tasty*, why don't any of your other boyfriends ever come back for seconds?"

I could tell from her eyes that I'd hit a soft spot. She stayed calm, though. I hadn't expected her to. I thought she would come at me like she had the night she moved out. And I had been ready for that; I was prepared to fight if I needed to. This confrontation had been a long time coming between the two of us. "You're so smug. I just want to slap that look off your face. But I know you're just upset because Ethan wanted *me*, not you, so you're just jealous. I'll give him what he wants."

I started laughing. I probably shouldn't have, but I couldn't help myself. "I don't think he really wanted your chlamydia."

She was starting to squirm. She moved out of the doorway just slightly to get closer to me. I still couldn't have just gone around without shoving her aside, though. She lowered her voice. "Valerie, why does it bother you so much?" She wound a finger through a lock of her black hair. "At least now I know why you thought he was so cute. You should see him in bed. He fucks like a stallion and gets this wild look in his eyes—"

"I don't want to hear it." I moved forward so that we were close. "Excuse me, Charlotte." I didn't want to hear about her pleasurable night with the guy who should have been *my* boyfriend. I was tired of her games, so I shoved my way between her and the door. She didn't make it easy, and she grabbed my arm to pull me back.

"I'm not through talking to you, Valerie Quinn." She hit me on the jawbone. It wasn't very hard, but I hadn't been expecting it, and I lost my balance.

When I regained my footing, I said, "Charlotte, I've had enough of you."

Now...keep in mind I was a young, inexperienced thing from a small town. I'd never physically fought another soul in my life. Not only did I not know what I was doing, I felt like an idiot. But something my little brother had told me once stuck with me. He'd said if you let the bully hit you, he'll keep hitting you. Hit the bully back, though, and it's all over. And that's what I thought Charlotte was—just an overgrown bully. So, like it or not, I thought I needed to fight back. And that's what I did. I punched her in the stomach. I didn't punch her hard, but I didn't want her to think I'd just cower and run off like a scared little girl. She wrapped her hands around her stomach. Hoping they were the last words I'd ever have to speak to her, I got close to

her face and said, "Don't mess with me, Charlotte." I started to leave again through the open doorway.

I'd thought we would be done, but she grabbed my hair from behind and pulled me onto the floor. Holy shit...that hurt. It felt as though tiny needles were poking through my skull. When I hit the floor, so did the back of my head.

Before I could even register what was happening, she was squatting over my stomach. "Valerie, you're mine now. And Ethan's not here to save you this time."

I tried to fight back, but she'd pinned my arms down with her knees, and I couldn't move. Charlotte had a snide look on her face. "First, let me tell you about my evening." I started to squirm, but I couldn't move. "We went out to eat first. He looked good enough to eat. And those eyes...mmm...so I grabbed his hand under the table and made him touch me. And guess what? I had my first orgasm right there in the restaurant. But all that did was make him want me more, so when we got to his truck, I let him have me anyway he wanted."

I was repulsed. I did *not* want to hear about Charlotte's sex play with *my* Ethan. I don't know how I did it, and maybe it was because she wasn't paying attention anymore, but with all my force, I arched my back and managed to gain enough wiggle room that I could throw her off. And then I got on top of her. "I told you, Charlotte, I don't want to hear it." I growled at her and then got off. I walked away, sure for some stupid reason that she would leave me alone this time. I was now walking down the wide walkway between the dorms. I paused and watched her through the glass door and, even though she'd stood up, she stayed her distance. Finally, I turned around and started walking to Ethan's dorm room, and I started to feel better. I didn't know if I was hurting worse physically or emotionally, not that it mattered. I'd need some time to heal up, but first I wanted to finish what I'd planned. Stupid me, though. I was lost in my thoughts and wasn't paying attention to my surroundings, and Charlotte must have slipped her heels off, because as I walked past the humming soda machines, I couldn't hear her feet on the polished tile. She jumped on me from behind, throwing me onto the floor. She held me down, with me lying on my stomach. She wormed her fingers through my hair and started bashing my head against the floor.

Oh, God, *that* hurt. I tried to twist my head so my nose wasn't taking the brunt of the blow, but my forehead was getting plenty. Even though I was pushing against her hand, she'd managed to throw my head into the floor once, and it hurt like hell. The second time, I knew what to expect and was fighting it, but I felt lightheaded and nauseous.

"Why, Charlotte? What did I ever do to you to make you hate me so badly?"

She snarled and paused. "You think you're so perfect. You do everything right. You're so nice, and you're this perfect little fucking virgin. And then, to top it all off, you just waltz into our room mid semester with one of the hottest guys on campus. Sorry, but a little goody-two-shoes like you doesn't deserve a guy that hot with a cock like that. You wouldn't have any idea what to do with the damn thing."

I growled again, using the muscles in my neck to push against her hand, but it was becoming a losing battle. "And he wanted *me*, Valerie. In fact, he said he wished you were more like me. He could never love you. You play too sweet. You don't want to get your hands dirty. And so it'll never happen."

Her words hurt worse than her physical beating was. And, believing that Ethan might have actually said those words, I lost hope. She sensed that and said, "Loss for words, bitch?"

*Slam!* went my head into the floor again, and I saw a white flash.

“Get the fuck off her, Charlotte.” Zane...oh, thank goodness. He must have started to worry when I didn’t arrive right away.

I lay there and felt her being pulled off my body, but I was losing consciousness. I drifted off, and the next thing I remembered was Ethan rolling me over, holding my head in his hands. My eyes closed again, and I heard him say, “Zane, let’s get her up to our room.” I couldn’t remember that trip, only that they helped me—mostly carried me—back to their dorm room.

When I opened my eyes again, I noticed I was on Ethan’s bed, and I didn’t know where Zane was. “Val, are you okay?” He brushed my hair off the bloody mess on the right side of my head. I blinked but didn’t say anything. “Good thing we came when we did.”

“Ethan...she said...”

Gently, he laid his finger on my lips. “Shh...don’t talk.”

Zane came back in the room with a wet washcloth, and Ethan wiped the blood off my face. I winced. It hurt.

Ethan looked at Zane. “Maybe we should take her to the hospital.”

I tried to sit up. “No. I can’t. I don’t have any money, and they’ll ask questions, and—”

“Val, don’t worry about it. You’ve been through too much tonight already.”

I shook my head, sending new waves of pain through my bones.

“Enough. We’re going.”

I sighed but then told them we’d need my dad’s insurance card. It was in my purse back in my dorm room. Zane went to fetch my purse. I gave him my room key, but he said he’d give Jennifer a chance to answer the door first. He didn’t want her hitting him over the head with a chair or something. While he was gone, Ethan stroked the side of my head that hadn’t been beaten in. “God, Val...this is all my fault. I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s not, Ethan. She’s psychotic. Always has been, I guess.”

“Yeah, but she probably wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t...been with her.”

I tried to smile. “That’s true...asshole.”

“I guess I deserve that.”

“I was just joking.”

“I wasn’t.” We were quiet then, and I closed my eyes, trying not to think of Charlotte wrapped around Ethan. Man, she’d known how to hurt me. The physical wounds would heal, but I didn’t know about the ones she’d inflicted on my heart.

I was having a hard time holding onto wakefulness, but soon I was in the emergency room, waiting for someone to look at me. When the doctor came in the room, he kicked the men out. He believed I had a minor concussion and said that someone should wake me up every few hours. If I didn’t wake up, they needed to call the doctor. He also treated my gashes and then sent me on my way. They said they’d bill my dad’s insurance. I needed to call my parents the next day and let them know what happened. I knew they’d be okay with the bill, but I wanted them to know the details instead of getting the bill or the statement from the insurance and wondering what happened.

It was late when we got back to the dorms...early morning, actually. Ethan said, “I want you staying in our room, okay? We need to keep an eye on you like the doctor said.” I didn’t protest.

Zane asked, “You need me to fetch anything from your room?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

He nodded. “I’m gonna go shower then.”

Ethan knelt over and untied my shoes for me. "I want you to lie down and try to rest. I'll wake you up every few hours like the doctor said."

"Ethan?" He looked up at me from where he squatted on the floor. He raised his eyebrows, waiting for me to speak. "Thanks."

He frowned. "I don't know what for. But...you're welcome." He stood. "Now, lie back, and I'll pull the covers over you."

I did as he asked, and he pulled the sheet and blanket over my body. He sat on the bed next to me and moved my hair off my forehead. "Tell me what happened. You think you can do that?"

I sighed. "You really want to know?" He nodded, so I strained to recall the events that had occurred earlier that evening, from the time I'd gotten to the bottom of the flight of stairs in my building up until he and Zane found me in the hallway. "But...what hurt the worst was when Charlotte said you told her you wished I was more like her."

"She *said* that?"

"Yeah."

He leaned closer to me. "I never said that, Val. I would never say that. I don't ever want you to change." He stroked my cheek with his finger. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"If you didn't say that, I don't need to."

"Oh, yeah, I do need your forgiveness. I never should have gone out with her but...she was so goddamned tempting..."

I hadn't needed to hear that either, and if he wanted my forgiveness, he needed to shut up. But, in that moment, he looked so vulnerable. For the first time since I'd met Ethan, he looked open...exposed, and he'd done it on purpose. He was laying himself bare to me, for me, and gone was that glint in his eyes he'd usually carried with him. He was pure then, and so I let my guard down too. "Ethan...I have to tell you something, something I should have told you so long ago, and I hope you'll understand." His eyes just looked at me, the question drawn in them. He didn't need to ask. So I continued. "I...care more for you than I've ever let on. I thought you just considered me a friend, so I left it at that, but I can't bear it any longer. I want you to know and then, well...where it goes from here is up to you."

His eyes searched mine. "Are you saying you...love me?"

I'd already said too much, so I just nodded. He smiled. "Val, oh, God, Val." He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. "You have no fucking idea. But...after Brad, and then Zane...I just thought you wanted to be friends with me. I had no idea."

I chuckled, but it hurt my head. "Ethan...do you remember the day we met?" He nodded. "My sitting behind you in class was no accident." He raised his eyebrows, but I kept talking. "And then you invited me to that concert. What prompted you to ask *me*?"

He grinned. "Stupid ass Zane was supposed to come with me, but some little sorority girl in a miniskirt invited him to a barbecue. He couldn't pass up a cute little blonde piece of ass. So you told me you were into metal and I had an extra ticket. Perfect timing. What about you, though? What do you mean sitting behind me *was no accident*? And then...why the fuck did you go to the dance with Zane?"

"Why'd *you* go with that Mercy chick?"

"I already told you. I thought you and me were strictly *friends only*. Besides, you're...so pure. I didn't want to...soil you." Had I not been so tired and achy, I would have protested, but he continued. "And...well... a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." I giggled again, and my head throbbed again. "Are the pain meds from the hospital wearing off?"

“He said I shouldn’t take anything else for a few more hours.”

Ethan nodded. “You’re avoiding my other question.”

“Oh...well, I...uh...I noticed you in class. You were the best-looking guy on campus, so I wanted to get to know you.”

He smiled and looked almost embarrassed. That was a first. “Really?” I smiled back. And as his expression grew more serious, he touched my chin and lowered his lips to mine. I closed my eyes. I had been waiting for this moment for so long. His lips were soft and warm and as his parted, mine responded. In just seconds, I was tasting the sweetness of him, and my head started to spin. In those few moments, I was aware of his breath on my cheek, of my heart beating, the blood pumping through my veins. My hands grabbed his t-shirt into fists, not wanting to ever let him go.

My spinning head, though...that wasn’t necessarily due to the breathtaking kiss. When he opened his eyes, he said, “You need to rest.” He reached in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out his cell phone. “I’m gonna wake you up every couple of hours, okay?” I nodded and felt my eyes closing. But I didn’t fall asleep until I felt him lie down next to me. He draped his arm over my waist, and the weight of it made me feel secure.

I drifted into a peaceful sleep. Not only had I kissed the man I’d fallen in love with, but we’d finally bared our souls, shared our deepest feelings with one another, and now I felt closer to him than ever before. His arm holding me close all night long reassured me of the new love we shared as well as our enduring friendship.



## Chapter Eleven

### Present

“BREATHE, BABE. THAT’S it. Through your nose, out your mouth. You can do it.”

Yeah, easy for him to say, but I bit my tongue. He was just repeating what the childbirth coach had told him in our classes. I couldn’t help it that the pain was making me pissed off.

But as hard as the earlier phases had been, the last hour had been excruciating. The nurse kept telling me not to push, that I wasn’t ready, so I had to fight the urge, and breathing was the only way. But I was still fighting the pain. They’d supposedly put a painkiller in my IV, but I wasn’t feeling it.

Finally, the fucking doctor arrived. I wanted to tell him I was sorry I’d disturbed his sleep, but he was trying to be cheerful, something he hadn’t always managed in his office. He examined me, shoving a latex-gloved hand inside to measure the progress of my uncooperative cervix, and he said, “You’re ready.”

I saw one of the nurses wheeling in all kinds of stuff—a table for the baby, complete with a lamp on top. I almost laughed, thinking it looked like one of the heating lamps at a fast food restaurant. Then she wheeled in a stainless steel table full of instruments, much like I was sure they used during the Inquisition. The doctor sat on a rolling stool and turned around to examine his tools of torture while the bedside nurse rattled off instructions. She told me to wait until the next contraction and then to push. She and Ethan would count to ten out loud, and I was to push as hard as I possibly could for the duration of the countdown while pulling my knees to my chest. After three tries, then I could rest until the next contraction.

And then I understood why labor was so painful—so that when it was time to push, it was a relief.

And it was. I heard Ethan and the nurse cheering me on while the doctor, in his calm monotone voice, kept urging me to “Come on.” But after the three pushes I lay my head back on the pillow and tried to gather my strength. Ethan looked at me, and I saw fear in his eyes. I’d never seen him look like that before, and it almost scared me, especially because he was trying—and *failing*—to put on a brave face. Was something wrong? He brushed my sweat-soaked hair away from my face with his hands, and I wasn’t able to worry anymore as the next contraction overcame me.

This time, I couldn’t even hear them counting as I pushed with muscles I hadn’t known I had. I could feel them bearing down on that little life inside me, trying to force it out into the world. “I see your baby’s head. Come on, now, Valerie. One more good, strong push.” I did as the doctor asked and then Ethan let go of my hand to go stand beside the doctor. “Okay, now, stop pushing.” He started doing something with the baby, but I rested my head on the pillow. I was exhausted. When I opened my eyes, I saw Ethan with scissors in his hand as he cut the baby’s cord.

The doctor looked over at me. “You’re the proud parents of a beautiful baby boy.” The doctor then placed the baby on my chest. He was covered in fluids, and his little face was balling up, ready to express his displeasure at his new surroundings, but I felt a tear form in my eye as I knew this little man was going to be the most important male in my life from this day forward.

That night, after hours of nurses doing this, that, and the other to my baby, having weighed, cleaned, and dressed the child, he was lying in my arms. He and I were making our best attempts at breastfeeding, and I felt like I was failing miserably. My once modest-sized breasts were now huge and trying to block his nostrils. One of the nurses who had been annoying the shit out of me earlier with her bossiness had now come back in the room. She was about to leave as her shift was almost over, but she was checking in. She showed me how I could press on my breast right by the baby's nose so he could breathe and nurse at the same time.

And did it hurt. She promised me I'd get used to it. I was too tired to argue.

While I held little Christopher in my arms, I looked over at Ethan snoozing in the chair. He'd been on the phone earlier, calling everyone we knew to let them know he was now a proud papa. Tomorrow, we'd have visitors like crazy until it was time to leave. It would be nice to see the people who cared about us and the baby—Brad, Zane, Nick; my parents; my brother and his wife; June and Jason. For now, though, I needed some time alone.

I was tired but happy, and I knew I was beginning the most important job of my life...as the mother of this precious child.

## Chapter Twelve

### Past

MY FEELINGS FOR Ethan were more open after we'd confessed to one another. At first, he seemed apprehensive about kissing me, but I wouldn't let him use that as an excuse. If he got close enough to me, my lips were on his.

I never did see Charlotte again. Not once. I suspected Zane or Ethan had something to do with it, but I was too stupid to ask. I didn't think about it again until much later. But the first week after, I'd look closely at my surroundings before stepping into an empty hallway. I usually managed to be out in the open when there were lots other people, so I felt a little safer.

By midterms, Zane was calling us "you two," as in "Are you two ready to go to dinner yet?" And he started dating Jennifer too, but that was over by spring break. Ethan's mom friended me on Facebook, and she and I talked on Skype once in a while. I really liked her, but she didn't seem to know how to be a mother to Ethan. But what did I know? I myself had never been a mother before.

Our relationship started getting a little hotter, but he never tried a thing on me. I was okay with that, because I didn't know if either of us was ready for something more. He seemed to want to keep our relationship in sweet, wholesome territory, and—when I was ready—I was going to call him on it.

One night just after midterms, Ethan and I were in my dorm room doing a little studying, but mostly talking. I was taking a class called Poetry of the Twentieth Century, so I was explaining to him what we were studying in class. Out of the blue, he said, "Didn't you tell me once that you write poetry?"

I smiled and nodded. *Yeah...a long time ago.* But I was just happy he remembered.

"So let's hear it."

"No way. I'm not reading it to you. But if you want, I can get out some of my notebooks, and you can read some of it."

He grinned. "Okay. I'm game."

I got up off my bed and opened a drawer at my desk to pull out several notebooks. I tossed them on the desktop. "Have at it."

He looked down at the notebooks and then up to me. "All these?"

I grinned. "Yep. I have more at home."

His eyes grew wide. "Why don't you pick a few for me to read?"

Oh...I'd overwhelmed him. So I picked the notebooks up and sat back on my bed. I grabbed the green one and started leafing through it. God...this was like ripping my chest open and letting him look inside, but I'd promised. So I found a poem I'd written about him. It wasn't the best I'd ever written, but it was from my heart. It was called "You Are." I handed him the notebook turned to that page. I just watched his face as he read it.

How can I say the words I want to say?

My emotions...pitifully mute.

I find it impossible to express myself with words.

You're special to me.

I don't have to change for you.  
Everything about me is right for  
you.  
My hair, my mind, my silliness.  
And I love you just the way you are.

You're spring to me...  
A warm, gentle breeze  
slowly brushing the tree tops,  
making silent waves on the placid water.

You are the stars.  
You give me hope.  
You surround me entirely  
and now I can't let you go.

I don't understand what you've done to me  
but please don't let it end.

Oh, no. This was taking far too long. My poem was short. It shouldn't take so long to read, but he wasn't just reading it. I knew he was thinking about it too. Finally, he looked up from the page. "This is really nice." He flipped the page and, without looking at me, asked, "Who's it about?"

I let out the air in my lungs I'd been holding there. "*You*, silly."  
He grinned but still didn't look up. "You can never be sure..."

Oh, this was making me nervous, but he started reading them. All of them. One at a time, he turned page after page in that notebook. I tried to distract myself by studying, but it didn't work. I desperately wanted to know what he thought. At one point, he whispered, "Holy shit."

I couldn't stand it anymore. "What?"  
He read my words to me this time:

"You play the once-wild guitar  
with such emotion.  
You calm her down, play her slow

And she responds, low key.  
Silent strumming, whispering strings.  
You sing; the guitar sings with you.  
Silently strumming."

"The fuck is that, Val?" I wasn't sure what he was asking, so I just raised my eyebrows. "That's fucking genius." He started tearing through the notebook and paused on a page. This time he only read a few lines from one of the poems:

"You punished me for loving you,  
for letting you in,

for letting you see my fire,  
and each day I paid  
again  
over and over.”

“This shit is raw. It’s intense. God...if I could only come that close.”

“What do you mean?”

“Writing lyrics. Val, this stuff might not be like...Emily Dickinson, but Jesus. The emotion. Un-fucking-believable.”

I smiled and looked down at my lap, feeling bashful. I had hoped he would like my poetry, but I hadn’t expected quite *this* reaction. “Thanks.”

He turned some more pages. “And seriously...” I looked up. “I wanted to ask you—would you care if I adapt this? You know, change it into song lyrics?”

“What?”

“Part of this poem called ‘Scythe’.” I knew the one, but I wanted to hear the part he wanted to use.

“Frigid hand reaches up; touch my face.  
Cold air drifts across my back.  
Silently, he draws me into the dark night.  
He pulls me nearer.  
I stiffly obey.  
He is peaceful.

When he’d taken others,  
my stomach clenched;  
I screamed in pain;  
I gouged my eyes.

Now he is peaceful,  
a lover beckoning to me.”

He looked up again. “I don’t know if this is about death or mental illness or what, but it’s sick. I could use parts of it.”

“Sure...use whatever you like.”

For the next hour and a half, he pored through my notebooks, gobbling them up. I managed to relax and get some studying done. When he finished, he put them down and said, “Jesus. You’re brilliant. And I can’t believe you’ve written so much.”

I shrugged and sat up. “I like to write.”

He sighed. “You’ve heard my lyrics. They pale in comparison, Val.”

I shook my head. “Don’t beat yourself up.”

“Hear me out.” He leaned over, resting his elbows on his thighs just above his knees. “I can’t write lyrics for shit. My poetry comes out of the guitar. I think that’s why I liked your guitar poem so much. But...I’m not a wordsmith. Not by a long shot. How would you feel...about writing lyrics for me? For Fully Automatic?”

It took me a few seconds to completely grasp what he was saying. “Are you serious?”

“Totally.”

“Um...yeah, I could. Would you want me to just keep writing poems and you change them to fit your music or...?”

“You saw how me and Brad did it in his garage when you came home with me. That’s the best way to do it. Then the words and music mesh together perfectly.”

“So how do we do this?”

“My plan? Once I have music written for a song, I have you listen, and then you can write what comes to you. Can you work that way?”

I gave it some thought. “Maybe. I’d be willing to give it a try.”

And so I did. For the next few weeks, two or three days a week, Ethan would have me over to his dorm room where he’d play his latest song. It was harder for me to imagine it without bass or drums or even the second guitar, but I wrote a couple that way anyway.

After the second song, I sang the lyrics while he played back the music. I didn’t know what, if any, melody he had intended for the lyrics, but the tune felt right. When I finished, he said, “Perfect.” He placed his hands on my cheeks. Zane wasn’t home, was at some party off campus, so we were alone. This was likely the most passionate kiss I’d ever received from Ethan. He nearly consumed me, but I didn’t care. I wanted him, and if it was going to be today...I was okay with that.

His fingers were in my hair, and I decided to be bold. I ran my fingers up under his t-shirt, feeling his abs first, then slowly started moving my hands upward. He let out a deep breath.

“Val...you don’t wanna go there.”

I opened my eyes. “Yeah, I do.”

He pressed his forehead onto mine. “No. I don’t deserve you.”

“What?”

He shook his head and pulled back, but he still held my head between his hands. “I don’t deserve you. I haven’t earned your love and trust...not yet.”

I let out a sigh. He didn’t make sense. And I knew if I was feeling amorous, a man who already knew the pleasures of the flesh was bound to be feeling it even more than I. “That’s stupid, Ethan.”

“No, it’s not.” That glinting look he got in his hard green eyes showed up for the first time in a while. “We’re not ready for that step yet.”

I wanted to ask, *Then when?* But I thought it best to just let it go for the time being. He made sure I dropped it by returning to the music.

Throughout spring, anytime I wanted to talk about this weird pedestal he’d placed me on, he’d avoid the discussion. And he wouldn’t kiss me for long periods of time. I figured he did that to keep us both on the cool side. But I was getting frustrated.

One evening on Skype, June told me I was so good for Ethan. I didn’t know exactly how, but I just smiled and thanked her for thinking so. Sometimes I thought she was right, though, especially when I’d see the bitter look in his eyes fading away to nothing. But I wondered why he was afraid of sharing everything with me. It made no sense.

One evening in early April, Ethan and Zane met me at the cafeteria for dinner. They were both more excited than usual. “What gives?” I asked.

Ethan sported a cocky grin. “My man Brad has been busy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He has us booked for a few shows this summer.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

Zane grinned. “But you haven’t heard the best part yet.” He nudged Ethan. “Go on. Tell her.”

“What?”

“He booked us a gig here at The Cave.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. In two weeks.”

“Terrific!”

It *was* great news, but then Ethan went on to inform me that it meant, aside from studying, all his and Zane’s free time would be spent practicing. I asked what the other guys on the floor of his dorm would think. “We’ll have to do most of our practicing unplugged or turned down low, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna play a show and sound like shit just ‘cause I wasn’t prepared.”

“Understood.” And I did...mostly. The next weekend, he and Zane drove home to practice, and I was lucky the week after to even see them for meals. That Wednesday night, though, Zane came with me to dinner and Jennifer skipped, so it was just the two of us.

Zane and I sat down and started eating. He said, “You know Ethan’s a complete pussy, right?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s kind of a mean thing to say, Zane. Why would you say that?”

“Truth hurts.”

“How do you figure he’s a *pussy*?”

He sneered. “Have you noticed how he’s not spending any time with you?”

“Yeah...and he said it’s ‘cause he has to practice, practice, practice for the show this weekend.”

“And that’s complete and total bullshit.”

I was confused. “How so? You *are* playing, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we’re playing. And that part’s sweet, even though five songs we played together for the first time last weekend.”

“But that’s good. And I bet you all did great together.”

“Yeah, Val, but you’re missing the point about what a shit Ethan is.”

I let out a breath. “Okay, I give. How is Ethan a shit?”

“I wish you’d ask *him*.”

“I’m asking *you*. You brought it up.”

He rolled his eyes and finished chewing the bite of salad in his mouth. He didn’t say anything for several minutes. I just sat there, fork in hand, not moving, waiting for him to talk.

“Have you noticed that Ethan’s cooled a little bit?”

Yes, I’d noticed, but as I’d said, I thought he was focusing on their big night. I shrugged. “Yeah. So?”

He sucked in a breath. “Know what? I can’t do this. I can’t be Ethan’s little messenger. You’re gonna have to talk to him yourself.”

Anger started bubbling up inside me. “What? Now you’re telling me Ethan put you up to this?”

He shook his head and looked out at the sea of students pouring into the dining room from the serving area. “Just talk to him, Val. Talk to him, okay?”

"I thought you were my friend," I said and picked up my tray. Yeah, I was shitting on the messenger, but I was upset. I scraped off my plate and left the tray on the belt that pulled all the dirty dishes into the kitchen and left the dining room without looking back. Then I went to their dorm room.

When I got there, it was quiet inside. I'd expected to hear Ethan banging out some guitar riffs. But then I did hear something, and the door opened right after. And there was Ethan, along with a raven-haired girl wearing a hot pink tank top. I swallowed hard. No words would come out. Me...he'd called *me* his *wordsmith*, and yet I couldn't find a single word to say.

It could have been innocent. Could have. But the girl wasn't wearing any shoes, and her hair was mussed up. Ethan's shoes were off too. And I felt the tears start to well up in my eyes, so I just backed away while I could still save face. I heard him say, "Val..."

But he didn't come to get me, and before I got to the end of the hall, I heard the door close.

So that was it, huh? Now I knew where I stood. I was up on some pedestal. He couldn't *soil* me, but he could sure as hell cheat on me? That didn't make much sense. And when I got back to my room, Zane was standing in front of the door waiting for me. Without a word, he just wrapped me in his arms and let me cry until there were no more tears to fall.

\* \* \*

Although I'd spent the next two days just focusing on homework and ignoring Ethan's texts, I still planned to attend the Fully Automatic show that Saturday night. After all, some of the lyrics were mine, and I'd never seen them performed before. Besides, Zane and I had become close friends, and I hadn't seen Nick and Brad since early December the following year. As far as I was concerned, Ethan could fuck off, but I wasn't going to miss the show.

Friday night, Zane joined Jennifer and me for dinner. I said, "You sure Ethan's not going to show up?"

"Yeah."

When we sat down, Zane asked, "You're coming tomorrow night, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I plan to."

"What about you, Jennifer?"

"What?"

"I told you about that—the Fully Automatic concert at The Cave."

"You're playing, Zane?" He nodded. Yeah...maybe there was still a spark between the two. That made me happy, because Jennifer was a sweet girl and Zane was a nice guy, and both deserved each other. "Then...maybe." She looked at me. "I could drive us there."

"Sounds great." Until she'd said that, since it was April and spring was fully in gear, I'd planned on walking. With a friend driving, though, it would be a lot easier.

The show started at seven, and Fully Automatic wasn't the first band. There were three bands playing that night, and I didn't know which one would play first. I let Jennifer borrow some of my clothes, and I put on a black tank top, spiked wristbands, black leather pants, and black heeled boots. I was probably overdoing it, but I didn't care. I hoped Ethan would see me in the crowd and regret what he'd done to me. I put on bright pink lipstick and dark eye makeup and off we went.

The place was just as dark as I'd remembered. Jennifer pointed out one of the tables a little back from the stage. "Do you care if we sit there?"

"You don't want to get close to the stage?"

"Isn't it dangerous there by the moshpit?"



I laughed. "Well, it can be. How about we sit here for now and move up front when the guys play?"

She agreed. So we sat at the table, sipping at the bottled waters we'd purchased, waiting for the show to begin. They were blasting plenty of metal, but the actual bands weren't yet playing.

I saw someone sit next to me, so I turned my head. It was Brad, and sweet Jesus, he looked better than ever. He was still gorgeous, but his hair had grown some, and he had let a few days' stubble accumulate on his face. I smiled. "Hi, beautiful," he said as I looked over.

I wanted to jump him and get all excited, because I'd really missed him, but I wanted to keep my cool. He'd delivered his line as suave as could be, so I didn't want to just spaz out. "Well, hello back, gorgeous." I propped my head on my hands, resting my elbows on the table.

Holy shit. There was still some weird magnetism vibrating between us, as though no time had passed since I'd last seen him. I realized at that moment that I felt more sexual attraction for Brad than I'd ever felt for any other guy on the planet, including Ethan. What I thought I'd felt for Ethan was more permanent, more loving, while what I felt for Brad was primal, animalistic, and irrational.

"Um...this is my roommate, Jennifer Manders."

Ever charming, Brad offered his hand. "Jennifer." But when she put out her hand to shake his, he instead brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"How debonair," I teased.

He lowered his voice. "*You*...I'll kiss elsewhere." I lost my ability to breathe. But then he spoke louder again and said, "So...you here to watch us play, or is this just a coincidence?"

I didn't plan to quit flirting now. "I came to watch *you*."

He smiled, and I could tell he was trying to gauge how much of what I'd said was true and how much was just teasing. "You're here just for me?"

"Yep. Just for you." I smiled back and then he winked at me, as though telling me he didn't care if I was full of shit or not; he just appreciated the effort.

"Gotta go. I'm hanging at another band's merch table to see how it's done." He kissed me on the cheek and then stood. "See you after the show?"

"Maybe."

He raised his eyebrows and pointed at me. "You better be here." And off he went.

Jennifer said, "Oh, my God. Who *was* that?"

"Brad Payne. He's in Ethan and Zane's band. He sings part of the time, plays guitar."

"Holy cow. He's hot. And he really likes you."

Yeah, well...I'd thought Ethan liked me too. I wasn't about to get my hopes up again.

## Chapter Thirteen

JENNIFER AND I were completely wired and ready by the time Fully Automatic came on stage. I'd had a mini concert in Brad's garage months ago, but I'd never really seen them onstage, and I certainly hadn't heard them singing my words. I might have been angry feeling like I had to watch them had Brad not put in an appearance beforehand. I wasn't ready to see Ethan.

Both Ethan and Brad split up the singing time. Most of Ethan's singing really *was* my words, and even though I was so angry at him I could spit nails, it felt good to hear my stuff. Jennifer fell completely in love with Zane watching him onstage and she seemed mesmerized, but she still took time to ask, "Hey, is that the poem you told me he converted into a song?"

"One of many."

It didn't escape my attention that when Brad could spot me just off the edge of the stage, he focused on me. His gaze penetrated deep into my soul and made me feel better about Ethan. I noticed that Ethan noticed me once and then avoided looking at me the rest of the time. Good. Let the bastard squirm. I knew that wouldn't happen, though, because at some point, Ethan would hit that point where he experienced a performance high, and no one else existed. I'd seen him do it before...disappear into Ethan's music world.

The second to last song, Brad said, "I'm dedicating this song to the cute brunette standing near the edge of the stage." He looked over at me. "You know who you are." He made sure I *did* know it by looking me straight in the eyes. And since he'd made such a production out of getting my attention, I made sure I gave him plenty of mine. I had plenty of admiration to give him. He'd stripped his shirt off midway through the show. I'd already noticed a new tattoo on his left arm, but I had no idea that he'd had a couple under his shirt. But more impressive than the tats was the definition of his abs and pecs. He was covered in a slight sheen of perspiration which just made each muscle stand out more. He'd been wearing a Black Label Society t-shirt over knee-length faded jean shorts with black Converse shoes. I scanned his calves for more tattoos and found none, but I knew that could change over time.

His hair, now fully past his chin, was damp, and I saw a bead of sweat slide down the side of his face. His dark eyes, though, were hotter than anything else on his body, and he was caressing me with them every chance he got. "This song is called 'Want You'." Okay, so that really got my attention, and I knew I hadn't heard this song when I was in his garage. Had he written it since I'd last seen him?

I didn't catch all of the lines, but I caught enough, because this song didn't have screaming vocals—they were all clean. And even though some of the lines still suffered from what he'd described as *being generic*, they got the point across better than any other words could have. And I wasn't the only one who thought so. By the end of the song, some of the girls in the crowd were waving their lit-up cell phones over their heads.

I'd heard the chorus enough to know what he sang:

"Want you, baby, be mine tonight.  
I need you more than words can say.  
I'll make you my queen, make you my whore,  
But I know I can't have you anyway."

I wondered if the actual words were supposed to mean something to me or if he just wanted to dedicate his sexiest song to me to send a message? Either way, I got the hint.

After the last song, one that would have become their signature (had things not changed), called “Bullet Through My Soul,” they got their stuff off stage so the last band could set up. Jennifer and I enjoyed the third band halfway through until Brad came out and headbanged with us for a few minutes. Then he urged us to come backstage.

Well...if you could call it that. Backstage was barely even a room. Crammed in there were several band members from both Fully Automatic and the first band. It was quieter, though, and we could talk.

Zane joined Brad, and I could tell something between him and my roommate had reignited. I was glad, because I wanted them to be happy, but more than that, it meant I was free to feel like I didn’t have to entertain my friend. Brad said, “We’re gonna go party at Zane’s in a minute. Much as I wanna stay and headbang, ‘cause this band’s awesome, Ethan’s in a hurry to get out of here. So...you’ll come by after?”

I smiled. “Yeah.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. I said yes.”

“Just making sure.”

Zane actually kissed Jennifer before the two of us went back in the crowd. Jennifer was ready to leave; I could tell. But I told her the guys would want to clean up before we got there, so it wouldn’t hurt to give them some time.

We left when the last band was done playing, and then we had to wait some for the parking lot to clear out. When we got to Zane and Ethan’s, I knocked on the door, hoping against hope that Ethan didn’t answer the door. I still couldn’t look at him.

Zane answered the door. There were several people in that tiny little room. Zane had been sitting in his desk chair and invited Jennifer to join him. Nick was passed out on the floor in the corner, but there was a girl sitting next to him, trying to wake him up. Ethan also had a girl sitting next to him on his bed. I was surprised that it wasn’t the girl who’d been there earlier that week. I determined then that Ethan was a slut.

Brad had been sitting in the other chair and stood up when he saw me. He came over and gave me a hug. He was wearing fresh clothes, and his hair was damp. He’d showered since I’d seen him, and he smelled fresh and clean. He’d already been drinking, and he had a bottle of rum in his hand. He draped an arm over my shoulders. “We’re getting ready to play some quarters. I know you don’t drink, but will you hang with me?”

“Yeah.”

In between slamming shots, Brad asked me questions about the show, not just if I liked it, but he asked technical questions about particular elements, like how his guitar sounded during certain spots, how his and Ethan styles melded, how they looked onstage. I answered as best as I could, but his arm over my shoulder was quite distracting.

And then, when Ethan started getting more physical with his date, I felt more uncomfortable. Brad was pretty drunk by that point, but he was still sharp. “Wanna get out of here?”

I nodded, and we slipped out of the room. At that point, I wasn’t sure if anyone even noticed we were leaving. I sensed it was getting ready to turn into an orgy, the way people had started groping each other.

Brad moved his arm to around my waist. “Where are we going?”

“Let’s go to my room.” He smiled.

Once we were out in the hall, he said, “So...that shithead Ethan’s not even writing his own lyrics anymore? That right?”

I nodded. “Yeah...a lot of those words were mine.” I worked up the courage to reciprocate by putting my arm around *his* waist as well. Smooth Brad didn’t say a word and just kept talking.

“Goddamn, girl. Pretty impressive. That one song—‘Metal Forever.’ You write that?”

“Yeah...and ‘Coming Down,’ ‘Intended Punishment,’ and ‘Fates Aligned.’ Also, the basis for ‘Scythe’ was one of my poems too.”

“No shit.” We walked in silence for a while and passed the place in the walkway where Charlotte attacked me. I forced myself to look away from that spot on the polished floor. “Maybe we need to hire you as our full-time songwriter.”

I started laughing. “I just like writing.”

“I’m not fuckin’ with you, Val. You’re writing shit the likes of which we’ve never seen.” I looked down at the ground and leaned my head into him. I didn’t like talking about myself like that. We walked up the stairs and then reached my floor and started walking down the hall toward my room. He said, “Zane told me about some fight you got into. Your ex-roommate just tried to beat hell out of you?”

“Something like that.”

I unlocked the door to my room and turned on the light. He closed the door behind him and looked around our rather unimpressive room and smiled. He didn’t let me get far. He slid a thumb across my forehead. “I’m glad she didn’t leave any scars on that pretty little head of yours.”

I grinned. “Yeah. And I wouldn’t want to have to sue her ass.” He started laughing...hard. Oh, shit. He’d had a *lot* to drink—rum, straight out of the bottle, and it was showing. “Come on in.” I walked back to the door and locked it. When I turned around, Brad was starting to sit on Jennifer’s bed. “No, not there. The other bed.”

He stood up and raised his eyebrows. “Oh...you gonna come curl up with me?” He was being so silly, and I didn’t want to laugh, but he was *hammered*.

“I think I need to put you to bed.”

He looked at me and sobered up quickly. He sat up. “I’d like that. Want me to tell you where to start?”

I couldn’t help but smile as I got closer. “Oh, Brad. You are such a bad, bad boy.”

He smiled back. He had a twinkle in his eye. “You like bad boys?”

God...he was irresistible. “I like *you*.”

“Did you know I turned twenty in March?”

“Yeah? So now you’re an older bad boy?”

He looked so...desirable in that moment, the look in his eye. I got closer to the bed, and he held out his hands, palms up. I put mine in his. He said, “I think you’re probably the best birthday present I’ve had.” I sat down next to him. He ran his hand along my cheek and kissed me lightly on the lips. Then he opened his eyes and said, “I’m way fuckin’ drunker than I thought. I need to rest my head. The room is spinning.” He lay back, and his head fell on the pillow.

I sighed. I didn’t even get a real kiss. I pulled his sneakers off and then grabbed his legs to pull them up on the bed. Afterward, I went to the bathroom where I brushed my teeth and changed into a Godsmack t-shirt and flannel pajama pants. I switched off the light and curled up on the tiny sliver of bed left after Brad’s body ate up the rest. The only way I could fit was by

resting my head on his chest and draping my arm and leg over him. He was so warm, I didn't need a blanket. And as I drifted off to sleep, I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to really kiss him.

\* \* \*

Pounding on the door. I startled, realizing I was wrapped up like a burrito in Brad's arms. Somehow during the night we'd both rolled over, and I was truly in his arms. I managed to get myself untangled from Brad, and he somehow managed to stay asleep in spite of the ridiculous banging on the door. "Hold on a second!"

I glanced at the clock on my way across the room—it was barely six in the morning. I also noted there was no Jennifer, which told me she spent the night with Zane. Then again, maybe Jennifer was at the door, having stayed up all night partying, unable to find her key.

I opened the door to none other than Ethan. "What the hell?" I couldn't even get the words out of my mouth before he was shoving his way into my room.

"I knew it. You son of a bitch." He stormed over to my bed and grabbed Brad by the shoulders. "Wake up, you motherfucker." Ethan was drunk—very drunk. Brad stirred but was still pretty out of it. I shook myself out of my shocked paralysis and started racing over to where Ethan was manhandling Brad. He was trying to hold Brad up off the bed by his t-shirt at the neck. "Did you fuck her?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" He looked around. "Where am I?" Then he saw me standing behind Ethan, frantically trying to pull Ethan off him. Brad wasn't fighting him, though. "Valerie...Did I? Did we...?"

Ethan finally gave into my tugging. I asked, "What are you doing?"

He turned to look at me and grabbed me by the shoulders. "You mean...you invited him here? Did he force himself on you?"

"Force himself on me? Whatever gave you that idea? Brad is a gentleman."

I saw Brad raise his eyebrows as he sat up in bed, but he didn't say anything. Maybe he was remembering my *bad boy* comment from the night before. Ethan continued. "Gentleman? Then he seduced you."

I rolled my eyes. The situation was ludicrous, and I was still quite angry with Ethan. Who was he to barge in my room early in the morning and start shouting accusations? "Get out."

"He did. *You* did."

"Get the hell out of here, Ethan. I've had it with you."

"But Valerie..."

I was trying to push him out of the room to no avail. "For your information, we did not have sex. But if we had, I can assure you that we both would have been willing."

The look on Ethan's face changed from anger to pain and worry. "You mean...you would have slept with my best friend?"

I heard Brad behind me. "Really?"

"And not with me?"

"You asshole. After the way you've treated me, you think I'd *want* to sleep with you? You never even *tried*, Ethan Richards. And neither did Brad. But that's unimportant. Nothing happened. Now..." I started pushing Ethan toward the door, and his shock made it possible. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd really like to get some sleep. Good night, Ethan."

I gently pushed him out into the hall and closed the door. I started to lock it when Ethan opened it again and pushed his head in the crack. "You sure you didn't sleep with him and just forgot?"

“Positive.” I pushed his head back out the door, shut it, and locked it quickly so he couldn’t come in again.

I walked back in the room and Brad asked, “What happened exactly?”

“You don’t remember?”

“It’s fuzzy.”

“You fell asleep.”

“What were we doing?”

I didn’t know if I wanted to mention his failed attempt at kissing me. “We were just joking around, and you passed out on my bed.”

He squinted his eyes, trying to remember something. “But...you slept here...in this bed...*with* me, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. This is my bed. That bed over there belongs to my roommate. I didn’t think it’d be cool if I crashed on her bed, just in case she came back needing it.”

“I lost a golden opportunity. I need to quit drinking so much.”

I grinned. “Maybe. Now...I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted, and you need your rest too. Do you mind sleeping for a little longer?”

He raised his eyebrows. “No way in hell will I be able to sleep if you cuddle up next to me like you did last night.”

“Oh...” I was trying to figure out how to make it work.

“No. You know what? You said I was a gentleman, so I guess I’ll do my best to keep being a gentleman.”

“You sure?”

“Shit, Val...it’s *your* bed. I’m not kickin’ you out of it just ‘cause I’m a—what’d you call me last night? I might be a bad boy, but I can keep my dogs down.”

“I didn’t say *that*.”

He laughed. “No, but I *do* remember you calling me a bad boy. And you seemed to like that.”

I just smiled. “So is it okay if I lie here too? I’ll roll over so my back is to you.”

I heard him sigh. “Do what you gotta do. I’ll...just roll over too.” And so we lay like that in bed for some time, our backs to each other, and I was growing so uncomfortable—feeling like I was in an unnatural posture and as though I were going to fall off the bed—that I was contemplating getting up. But Brad started moving and he rolled over. “I can’t get comfortable. I promise...no funny business.” I turned my head to look at him. “But are you okay if I face this way? Isn’t that what we did last night?”

I lay my head back on my half of the pillow, so I was sure he couldn’t see me smile. “Yeah.”

“Do you mind if we do it again? I don’t think I’ll be able to get to sleep the other way, and I’ve got a headache. I just want to sleep it off.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

He tucked his arm in between his abdomen and my back, and I imagined that wouldn’t be as comfortable either, so I reached behind me and grabbed his arm, pulling it over my waist.

“That’s not an invitation.”

“Is it okay to close the gap?”

I considered it. “I guess that would be okay.”

So he did, resting his body right up against mine. And, although I was still inexperienced at this point, I was keenly aware that I’d be able to tell if he was getting a little excited. But I also

knew that, no matter how much he might have liked the idea, he still needed more sleep, and it sounded like he had a bit of a hangover. So, even though he pulled me close and cuddled me like a lover might have, all we did was sleep.

That's not to say I didn't have a hell of a time drifting off. He was warm but not too hot, so he was definitely snuggle material. And feeling a man's body against mine—hard where mine was soft, hairy where mine was not—made it difficult for me to doze off. When I finally did, I'm pretty sure my dreams weren't about Ethan.

\* \* \*

Needless to say, I wasn't able to sleep as much as I would have liked. I kept waking up, simply because I wasn't used to sharing my bed. So I got up and decided to start my day. I had plenty of studying I had to do, especially with finals right around the corner, but first a shower.

After I extricated myself from his arms, I looked back at him. God, he was cute, especially sleeping. He looked like he had no worries in the world. And then I took a deep breath. What was I thinking?

Time to take that shower.

When I returned to my room, I was wearing a robe and slipper socks, and while I was covering more than I would have if I were wearing jeans, I suppose it could have been construed as suggestive, but I hated forcing clothes on my damp body. It took longer and was a bigger pain, so I liked to wait a few minutes before getting dressed. So I sat at my desk and opened my makeup drawer, pulling out the mirror and turning on the desk light to put on my makeup. Once done, I pulled off the towel and combed out my hair and then I was ready to get dressed.

As I stood up, I heard Brad say, "Morning."

I looked over at him. He was sitting up in bed, stretching his shoulders. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He took me in, realizing I'd been up for a while. "Did I make it hard for you to sleep?"

No way would I tell him that yes, he did, because it wouldn't be for the reasons he was asking. So I told him I slept fine. He rubbed his face and then slid his legs off the bed. He didn't see his shoes so he looked on the other side before I could tell him that was where they were. Then he stood up. He looked sleepy, but he still looked like the kind of guy I should keep my eyes off of.

I think we were both feeling a little awkward by that point.

He said, "If you can just point me in the right direction, I think I can find Ethan's place. I need to see what the guys are up to—I'm not sure when we're hitting the road."

So I took him to the door and pointed down the hall. "Go through that door to the stairs. When you get to the ground floor, go out the door. Then there's a long hallway. Follow it all the way to the end. There you'll see a door just like this one. Those are the stairs to Ethan's dorm. He's on the second floor."

"Yeah...I remembered that much." He paused. "Hey...thanks."

"For what?"

He smiled and shook his head. What was he thinking? "For everything." He started walking in the direction I'd pointed him, but he turned around. "I'll be back in a while."

I nodded my head. "Okay." At first, I'd thought that odd, but then I realized they'd want to say goodbye before they left. And then I wondered how poor Nick was doing. Last night, he'd been in even worse shape than Brad had been.

After he left, I got dressed, pulled my hair into a ponytail, and made my bed. Then I sat at my desk and started reading through the next chapter in the textbook for my poetry class.

It wasn't long, though, before I heard a knock at my door. Surely they weren't leaving already, but I still wouldn't have been surprised if it was Jennifer needing in. It wasn't, though. It was Brad...looking more awake and in clean clothes. "What's going on?"

I stepped back to let him in. "You think *I* was fucked up...you have no idea. Zane let me in. All I can figure is they were still partying when Ethan came over here this morning. Nick isn't even there. Zane said he's pretty sure he went to that girl's dorm room sometime after we left. He and Jennifer were crashed on his bed, decided to lay down till morning. Ethan was crashed on his bed too. But...looks like I'm gonna be here a while. I could text Nick, but I'd rather give him a little while longer to sleep." He shrugged.

"You can hang with me if you want." I wondered if he'd want to watch television while I was studying or maybe we could get some breakfast somewhere.

But he got close to me. "That's not the main reason why I came back here, though." And whatever words had been on my tongue went scurrying to the floor. "We have a little unfinished business."

I was finally able to swallow, but my voice sounded weak and tiny. "We do?"

He leaned over and cupped my face in his hands to bring my lips to his. My breath was shallow as he touched his lips to mine. But although his hands on my face were gentle, his kiss was not. His lips were firm and demanding, and I parted mine, inviting his tongue into my mouth. I felt lightheaded in the presence of this man and just allowed myself to enjoy the feeling of finally kissing him. When he let go of my lips, he said, "Unfinished, right?"

All I could do was give him a thin smile and let out the rest of the air in my lungs. I didn't notice until then that I'd put my hands on his pecs. And, since I wasn't pushing him away, he took that as a signal to move forward. He moved his hands to my waist and pulled me as close to him as I could possibly be. And his next kiss transported me. I no longer felt like silly little Valerie Quinn, college freshman, living in a tiny dorm room without a clue of what she wanted to do with her life. Instead, I got my first taste of womanhood, for inside me he opened up a Pandora's Box of emotions and desires I hadn't known existed. Yes, I'd thought I knew, but Brad was on a whole other level when it came to arousing me. Maybe it was because we already had some flirty sexual thing going. And while I was confused, I wanted to venture a little further.

I felt the hair on my arms standing on end while I slid my hands up to his neck to hold his face from his jaw to his temple while his tongue danced with mine, performing some wicked magic inside me. And then, when I moved my hands into his soft hair, I couldn't help but notice yet didn't object to his hands moving to cup my ass and push me into him.

And, oh, was that a delicious sensation. I might have known, in the logical, cold sense, how my body was supposed to work but being a late bloomer hadn't experienced what those things I knew about actually felt like. My entire body felt like it had been plugged into an outlet, and I could have lit up a Christmas tree. My senses were heightened, and there was nothing he could have done in that moment that would have felt wrong.

But that stupid little niggling voice in the back of my head. I could hear it. It might have been muffled, but I could still hear it telling me I didn't want to lose my virginity in the heat of the moment just because I couldn't control myself. It told me I didn't love Brad, and that was, of course, my cardinal rule.



Oh, in those few seconds, I think I tried to convince myself I did. I certainly loved the way he knew how to handle my body. And that time, when he released my lips, he moved to kiss my neck, and I heard a low moan escape my lips. So who could blame him when he took that as a signal to go? One of his hands released my ass and slid up underneath my shirt. Again, I was surprised at my body's response to him. His warm hand on my side felt delightful and electric, but that little voice tried one more time, urging me to stop. If I didn't put on the brakes now, it was all over, because that little voice was getting buried deeper and deeper, and the sensations of Brad's touch were feeling better by the second.

And so I listened.

One of my hands released the hair in its grip and brought itself back down to his pec to aid me in stopping the proceedings. And good thing too, because I detected that I might be feeling his piston revving up.

"Brad...please stop."

He opened his eyes and moved his head to look at me. "Stop?"

"Yeah."

He kissed me again, knocking the wind out of me once more. "Stop *that*?"

I took a moment and blinked. "Yes."

"You don't seem so sure..." He pressed his forehead on mine and gazed in my eyes.

"What's wrong?"

By now, I had both hands on his chest as though they could push him away...as though my hands *wanted* to push him away, but we were still in a tight embrace, and I *wasn't* pushing against him. "I...It's not you, Brad. Oh, God, it's not you. I swear. I want you bad."

He was trying to understand. "So why not? If you're worried about birth control..."

*That* got my attention. Yeah, I *should* have been, but it had been the last thing from my mind. "No. I'm...um..." I swallowed hard. "I'm a..."

"Virgin?" I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Oh." I could see his mind struggling with this new knowledge. He nodded and said it again. "Oh. Yeah. Uh...your first time should be...special, right? At least, for girls. I didn't give much of a shit."

In spite of the overwhelming and heady mix of emotions, I couldn't help but giggle, and I think that was partly from the relief that I wouldn't have to explain to Brad how fucked up my mind really was. I didn't think I loved him, and I had that stupid idea that I have to love the first guy I gave myself to. *That's* what would make it special, I thought.

But his eyes kept scanning mine. "That's not it, though. It's Ethan, isn't it? You still care about him."

Did I? I'd been so angry with him, and then that's when I realized Brad was right. I was only so furious with him *because* I'd cared so much to begin with. But I didn't say a word.

Brad was no dummy, though. He let out a long breath of air and loosened his grip on me. "And...I already told you, as you'll recall, nothing between you and me as long as he's in the picture." He let me go and turned around to pace the length of my room. He let out another deep breath and then looked over at me, still frozen in place by the door. All I could hear was his step, one after the other, as I held my breath, waiting to hear what he had to say. "So...how about we go grab a bite to eat? I'm starving."

"Uh, I..."

"On me."

Well, after breaking his heart and crushing his balls, it was the least I could do.

## Chapter Fourteen

WE FINALLY SAT in a booth at McDonald's, Brad with an entire tray of food, me with a cup of coffee, hash browns, and a small breakfast sandwich. So...unlike his bandmates, Brad at least appeared to have a little money to spend. It made me curious. "So...what do you do besides play in your band? Where do you work?"

He sneered. "I work for one of those places that changes oil. Pretty much sucks." He smiled. "Course, anything that doesn't have anything to do with music sucks, as far as I'm concerned." He took a bite of his sandwich, and after he swallowed, he said, "But I'm saving up so I can actually make something of my life."

"What are your plans?"

"I'm pretty sure you have the idea. I don't have any crazy notions, like we have to move to New York or L.A. or Seattle, but we need to amass a fan base. Nothing happens nowadays without fans, and we won't get fans by sitting around on our asses. That's part of why I booked that show here—the sooner Ethan and Zane realize college isn't their future, the sooner we can get on with our lives. They need to feel the need in their blood."

Oh...so Brad planned to take Ethan out of my life for good. It didn't matter that I hadn't decided if college was my future either; it was all I'd known in my short adult life, but the one constant so far for me had been Ethan. For him to be gone, whether I wanted to scratch his eyes out or not, hit hard. But I tried to keep my emotions under check. "So what are you thinking?"

"I dunno. Colorado Springs, Denver, some of the big college towns. But that would involve moving to one of those places. I'm thinking Denver. It's huge. I bet we could have shows booked all the time."

We ate in silence for a few minutes until he said, "So, that's what I'm saving up for. I'm sure my mom will be thrilled for me to move out."

"You think so?"

"Actually, no. I'm her youngest kid and she's divorced, so she really doesn't want me to leave. But I've been trying to prepare her for it." I nodded and took a sip of my coffee. He looked up at me. "So what about you, Val? What big plans do you have for the future?"

I took a deep breath. I was no more decided about my future this early morning in April than I had been when I'd chosen my classes at freshman orientation the summer before. I shook my head. "I have no idea what I want to be when I grow up."

He laughed. "Okay...I'll ask you what my douchebag counselor asked me my junior year in high school." He sat up straight in the booth and wrinkled up his face, pretending to peer over the rims of glasses and screwing up his mouth. Then he talked in a garbled voice that was higher pitched than his regular speaking voice. "What are your interests, Mr. Payne? What do you find yourself doing when you lose track of time?"

I giggled. "Those seem to be reasonable questions."

"Yeah, they were, even though he was reading them off a card while looking out the window watching the cheerleaders practice on the front lawn. And when I told him my answer, he told me to *be realistic*." He used the counselor's voice again, once more sending me into peals of laughter.

"You seem to be talented with your impersonations too."

"Yeah, but seriously...what interests you, Val? There's gotta be something, right?"

I thought about it...really thought about it. But I still gave a lame answer. "Well, isn't that why I'm taking all these classes, these varied classes, to help me figure out what I like?"

"Maybe...so have you found something?"

"That's the problem. Everything seems fun...for a while."

He looked at me hard, as though he were peering into my soul...and it felt like it. "You like writing?"

"I guess."

"Because that shit you wrote for us was phenomenal."

I felt my cheeks grow warm. "I thought you were just saying that."

He smiled. "Because I was drunk? I'll let you in on a little secret." He winked. "I'm brutally honest when I'm drunk. Scary honest."

I tried to think back to exactly what he'd said last night about the songs I'd written. I couldn't remember his exact words, but he'd pretty much gushed. So I just nodded and took a sip of my coffee, hoping it had cooled down enough that I could get lost in it for a bit.

But when I put the stupid cup down, he was still looking at me, intent. "You ever think about being in a band?"

Yes, I had, but it was something I'd never admitted to anyone else before. Yeah, there were more women in metal today than ever before, but it still seemed to be a mostly boys' club. Add to it that many guys in that culture still loved to objectify women. They acted like we lived in the middle ages, like women were theirs for the taking. Would someone like me even be able to hold her own in a business like that?

I knew the answer. So even though I knew I would love it, I shrugged my shoulders and conjured up the most blasé face I could muster. "Nah." And then I focused on my coffee again.

\* \* \*

Up through finals week, I caught glimpses of Ethan here and there, and he was always with a girl. A different girl to boot. But I just put my mind to studying and trying my best to ignore him.

Brad texted me once in a while, usually just to say a quick *hi*. He'd tried to connect with me on Facebook, but I'd realized it was too big a timewaster, so I'd been avoiding it since the third week of school. I logged on once in a while but realized it was either Facebook or decent grades. I chose to focus on school work. Still, Brad made the effort to keep in touch. I slipped once and mentioned that Ethan was on his tenth girl of the week, and Brad just texted back that Ethan was like that. And then I didn't hear much from Brad for over a week, so I realized I needed to keep Ethan talk out of it.

But then finals week was over. The last time Ethan and I had looked each other in the eye and had a conversation was when I'd kicked him out of my dorm room. And the longer the time passed by, the more I hated him for the way he'd just dropped me...like a piece of meat he was no longer interested in. I didn't understand what the problem was, and it made no sense to me, but we didn't even have a chance to get sick of each other. He'd just decided he was done with me.

That Thursday night, Zane stopped by my room to say goodbye for the summer. He said Brad had managed to get them some tour dates for the summer throughout Colorado. He wasn't sure where or when they were yet, but he asked me to keep my eyes open for Fully Automatic in a town near me. I figured the closest they'd come would be Colorado Springs, if they even made it that far. But I *would* keep my eyes peeled. I was happy that they were starting to enjoy playing to real crowds with real people, and I knew that was all thanks to Brad's efforts.

Secretly, I hoped Ethan would break his hand so he couldn't play. Then I felt bad for thinking that...and then I justified it with myself that it was okay for me to feel that way, especially considering Ethan loved his stupid guitar more than anything else in the whole world...so for him not to be able to caress it for a few weeks...well, that thought made me smile more than it should have.

Ethan had once said that he never wanted me to hate him. Well, if that were really true, he shouldn't have asked for it. I was well on my way to fully hating him. Not only had he finished our short-lived romance, but he'd also terminated our friendship in the process. Yeah, I did hate him for that.

The first week I was home, I relaxed. The burden of school was off my shoulders. It was so weird being there. I felt like a fish out of water. Sure, I was welcome there; I was loved there; but it didn't feel like I belonged there anymore. Really, it didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. But I spent the first week at home kind of settling in and figuring out where I fit now that I was back there.

And then I figured I should start looking for a job. I'd pretty much been a poor college student when I was attending classes, but school took so much effort that getting a job scared me. I wasn't sure that I could handle both. Now that I understood how school worked, I figured I'd be able to handle it when I returned in the fall.

But that was another problem. I still didn't know what I should be going to school for. My advisor told me I'd be okay for one more year, because I still had core classes I had to focus on. Until my junior year, I could skate by on general classes. So I tried not to stress out about it. Still...I found it worrisome.

And that second week back at home, as I started putting in applications around town, I realized none of the jobs I applied for sounded interesting at all. I remembered what Brad had said, that any job outside of music sucked. I thought he was right about that. To him, though, music *was* his life. For me, I loved music, yes, but I hadn't banked my whole life on it. Hell, I couldn't even read music without tracing it like Braille and concentrating. But I was still writing my poetry...although I found myself crafting my poems to be more like lyrics now. And then I decided...if I was able to save up enough money by the end of June, maybe I could buy a guitar and lessons to go with it in July. That would make the summer fun and worthwhile.

Being away from Ethan helped my state of mind. Right off the bat, I was away from his intoxicating aura. He wasn't able to suck me in or hurt me if he wasn't around. But there was more to it than that. I was able to think things through better, and I realized that I didn't hate Ethan, just his attitude. And Brad and I continued the occasional text to each other (and he talked me into getting my ass back on Facebook so I could like his page for Fully Automatic). They had some cool pictures, both color and black and white. I didn't know who they'd gotten to take their pictures, but it was pretty clear the guys had been studying band pics for years. They had the disinterested and badass stares down pat.

And looking at their pictures also made me wonder about Brad. Being away from him made me aware of the pull he had on me while I was nearby, but it faded when I was away. I wondered why that was. I still considered him a good friend, though, and that didn't fade with time away.

One day I got a couple of invites from Brad to attend a couple of Fully Automatic shows the third week I was home, one in my hometown and the other in nearby Colorado Springs. Tickets were fairly cheap and both shows were the same weekend, so wherever I got a job, I'd have to

request those nights off. And then I wondered—could I bear to see Ethan? And how exactly did I feel about him being in my hometown?

I wrote some lyrics about how Ethan had pretty much ripped my heart in two, and then I wrote some love poems. Finally, I wound up writing another one about unrequited love, about wanting what you can't or shouldn't have. The last set of lyrics I loved and hoped the band could use. But since I still wasn't on speaking terms with Ethan (and doubted I ever would be again), I sent them to Brad to see what he thought.

He messaged me on Facebook. *These fucking rock, Val. Where the hell do you come up with this stuff?*

I wanted to tell him I came up with those lyrics because of him, but I didn't say a word. As I said, the pull wasn't there when he was far away, but I remembered the feelings he'd stirred in me. He asked if he could write music for the lyrics, and I told him to *Write away!* A week later, he sent me a file with him playing the song fully acoustic, singing the words. I couldn't quite imagine the song plugged in, but he'd done a great job of putting it to music. I was beginning to believe he was the most talented member of the band, and that was saying something. I was flattered with what he did with the song, so I listened to it over and over. His voice had never sounded better.

My mother reminded me that she still wanted to meet Ethan until I confessed to her that we were no longer friends. When she asked what had happened, I kept it short and sweet and just told her we didn't get along anymore.

I wasn't able to get a job those first few weeks, and I think it was because the tourist places, restaurants and little shops already had hired high school kids as their summer help. But I did manage to land a babysitting job. School for the kids in my hometown of Winchester got out the last week in May, and some folks I'd known for years needed someone to watch their children during the summer while they both worked. They would need me until the first week in August when they'd take their family vacation, and then their two daughters would spend the rest of break with their grandparents. But it would be two entire months of steady work, almost forty hours a week while both parents worked. I wouldn't make as much as I would have working at a fast food restaurant, but I knew with kids, I could vary what we did. One day we could watch movies and then walk to the park; the next we could write stories and draw pictures. We could walk to the library and then all read books. I thought I could handle it. Plus the best part? I had nights off after five.

I was pleasantly surprised when my old high school friend Jill called me at my parents' house. We caught up a little bit, but there was still that distance I'd felt the last time. She and her new husband Chad were still living in Winchester, and they were both working. I wanted to actually hang out a little with Jill, but I wanted it to be comfortable, not awkwardly sitting around a table at Chili's, trying to come up with things to make conversation about. So I asked if she and Chad would want to come with me to the Fully Automatic concert that Friday in Colorado Springs. I wouldn't get paid for another week, so I asked my mom if she could spot me enough for tickets and a little extra for a drink or something, promising to pay her back when I got my first check. I'd just have to skip the second concert on Saturday, but it would be worth it to reconnect with my old friend. They agreed and offered to drive since I was buying the tickets.

When they picked me up, I expected to see Jill looking haggard and tired, but she looked like the same old Jill—happy, smiling, and beautiful—and she and Chad looked great together. He had short blonde hair to match her light long hair, and both looked fit. I sat in the back seat

but positioned myself in the middle so I could lean over and engage in conversation. When I commented how good they both looked, Chad told me they had started running every day—half a mile at first, but now they were running over two miles a day. They looked fantastic. So I had to ask. “How’s it going with your parents, Jill?”

“Not good, but at least we’re on speaking terms again.” I could tell it was a touchy subject, so I decided not to pursue it. “How was school?”

“Oh…fine.” I decided myself not to say a word about Ethan, but, I supposed, I should confess that I actually *knew* one of the bands we were going to see. “Speaking of, one of the bands—Fully Automatic—has two guys I went to school with, and I wrote the lyrics to some of their songs.”

Jill turned around in her seat. “Are you kidding? That’s so cool, Val. Why didn’t you say that before?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. I was planning to go see them no matter what, so I didn’t think much about it until you asked about school.”

The rest of the way, we talked about classes, Jill about her experiences at the community college in town and me about mine away from home. We’d both done a lot of growing up, just in different ways, and I realized that, while she and I might never have an intense, super-close friendship like we’d had in high school, we could still be good friends now.

We got to the venue, an out-of-the-way place called Sunshine Studios, but when I started to buy the tickets, Chad said, “No, no, Valerie. I’ve got ours.”

“But you drove.”

“No problem. I know Jill’s just been wanting to spend time with you.” He kissed his wife on the cheek. “Can’t tell my girl no.”

The place was loud, blaring metal to get us revved up for the concert. We found a good spot near the front. There were a couple of tables and sofas, but we wanted to be up close. The first band was setting up, and I smiled, realizing it was Fully Automatic. “That’s them,” I said to Jill, raising my voice so she could hear me over the music pumping through the large room.

“So how’d you meet these guys anyway?”

I decided to just tell her the whole story, so I told her how I’d decided to sit behind hot guy Ethan during class. She said, “What? Sweet, shy Valerie?”

I nodded and giggled. I didn’t want to drag out the story, but I wanted her to know a little about how it ended up. “It was totally weird. He treated me like shit most of the time. Doesn’t matter how cute he is. And, even weirder, I went out on a date with Zane, the bassist, and Brad—the other guitarist/ vocalist—and I have something strange going on.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I wish I could explain it.”

She spotted Ethan, pointed, and said, “That him?” It was Ethan, all right. His hair was just a little longer, and his eyes were lined with black kohl, but there was no mistaking him.

I nodded. “How’d you know?”

“He’s your type.”

I had a type? That was news to me. So then I pointed out the other guys…Brad, Zane, and Nick. Then she said, “They’re *all* hot, really.” I raised my eyebrows and giggled again. “Hey, I love Chad, but I can look, can’t I?” I smiled.

The guys were testing their instruments and the sound level of the mikes. In the midst of it all, Ethan spotted me. He came closer to the edge of the stage, I think to be sure it was me.

Then he pointed at me and threw a thumb to the left side of the stage that was blocked by a wall flanked with the bands' merch tables. Jill elbowed me. "I think he wants to see you."

I sucked in a deep breath. Well, if she thought so, then I wasn't losing my mind. I nodded. Time to bite the bullet. I grinned as I realized that stupid cliché was floating through my mind of the band that once wanted to be called *Bullet*. "Be right back."

I walked toward the wall on the side of the building where the restrooms were located and where, I thought, I could get backstage. Ethan was right there at the opening. He pulled me into a warm embrace. "Val, God...I missed you."

I was blinking, unbelieving, but I hugged him back. He was warm and firm and smelled good, and for a moment I forgot that I was trying to hold a grudge against him. I couldn't help myself, because all those thoughts just melted away.

But that wasn't the only trick up the boy's sleeve. When we pulled back out of the hug, he buried me in a kiss. I was shocked at first, but my body knew what to do. Damn my brain for being too slow, because it would have ordered me to shove him away and tell him to *fuck off*. But, no...one of my hands gripped his shoulders as though I were a rock climber who'd lost her footing, and the other hand wrapped around his neck. My lips parted and sucked him in.

And wow. What a kiss it was. Full of passion and promise. It was as though we were still dating. He loosened his grip and said, "Great to see you here. I didn't know you'd be at the show."

Well, apparently he wasn't involved in marketing. That was probably all Brad. "I responded to the invite on Facebook."

He looked sheepish and then nodded. "I wasn't paying attention, I guess."

*Probably too busy getting blowjobs from cute blondes.* Oh, *now* my brain decided to kick into high gear, but it was still a wuss. Yeah, heaven forbid I actually say what I was thinking out loud. Wouldn't want to hurt Ethan... I just shrugged and smiled.

He kissed me again and said, "Glad you're here." He frowned then. "But I need to get back." As he looked at me just before he left, I noticed that his eyes were dilated. Yeah, it was dark in there, but still...it made me wonder if he was on something...and if that something had influenced this sudden warmth.

I staggered back to my place next to Jill and Chad, and that's when I saw how packed the place had become. There was a huge crowd. Jill was smiling. "So what did he want?"

I shook my head. "To confuse the hell out of me."

## Chapter Fifteen

FULLY AUTOMATIC PLAYED their first four songs and impressed the hell out of me. I imagined that they'd been practicing pretty much nonstop since Ethan and Zane had returned home, because their sound was polished. They sounded great all around, and their energy was unbelievable. Ethan and Brad both took turns singing songs, and for one of them, Brad even put his guitar down to croon to the crowd. I could tell he'd been working hard on vocals. They'd *all* been working hard.

But after the band had checked their instruments, they had a good ten minutes before the show started, and Brad had found me in the crowd. He came out and gave me a hug. "How are you, sweetheart?"

I don't know why, but I really liked his greeting. It was affectionate but not overly intimate. "Great. So good to see you."

"How's your break so far?"

"Okay." I smiled. "Better now." He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, Brad, this is my old friend from high school Jill and her husband Chad." He nodded to them and when Chad put out his hand, he shook it. "This is my very good friend, Brad Payne."

"Very good friend? I feel privileged." He kept his other arm around my shoulders, and I couldn't help but notice it was still there...that animal attraction that dominated us both so powerfully. Just having him stand beside me, touching me, made every hair stand on end, and I imagined being in his embrace. "Nice to meet you folks." He looked at me. "I gotta get backstage. See you later?"

I nodded. "You bet." Sad...I was happier to talk to Brad than to have Ethan lay one on me.

So as he'd walked off, and I couldn't take my eyes off his backside, Jill leaned over and said in my ear, "What's up with you and *this* guy? Didn't you say there was something strange going on between the two of you?"

I looked over at her. I wasn't quite sure how to explain it. "I've kissed him. It's...like he's a sexual magnet that I'm drawn to."

She raised her eyebrows. "Valerie! You?" Then she put her hands around my ear. "I'd tap that."

I'd started giggling. But now we were watching the band begin their fifth song of the evening. They were solid, a far cry from when I'd heard them in Brad's garage months earlier. They sounded just as good as many of the professional bands I'd purchased the music of. What I noticed most, though, was the new songs of Brad's that I'd heard so far. It seemed as though he'd been working on making his lyrics less *generic*. That was real growth. He was pulling emotions and ideas from his heart and painting pictures with words instead of spewing out knee-jerk clichés that he'd heard over and over in other songs and on TV.

Ethan...well, there was nothing new from him. The new songs we'd collaborated on during the spring, sure, but nothing since. Not yet, anyway. Maybe later in the set, but I figured I wouldn't hear anything, since they seemed to be packing in a lot of their new songs first.

More than halfway through their part of the show, they started playing a tune I thought I knew, but I couldn't quite place it. Brad grabbed the mike and started to talk. "Colorado Springs, you've been great so far. Thanks for welcoming us here." He stepped closer to the edge of the stage. "I want to do something a little different right now. A friend of mine is here



in the audience. She's written a lot of the words you've heard tonight. Anyway, this is a song we wrote together, and I'd really like to have her sing it with me." *What?!* He pointed a finger at me and then crooked it toward himself, urging me to join him.

I felt a cold sweat break out all over my body. Yes, I'd heard his acoustic version over and over enough that I felt I could sing the right tune and I knew the words, but this...this wasn't like when he had me sing in his garage (that was embarrassing enough). This was a *real* crowd of people. I looked up at him, shaking my head feverishly. "No!" I was frantic and considered walking the other way, out of the building.

But I'd underestimated the Brad's pull on me. Part of me really *did* want to join him up there. He smiled at the crowd. "She's a bit shy, folks. Why don't we encourage her to come on up here?" The noise of the audience swelled with cheering, yelling, and whistling, and even Jill pushed me gently on the shoulder. He looked down at me again. "See, Val? Everyone wants to hear you. You can't let them down now."

Well, at this point, I'd look like a jerk or a bad sport if I didn't at least try. So I took a deep breath and tried to look pissed. The stage was high, but Chad laced his hands together to make a step for me, and Brad reached down and helped me up. He picked up the mike again and said, "Please give Valerie a big hand."

He had the biggest, most devilish grin on his face and gave me another hug. I said in his ear, "You could have at least warned me. I'm gonna kill you."

"Gotta catch me first."

I could tell by the look on Ethan's face that he hadn't known about this either. I couldn't tell if he was angry or amused, but it didn't matter. I was doing this, like it or not. Brad said into the microphone, "Let's turn this shit up." He slid the mike into the stand and then said to me, "I'll sing the first verse, you do the second, and maybe we could harmonize on the bridge?"

The adrenaline rushing through my body was making my hands shake and my feet already felt numb. But on top of that, I felt woefully unprepared. "What about the choruses?"

"Same deal. That okay?"

My eyes were wide. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

He grinned and suddenly I felt transported. I could *feel* the music when I was onstage, in my heart, my muscles, my veins. And I couldn't actually see faces in the crowd, so that took a little of the edge off. I discovered the acoustic version Brad had emailed me was nothing like the electric one. It was low, in a minor key, and heavy. I didn't know how well it would match the words.

I couldn't look at him. Couldn't look. The words were too personal, too close, way too fucking intimate, and here he was gonna let the whole world know how I felt. He cooed up to the mike while striking the chords on his guitar. I glanced over and felt tremendous relief that he wasn't looking at me, was instead focusing on the audience.

"What is it about you  
That makes me weak in the knees?  
You're the only one on this earth  
Never needs to say please.

But you know my weakness,  
Know where I hide my soul.  
Yet you kept me safe

And you made me whole.  
You made me whole.”

He looked at me as he said the last line, just a sly glance to the side, and it nearly wrecked me. And then he started the chorus.

“But you’re the rainbow I can’t touch,  
The forbidden fruit I want so much.  
Just one taste, one night together  
Would help me endure the rest of forever.”

The emotion in Brad’s voice as he sang the chorus nearly crushed me. He *did* know, must have known I’d written it about him. How could he not know? I had hoped he would just like the song and gloss over it like some of the most complicated poems I’d read in my poetry class. Brad might have been a lot of things, but he was no idiot, and he’d figured it out.

So now I had to contend with emotion too, and how the hell would I be able to sing that way? I tried to think of the most peaceful place I could think of. It was a place where my parents used to take us camping as kids, high in the Rockies, next to the clearest creek I’d ever seen, a place full of warm fun days and cold nights, even in July, a place where the air was crisp and clean, and I could see the Milky Way at night. I thought of myself there and tried my damndest *not* to think about what had been on my mind the night I’d written the words that started pouring out of my mouth. I held the mike in the stand on both sides as though I’d fall over if it didn’t hold me up.

“You said that you’d wait for me  
But you didn’t know what that entailed.  
You didn’t know my heart was diseased.  
In all things love I have failed.

But you seem to see right through me.  
You know my heart’s desires.  
I don’t think I ever fooled you  
When you set my soul on fire.  
You set my soul on fire.”

And I started singing the chorus, but I still wasn’t going to look at Brad or Ethan or anybody. I was looking into the void, the black across the way, and I felt safe there. But I saw Brad out of the corner of my eye, and he got close to me. He started harmonizing on the chorus with me, even though he’d told me he was going to do that at the end. But I could read his intent. He wanted me to keep singing, to run with the bridge, and he’d back me up with harmony. So I did. And, for never having practiced together, we sounded pretty good. Our voices meshed together really well.

“You will be my heaven and hell,  
My promise so far away.  
Can I wait until that day?”

And then Brad moved out from behind the mike to play a solo I hadn't heard in the acoustic version. It was wrought with raw emotion, and in that moment, I defied anyone who'd dismissed the electric guitar as simply a loud but inferior instrument to tell me otherwise. I could sense what he was feeling, and it was intense. I looked up from his guitar in the crowd and smiled at the cell phones swaying back and forth. *Holy shit!* That praise was for my words! Well, not just that. It was for Brad's incredible music writing too. The song was nearly perfect by my estimation. And I was so immersed in the music, I almost forgot to start singing again. But Brad didn't let me forget.

And this time I looked at him as we sang the chorus the last time. Yes, he knew.

And, based on the audience reaction, I think they had an inkling too. I just hoped Ethan and the other guys didn't pick up on it. Well, I figured Ethan was clueless. I'd seen him play enough to know that if it wasn't his guitar, it was off his radar, so I figured I was safe there.

Brad threw his guitar pick in the audience and then wrapped his hand around my neck to pull me close. He kissed me on the cheek and said, "Thanks for being a good sport."

I just smirked at him and then tried to figure out how I was going to get off the stage. I needed to maneuver past some of the platforms and amps they had near the edge. Getting up might have been easier. But I found a space wide enough for my butt and sat on the edge, then dropped to the floor. As the applause died down, I heard Brad say, "Wasn't she great?"

They started playing the next song, something hardcore to switch gears and move out of ballad territory, which was good for this crowd who looked ready to start moshing. I stood next to Jill and Chad again, and Jill said, "I'd forgotten how great your voice is, Val. You *wrote* that song?"

I grinned. "Just the words. Brad wrote the music."

"That was great."

I was glad it was dark, because she couldn't see me blushing. I focused my eyes back on the band. Well, so much for being off Ethan's radar. He looked pretty irritated.

But the rest of the time I watched them, I not only enjoyed the music, I basked in that feeling of being onstage. It was such a high, and I can't describe what a rush it was. To feel like I was giving my soul to a throng of people, and they were loving it and giving it back...incredible. Those of us onstage were joined with the crowd by the music. So part of me envied the guys onstage. I knew they'd worked hard for this moment and all the moments that would follow, but now I'd gotten a taste—a *real* taste—and suddenly I experienced clarity. These four men loved being in their band more than anything else in the world, something they'd dedicated themselves wholly to, something they loved beyond everything else. Why couldn't I do something like that?

Well, I couldn't. I hadn't had enough musical training, for starters. My music reading ability was pathetic at best. I might have *loved* music, but I couldn't write it, couldn't perform it save singing, and even despite that, I knew I was no Lita Ford or Cristina Scabbia. So...I needed to just relish the memory.

They were so good, and I was sad when it was over. I knew the other bands would be great, but they'd pale in comparison, mainly because I didn't know them and didn't know any of their songs like I did those that belonged to Fully Automatic.

While the band took their equipment off stage, Chad went outside to smoke and Jill went with him. I considered going too but didn't want to miss if any of the guys came out to say *hi*. Sure enough, Brad came out a little while later and gave me a hug. "Still want to kill me?"

I couldn't help but grin. "Yeah. A little."

“They loved you.”

I wanted to believe that. “They loved *us*.”

He shook his head. “Nope. I know better.” I rolled my eyes, and he took that as a cue to change the subject. “So...wanna party with us after?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I came with Jill and Chad, though. Is it okay if they come along?”

“Of course. The more, the merrier, right?” I smiled. “You coming to tomorrow night’s show too?”

“I wanted to but...oh, yeah. Never mind.”

“What?”

“Well, I didn’t think I was gonna have money for tickets, but I forgot Chad and Jill paid for their own.”

“So? Text me when you get there, and I’ll get you in the back door.”

“Actually, it’s a bar, so should I even be there?”

“Who cares? If you’re with me, they can’t say shit. You’re part of the band.”

“Oh, no. You’re not getting me to sing again.”

He paused for a moment, looking in my eyes, trying to read something. “You trying to tell me you didn’t like that?”

“No, I did. But I don’t want to get too used to it.”

“Why not?” No. He was getting too close...not bodily, but he knew. How was it Brad was always able to read me so easily?

I was trying to change the subject when Jill and Chad showed up. “Hey, guys. Brad wanted to know if you wanted to party with them after the concert.”

Chad said, “Probably not. Sorry. I have to work in the morning.”

I didn’t want to make them feel bad about it, so I said, “Not a problem.” I turned back to Brad. “You’ll be partying tomorrow night too, right?”

“If you have to ask, you don’t know me very well.”

I gave him a fake look of disgust. “And you’ll be in my hometown tomorrow night.”

He smiled. “Yeah.” The rest of the band joined us eventually, and we enjoyed rocking out to the other two bands. By the end, I was tired too and glad I wouldn’t be partying, but tomorrow was Saturday, which meant I could sleep late and, therefore, stay up later.

When it was time to leave, I hugged them all and told them *good night*. Ethan held me longer than he should have, and he asked, “Will I see you tomorrow?”

I smiled in spite of myself. He had a hold on me I couldn’t explain. “Of course.” And so he kissed me again, right there in front of everybody, tongue and all.

And stupid me. I couldn’t help but kiss him back.

\* \* \*

The next night, I decided to play up my sexy side. If Ethan wanted me back (and I hoped to push it that far), he was going to have to *win* me back. But I had to make him want me. So I wore a leather mini wraparound skirt with a red baby doll t-shirt and matching sandals. My toenails were painted pink. I knew I looked good and couldn’t wait to see Ethan’s eyes. I’d dreamed about him all night, and I knew it was because he was making me feel like he cared again.

I decided to walk. It was a warm evening in late spring, and my parents lived less than ten blocks away. As planned, I texted Brad when I got to the bar where they were playing. It was an old biker’s bar that I hadn’t thought people went to very often, but Brad assured me they’d be packed. It just so happened the guys were playing with the same two bands they had the night

before. My town was just an hour away from the Springs, so it wasn't too far out of their way, and I thought it was cool that they were playing together twice.

Brad texted me to come to the back because there was a door there, so I walked around the old building and, sure enough, Brad was standing outside leaning up against the wall. He smiled, but the smile quickly faded, and it took me a few seconds to figure out why. I hadn't anticipated the effect my clothes would have on *him*. I'd only been thinking about Ethan when I'd chosen my outfit. He let out a long slow whistle, but then he tried to lighten the mood, so I had no idea what he really thought. "I do believe this is the first time I've seen your legs, young lady." I grinned but wasn't sure what to say. He stood up straight as I got closer. "Sure I can't talk you into singing with me again tonight? You kicked ass doing it on the fly last night."

I considered it. Once I'd actually started singing, my nerves had settled and I'd enjoyed it. No, that wasn't true. I hadn't just enjoyed it. I'd relished it, eaten it up, imagined myself doing it over and over and loving every second of it. Yeah, Brad had put me on the spot last night, but we'd managed to do a great job never having rehearsed before. Now, I could say we'd at least done it and done fine. So did I really want to do it again? "Yeah, okay."

"Good. Now I can take *Worrying that Valerie's gonna kill me* off my list. Seriously, you won't have to worry about being underage in there then, because you're part of us." He started walking, leading me inside the building. "Maybe we could have you do *two* songs. Maybe you should sing 'Metal Forever.' I fucking love that song."

"Oh, no. I'm not stepping on Ethan's toes."

He lowered his voice as we made our way through the hallway. "*You* wrote the goddamned song, Val. It should be your choice."

I stopped walking. A few steps further and he realized it, turning around. "I wrote it for *him*. He sings it. End of story."

He sighed and then grinned. "Fine. But you're cool with a duet again?" I nodded. "Or would you rather sing it solo this time?"

"What would *you* rather do?"

"I asked you."

I was torn. Part of me wanted to sing solo, just to see if I could do it without choking, but the audience was there to see Fully Automatic, not Fully Automatic *and* Valerie Quinn. I felt like I'd be cheating the audience if I sang it solo. And so I told Brad that.

"That's cool."

He led me onstage to where they were setting up Nick's drum kit. Zane was helping him, but Ethan was over to the side tuning his guitar. Yep, immersed in it again, oblivious to all else. Typical. But Brad asked them, "Got this?"

They were just about done. I looked out at the bar floor, and there were already a lot of people ready to rock out. So he turned around to me again and got close, putting his arm over my shoulders. "Sure I can't talk you into singing one more song?"

I smiled. "Yes, I'm sure." I looked around. "So, where do I hang until then? Can I join the audience?"

"Maybe you could, but I'm not sure how we'd get you back up here in a smooth fashion. You wanna just hang out over there by the side of the stage, kinda out of the way? Maybe we could get a chair out of one of the rooms in back."

"I guess that would be okay." If I hadn't seen them the night before, I might have been upset by it, because I had wanted to watch them. But I'd seen them in action now, and so I could watch them from the side this time. He left to find a chair, and I turned back around to see what

progress was being made on the drums. That's when I noticed Ethan looking at me. I had no idea what he was thinking, because his expression gave nothing away. He didn't look happy, though, and that's when I realized he'd seen Brad's arm around me. I could have kicked myself. How would Ethan and I ever stand a chance if he didn't think he had a shot?

So I walked over to him, smiling. "Hey, Ethan. How's it going?"

He shrugged. "Fine." Again, it felt like something weird was going on. He wasn't acting normally. He acted mellower than he should have been at that moment—he should have been hyped—and his pupils were dilated again, just like they'd been last night. I might not have been worldly, but I was pretty sure Ethan was on something.

Had he already noticed my outfit? Did he not care? Or had he just wanted to see if I'd come running? Well, if his kisses last night were simply designed to see if I'd be the stupid starry-eyed girl who'd respond to the snap of his fingers, it had worked, and I felt foolish. I decided right then that I wouldn't say another word to Ethan that night unless he spoke first. So I just nodded and walked over to see Zane and Nick.

"Goddamn, girl, you're gonna steal all the attention. Yeah, these biker dudes love to *hear* us, but they like to look at women like you."

Woman? That was a first. I didn't know that I quite felt like a woman yet. Still, it was flattering. "What makes you think I'm gonna steal your attention? I'm not even gonna be up here."

His expression changed. "I thought Brad was going to have you sing a few songs." Oops.

I shook my head. "Nope. We're doing what we did last night, but that's it. He asked about another, but I'm just doing the duet again."

He nodded. "Oh. That's too bad."

I was going to ask him why when Brad showed back up and showed me where he'd placed the chair, but he told me to move it to wherever I thought I'd get the best vantage point.

Soon, they started their show, and Brad only asked me to do the song we'd agreed upon. I'd been nervous, based on what Zane had said, that Brad might try conning me into something more, but he didn't. And, just like the night before, the crowd seemed to like it, even though they hadn't been expecting me.

I helped them take their equipment off stage when it was over, and once we had it tucked out of the way for the next band, we then had to take it out to the rented trailer attached to their van. Brad said, "Check out our tour bus, Val."

I started laughing. It was a long navy blue van that had seen better days. "Complete with kitchen and bathroom, right?"

"Gotta start somewhere. At least, tucked in all the right places, we can fit all of us *and* any extra shit we need to tote that won't fit in the trailer. When we get more of our own amps and shit, the little trailer won't cut it anymore. For now, though, it works."

"Where'd you get it?"

"I bought it from a church that was upgrading to a newer model." He got up close to the side, but it was dark, so I couldn't see it anyway. "If you look closely, you can see the old lettering I had to peel off."

"Very cool." I was impressed, and it was right then that I realized how focused Brad was. He was doing everything he'd said he was going to do. He was getting his band gigs and making sure they could get to them easily. I wondered how much the other guys drove the plans along. But it didn't matter. They had Brad in their corner, and he was beginning to appear to be unstoppable.

We went back in to headbang to the other two bands and then we'd party, but I noticed Ethan had disappeared. It wasn't until it was time to leave that we stopped in the back again to find him. He was surrounded by four young girls, and they seemed to be having a great time. I hoped that didn't mean I wouldn't.

## Chapter Sixteen

WHEN WE GOT to the van—the band, me, and the other four girls—Brad said, “All you motherfuckers in back. Val is riding shotgun with me. You guys work out the details amongst yourselves back there.”

I smiled and got in. Yes, in his own way, Brad was always a gentleman. When everyone was in, he said, “Buckle up.” Then he leaned over and whispered to me, “There aren’t enough seats for all of ‘em. This should be fun.”

But they managed. I looked back and could see that the two wide seats back there could each easily accommodate three people. But that meant they had one extra person. Just so happened that one of the two blonde twins sat on Ethan’s lap. Yeah. Thanks, Brad. Really fucking funny.

But he started the van and backed up, not realizing the distress he’d caused me. He asked, “You like being onstage, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah...”

He looked over at me and smiled, but the dark partially masked his face. “You should do it more often.” He looked back at the road. “You’re good at it.”

Well, I didn’t know about that, but I *did* know I’d enjoyed it. A couple of the girls in the back started giggling, and Brad reached over and cranked the music. I saw that he’d already had a CD player installed, so I figured the speakers were top of the line. Brad took his music seriously. Buried under the music, I let my mind wander, spurred by his last words. Yes, I’d loved being on that stage. I never would have thought I’d *really* enjoy something like that, but I had. I had to quell those emotions, though, because I knew nothing would ever come of it. It was temporary. The summer would soon be over, and I’d be back at school...with or without Ethan.

Brad parked the van at one of the cheaper motels in town, just a few blocks away on the same side of town but near the outskirts. As everyone was piling out, Brad hung back so he could lock up the van. He said to me, “Yeah, I know it’s not the greatest accommodations and, yeah, we’re all sharing just one room, but we’re starving musicians, right?”

“I didn’t say a word. I’m impressed as hell at the van.”

He smiled. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.” He affectionately touched my chin with his fist.

By the time we got to the room, the rest of the gang had already piled in. I wasn’t surprised when I saw Nick and Zane open a dresser drawer and pull out bottles upon bottles of liquor. I raised my eyebrows. “Where do you guys get all that?”

Brad wiggled his eyebrows up and down, and I knew I was in line to get a smartass answer. “Connections.”

He closed the door behind me. Everyone was sitting in a circle—some were on the edges of the beds, two were sitting on chairs, and Ethan was flanked by the blonde twins on the floor. He had a matching pair. How cute. Brad and I sat on the edge of the bed closest to the door.

Ethan pulled a cigarette out of his pocket...at least, that was what I’d thought it was at first. I found out quickly, based on its uneven size, that it was a joint. He lit it and held the smoke in while handing it to the girl on his left. Then he took three other joints and the lighter and handed



them to Nick who started spreading the joy. Zane, meanwhile, had started a few bottles going around the circle.

Oh, God. I was the stick in the mud here, and I knew it. I wasn't going to be drinking or smoking, and I could have kicked myself. I should have known this was the kind of thing they were going to do when Brad had invited me to party, but I hadn't thought much about it. I'd instead just wanted to spend time with the guys...well, Ethan. And he'd already ruined that.

Before I could fully register what was happening, everyone except for me had taken a drink or a toke or both. Brad had a joint in between his fingers and pulled on it, holding it in his lungs until he couldn't anymore, and then he blew it out in a slow, lazy exhale. He handed it to me, and I immediately started to hand it to the girl seated next to me.

Brad leaned close. "Come on, Val. Just try it."

I trusted Brad, yes, but I'd never tried anything like marijuana, and I wasn't ready to cross that line. I shook my head and so he nodded, and then I passed the joint on. He closed his eyes and said, "Fuck. That's nice." I wondered how much the pot and booze had cost them in addition to everything else. At this rate, they probably weren't making any money playing the music, but I wasn't going to tell them how to live their lives.

"I'm gonna get some water. Do you know where the vending machines are?"

"Don't waste your money. There are glasses on the counter over there, and I'll go get some ice since none of these douchebags bothered."

So I got up and got some water while Brad left with the bucket to find ice. I poured some water into the glass and sucked it down, then poured another glass when Brad showed up with ice. There was some conversation about music, some about the show itself, but Brad and I were quiet. He had a couple more hits and one more swig out of one of the bottles floating around. As the minutes ticked by, I felt myself getting a little lightheaded. As *more* minutes ticked by, everyone in the room started getting a little friendlier, but my attention kept getting drawn to Ethan. The two blondes were now sitting on their haunches facing each other in front of Ethan's face, and I got the idea they were responding to his commands. It pissed me off that the lyrics I wrote for him helped him score those girls. In that way, I guessed I couldn't blame anyone but myself. The two girls started kissing each other, and before I could look away, Brad said, "Why don't we go sit in the van and talk?"

I didn't know what his motive was for offering to get me out of there, if he'd seen the look of horror on my face at the girls or felt bad about the pot or if he had other designs. But it felt like a rescue, and I was going to take it.

He took me by the hand and I stood, and that was when I noticed Zane getting friendly with his date as well. Yes, I was being saved...from what, I didn't know, but I felt immense relief. If being in a band meant a nightly drunken orgy, I knew I needed to hang up the music fantasy right now.

It was quiet in the dark parking lot. There was only one street lamp in the lot, and it was closer to the office by the street, so even though the light reached his van, it wasn't bright. Brad leaned over and had trouble getting his key in the lock, so he started feeling for it with the fingers on his other hand. Then he started laughing. He was feeling no pain at that moment.

He got the door open, and I could feel the stifling heat that had been trapped inside pouring out. "We need to open the windows." He moved to the front and turned on the van so he could roll them down, and so I sat in the passenger seat. When he finished, he said, "Let's sit back there where there's more leg room."

Okay, now I figured out his ulterior motive but decided I was okay with it. Looking back, I know I also had a bit of a contact high, so my judgment was impaired, but deep at the heart of it, I also felt an undeniable sexual attraction for the man who was at the passenger door before I could barely get the door open. He placed his hands on my waist and lowered me down out of the van. And the look in his eyes was like a harpoon...Cupid's harpoon. Except it didn't infect me with love but sexual desire.

But we got in, and he urged me to sit in the seat in the very back. It was a little bigger than the one in the middle. Once he sat down next to me, he started laughing again, this time uncontrollably. I couldn't figure out what was so funny, but his laughter was infectious. Soon I started giggling at him, and I didn't finish until my stomach ached.

But then his face got serious again, and he stroked my cheek. "Sorry about earlier. I guess we put you in an uncomfortable position. I didn't know you didn't smoke pot."

"I was accused of being prude in high school more than once."

He placed his hand on my thigh. "Oh, I don't think you're prude, Val. You just haven't met your drug of choice, and you definitely haven't met the right guy."

His hand was warm. I was staring at it and deciding if I wanted to push it off my leg or not. As usual, though, I couldn't resist Brad...flirting with him or anything else. So I said, "Meaning you're the wrong guy?"

He smirked at me, and I wished I could figure out what he was thinking. "Yeah, I'm sure I'm the wrong guy, but I can feel like the right one if you let me try."

I don't know why, but his words were exactly what I needed to hear in that hazy state, and I felt like the most special girl in the world then. Brad had that effect on me, and I think it's because I'd never seen him with another female...ever. It allowed me to believe him. Someone like Ethan, though...it was evident that he loved women, but he loved *all* of them. Whether Brad had designs on other girls or not, I didn't know, because I'd never seen him hit on other girls when I was around. It was like he only had eyes for me. And I don't have any idea why, because—even though that sexual attraction was there—I didn't feel like I was encouraging him at all. He knew I was hung up on Ethan. He'd known that from the first day I'd met him.

"Did I tell you already how much I like this skirt?"

In spite of my muddled emotions (or because of them), I liked his hand on my thigh and a deep, dark part of me that I would never admit to thought I wouldn't mind if he moved his hand even higher. But I struggled to maintain control. Still, I couldn't stop myself from flirting. "Your eyes did."

He took his hand off my leg and placed it on the back of my neck while his lips touched mine. The passion—yes, it was still there, murky and bottomless, threatening to consume us both, but somehow he had a grip on himself. I didn't know if it was the pot helping him to slow down, but this kiss was *not* like the kisses we'd shared in the past, as few as they'd been. This kiss felt like an exploration...not just of my mouth but of what was between us. It was questioning, probing, moving slowly, hoping to find something.

And, yeah, whether I wanted to admit it or not, my judgment was impaired, although I don't think Brad could have been considered a bad choice for anything. But my code—the notion I had that I needed to love the man I lost my virginity to—was thrown out the window with the too hot air in his van.

And after luxuriating in his sweet kisses for several minutes, he kissed my neck, and those nerves must have been connected to my nipples and my pussy, because the sensations vibrated to those places and past them to my core. Oh, God, I wanted Brad like I'd never wanted anyone

else. To hell with the code. So when he said, “Come on up here,” and placed his hands under my arms to help lift me on his lap, I went with the flow. My legs were bent at the knees as I positioned myself on top of him, straddling him. Oh, it would be so easy, and I tingled all over in anticipation of what was sure to follow.

He started kissing me again and, in spite of my feeling of relaxation, I could feel my muscles respond to his touch over my entire body, and I could tell I was breathing heavier too. I’d been running my fingers through his thick, soft hair, but now I decided to act with abandon. I felt my way to the bottom of his shirt, but I wasn’t just going to be coy and run my hand on his skin underneath. Oh, no. I was going to take his shirt off. I wanted to feel all of his skin. I’d never done it, and I knew he had a firm body and just the slightest amount of hair on his skin to make him look deliciously masculine. I’d seen it enough times that I wanted to touch it. He leaned forward to help me and grabbed it too to help pull it off. And then he thrust his fingers in my hair followed by his tongue in my mouth again, and I felt as though every nerve fiber in my body was ready to start singing. So when I felt his hands on the bottom of my t-shirt, I just pulled my head away from him and lifted my arms. He set my shirt on top of his on the seat beside us and placed his hands on my cheeks to pull my mouth to him again.

I think he knew I needed to move slowly, because he didn’t just grab my breasts even though they were right there, and I probably would have let him. Instead, he moved his hands to the small of my back and, while still kissing me, moved them up, just feeling every square inch of bare skin below my bra strap.

Meanwhile, my hands were enjoying feeling his chest and abs. His skin was smooth but firm underneath, and as I explored, I felt him growing hard underneath me. Oh...that felt really nice, the feeling of his penis up against me, right where he belonged. His jeans and my panties were all that separated that joining, because my skirt wasn’t impeding us at all.

He moved his lips to my neck once again, and I heard a breath of air rush out of my mouth. This time, though, he kept moving down and began kissing the tops of my breasts that weren’t covered by my bra. Yeah, this felt way too good to stop. I was unaware of everything else—of the almost uncomfortable, stifling warmth in the van, of the world around us. It was just Brad and me.

He slid his hands up my back, and his fingers started to grab the back of my bra with the intention of unclasping it. That’s when I heard a girl giggling outside the van. Then Nick’s voice. Then the creak of the metal door sliding open.

Nick was laughing and then stopped when he got inside. “Oh. Don’t let us stop you.”

The dome light was on now, and it brought me completely back to my senses, to the present. Oh, my God. Here I was in one of the most compromising situations I’d ever been in. Was I really considering having sex? In a van where anyone could just peek in and see? With Brad? Really? What the hell was wrong with me?

Nick couldn’t shut up, though. He slid the door closed, his giggly girl now inside and on the seat, so the light was off again. “We’re just gonna take the seat up here. Proceed.”

I think Brad knew the gig was up, but I had to give him credit for trying. He brought his lips back to my neck, then my ear, and asked, “You okay?”

I took a deep breath to kind of stabilize myself and said, “Define *okay*.”

He chuckled, and I noticed Nick and his girl had quieted down to just a series of random grunts and gasps and the sound of clothing being tossed off or pushed aside. Brad said, “We can keep going.”

No, we couldn't, not now that I was back to my senses. "I really should go." I started reaching for my shirt, feeling along the seat.

"Oh, Valerie," he said, whispering, and I could almost believe it was just him and me again. He ran his fingers back through my hair at the temples. "I could make you feel like you were born to fly. I want to do that. I want to show you what you were made for."

Oh, he was tempting. I considered it...for just a moment and then blew a stream of air out of my mouth. I started feeling for my shirt again, groping beside me, now starting to panic. He kissed my neck again. God, I had to get out of there.

"Brad, I'm sorry. I can't." Even in the dark as I pulled back, I could see the grimace on his face. But he let me slide the shirt back on and even reached for his own.

I maneuvered off him after my shirt was on and then I sat on the seat, feeling for the sandals that had long since slipped off my feet. By the time I had my shoes on, his white t-shirt was back on, and he followed me as I made my way to the door. When I got out, I couldn't help but notice that Nick and his girl were attached at the hip and only partially unclothed, but—despite my lack of expertise—I was pretty sure they were already mid-coitus.

The air felt cool and fresh, and it helped me gain my bearings. And I noticed my panties were soaking wet. That freaked me out at first, but I didn't want to say anything. Brad slid the door to the van closed and pulled me close again, his hands circling me at my waist. "Did they make you uncomfortable? I know that was weird. I can get us a room, just you and me..."

"I can't, Brad. I just can't." I looked down. I felt guilty. "I think I'll just go home."

He was still holding me pressed close to him. "No, that's cool. I respect your decision...probably more than you'll ever know." He rested my head on his shoulder and held me in a tight embrace. "Doesn't mean I didn't wish you wouldn't change your mind." He let out a heavy sigh. "How far do you live from here?"

"Not too far. Probably less than a mile."

"I'll walk you home." He let me go but wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "You okay?"

I smiled, wrapped my arm around his hip, laced my thumb through a belt loop on the other side of his jeans, and leaned my head into the crook of his arm. "Yeah, I think so."

"You are amazing."

I giggled, thinking that was the truth. I even amazed myself sometimes.

\* \* \*

"Val, the door!" Danny yelled up the stairs to my bedroom, although he was so loud, I think the neighbors could have heard him.

I'd been hiding out in my room since we'd gotten home from church that morning. Oh...I'd prayed and prayed and prayed. I was a sinner, and I was going to burn. I felt so guilty, and I'd hated being in that building that day, surrounded by good God-fearing people and a few hypocrites. I felt like they were all staring me down like they knew.

We went home to pot roast and potatoes, one of mom's specialties, and ate what started as a quiet meal. But then the family asked me questions about the night before, and I told them about the concert...but not the party after. They expressed interest in meeting my friends, and I told them if they came back to Winchester, I'd make sure they would get to.

After we'd done dishes and the leftovers were put away, dad went out back to mow the lawn and mom went in the basement to work on whatever craft she had going on. I think at that time she was into ceramics, but I can't remember. She went through phases, focusing on needlepoint one month, quilting the next, scrapbooking later on. So Danny started playing a videogame, and

I went to my room to listen to music. I'd only been in there for five minutes or so when Danny hollered at me.

I figured it was either Jill, having enjoyed our time together and wanting to spend more, or one of my other old high school friends I hadn't seen since last year. But it wasn't. It was Brad.

Seeing him was completely unexpected. I wasn't quite ready to see him. I smiled, feeling shy, trying to forget our steamy night together. He'd been so loaded, maybe he'd forgotten. And that made it easier for me to talk. "Come in." He came into the living room and sat on the sofa. I'd just promised my parents I'd introduce them to my friends, but my family didn't know it was way too soon. So I had to see what Brad wanted and send him on his merry way. I didn't have to introduce Danny because my brother had already passed me on his way back to the family room. "So...what's up?" I hoped it wasn't going to be any kind of awkward apology for what had happened between us. Oh, shit. Maybe I should have talked to him outdoors. I didn't need my family hearing about what a slut I'd become.

I was nervous, wondering what the hell he wanted. Surely, he wasn't there to confess his undying love to me or anything stupid like that. "Me and the guys wanted to talk to you about something before we blow town." I had already expected them to be gone, but I wasn't going to say so. I knew they must have continued to party hard the night before and were just getting around to leaving.

"What?"

"We're gonna eat a late lunch before we go. The guys are already at a pizza place downtown. Can you join us for a few minutes?"

"Sure." I wasn't going to tell him I didn't plan to eat. "I need to let my mom and dad know, though." So I got up, and he came with me. I yelled down the stairs to the basement. "Hey, mom, is it okay if I go hang with my band friends for a while before they leave?"

She was talking but moving at the same time because her voice got closer as she continued. "Where are you going to be?" She appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Napoli, I think."

"Oh, is this Ethan?"

Oh, shit. I'm sure Brad loved hearing that. "No, I'm Brad Payne, Mrs. Quinn." Mom was already walking up the stairs, so he held his hand out to her as she got near him.

"Nice to meet you," she said, shaking his hand. I was glad she didn't ask or say anything else. "I'm sure that's fine, hon. What time do you think you'll be home?"

I looked at Brad. "I should have her home in two hours or less."

"Have fun, kids."

On the way there, I figured out what they wanted to talk to me about. They wanted to apologize for the activities of the night before—the drugs, alcohol, and sex. But I wouldn't take the wind out of Brad's sails. I would let them apologize, and I would graciously accept it. Even though I would probably harbor a grudge against Ethan for my entire natural life, I did want to remain friends with these guys. It had been a simple misunderstanding, and I knew now that I was too straight-laced to hang out with my band buddies after hours. Still, it was sweet of them to think enough of me to say they were sorry.

Brad didn't say a word on the way, choosing instead to crank an old Guns N' Roses CD. I thought either he was feeling sheepish about the night before too or maybe he had forgotten a lot of it. That was okay, because I didn't want to talk about it either. Just thinking about the fact that he'd seen me with my shirt off—that he'd kissed the top of my boobs!, a place no one else

had ever touched—made me blush like mad. Maybe I'd be able to talk about it someday, but I wasn't ready yet.

When we got to the restaurant, I hopped out of the van before Brad could play gentleman again. I wanted to go back to being regular old Valerie, just one of the gang. He met me in front of the van, though, and we walked in together. Just as the hostess came to ask us if there were two in our party, Brad said we were already with a group, and he'd already spotted them.

As we approached the table, Zane said, "We ordered one pepperoni and one with everything and a couple pitchers—one Pepsi, one Dr. Pepper. Is that okay?"

Brad shrugged. "That's fine." There were three empty seats, all in between each of the guys. Brad sat between Nick and Zane, and I sat between Zane and Ethan.

Ethan acted kind of surly, sitting with his back to the wall. Nick looked like he had seen better days. I guessed he had a horrible hangover the likes of which he'd never seen before. The waitress stopped by our table just to check in on us. I asked, "Can I get a glass of water, please?"

"Sure thing."

Brad poured himself a glass of soda and then said, "Okay, guys. Who wants to tell her?"

Ethan sat up straight. "I will." He looked at me, and I couldn't read a thing from his expression. So...we were on speaking terms again? Maybe I looked like a slutty bimbo? Mentally, I chided myself and told myself I needed to pay attention. I wouldn't look sincere accepting their apology if I was zoning out. He took a deep breath. "All four of us have talked about this seriously, and we want you to sing for the band." I know I looked like a dumbass at that moment, because I was sure I'd heard incorrectly. He continued. "You probably already know Brad's lined up a bunch of shows this summer, and we want you to go with us." Well, as soon as I got excited, my bubble burst. First of all, I was already obligated to watch those two little girls until August and, secondly, my mother and father would never agree. Staying away for days at a time with four boys unchaperoned doing the kinds of things they were doing last night? Nope. They would never, ever agree. I knew it without even asking.

Still...my mind couldn't help but soar just a little bit.

And then the questions flooded through my mind, and my brain told me all the reasons why I couldn't. Why I shouldn't. I wasn't good enough. I didn't have the talent. I wasn't pretty enough. I didn't deserve it. My voice sucked.

*Shut up!*

I forced the logical and rude part of my brain to quiet itself and just let the excited part take over. I wanted to indulge it just a bit. "So...what would I do? Just sing?"

"Yeah...sing."

"But then what would you and Brad do?"

Ethan shrugged and acted like that was the silliest question he'd ever heard. "We could sing on occasion and even do a duet or two, but we could focus more on honing our guitar skills. I mean...we're good, but we wanna be great. And we need a frontman—er, *woman*—who can really interact with the crowd. That's harder to do when you have a guitar strapped to you. We need someone to stir them up, make them energetic, and I know you could do that."

Brad said, "And face it, Val. We can't hold a candle to your voice. The crowds ate it up both nights. They really like you."

"Yeah, but what if that's only because it's something different?"

"Would you stop that already?" Ethan was tapping his finger on the table. "Give us a good reason why you can't."

I let out a breath. "Oh...I can give you more than one."

Zane asked, "Like what?"

"My job."

Ethan asked, "You have a job?"

"What? Like that's so unexpected? Yeah...I babysit two girls Monday through Friday from now through the first week of August."

"So? Give 'em your two-week notice."

"I can't do that. It was a difficult decision for them as it was." The waitress brought my water by and set it in front of me. "Besides...that's the easy problem."

Ethan was still ready to challenge anything I had to say...and I was surprised by that. "So tell us."

"I don't think my parents will let me."

"Fuck your parents. You're a grown woman."

I felt my eyebrows jump up my forehead. That was easy for him to say. He'd been raised by a lenient mother who didn't seem quite sure how to handle him and had probably never told him no. Brad offered gentler advice. "You could ask." For the first time that day, I saw hope in his eyes...and an acknowledgement of what had happened between us the night before.

Yeah...if my parents were smart, they'd say *no* without any discussion. Brad and me alone together for five minutes equaled danger for my virginity.

"Okay. So let's say for some strange reason my parents have been replaced by pod people and say *yes*. Then what? I already told you I'm not going to ditch my job, and I'm sure you'd need to practice with me, and I doubt all your shows are Saturdays only, and—"

"Whoa, Val," Brad said and reached across the table to grab my hands, probably so I'd stop flailing them and making him nervous. "Why don't you ask your parents? If they say *yes* and you want to do it, then we can figure out the rest. One step at a time."

I let go of the protest that had been forming in my lungs. Yeah, that made sense. I nodded as the waitress brought the pizzas to the table. Yeah...first things first.

## Chapter Seventeen

HOLY SHIT. THIS was exciting stuff. I stayed for the meal but didn't eat, and the guys started talking about the shows they had lined up for the summer, already acting like I was going to be joining them. They had some in the big cities—another two dates for Colorado Springs, several dates for the Denver Metro area, and even a show in Pueblo—but they had a few in smaller towns too. They were going to be busy, and that told me Brad had been a booking machine. He even had presale tickets for some of the shows that he hyped at work and on their Facebook page.

Oh, yeah. I'd forgotten Brad worked too, and surely he'd had that in mind when he'd put the schedule together. Unless, of course, his rock star passion had taken over...which wouldn't have surprised me. I was already acting giddy and hopeless, forgetting I had to clear the idea with my parents.

So I told them I wanted to talk to my parents about it alone. I don't know that their presence would have hurt, necessarily, but I didn't think it would have helped. For starters, I had Brad to contend with, and between his hair that was to his shoulders and the half-sleeve tattoo started on his arm, dad wouldn't care for that and would have serious reservations about the kind of boys I would be hanging with. And if Brad got that look in his eye like he did for just that moment at lunch, the one where I knew he could remember what I felt like under my shirt while grinding into him...well, then, my dad would say *no* on principle. Ethan and Zane weren't much better. In fact, Nick would probably be the only one of the bunch that my dad would look at and think was a "nice kid." But Nick probably wouldn't say a word...and silence wouldn't help either.

So, yeah...I had to do it alone, and I chose to do it over dinner. I promised Brad I would text him later and let him know, but I told them all not to get their hopes up. Too late, though, because I already had. Those two nights onstage had fueled my inner desires that I hadn't even known existed, had awakened a dream that likely could have stayed dormant my entire adult life. Never mind any money I was expected to make. The guys said they'd do a five-way split after expenses. But I didn't imagine that would add up to much, even though Brad had said they were starting to make money on merchandise too.

That night at dinner, mom asked how my afternoon had gone, which provided me the perfect opportunity to bring up what I needed to ask them. "About that...um...I told you I sang a song each night at the concerts, didn't I?"

Mom looked surprised, and dad actually smiled. Danny was unimpressed, not that I'd expected him to be. Mom said, "That sounds like fun."

"Was it a real song or was it some of that music you listen to?" Dad had never made his displeasure with metal unknown to me or anyone else within earshot if he happened to hear it.

I needed to win him over, though, so now was not the time to argue the merits of metal. It might come to that, but, for now, I just had to patiently present them with the proposal. "Well, I've been writing some lyrics for their band, and it happened to be a song I co-wrote, so it was a lot of fun. And, to answer your question, dad, yes. It was metal."

He smirked as if to say, "Yep. Figured as much." But he didn't say a word, instead kept eating his dinner.

Time to bite the bullet. "Anyway...they wanted to ask me if I could sing in their band full-time."



Mom smiled, but dad put down the bite he was getting ready to put in his mouth. “What would that entail?”

“Well, I have no details as yet, but they’re touring all over Colorado this summer. I already told them I have a job through the first week of August, and I don’t want to mess that up, but they said we could work around that.”

Mom joined in. “So what would be involved?”

“It would probably be weekends, overnight in several places.”

“How many girls are in this band?”

Oh, here was the hard part. I swallowed. “I would be the only one.”

“And you’d be overnight in other places with strange young men.”

“They’re not so strange, dad, but you’re right.” No sense lying about it. But I started thinking, *Wait a second. I am an adult now. I was at college all by myself for a year...and it involved lots of overnights.*

Mom said, “It’s not a good idea. But tell us more. Would you all be sharing a room or sleeping in a vehicle? What kind of arrangements will be made?”

“I’m not sure. We didn’t get that far in talking. I knew I’d need to run it past you guys first. When they performed their shows in the Springs and here, they stayed in a motel overnight. I could get my own room. That wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Do you have that much money, Valerie?”

“I’d be making money on the road.”

Mom let out a deep breath. “Sweetheart, it’s just not a good idea. Being with four teenage boys constantly—”

“Your mother is right. Not a good idea.”

“But dad—”

“No.” His voice was firm.

But I wasn’t about to give up. Not yet. I had one more thing I wanted to say. “Look...I was away at college for a long time. I was *surrounded* by teenage boys and even guys older than that. The thing is at some point you have to trust me. I didn’t get into trouble in college, and I wouldn’t while touring with these guys either.” Never mind what had happened last night. Over all, I had a solid track record. “I’m a good girl.”

My dad didn’t say another word, which meant his mind on the matter was made up. The rest of the meal was eaten in silence, and I kept it together, but all I wanted to do was cry. Finally, I’d found something in my life that had set me on fire, and my parents were forbidding it. But as I sat there pushing the peas and carrots around my plate, I decided I’d let them sleep on it. Then, tomorrow, I’d tell them that I was an adult, and I had made up my mind. How could they stop me?

So, after dinner, Danny and I loaded the dishwasher and cleaned up the kitchen, and then I went to my room, feeling disheartened, even with my plan in place. I tried not to give up hope yet, because just hours earlier I’d been thinking how much fun my summer would have been—singing, performing onstage, dressing up, rocking out, not just banging my head but leading a crowd of headbangers. Please don’t let it be just a dream, just a hope, a penny cast into the wishing well, never to be found again.

I decided my mood needed a little Three Days Grace, so I played some on my laptop and just started writing poetry, as I often did when something bothered me. I wasn’t going to text Brad, not yet, not until I’d given my parents the ultimatum.

There was a knock on the door later, and when I said, "Come in," both my mother and father entered my room. I was lying on my bed. My mom sat on the edge, and my dad sat on the chair at my desk. I could tell something was bothering him. "Valerie, you're right. You're an adult now, and you spent the last year in college without anyone there telling you what to do. You got good grades. You stayed out of trouble. We need to trust you. We have to allow you to make decisions, and sometimes that means you'll make a mistake or two along the way. But you won't learn if we don't give you the space to try. So...your mother and I have discussed it, and the decision is yours. We can't financially support this endeavor, but we will support whatever decision you make. We love you."

Mom nodded in agreement.

"Thanks, mom. Thanks, dad." I hugged them both. I wanted to tell them they wouldn't regret it, but I figured I shouldn't push my luck...or make any promises I wasn't sure I could keep.

\* \* \*

Late that night, I was in bed and texted Brad. *If u guys r serious, I'll b ur singer!* He didn't text back.

Instead, he called. "Fuck, yeah! I'm glad you agreed, Val. I'll email you the show dates tomorrow morning, and you can let me know how that fits in your schedule. Then I'll email you all the songs we've recorded so you can learn them. I can do a couple rough cuts of the newer ones that we haven't recorded."

"Shouldn't we practice together?"

"Yeah, but...look over the schedule first, and then maybe we can figure out some times."

When I agreed, he said, "Seriously...glad you decided to do this."

"Me, too."

I hardly slept a wink that night. All I did was imagine myself in Fully Automatic. I pictured myself onstage, engaging the audience, pulling them in. What would I wear? How would I do my hair? My makeup? I knew from what little high school theater I'd done that I should wear my makeup heavier and darker, but how would I know when I'd gotten it right?

In spite of all the worries, I slept well once I drifted off, but I had to get up early to watch the girls. Brad texted me midday to ask if I'd gotten the emails he sent. I told him it would have to wait until I got home, because I was at work.

He must have been up half the night, because I knew he'd had to work too. He emailed me every piece of music they'd recorded with a promise of more on the way so I could start learning the songs. He also emailed documents of the lyrics. Then he put together a list of shows. As I glanced, I was glad to see that most of them were weekend gigs, but there was one on a Thursday night at some place in Denver. Brad must have made arrangements with his job already for that one. I guessed that would be one they could do without me, and I emailed him back to say that.

I also noticed that the schedule went through October. Surely, though, they knew I would be back in school that last week of August. But, I supposed, it wouldn't hurt to remind him about that either.

So I did send an email about both those concerns but told him I thought the rest were fine. They had quite a few Friday dates, but they were all nearby...Colorado Springs and the Denver Metro area mostly, so I would be pushing it, but it was doable. I told Brad all of that in the email.

I started toting my laptop with me to work. I didn't hook up to my employers' wireless, but I did use my computer to listen to songs. I'd get one looping in my head enough that my

subconscious could start to work on it. By the end of the week, I was already feeling better about the songs. I had a week to go before my first show.

That weekend, on my first paycheck, I paid my mom back what I owed her and then went shopping. I went to consignment shops and secondhand stores, looking for vintage clothing, Goth-type outfits, leather, lace, and anything I thought I could convert into cool stage clothes. I also assessed what I already had. I had a lot of things I could use—some leather already, jeans, concert t-shirts. After shopping, I felt like I had enough different outfits for the summer so I wouldn't get bored.

My mind toyed with the idea of getting a tattoo, but I knew my parents would flip out. Maybe I could sneak in a piercing somewhere, though, and I decided to think on that for a while.

One last thing, and I texted Brad about it. Would they pick me up before all concerts, even though Winchester was totally out of the way? Did I need to invest in a vehicle?

I stressed at first but then reminded myself how much I wanted to do this. Besides, I could use a car anyway. Our first show was somewhere in Denver, and it was next Saturday, so I wasn't worried about catching a ride. It was another thing we'd have to discuss later on, though.

Brad called me that weekend. "Are you as worried as your emails sound?"

I started laughing. "No. Actually, I'm really starting to get into this. Who's your tattoo artist?"

"Seriously?"

I laughed again. "I wish. No...my parents would kill me."

He lowered his voice. "If you got one on your ass, they'd never know."

"Yeah...right."

"So...the Thursday night show in July. It's not till eight that night, and I could maybe make sure we're one of the later bands. What time do you get off work?"

"It depends...but usually between four and six. I could let them know what's happening to see if they could let me go earlier that day."

"It doesn't take long to set up. How long from Winchester to Denver?"

"If you're not driving through rush hour, two and a half to three hours. Downtown?"

"Not sure. Not a problem, though, because if you got done at work by five and it took three hours *and* we played a little later, we'd be okay. Pushing it and not able to set up a merch table, but it would be doable."

"You know what would be easier? You guys just do that show without me."

"Fuck no, Val. If you're part of the band now, you're part of the band. If you can't make it, we don't do the show."

"But no pressure."

I could hear him chuckling. "The other dates work, though?"

"Yep."

"How are you feeling about the songs?" I started singing one of the ones Brad had written before I'd even met him, one he'd called "Take You Down." I'd been working on kind of a growl, which I knew had been done much better by Brad, but some of the words warranted it. So I sang a few lines just so he knew I'd been working my ass off. "Nice."

"Thanks. So...I'm learning the songs, but I'd feel a lot better rehearsing with you guys a little before we play our first show. Could we maybe Skype some night next week?"

"What are you doing Friday?"

I put a *duh* quality in my voice to tease him. "Working."

He matched my tone. "After that..."

“Nothing.”

“So why can’t we do a rehearsal Friday night? Maybe even Saturday?”

“Where?”

He was quiet for a few seconds. “Good question. My garage is always free. Would you be able to drive here?”

*That* was the problem. “I don’t know. My parents might not have a car they’d want me to borrow for that long a trip. I’m hoping to save enough for a car this summer, but until then…”

“You’re off work around five?”

“Ish…”

“Five-ish. Nice. Maybe I could pick you up and bring you back here. It might be kinda late. We might not feel like rehearsing that night, but maybe Saturday late morning, early afternoon, before we hit the road to go to Denver. Would that work for you?”

I nodded, even though it was only for my benefit. “Yeah. I think so.”

We planned to make it work. Brad showed up Friday evening with Zane in tow. Zane was feeling stir crazy and wanted to come along. I had a suitcase crammed full of everything I thought I’d need (including plenty of cash) and off we went. We stopped and got Taco Bell as we drove through Colorado Springs. Brad sped like crazy, and I was afraid we were going to get pulled over, but we were lucky. After we ate, the three of us sang several of our songs, and both guys were impressed with what I’d learned.

Zane said, “I like some of the things you’re doing kinda different from the douchebags who were singin’ before.”

Brad flipped him off without saying a word. It was still light out, so I was able to see they were both just kidding around with each other.

I hadn’t thought to ask until we were on our way where I would be staying, but I thought it might be good to ask now.

“Oh, yeah. Ethan said, since you’d stayed at his house before and you knew his mom pretty well already, you could sleep on his couch.”

I was surprised to find I was still pissed at Ethan, but as soon as Brad mentioned that he had been so good to volunteer his place, I felt the anger flare a little. “It wouldn’t be imposing on his busy social life, would it?”

Zane said, completely deadpan, “You know about that?”

Before I could retort or even get an upset look on my face, Brad said, “He’s just fuckin’ with you, Val. Ethan really did mean it as a nice gesture.” He made sure his eyes stayed on the road when he said, “But if you’re not comfortable there, you’re always welcome at my place. I know my mom wouldn’t have a problem with it.”

Yes, but he hadn’t offered initially, and I didn’t want to impose. I loved Ethan’s mom, so Ethan’s place it would be. Besides, it was only for one night.

It turned out that June wasn’t there, but the three guys wound up staying up late watching a movie and drinking, and I dozed off on the couch anyway. When I awoke the next morning, my shoes were off, my head was on a pillow, and I was covered with a sheet. Brad was spread out in one of the chairs and Zane was on the floor, a pillow from the couch scrunched up under his head.

I sat up and stretched, wondering how long they’d been up. Ethan was nowhere to be found, so I guessed he was in his own bed sleeping. Since I’d been a guest there before, I knew where the shower and towels were, so I got myself ready for the day, but when I was done, everyone else was still asleep.

I sat back on the couch and rested my head on the back, just running the songs through my head. Yes, I had this. I needed to just trust myself. And once I would run through them a time or two to live music, I'd have the confidence needed to front the band. I'd seen enough concerts, both live and recorded, to know that the vocalist was typically the performer who would make or break the show. A frontman (or woman, in this case) was the one who was usually the most mobile. I'd have to interact with the audience; I'd have to move all over the stage and shine some light on each performer at multiple opportunities. I was responsible for infusing our show with energy. The guys just had to play. I knew a lot weighed on my shoulders, and I hoped I was up for it. I was just grateful I'd have the chance to practice a couple of times live, because I was sure it wouldn't be like singing along to a prerecorded song. There were variables with live music, and that's what made it good, but that's what also made me want to run through the show once or twice, just so I knew what I was doing and had some confidence. I still wouldn't be perfect, but I'd be relaxed in the knowledge that we, as a group, worked well together.

That was what I was most nervous about too (aside from just feeling inexperienced)—remembering the order we would do the songs in. Brad had sent the playlist to me in a text. Maybe I'd just have to know what song was next by hearing the music, and I knew after doing the show a few times, I'd just know, just like I knew on a CD which song came next after listening to it several times, or I'd remember the order of songs on my iPod after listening to the same list for weeks. It was just something I knew I'd remember once I'd settled in.

I was making myself sick with worry, and I just wanted the guys to wake up so we could get on with it. I wasn't hungry, so I just got a drink of water and, finally, I turned on the television with the volume low, hoping the sound would stir the guys in the living room. There was no sign of booze around, so I knew they'd had the presence of mind to clean up after themselves. I hoped that also meant no hangovers this morning. I considered letting them sleep late to be sure, but my nerves overruled any sense of empathy I might have had.

I started flipping through channels. I really wasn't in the mood to watch anything, but I needed to be distracted for a while. I stopped on a channel that showed two women redecorating an apartment using junk store finds. After fifteen minutes of the show (and I hadn't turned it up louder), I saw Brad stirring. Zane had rolled over when I first turned on the TV, and I wondered how the hell he could sleep on the floor like that.

I glanced over at Brad, but his eyes were still closed, so I looked back at the show. Then I heard him say in a high-pitched voice, "Oh, my God! Doesn't this lamp have so much potential?"

He was making fun of the show. I glanced over at him, and his eyes were still closed, but he had a smile on his face. "I thought you were sleeping."

He opened his eyes. "Who can sleep through this riveting programming?"

I giggled. "What else was I supposed to do while you guys were getting your beauty rest?"

He sat up and stretched his neck. "You trying to tell me this is the only shit you could find?"

I got up and handed him the remote. "I just wanted something to do while I waited for you guys. I want to practice."

He looked at me then, those dark eyes of his understanding. "Val, you'll be fine. We'll have a goddamn blast and make a little cash while we're at it. It's cool."

I took a deep breath and smiled. I nodded my head. "When can we start?"

That's when he stood up. "First, we gotta get these lazy motherfuckers up." He walked over to Zane and nudged him with the tip of his boot. "Hey, man...we got a vocalist here itching to try us out."

Zane muttered something into the pillow but started moving. Brad wasn't wasting any time, though. He strode to the bottom of the stairs and shouted up. "Ethan! Get your ass out of bed!"

"I'm up."

"Hurry up. Val's chomping at the bit here."

Ethan opened his bedroom door, so I could hear him better. "Gimme five minutes to shower."

Brad walked back to the living room. "Did you hear all that?" I nodded. "Feel better?"

I smiled a little and nodded, but no, I didn't feel better...not yet. But this was a good start.

## Chapter Eighteen

“GODDAMMIT. WHAT THE fuck are you doing, Nick?” Ethan was pissed. He and Nick had been going back and forth for the last hour, bickering over stupid stuff. Ethan had accused Nick of doing something *funky* with the percussion. I couldn’t understand his exact issue, so I just shut my mouth. But Ethan really jumped on him this time.

I’d been giving it my all, but I was starting to worry. We sucked. We totally sucked. I knew they had to be already regretting asking me aboard. While Ethan and Nick were settling their shit, Brad stood by me and placed his hand on my shoulder. “You’re doing a great job, Val, but don’t sing at top capacity. You need to save your voice for tonight. No need to impress us. Just do what you gotta do to feel comfortable, and drink lots of water.”

I took the hint and grabbed my bottle of water off the floor and had another swig while Ethan told Nick he was fucking up the song. I still wasn’t convinced that I was *doing a great job*, but I tried to not worry. Brad said, “Shut the fuck up, guys. Work through it. Val wants to go through the set twice, and we’re never gonna get it done if you keep this shit up.” Ethan wasn’t budging, though. He was over at the drum kit hovering, and Nick was standing too, puffing out his chest. Nick might have been a quiet guy, but he wasn’t backing down from Ethan’s challenge.

Brad walked over and pulled Ethan away. He wasn’t forceful or anything, and I wasn’t really sure how he’d managed it, but he got Ethan to back off. Before Ethan had completely returned to position, Brad said, “This practice isn’t for you guys. It’s for Val. Let’s give her what she needs.”

We did get through the set once, but then I was ready to cry. We sounded awful. Brad, seeming to be a natural-born leader, told us we needed a break. We could all go out for lunch, or we could take a break apart. If we needed a little time away from each other, that was fine, but we had to be ready to work together...at least tonight, if nothing else.

Brad offered to buy, so all the guys decided to go together. I’d just about had all the testosterone I could stand, but I thought it was important that I be with them, especially if we were to bond as a band. None of the guys seemed to have a beef with me; they just couldn’t get along amongst themselves. And maybe that was just preshow tension. I hoped so. My dreams of enjoying myself this summer were fast fading. No way could I stand this kind of behavior for that long.

But the second rehearsal was much better. I wasn’t sure why, but Ethan seemed a lot mellower. I couldn’t be certain, but I thought maybe he had a little chemical help with calming down. Whatever the case, after we finished, we packed up the van. Brad said there were sometimes places to get ready at the venues and sometimes not. He said if I planned on wearing something else, I might want to dress before we left, so I did. I figured I could do my makeup on the way. I pulled out of my bag what I thought would be the perfect outfit for my first night on stage...tight faux leather pants (something I already owned) and a fitted red super-short sleeved t-shirt. I’d seen a woman in a band wearing one that she’d cut horizontally across the back in about one or two centimeter strips, and I think it was to show off all the tattoos on her back. I just thought it was a cool grungy look. So I had done something similar, only I ripped it and made some holes in it, but mostly on the back. I put a few smaller holes around the tummy area in front. Yeah, I had no tats, but I hoped it looked cool. I left my hair down. I’d also put on a

pair of big black Dr. Martens boots I'd had for a few years. They were perfect, and I'd worn them to many a metal concert, so why not onstage too?

The guys liked my look. I knew I'd match them, having seen them onstage before. But I wasn't ready for their reactions. "Val, you look great." That was Nick's response. His was more subdued than the rest.

Zane: "God, you look hot."

Brad: "Nice...I like the skin." Yeah...he'd already seen most of that.

Ethan: "We gonna have to beat the guys off with a stick?" And he didn't seem like he was joking about that or happy either. Like I cared.

Ethan planned to ride shotgun to Denver, but Brad told him quite emphatically that I was to ride next to him. "That seat belongs to our muse." I'd heard them call me that before, but I couldn't remember when. And Ethan was fuming about my sitting up front again. Still, though, I could tell he was low key, and I was convinced he'd had a little pharmaceutical help with that. I planned to ask one of the guys later—maybe even the next day—if they knew what was going on with him.

On the trip there, we tried to laugh and joke, but I was nervous. Brad turned up the music off and on, I think to try to get my mind off it. But it didn't help. It was even worse feeling like our rehearsals had stunk.

Brad stopped in Colorado Springs at Burger King and urged us to get something to eat. I told him I was too nervous.

"Val...if you don't eat, you're not gonna have the energy you need. Eat *something*." So I got one of their chicken sandwiches and fries and managed to eat half before I decided I was done.

And the closer we got to Denver, the more nervous I got. I can barely remember unpacking the van and setting up. We were slated as the first act of the evening, and I don't know if that helped or not. Knowing I could get it over with sooner was good, but I don't know that I'd ever been that nervous about anything in my entire life. Various limbs on my body were either numb or tingly due to an overdose of adrenaline.

Once we were set up, all the guys were checking their instruments. I stood off stage, not ready to put myself out there. We still had fifteen minutes before show time, and the place was filling up. It made the big bar in Winchester look like a bathroom.

I tried pacing but didn't know that it helped either, so I just stood with my back against the wall near the stairs. Ethan started walking my way, still wearing his guitar strapped over his body. He stopped in front of me. Before he said anything, I examined his eyes. I thought maybe now he was sober, but I couldn't be sure. He seemed lucid. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yeah..." Really, though, I wasn't too sure.

With one smooth motion, he pushed his guitar so that the strap carried it around to hang on his back, and then he put his hands around my waist. "You'll do *fine*, Val." And then he kissed me. At first, I was taken aback and unsure, but then I gave in. In the short time we'd dated—and even more recently—Ethan had never kissed me like this. His kisses, while thrilling, had never been full of unbridled passion and promise. But this one was. This kiss was deep and hard, and he held nothing back, and it completely took me out of the moment. One second I was freaking out about the upcoming performance and the next I was transported. So when he stopped, it took me a moment to open my eyes and let myself come back to the present.

But he wasn't done. I don't know if it was because of the look in my eyes or the expression on my entire face, the one of having had my breath taken away, but he kissed me again then and



nearly knocked me down. I might have been in shock the first time and frozen, but the second time I was thawed and moving. I wound my fingers into the hair at his temples and let him have me. For the first time since he'd walked away from me, I felt myself at his mercy again. And just like that, he was completely forgiven and back in my good graces. I shouldn't have made it that easy, but he just so happened to give me what I needed in that vulnerable moment, and I responded.

This time when the kiss ended, he again waited for me to open my eyes. And then Ethan was like a new person to me. Gone were all the bitter, angry feelings I'd had pent up about him over the last few months. It was as though none of that had ever happened. He said, "You gonna be okay?"

My voice was barely a whisper. "Yeah."

He nodded and smiled and then let go of me and walked back onstage. I just watched him, and then I saw Brad looking over at me. I didn't know if he'd seen any of it, but I couldn't even bring myself to smile.

And then it hit me. I went straight outside and threw up what I'd eaten at dinner.

\* \* \*

It was a blur, and to this day, I don't remember everything about my first real show. I can remember some details, but big chunks are almost missing from my memory. That was my brain's way of dealing with it. My voice was a little shaky on the first verse of the first song, but I let the music take over and guide me. And it did. Throw into that a frenzied crowd moshing and headbanging at my feet, and suddenly I was part of the concert too, just having a good time.

And our earlier rehearsals were no indication of how we'd perform. Suddenly, we were on; we were in sync, and we were smooth. I didn't hear a single bad note or mistimed drum beat. To boot, it was almost like we could psychically read each other. And it was only our first show. As we walked off stage to cheers and whistles, I wondered what more time together would do for us. I still didn't quite feel like I was a full-fledged member of the band, even though a good many of the words I'd been singing were mine. I felt like I had to grow with them; this concert was the first step. After all the stress, worry, and nerves, I was now ready for more. I wanted to see how we would evolve together. I wanted to enjoy the crowds, the feeling of the music flowing through my body as I belted out the tune. I looked forward to relishing the moment.

That night, we went to a cheap ass hotel. Brad had already explained to me that once he paid the last of the expenses (and that was usually the hotel room and he'd hold back some for gas), he'd split up what was left among the band. I went in with him and told him I had to get my own room. "That'll double the cost, Val. We'll make sure you have your own bed."

The clerk said, "We can get you a cot. Then you'll have three beds."

I considered it. I really did. But I knew these guys would get rowdy and party, and if any of them picked up girls like they often did, I did *not* want to have to try to sleep through it. Then there was the sticky issue of sharing a shower and all that good stuff. So I pulled the goody-two-shoes card. "I promised my dad, Brad. *My dad.*"

He looked at me and sighed. "All right."

"But I'll pay for it. I don't want to cut into our earnings."

"Fuck that." He glanced over at the clerk who just smiled. "Oh, sorry." He looked back at me. "No way. You keep doing what you did tonight, you'll be earning that goddamned room." He looked back at the clerk again, this time not apologizing for cursing and said, "I guess two rooms. One a double, the other a single. Any way you can get them close to each other?"

The clerk tapped on the old computer in front of her and said, "Yeah. Next door."

After Brad paid and we had the keys, we started walking back to the van. “At least if we’re next to each other, there’s less chance of neighbors complaining about a noisy party.”

I raised my eyebrows and kept as straight a face as I could. “That’s what *you* think.”

We got set up in our rooms, and the guys pulled the liquor out almost immediately, making me glad I’d insisted on my own room. There were no girls tonight (yet), but the men were going to be rowdy. I enjoyed some time with them, though, until I was too tired to stay awake anymore. But the guys assured me they were happy with their decision to bring me on board. Ethan said, “Val, Brad and I were okay on vocals, but you blow us out of the water. You’re exactly what we needed.”

Zane joined in. “Yeah, and you keep wearing shit like that, our fan base’ll grow a lot faster.”

I laughed. They weren’t used to seeing me wear stuff like that, but I didn’t think my choice of clothes would make people, even men, appreciate our music any more. It just enhanced the experience.

Had Ethan decided to get chummier with me that night—like he had earlier—I would have forced myself to stay awake longer. But I was tired and told them good night. Then they could go find girls if they needed to. I just needed my rest.

I couldn’t sleep, though. I was still on a performance high, and it would take me quite a while to fall asleep. That and the noise from my bandmates made it difficult. But when I did sleep, I was still relishing my new role, and I could barely believe my good fortune.

I finally got up around eight. I’d slept for shit and should have just gotten a cot with the guys. I doubted I would have gotten less sleep. But I jumped in the shower to get ready to head back home. If the guys needed more time to sleep (and I suspected they would, and checkout wasn’t until eleven), I would do some writing. I had a lot I needed to get on paper.

I’d gotten my makeup on but was still in just my panties and bra and had only combed out my hair when I got a text from Brad. *U up?*

I was surprised *he* was. So I texted back. *Yep.*

Then a knock on the door. I ran over and peeked through the peephole. It was Brad. I opened the door a crack. “Gimme a second. I need to get dressed.”

He grinned. “I could help you with that.”

“I’m sure you could.”

I closed the door and ran to my suitcase, grabbed a t-shirt and jeans and threw them on. Then I let him in. “So what’s up?”

“Jesus...those guys are trashed. They’re gonna be fun on the drive home. I need to get some breakfast and coffee and just wanted to know if you want to come with.”

“Sure.” I slipped on shoes and pulled my hair in a ponytail, and we were out the door.

We were quiet as he drove around looking for a place to eat. He had the music loud, and that was okay. Brad was the kind of person I felt comfortable around, even when we had nothing to say to each other.

He found a diner just a couple of miles from our motel. As he parked, he turned the music down and asked, “This okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

Within minutes, we were seated, had placed our orders, and had hot cups of coffee...just what we both needed. And I saw that as my opportunity—no better time than now to broach the subject I knew needed discussion. “Um...about last night...”

He looked at me then and shook his head. “No...Val, we don’t need to do this.”

Considering a little over a week ago, I'd almost lost my virginity to him, yes, we did. Just a few days later, and he'd seen me right back in Ethan's arms, a slave to his best friend's charms. I looked at him and, my voice low, said, "I'd like to."

He looked down into the black liquid in his cup, considering my words. Without looking at me, he sighed and then said, "I knew what I was up against." Then he lifted his eyes to mine. "I *know* where your heart is, and I chose to take that chance anyway." He took another deep breath and those eyes...they bored into me with an intensity I'd rarely experienced in my short life. "I told you...I'm a patient man." If he'd been a football player, he'd be tackling me right now, knocking the wind out of me, crushing me. But I realized what he was referring to—his promise to me months ago that he would wait for me to get over Ethan. And what if I never did? Had he thought about that?

No matter what the case, I felt as though Brad and I were becoming close friends. I trusted him more than I had anyone else in my short adult life. Brad had always been honest but caring, and I respected the hell out of him too. He was driven and motivated. I liked the other guys in the band, but when it came to accomplishing goals, Brad had it all over them.

Ethan...he was another story. Why he had such a hold over me, I couldn't figure. But he did, and Brad had known it from the beginning. It had never been a secret from him. There was something unspoken between Brad and me...somehow we knew a lot about what each other was thinking and feeling. I didn't know how it had happened, but it had.

But I sat there, no words rushing to my lips. What was I supposed to say? *Gee, Brad...thanks for waiting for me while I pine over another man.* I grabbed for my coffee cup and noticed my hand was shaking. But I wanted to say more. "Still...whether I'd expected what you saw or not...I'm sure you didn't appreciate seeing that."

I couldn't read him, not right then. I saw his jaw grow tense...or maybe it was my imagination. "Doesn't matter. It was a good reminder."

Oh, God...I really *had* hurt him. Pretty badly, from the looks of it. "Hey..." I touched his hand with mine. He didn't pull away. "You are...one of the best men I know." And then I shut up, because anything else I'd say after that would sound fucking lame. If he was so great, why was I shitting all over him?

If I'd known the answer to that question, I likely could have solved a good many mysteries of the ages.

\* \* \*

It wasn't until Brad and I were heading back to the hotel that I found a way to ask him about Ethan's drug usage. I might have been inexperienced, but I was pretty sure Ethan was using something. I hoped Brad would know.

We were halfway back, so I knew I didn't have much time to broach the subject. "So what's Ethan taking, Brad? Do you know?"

"Hmm...what?" Either he hadn't been paying attention, or he was pretending he didn't catch my question. I repeated it.

"Come on, Brad. I'm not stupid. What's Ethan been on lately?"

He shook his head. "You really don't wanna know."

"Yeah, actually, I really *do*."

He sighed, pulling into the motel parking lot. He didn't say anything, instead pulling the van back into the space where he'd parked before. After he shut off the engine, he looked at me. "I'm not positive, but I'm pretty sure he's taking Vike."

"Vike?"

“Vicodin.”

“How do you know?”

He looked over at me, stopping himself from rolling his eyes. “I don’t, Val. But I have my reasons for why I think that.”

He started to get out of the van, but I grabbed his arm. “Wait. Just tell me. Why?”

He took a deep breath, just looking out the window. But then he looked over at me. “A couple years ago, his mom had some in the medicine cabinet...leftovers from something, and she never used the rest of ‘em. So we both took one before going to a party. Well...we wound up not going to the party. We were wasted. It was...hard to describe. Pretty peaceful feeling. I didn’t want to do anything, just lay there, vegging, watching whatever stupid movie we were watching on TV. And then I just wanted to sleep. But Ethan...over the next year, he’d take one now and then until the whole goddamn bottle was gone.”

“So if it’s gone now, how’s he getting more?”

The look on Brad’s face told me how pathetic he thought I was. “How does anyone get illegal drugs? You think it’s that hard? All you need is the right amount of cash and a connection.”

“So...what should we do about it?”

Brad let out a puff of air, almost like a laugh, but it didn’t come off that way. “What do you think we can do about it, Val?” I just looked at him, desperate for an answer, now that Ethan’s drug use was confirmed. “We can’t do shit. He has to decide he wants to stop. You try to make him stop, he’ll just do it more. You stand back. That’s what you do. You...” He squinted his eyes and let out another breath, but he kept talking, his voice low. “You go on loving him and be there when you need to.” He pulled his keys out of the ignition and opened the car door. “Just like I always have.”

\* \* \*

So I felt no better actually knowing the truth, and Brad had probably known that would happen. Maybe he’d tried to shield me from it. It didn’t matter, though. I needed and wanted to know, and maybe his advice was right. Maybe all I could do would be to be there to help Ethan when he was ready.

During the next week alone, I did a lot of thinking. I decided that maybe I needed to be more forward with Ethan. More than that, though, I also thought maybe I needed to take control of my future. I knew I wasn’t going to be a virgin forever, and now that something inside me was awakening, I needed to be safe. I knew, deep down, that if Nick and the girl he’d been with hadn’t interrupted Brad and me that night in the van, we probably would have wound up having sex. And that would have been stupid on my part. No protection meant, first of all, possible pregnancy. Nothing would happen with my life if I wound up being a young mother, no matter who the dad was. I knew STDs were a concern too, but that didn’t scare me as much as having an unwanted baby. So I made an appointment with the family planning agency in town and took the first step. The nurse gave me a three-month prescription of the pill and several condoms, and even though I couldn’t start the pill right away, I felt some relief at knowing I was being smart.

We had shows every weekend, and by the end of June, I felt comfortable on stage. I was enjoying being the center of attention, stirring the crowd into a frenzy. I felt like I’d started to master some screaming in addition to singing clean, and I knew the songs well. We’d started doing a little writing again too, but a lot of it was done through email, simply because it was hard for us to get together much being in different locations. We saw each other for shows, and when the guys didn’t party too much, we could get a little work done, but partying was their priority. I

guessed I could understand it, but we hadn't made it big enough to justify blowing all our money on party favors.

Ethan didn't warm up again like he had my first night on stage. We were on speaking terms again, but our relationship—as boyfriend and girlfriend or even as just friends—hadn't returned to normal. We'd talk now and again, but it was often strained. I was beginning to think it would never work between us and, no, I didn't immediately go running back to Brad. He and I both knew I was “hung up” on Ethan, even if nothing was happening. Until that boy was out of my system for good, Brad was off limits. It was a now-unspoken agreement between the two of us.

By the time we got to the Thursday show in Denver, the guys weren't willing to do a show without me. I'd suggested a couple of weeks earlier that Brad and Ethan could, for one night, resume their previous roles, but they wouldn't hear of it. Instead, they picked me up right after work, and we sped to Denver. After the show, they drove back to Winchester, dropped me off at home so I could get a little sleep before work on Friday, and then found a motel.

What surprised me was how that summer I'd fallen into the routine so easily, and I loved every moment I was onstage. It was magical. There was an energy that came from the audience that fueled every performance. It drove me and excited me like nothing else I'd ever done in my life. And I tried to ignore the voice in the back of my mind, the one telling me not to get used to it. I wanted to just enjoy the feeling, live in that moment.

One show near the beginning of August, we were playing in a small rural sleepy eastern Colorado town. Knowing what little I'd known about this town which shall remain nameless, I hadn't expected anything great. But they turned out to be one of our best audiences. They loved us and the other two bands we were playing with, and I was bummed we wouldn't be coming back.

We were staying in another rundown cheap-ass motel, just like all the other ones we'd been staying in, places with worn yellow carpeting, faded beige drapes, and plumbing that had seen better days. The guys were drinking again, and they had girls in tow. But I'd been sitting at the round brown table in the corner, and I saw Ethan put what looked like a pill in his mouth before knocking it back with a beer. That was my opportunity. I didn't have to guess anymore. So I walked up to Ethan and asked him if we could talk outside.

He agreed, and we stepped just outside the door on the sidewalk that served as a buffer between the parking lot dirt and the rooms themselves. He seemed guarded. Maybe he already knew what I wanted to talk to him about. “What's up?”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look in his eyes. “What are you doing, Ethan?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you're taking something.”

His eyes grew dark then, and I could see him shutting himself off. He narrowed his eyelids and got his face closer to mine. “And this is your business *how*?”

I hadn't known what reaction to expect from him, but it certainly hadn't been that. He was cold and closed in, already unwilling to talk. But I couldn't just give up, not yet. “You're my friend, Ethan, and you're also kinda like my coworker now. What you do affects me, affects the other guys. I'm afraid of what you're doing to yourself.”

“It's no worse than drinking.”

“You don't see me drinking.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I don't see you lecturing the other guys either.”

Well, he had a point there. I wasn't ready to give up yet, though. I grabbed his hand. “I'm not saying I approve, but you've seemed to function just fine with drinking. This...*stuff*, though.

It's like you're numb, Ethan. It's like you're not here with us. It's like you're far away somewhere else."

His eyes hardened. "You ever stop to think maybe that's the only way I can do this?"

I was at a loss. No words wanted to form on my tongue, and I heard the door open behind me. But I ignored it and decided to try a tough love approach. "That's bullshit, Ethan. I thought you *loved* this...and if you're not giving it your all, if you're not fully here, then you'll never reach your full potential. You're not just letting yourself down. You're letting us all down."

He grabbed my arm just above my elbow. His voice was low, almost like a growl. "Listen, Val, I know you think you know me, but you don't. I do this shit to survive, and I'm here, all right? The day I don't perform, the day I don't show, that's the fucking day you can tell me I've let you down. Till then..."—he let go of my arm then and started backing away—"not another goddamned word about it."

That's when I noticed Brad behind him. Brad wasn't much taller than Ethan, but it was enough that I could clearly tell that was who it was. He put a hand on Ethan's shoulder and said, "Everything okay here?"

Ethan gave him a dirty look. "Yeah. I was just leaving."

I raised my eyebrows and nodded my head. I was pissed. "Yeah. So was I." Apparently, Ethan wanted to self-destruct, and the rest of us be damned. I might have been naïve, but I wasn't stupid. I knew about rock stars who'd killed themselves with drugs. And long before the point of death, they'd done stupid shit to damage their careers. How many concerts had The Doors's Jim Morrison been late for? He'd been the first of a long line of rock artists known for letting drugs wreck their lives before they killed them, and I didn't want Ethan to become just another rock star cliché.

For now, though, I had to let it go, so I just walked over to my room, leaving Brad standing alone. I didn't slam my door, but I couldn't sit down right away. I was angry at Ethan for just giving up, and I think I might have been even angrier that his friends seemed to be just letting him flush his life down the toilet while they watched.

So when I heard the knock on my door, I was really not in the mood. It was Brad, carrying two bottles of beer. I didn't even know what to say, but I know the look on my face was not one of amusement or happiness. "What?"

He didn't seem too amused or happy either. "Can I come in?" I didn't say anything, just stepped back, pulling the door open further, letting him walk in. He sat at the chair up against the desk, so I sat on the edge of the bed. I still didn't say a word. "Want a beer?" He handed the bottle to me, the neck tilted toward my hands. I shook my head. He placed the bottle on the desk and then twisted off the cap of the other bottle in his hand. "I know you want to help Ethan, Val, but what you're doing now...he'll just blow you off completely. He needs to realize on his own what he's doing." I rolled my eyes. "I mean it, Val. Don't push him. Trust me. Doing that is a bad idea." I sucked in a breath of air, considering arguing with him. "I don't think he'll overdose on it. I've never seen him go overboard."

"But can he become addicted?"

His eyes looked sad then. "He probably already is."

"And you just let him?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I *let* him? Like I'm his mom, or I have any control over what he does?" I just kept staring at him. "I have my own shit to deal with, Val. I'm not the fucking cops. That would be like me asking you why *you* just let him."

At first, I wanted to tell him I'd only known Ethan for less than a year, that Brad and the other guys had known him for much longer. But then I realized Brad was right. Ethan was the only person responsible for Ethan. No one else here could control his life. Even I, with my good intentions, could only hope to reason with him. I shrugged my shoulders and made myself look at him. Then I nodded. "Fair enough." I sighed. "But what can we do, Brad? We can't just let him keep doing this."

"What the hell are we *supposed* to do?"

Well, he had me there. Ethan wasn't far enough gone to stage an intervention, and Brad was right. Until he admitted he had a problem, there wasn't much we could do. "I guess there's nothing. I just feel so helpless...and lame not doing anything."

"How do you think *I* feel? I'm his best friend, and you were right about one thing. I used to encourage a lot of that shit. Hell, we used to do a lot of shit together. First time I tried meth and coke were with Ethan."

I couldn't help that my eyes grew wide. "You've tried meth?"

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"Are you crazy?"

"Probably. Yeah...we did stupid shit, Val. Just...I knew when to stop. And...apparently Ethan doesn't. And...at least he's *not* hooked on something like meth." He took a long draw off his beer. "So, we gotta be here for him. We need to catch him when he falls, because he will. He'll fall. And that's when he'll decide he needs to do something different."

I felt my expression soften. "So what's the difference between you and him? Why could you stop and he can't?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has a more addictive personality than I do. Hell, I don't know. Seriously, Val. The man's been through hell. You have no idea. And this is one of the things he does to cope."

So Ethan hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said he did the drugs *to survive*. I'd never forget that, but I wasn't sure how I could help him...or even *if* I could help him. And I wanted to know what Brad knew, but I also knew Brad wouldn't tell. He'd tell me I needed to ask Ethan, and I also knew Ethan would only tell me when he was damn good and ready and not a moment before...if ever. I nodded, letting Brad's words sink in, that we had to just be there for Ethan. I knew he was right, and I hoped I could be strong for him.

"Offer on the beer still stand?"

Brad raised his eyebrows. "You serious?"

"I know...stupid."

He laughed. "Nah. If you're gonna drink, this is better than a lot of other things." He twisted off the cap and handed it to me.

I took a sip. *Yuck*. I'd had beer before, and I'd never been a big fan. Just not a flavor that made me want to drink more. But I'd asked for it. Brad smiled at me. He knew, just like he knew way too many of my thoughts. I didn't know that my expression had given it away, but he knew just the same. He said, "There's something else we should probably talk about."

I squinted my eyes. What now? Hadn't we covered enough tonight?

"You and me. I want you to know I respect the hell out of you, Val. Now that you're in the band, it's hands off. I don't want to lose you for Fully Automatic. You're exactly what we needed. No way am I gonna fuck that up. So...I just wanted to assure you, in case you had any worries, that I'll keep my hands to myself."

Part of me was crushed. I'll admit it. Brad and I had something between us, something I couldn't name, but it was even stronger than what I felt for Ethan, and I don't think Ethan knew that. But he was right. We needed to maintain a professional relationship, and even at that young age, I saw the wisdom in that decision. Brad was driven, determined to see his band go as far as it possibly could, and a fling...well, that could make a mess. I knew emotions could muddy the waters, and I respected his call. I held out my hand to shake his, and the warmth and electricity in his hand reminded me those feelings were still under the surface, but I'd have to ignore them now. "I respect you too, Brad, and I trust your decisions for the direction of the band." I didn't even think ahead to the fact that I'd be out of the band once school started up again. I was just living in the moment, enjoying it.

But we shook on that agreement that night, based on the hope that the band could get far. And I awoke the next morning, refusing to acknowledge the dream I'd had about him. If Brad was to keep his hands to himself, I had to keep my thoughts from myself...anyway I could.



## Chapter Nineteen

### Present

I'D HAD NO idea what becoming a mother would mean. Even with all the reading I'd done, the connecting with groups, and attending classes, I'd had no clue what I would be facing. It didn't help that little Christopher had jaundice, so we had to take him in to the doctor frequently until it cleared up. But that first month was insane, and all I'd really wanted to do was to get to know my baby and figure out how to be the best mom I could. I'd decided to breastfeed, so I had to figure out how to do that in addition to all the other things Ethan and I were so new at and clueless about.

But by the second month, I was starting to believe Ethan, that he was leaving his old self behind. He wanted to be a loving father and husband.

The first time Christopher laughed, it was as though the world had stopped. Ethan had placed him on the floor on a blanket to change his diaper, and he was kissing the baby's belly, rubbing his beard on him, just enjoying the feel of our child. Chris laughed. I got down on the floor too. My baby laughed! "Do that again," I said to Ethan, and Ethan tickled Chris's tummy with his beard again, and the baby laughed again. We spent a long time there, with Ethan tickling the baby's tummy over and over again. Then Chris would laugh, and we would laugh at his cute little giggle.

I was in love. That baby was now my life, and no matter what happened, the task before me was clear. My job was to love and nurture, protect and cherish this baby for the rest of my life.

After a while, we were on the couch watching a movie, Chris in my arms, having fallen asleep. I wasn't really watching the movie. I was staring at my baby's peaceful face as he dreamed. Ethan paused and said, "I still can't believe I'm a father."

I pried my eyes away from the baby to look at my husband. "Why not?"

He too was staring at the baby. I couldn't tell what he was feeling. He shook his head. "Just...I guess it's better than I thought it would be."

I let those words wash over me. "Did you think it would be bad?"

"No...I just...can't wrap my mind around the fact that I have responsibilities now."

I smiled. "You had them before."

He shook his head. "Not like this."

I was starting to suspect he was feeling trapped, and that was not a healthy place for him to be. I knew Ethan too well by this point, and I didn't like where this was going. "Are you not happy?"

He smiled. "Oh, no. I am, babe. I am. It's just...different." I started looking at Chris again. I knew my baby wouldn't, couldn't break my heart like his father had so many times, and just by his words, I feared Ethan was feeling cornered again. I didn't know if I wanted to talk about it or just brace myself for what was sure to come. He pulled me close to him. "No...this is good. I'll just...miss the old days. You know, fighting for you but still being a wild child."

I couldn't help the incredulous sound of my voice. "*Fighting for me?* You hardly ever fought for me."

He laughed. "I did...in my own way."

I sat there with him for a little longer, but then I decided to put Chris to bed. His crib was in my bedroom, so I lay him down and covered him with a light blanket, and then lay down on my bed. I couldn't sleep, though, because Ethan's words wouldn't leave my head.

A while later, Ethan came in the room and lay next to me. I could feel as he shifted in the bed. Well, at least he was still at home. He wasn't running...not yet, anyway. So I was surprised when I felt him move again, this time pressing up against me from behind, his warm breath on the back of my neck.

I was surprised. We hadn't made love since I'd had the baby. At first, I knew it was because the doctor had said we couldn't for a while, and we were so tired and stressed with being new parents that sex was the last thing on our minds. And, frankly, I hadn't wanted to think about it, because past experience told me Ethan would find it elsewhere if he felt his needs weren't being satisfied. So, feeling him behind me, rock hard and ready, made me instantly aroused and made me forget about the feelings of insecurity I'd had earlier.

"Mmm..." He started kissing the back of my neck, and I reached up over my head to run my fingers through his hair. His hand moved up under my shirt to find my breast. It wasn't as sensitive to his touch as it had been, but his touch in general was welcome and wanted. I could tell he wanted me now, and knowing I was awake and willing just encouraged him. He slid his hand under the back of my panties to pull them down my leg, but my weight had pinned them between my body and the bed. He just tugged harder until they were down my thigh.

I felt his other hand slide under my side, and he kept moving until his fingers were between my legs. He could tell I was ready. Of course, I was ready. He hadn't touched me this way in months. We hadn't been together much right before I got pregnant, and even then when we did, he was usually under the influence. And then, when I *was* pregnant, he tended to treat me like a piece of porcelain. Yes, I needed him; I wanted him, and I didn't want to wait anymore. I could tell he didn't plan to focus on foreplay, and I was okay with that.

I was a little nervous until I felt him thrust inside me, filling that need I'd forgotten was there. And even though we didn't say a word, he held me close after in that same position, making me hope it hadn't just been a dream. And still...an old song I'd written during the summer after my freshman year in college kept rolling around in my head. But one line, just one line from that song kept haunting me: "I thought I'd lost you forever."

But I was afraid to say it out loud.

## Chapter Twenty

### Past

BEFORE I KNEW it, I was back at home preparing for another semester at school. I'd managed to save up some money and had avoided blowing any on a car or tattoos or anything I didn't really need. I was feeling down, though, knowing my tenure with Fully Automatic was just about over.

I didn't want to go back to college. I didn't hate it, but I still had no idea what I wanted to do there. It held no interest for me, and I was beginning to think it was a waste of time and money. Worse yet, I didn't know if Ethan or Zane were planning to go back. I supposed I could continue to sing—as long as the dates were weekends only—but the venues would be a lot harder to get to, especially in the winter. Throw into that the time I'd need to spend on school work, and I really did need to plan on hanging up the mike after our last show.

So when the guys picked me up on our last trip—another show in the Denver Metro area—I tried to put on a happy face. No matter what we'd gone through up until this point, I'd enjoyed being in the band and becoming closer friends with the guys. I would never regret the time I'd spent with them. It had been an exciting journey of self-discovery.

As we drove down the mountain from Winchester toward Colorado Springs, Brad turned down the music. "Val, we wanted to broach a pretty serious subject with you, and now's as a good a time as any." He looked behind his shoulder. "Right, guys?"

They all made sounds of agreement, and Brad looked over at the passenger seat to look at me. Why did this make me nervous? It sounded *too* serious. "Okay."

His arm was bent at the elbow, resting on the door. The window was down, blowing air through the van, helping the temperature inside be a tolerable level. It was blowing the hair on the left side of his head around, emphasizing how much it had grown since I'd first met him. He'd also gotten more tattoos, one on his right forearm and another on his right pec. Out of everyone in the van at this moment, I knew that Brad would make it. Music was his life, and everything he did played into what he perceived to be his endgame.

He was grinning, because he could tell how I was taking it, that I was a little on edge. "We've been talking, Val, and we're not ready for this to be over. Not by a long shot. You know we've already got dates clear through November, and I'm still booking shows out past that." He kept his eyes on the road but kept talking to me. "We don't want to lose you, Val. You've become one of us, and we can't see doing this without you anymore."

I nodded and looked out the front window myself. This was going to be a sad conversation. "Yeah, but I've got college soon."

"Yes, that's what you've said. So you've decided on a major then?"

"Well, no."

"You've narrowed it down, though, right?"

I knew where he was going with this. "No..."

"So why can't school wait *until* you know?"

He had a point. Why *was* I so hell bent on doing it right then? I was in a hurry to get it done so I could be out of school, but to what end? I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. He was right. I could go to school anytime, once I knew what I wanted to go for. Waiting would make sense.

I'd just have to talk my parents into it. And that's what I said. "Okay, so let's say I wait. But then I have to get my parents on board. More than that, though, my job's ended. What do I do then? How do I support myself? It's not like we're rolling in the dough."

"But what if we were playing four or five nights a week?"

"Yeah...I can see how that might add up. But you'd have to spend it all on gas, though, wouldn't you?"

"Not if we moved to where the shit is."

It started to sink in, what he was saying. "Are you thinking we should all move somewhere and play all the time?"

He'd started grinning. "Yeah...that's what we're thinking. We mostly play around Denver, so why not find a place that fits all of us? I keep booking shows, and I could do more if we lived there and didn't have to drive all over the place. Instead of figuring out if it fit around work and if we could make it to a show on time, I would just have to make sure we had the time free. There are lots of shows we could do, and Denver's a huge place. And that wouldn't mean we couldn't do shows somewhere else, but it would make the ones there a lot easier to get to."

I nodded. It was a great idea, but I really didn't know what my parents would think. They'd been uneasy about my "touring" with the guys, but I didn't know how they'd feel about me sharing living space with them. Brad continued. "We have a better chance of building a big audience, maybe even of getting picked up by a label someday in the future, if we're playing more shows." He could sense my hesitation. "Would it help if all us guys talked to your mom and dad, let them know you're safe with us?"

And that's how the men of Fully Automatic got invited to the Quinn family barbecue the following Sunday. I'd told my parents I wanted them to meet the band, and I also said we wanted to talk to them about something important. I *hadn't* told them yet that I wasn't planning on returning to school.

We were all out back that afternoon after church. Mom had finished making coleslaw, baked beans, corn on the cob, and potato salad, and I'd helped her carry them out to the picnic table, along with condiments, paper plates, and plastic flatware. Danny was sitting at the table, texting his girlfriend, while dad stood at the grill, checking for the doneness of the steaks on top. I heard the doorbell ring and went into the house to let the guys in.

A feeling of dread clenched my gut. I hoped they'd toned down their look. I hadn't asked them to, didn't feel it was right to request it, but I had gently suggested they try to be conservative. Brad told me he was on it, so I knew *he'd* look fine. I suspected he'd whip the other guys into shape too.

And I was glad to find that they all looked like respectable young men...in *my* eyes, at any rate. Brad's hair—now between chin- and shoulder-length—he'd pulled into a ponytail and—in spite of the warmer weather—was wearing a white, long-sleeved button-down shirt. He almost looked like he would fit in a laid-back office setting. But I knew what was under the shirt, and the weather could force him to roll up his sleeves if it got too warm.

Ethan's hair had grown over the last couple of months, and it was longish but still not the length that would make my parents freak out. His t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers made him look like any normal college guy. Zane's hair had always been longer, but he too didn't look bad. He wasn't wearing the eyeliner he had been during shows, and the new tattoos he had were high on his arms, so his t-shirt sleeves covered most of them.

Nick...well, Nick was still the shy guy and hardly stood out at all. Not only was he quiet verbally, but he seemed to never want to draw attention to himself, so he didn't do things that

would pull eyes to him. He looked like the most “normal” guy of the group: closely cropped hair and plain blue t-shirt and jeans, one small tattoo on his upper right arm that was covered by the shirt sleeve. Assessing my bandmates as a group, I felt a huge wave of relief washing over me. I knew then that they had a chance of my father not just dismissing them summarily. They could win him over with their personalities.

“Hey, guys! Follow me.”

I noticed Brad was carrying a bouquet of flowers and thought he wasn’t gonna win my dad over that way...until I realized he was going to give them to my mother. Oh...he was going to try to capture mom’s heart. Nice play. Should’ve known. Brad was a class act and smart as hell.

Zane said, “Nice place,” as we walked through the living room and kitchen to the back door.

“Thanks. I’ve lived here all my life.”

We got out of the cool house and out into the bright sunlight shining in the backyard. The picnic table had an umbrella, so we’d be saved from direct rays there, but until we sat, we were at its mercy. My mom was already playing hostess and welcoming them to our home. Dad was at the grill a ways away and wasn’t in any hurry to make his way over.

“Mrs. Quinn,” Brad said, handing her the bouquet. “We wanted to thank you for inviting us over...and for letting us borrow the vocal skills of your talented daughter.”

Mom smiled. “Oh, you’re certainly welcome.” I introduced the guys to my mom and to Danny who actually bothered to look up from his phone for two seconds. But he seemed to think the guys were cool and wound up sliding the phone in his pocket after one last text. Mom said, “I’d better get these in water. Valerie, could you introduce them to your father?”

As she walked into the house with the flowers, my dad was making his way over to the picnic table with a platter full of steaks. All the guys looked cool and composed, but I was nervous as hell. That’s probably because I knew my dad a lot better than they did. When dad made his way over, I introduced each of the guys to him and had finished just as mom was heading back out. Dad didn’t give anything away as he shook each guy’s hand.

We sat down to eat, passing around plates and bowls of food, and just as everyone’s plate got full, my dad asked what we had wanted to discuss with them. So I told him as matter-of-factly as I could. Mom said, “You’re not planning to go back to college this fall?”

“Mom, I’ve thought long and hard about this. I’m wasting your money. I have no idea what I want to do with my life, and so I don’t have any solid ideas about a major. I thought after a year of attending school, I’d know, but I’m no closer to a decision now than I was a year ago. And I *want* to do this. It might not be for a lifetime, but I want to do it now. It’s like those kids who travel around the world for a year or two before going to school. I went to school for a year, and now I’m going to try something different. I need to figure out who I am and what I want.”

Mom’s eyes told me she understood but dad...well, he wasn’t convinced. I could tell just by seeing the rigid expression holding his facial muscles in place. He looked at me and then at each of the young men in my group, carefully and quietly assessing them. Finally, he said, “Let me tell you my concern here. I want to know what your intentions with my daughter are.” Oh, Jesus. Of course. I knew that would be where my dad’s mind went, because mine had already been there. His cold eyes stared each one of my bandmates down.

Thank goodness Brad acted as spokesperson. “Mr. Quinn, Valerie and I actually already had a conversation about that earlier this summer. And I’ll be honest with you, even though it probably won’t help my case at all. Valerie and I got a little friendly, but when we invited her to sing for the band, I told her that would be a line that we wouldn’t cross. Relationships and work

don't work, so there's no way I'm going to ruin my band just because I find her attractive. I want to assure you, sir, that we respect your daughter and value her contribution, and we have and will continue to treat her as one of us. With one exception. We'll use different bathrooms."

My mother giggled, but dad was not amused. Still, I could tell that what Brad had said had eased his mind a little bit. "Just so we're on the same page, there will be no hanky-panky, and one of you so much as *touches* my daughter without her consent, I will gladly go to prison for the rest of my life for murder." I noticed I was holding my breath, and I felt myself beginning to blush again because my father just had to go there. But then my mind did a double take. Wait a second. The way he spoke, it was like he was already viewing it as a done deal.

My voice was quieter than I'd meant for it to be when I said, "So you're saying I can do this, dad?"

He cocked his head to the side, but his expression didn't budge. I knew my dad well, though, and I saw his eyes soften. "You're an adult, Valerie. I can't really tell you what to do anymore. All I can do is give you my advice. I know you've already made up your mind, but I need to tell you that I don't think this is a good idea. Now is the time for you to work on getting a degree and figuring out what you want to do with your life. You said that much yourself. And I don't know that traipsing around the state singing your loud metal music is going to help in that department."

I couldn't stop the smile that was forming on my face, and I couldn't believe my ears. "So you're saying I can go?"

That's when dad smiled back. "Yes, Valerie, you can go. But know you always have a place to come home to."

\* \* \*

The next two weeks whizzed by as I made preparations for a new life. I had to contact the college and put an end to my involvement there, and then I had packing to do. Brad asked me to head up to Denver with him twice in his hunt for a place to live. He'd already booked more events for September now that he knew we'd be closer to most of the venues and desperate for work.

Everything was expensive, but we managed to find two-bedroom places for low enough prices. We wanted a three-bedroom apartment, but those were out of our price range. I started feeling nervous, because the gigs we'd had up to this point wouldn't cover our rent, let alone any of the other expenses I knew we'd encounter. Brad texted the guys and let them know we were going to go with a two-bedroom for now, and we'd find a way to make it work. We were lucky enough to find a place that was furnished so we wouldn't have to buy furniture as well. But one bedroom had a double bed and the other a twin, so we weren't sure how to work out those details either. It didn't matter, though. We'd found a place that was central to some of the venues we had already played and would play. We were closer to where the work was.

On the way back home, Brad said, "Guess we'll have to buy some sleeping bags or cots. The couch looked comfortable."

I smiled. "Like you said, we'll make it work. And who knows? Maybe we won't be there for long."

He and I had pooled our money for the deposits and first and last months' rent and also spent some time (and more money) setting up the utilities not covered in the rent. I was nervous and discouraged by the time I got home, but then I thought to myself that if we all had part-time jobs and had regular gigs, we could make it, and maybe we could even look at bigger places down the line.

If Brad was concerned too, he didn't show it. He oozed confidence, and he was positive we'd have no problems. His attitude helped alleviate some of my stress, because Brad had—in the short time I'd known him—done everything he'd set his mind to. So I trusted him and let go of the worry.

The day came that it was time for me to leave. Brad and the guys had already hauled all of their stuff to the apartment (including the van) the day before, but they said they'd only brought the bare essentials. Their parents—like my own—were okay with them leaving unnecessary items behind, their old rooms becoming storage.

I'd expected Brad to pick me up that Thursday afternoon, but it was Ethan. I'd already told my parents *goodbye* that morning, and Danny was off doing something with his girlfriend, so it was just Ethan and me putting my things in the back of his truck. I too just brought along what I thought to be essential—some clothes, makeup, music, laptop, writing supplies. I knew space would be limited, so I didn't want to bring too much along.

As we started the trip, Ethan told me the other guys were spending the day buying things we'd need to set up our home—food, cleaning supplies, and things I'd never thought of, like trashcans, towels, sheets, and things. I didn't have much money left, and I'd contribute what I could when I got there, but I knew Brad had to be getting to the bottom of his money supply too.

At first, driving down the mountain, Ethan just played the radio, and we didn't say much to each other. But then he said, "The past few months, I haven't talked to you much."

Oh, well, this was a newsflash. "Yeah..."

"We're good friends, right? Or were good friends?"

"Yeah, I thought so."

"And we kind of started getting hot and heavy there...and I sort of backed off."

I nodded and looked out the side window. This was starting to piss me off. I didn't need to be reminded of what an ass he'd been to me. "Yeah." There wasn't much more I wanted to say.

"There's a reason for that."

I looked back over at him. "What would that be?"

"I...uh...started to care for you more than I should."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I can't...shouldn't. I mean...you're my muse, Valerie." Oh, God...there was that fucking word again. "So I shouldn't touch you. And you seemed so innocent, Val...like an angel. I don't want to ruin that."

I started laughing. "Oh, yeah, because metal is full of happy love songs, and everything is all happy and bright and innocent."

He laughed too. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, but I don't think you get where I'm coming from. Pain is part of life, Ethan, and I'm willing to take chances. It hurt me more than you know when you just decided you were done with me. Don't you think that hurts more than just letting us explore where our relationship was going?" I was looking at him, waiting to see what he thought. "Even if it ends badly? Isn't it worth just trying?"

He was quiet for a while. We sped down the road, and I started thinking maybe that was the end of the conversation. But then he said, "Not necessarily." He looked over at me. "We were great friends, Val. We go down that road...any way you can keep your heart out of it?"

I wasn't sure what he was asking. "Why would I want to?"

"So you didn't get hurt."

It was my turn to contemplate the conversation. I didn't like the vibes I was getting from him. "Would that be inevitable?"

He kept his eyes on the road, but I could tell from his expression that there was no humor in his words. "With me...probably."

I was getting upset. It was like he'd made up his mind that anything between the two of us would end in disaster. "It doesn't have to be like that, Ethan. It'll only be like that if you *make* it that way. And that would be a shitty thing to do."

*That* got his attention. I didn't curse like the rest of the guys did, so when I swore, they noticed. He looked over at me, but it was like he was at a loss for words. "If we're friends, Ethan, then we move forward from there. And friends care about each other, take care of each other. Our friendship is mutual, isn't it?" He nodded. "So who says it has to be complicated and calculated? Why can't nature just take its course? Or is there something else you haven't told me?"

"No."

"Then why do we have to be afraid to see where this goes?"

Oh...that hit a nerve. Was he angry? I couldn't tell, but I wanted to listen carefully to what he said next. "Caution is not the same as fear, Val, and why shouldn't I worry about what happens to you?"

"Don't you see that's what I'm saying, Ethan? In your *cautiousness* for sparing me, you wound up hurting me worse than if we'd just let things happen." His jaw was clenched tight. "I don't care if you don't want to hear that. If you don't want to pursue it further, that's fine. Just say so, but don't pussyfoot around and then pretend like I'm a hot potato when things get a little warm." He still hadn't said a word, so now was my chance to drive it home. "And stop calling me your fucking muse, putting me up on a pedestal. I'm your friend, and I'm a band member. I'm an equal, so please treat me like one."

He seemed to think about it, and we sat in silence for a while. We still weren't talking by the time Ethan's truck made it to the Springs. He said, "You need to stop for anything?"

"Nope. I'm good."

We were on I-25 heading towards Denver when he started talking again. "So...start fresh then?"

Did he really mean it? He seemed sincere, and I'd felt cheated of his affection from the first moment he'd pulled away. Deep down, yes, I wanted to try it fresh. I wanted a second chance. I wanted to make a real go of it. Rational or not, I loved Ethan. I knew it was stupid, but it didn't matter. Stupid or not, I wanted him. Part of me knew he was damaged...deeply damaged...and I think that part of me also wanted to try to save him. So, yes, I wanted a fair chance. I nodded. "Yeah."

We were another few miles down the road when he said, "Am I fucking up anything between you and Brad?"

I felt my eyes grow wide. What the hell had Brad said? Was Brad part of the reason Ethan had shied away from me? "No." The less I said, the better.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. There's nothing there." Well, *that* wasn't true. There was some irrational sexual attraction there that I didn't think would ever disappear. Love, though? Nope. My feelings for Ethan blinded me to anyone else.

"Does *he* know that?"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"



His voice was quiet. "I see the way he looks at you."

Oh. I didn't know Brad looked at me a certain way. But we weren't going there. I refused. "Ethan, whatever happened between Brad and me is over. You heard him say it himself to my dad, and he meant it. He didn't want a relationship screwing up the band so he instituted a *hands off* policy. There is *nothing* there." Wow...was I protesting too much? Time to shut up, Valerie.

He wasn't saying much of anything either, and I had no idea what to expect. Little sprinkles hit the windshield as a light rain cooled the early September air. I looked out the window at the gray skies. Finally, he spoke again. "I know it's really none of my business, but I gotta know. Did you sleep with him?"

I don't know why I told him. "You're right. It's none of your business, but no. We didn't sleep together." I sighed. This conversation felt like an exercise in futility. "I'm still a virgin."

I saw him let the breath out of his lungs, almost like what I'd said was a shock. But then he hit me with a curveball. "So why are you on the pill then?"

My voice probably got higher than I should have let it. "What? How'd you know about that?"

"We toured together enough. I've seen you take it once or twice. I'm not an idiot."

Fair enough. "I wanted to be safe."

"With Brad."

I had to be honest. "Yeah, with Brad. We'd..." Shit, this was hard. I looked out the side window again. "Things got a little...heated, and I wanted to be safe."

"Did I do that to you?"

I felt my cheeks growing hot. "Do what?"

"Make you feel *heated*?"

"Yeah...you did."

He seemed satisfied with my answer. We didn't say anything else the rest of the way to Denver. Throughout the summer, we'd been driving into the city at night, and I'd been dazzled by the bright lights against the dark backdrop. Seeing the city in the daytime, though...floored me. It was huge. I was a small town girl. But Denver...it stretched on and on. To the west, it butted up against the mountains and to the east, it sprawled and stretched as far as my eyes could see. And to the north? I had no idea if the city ever really ended. Yes, I believed Brad was right when he said we'd have so many places to play, we'd never reach the end. Could we get noticed, though? Would we be able to make it? It remained to be seen, but that he had that unshakable faith helped me believe it too. That didn't, however, make me feel any less overwhelmed by the sight of the metropolis spread forth in front of me.

Ethan navigated the traffic like a pro. It was before rush hour, so even though the traffic seemed crazy to me at the time, it was actually pretty light. After a while, we reached our destination in a small dark parking garage. I was glad to be able to get out of the truck and stretch.

Ethan joined me on the passenger side of the truck. I asked, "How many trips do you think it'll take us to haul all my crap up to our place?"

He smiled and shrugged. "We'll make the guys help." Without warning, he closed the gap between us, his hands on my hips. His touch was aggressive, and I felt breathless. My back was pressed against the warm, smooth side of his truck, and I noticed my hands were cupping his biceps. "I just want to make it clear. Unlike Brad, *I* didn't make your dad any promises." He smothered me in a soul-searching kiss that I felt clear to the tips of my toes. The muscles

throughout my body grew taut, aching for his touch. Yes, I wanted Ethan. I'd always wanted Ethan. I loved him and maybe, finally, we could explore the relationship he'd denied us before. As my tongue fought against his and my hands wound through his hair, I at last had hope that we could try.

## Chapter Twenty-one

I CAME TO the conclusion that I had been a spoiled, pampered child my entire life. Why? Well, I hadn't been impressed with my dorm room my freshman year in college, but I hadn't minded the austere, plain feel of the rooms. After all, I was there to learn, not to feel like I was staying in a resort. But my new digs were anything but comfortable.

I knew I had no right to complain. We had a place that protected us from the elements. Everything inside worked—the shower, the toilet, the lights, the oven, you name it. But it felt old and uncared for. The walls were supposed to be white, but they were dingy. The carpeting in the living room was rust colored. It was worn and had seen better days. The kitchen table was past the point of looking *distressed*. It was just old. The linoleum in the kitchen had chips and dents in it and, around the stove, there were burn holes. The fixtures in the bathroom were all green and looked like they were thirty or forty years old.

I tried to keep a positive attitude, but I could tell the place could get me down. My two pieces of luggage and three boxes sat in a corner of the smaller bedroom, and the five of us met in the living room to discuss our arrangements. I wasn't a good enough actress to hide my dismay. I hadn't had enough time to work on hiding how I really felt, and Brad noticed. "What's wrong, Val?"

I let out a breath. "I know we checked out this place before, and it was all we could afford, but am I the only one who thinks it's depressing here?"

His smile was gentle. "Yeah...it's not the greatest. But it'll be what we make it, right? Besides, we don't want to spend much time here anyway. We want to be out playing gigs all the time. Am I right?"

I forced a smile back. He *was* right. I nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'll get over it."

"I don't know how much practice we'll be able to get in, guys, at least plugged in. We'll have to check with our neighbors..."

"We don't have to crank it."

"It just gonna be harder to write new stuff, but we'll manage. The big bedroom's on the corner of the building, so if we're gonna plug in and practice, I think that's where we need to." The guys agreed. "Now...living arrangements. I really think Val should have the little bedroom, the one with the twin bed."

"That doesn't seem fair, Brad. There's one of me and four of you. I can sleep on the couch, and you guys can share the rooms."

"Bullshit. I promised your dad we'd keep our hands off."

"That doesn't mean I need my own bedroom."

"It does in *my* mind. You need a place where you can feel safe, where you can have some privacy. You won't have to worry about one of us walking in while you're changing clothes or staring at you while you're sleeping."

I started giggling. "Should I have had to worry about that before?"

Brad smiled, but he was all business now. He was again taking on his role as our natural leader. "Now...as to the other bedroom, we're not gonna fight over it. Us guys are gonna share. We bought two cots today at an army surplus store for cheap, and when we're not using them, we can store them in the closet over there. Not the best plan, but it works."

Ethan said, "So we're just gonna use the big bedroom for our gear?"

“No. One of us will sleep on that bed, one on the couch, two on the cots in the living room. We’re gonna get a calendar, and each one of us will get the bedroom the same amount of days every month on a rotating basis.”

Nick said, “I don’t give a shit where I sleep, man.”

Zane elbowed him in the ribs. “Yeah, but if you have a girl wants to get friendly with you...”

Quiet Nick made my jaw drop. “I don’t give a shit where I fuck, man.”

Zane started laughing. “No, but *she* might.”

Brad started in again. “We’ll arrange the details tomorrow, and I think we need to schedule chores too. Don’t give me that look, Ethan. You know goddamned well that if we don’t map out who has to take out the trash that we’ll live like pigs, and Val will get stuck cleaning up, just because she actually gives a shit. Right?”

I smiled. Brad always seemed to have my back, and I was beginning to appreciate how much thought he’d given everything.

Ethan said, “Fine. Whatever. But don’t expect me to wash dishes every day.”

“No one’s gonna expect that. So...there’s a dresser and a closet in each room. Let’s figure out who needs what. Val, if you have extra space in your room for clothes, would you mind sharing?”

“No problem. I’ll unpack my clothes first.”

And so, even though the place wasn’t comfy cozy, I was going to make an effort to love it...to at least get used to it. Maybe I could find a way to decorate the place without blowing a lot of money—maybe some cheap prints or something that reminded me of home.

So I knew the first step to making this place home was to unpack. The second would be to find things that made me feel comfortable here, but first things first. I had a little closet space and two empty dresser drawers that I said the guys could use. Brad stressed that whoever decided to use it needed to make sure not to put stuff in there they’d “die without.” He really *was* trying to protect me. My dad would have been thrilled.

That first night, on a new bed with a too-firm mattress and new too-stiff, unlaundered but brand-new sheets, I couldn’t sleep. When I let go of the feeling of being down, I was excited about the future. I had no idea what was going to happen, but I was eager to find out. And my dad had nothing to worry about. I suspected even after what Ethan had said that he was more talk...*especially* after I found out how he really had put me on some stupid impossible-to-live-up-to pedestal.

I finally *did* sleep, and when I woke up, I was motivated. I decided I needed to find a job. Yes, making money playing music was the ultimate goal, but I knew we’d need more money than just gig money. I had faith in Brad that he’d keep us plenty busy, but I knew a job would help.

So I got up and showered while the guys were still sleeping. I’d heard them up talking like crazy the night before and having a few beers. I think they were just as excited. We were adults now, living on our own, responsible for everything, and even though it was scary, it was fun too.

I was glad the guys had stocked up on food. I nosed around the kitchen for a few minutes, trying to be quiet because Brad and Zane were on cots and Ethan was on the couch. I didn’t want to wake them. I found a packet of instant oatmeal but then noticed we didn’t have a microwave, and I wondered if we should get one. But we did have two pans, so I heated some water and then ate some hot oatmeal. I just thought it was funny how much I had taken for

granted until I didn't have it anymore. After eating, I put on makeup and did my hair after getting dressed.

Brad was sitting at the table when I came out, drinking a cup of coffee. I hadn't noticed the coffeemaker before. "What's up?" he asked.

"I'm going to spend the day looking for a job."

"Already?"

"A good idea, don't you think?"

He smiled. "I was gonna wait for a day or two, but I really can't put it off when you're so motivated."

I shrugged. "I need a head start. I don't have much experience. So what are *you* doing up so early?"

"Can't sleep. Too much on my mind."

I heard Ethan mutter from the couch. "Kinda hard to sleep with your goddamn blow dryer making noise."

Before I could even respond, Brad said, "Shut the fuck up, Ethan. She's doing this whole band a solid."

Ethan said something else, but I couldn't make out what it was. Soon I left and started walking around our neighborhood. I could have gone through the want ads, but I wanted to look for work within walking distance. I didn't have a vehicle and didn't want someone to drive me around. I wanted it to be simple. But like I'd told Brad, I didn't have much experience. I didn't know what I'd qualify for. So I applied at restaurants, including fast food places, because I knew I'd have a decent chance at getting on with them. I also applied at retail places, where I figured maybe I could get a job selling things. I even applied for a cleaning position, where I'd be one of many janitors cleaning a large office building. The problem with that job was it was after hours, and that would interfere with shows. If I were even offered the job, I'd likely have to turn it down. But I figured even filling out applications was good practice for me.

By the time I got back home late that afternoon, I was tired, sweaty, and hungry. I'd bought some French fries and a drink in the middle of my day, but the September sun on concrete and asphalt had been hot and exhausting. All I wanted was a quick meal and a nice long cool shower. I knew I'd sleep well tonight, especially after losing so much sleep the night before.

It was my lucky night, because Brad and Nick were cooking dinner for everyone. I said *hi* and then went to my room to put my purse away and take off my shoes. I also replaced the blouse with a t-shirt.

I came back out to the kitchen. "Do you guys know where the nearest laundromat is?"

Brad said, "We'll have to look it up. Maybe we could pick a day for laundry."

I nodded. "Another thing I didn't think of."

"You look tired. Sit down and relax. We'll be eating in a little bit."

"It smells good. What are you making?"

Nick turned around from the stove and said, "Something exquisite that will make you feel like you're home again...an exotic taste with just a hint of delicate cheese that will transport you to another world."

Brad smiled. "Hamburger Helper."

I started laughing. The more I got to know Nick, the funnier he was. He often had a joke or a retort, and he was turning out to be quite a ham. I appreciated the humor, especially since I was feeling worn out. "Well, I'm not complaining. It sounds lovely, Nick."

"Anything for the lady."

“And we’re having a salad and baked potatoes with it. These guys eat like there’s no tomorrow, so I figured we needed to make a lot.”

Nick acted serious. “Don’t expect this every night. Brad’s a slave driver. I can’t work with him anymore.”

Brad rolled his eyes and walked to the refrigerator, fetching out a couple of bottles of salad dressing. I was becoming quite impressed with his organizational skills. He kept surprising me with all the things he’d remembered to do or buy. I was glad he’d done the planning for our move.

Ethan showed up in the kitchen. “Val. You look beat. What the hell were you out doing all day?”

“I was looking for work.”

“Doing what? Singing not enough for you?”

“Oh, it’s plenty, but I want to make sure we can pay our bills.” He nodded. He stopped behind me and started rubbing my shoulders. It made the kitchen a little cramped but his hands on my shoulders felt good...and not just because he was touching me.

Dinner was served soon after, and Zane brought in a chair from the living room so we could all sit at the table. It was crowded, but it was the first thing we’d done that reminded me of home. Gathering around a table, talking and laughing, sharing food...that would be the one thing I knew was important for us to do on occasion as a group. Not only did it make me feel better about our move, but it also reminded me of how much I valued these four men—not just as friends but as bandmates. And based on how we all acted, I knew they felt the same way.

After dinner, Zane, Ethan, and I decided to clean up since the other two had made the food. Zane said, “Damn, guys. Why didn’t you find a place with a dishwasher?” But he filled up the sink and started washing anyway, while Ethan rinsed and I dried. When I finally excused myself to shower, I felt happy and like I’d had a good first day. I wasn’t feeling so sorry for myself anymore.

My brain turned off in the shower, and I just relaxed, but I decided I’d try writing a few lyrics before going to bed. I knew I’d sleep well tonight.

When I got out, I wrapped my head in my towel and put on a robe, then carried my clothes to my room. I was using a trash bag for my dirty clothes but realized I’d want a clothes basket to carry to the laundromat. And I could hardly wait to wash the stiff sheets on the bed. I knew it wouldn’t bother me tonight, but it was going to drive me nuts until I could wash them.

I decided to get something to drink and then just lie on my bed writing lyrics until sleepiness overcame me. As I left the bedroom, though, I heard the guys laughing and carrying on in the living room, and I hoped they wouldn’t take it personally that I just wanted to hit the hay. I was still wearing my robe and the towel over my head, but I was covered from neck to knee and didn’t think much of it.

I walked to the kitchen and guessed they didn’t realize I was there. Nick said, “I’ll go last. That’ll give me time to put it to good use.”

Zane: “You trying to find Angelica?”

“Hell, yeah. She gives good head.”

Ethan: “What makes you think she’ll wanna fuck your scrawny ass again?”

“They all want Nick again once they’ve tasted him the first time.”

Brad: “Okay. You’re fourth.”

Ethan: “So who’s tonight?”

“Me, I guess.”

Nick: "That's cool, though, right?"

"What?"

"Guests."

Zane: "Fuck, yeah. I thought that was the whole point. If we can't invite our girlfriends, why bother setting up a schedule or even having the room to ourselves?"

Nick: "You don't need a girl to take care of your needs."

"Maybe *you* don't."

They all got quiet when they heard the cabinet door close and the water running in the faucet. Brad, ever the gentleman, said, "Sorry you had to hear that, Val."

I turned around and walked into the living room. "Please, don't be. We're gonna have to get used to living together, and just 'cause I'm a prude doesn't mean the rest of you have to be."

I got some scoffs from that, but Zane said, "Hey...what's fair is fair. You can have guys over too if you want."

I could tell from the somber feel that dropped over the room that that idea was *not* okay with everyone. I wasn't going to touch it, so I just smiled and said, "I'm gonna go do a little writing and then hit the hay. I'm tired."

Ethan said, "Sure you don't wanna hang? Bradley here was gonna put a DVD in his laptop. Movie night."

"Thanks, but you guys can resume your conversation."

"We're done. Don't go."

"Thanks, really. I'm just tired."

They wished me good night, and I went to my bedroom. I hoped they knew I'd meant what I said. I didn't want them feeling like they couldn't talk about whatever was on their minds just because I was there. I knew they liked sex. They were young men, for heaven's sake, most of them still technically teenagers for a few months. I wasn't going to tell them what they could or couldn't do, and sex seemed harmless compared to some of the other activities I knew they engaged in.

Once in my room, I slipped off the robe and put on a short nightie, one that barely covered my bottom. It was still warm, and I didn't want to perspire all night in bed. I draped the towel over the folding chair in the corner of the room and combed out my hair, then lay on top of the bed with a notebook and pencil and started probing my mind, looking for ideas that wanted to be written about.

After struggling with a few lines for the better part of half an hour, I heard a soft knock at my door. I'd been getting drowsy, so I wasn't sure if I'd really heard it, but I got up anyway. I wasn't exactly decent in my tiny, strappy gown, so I figured I'd just peek out the door to see what whoever it was wanted. I'd heard the guys laughing at whatever movie they were watching, so maybe they just wanted to ensure that I really didn't want to join them.

When I stuck my head out the door, I saw Ethan. Oh, goodness, he looked extra cute in the shadow of our tiny hallway. His hair was growing out, adding to his ever-mysterious look, and over the past few weeks, he'd been working on a goatee. I didn't exactly mind seeing him there, but I wasn't decent. I was in one of those positions I knew my dad had worried about. But that was okay. It was just my head out the door. "What's up?"

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?"

He was quiet for a moment. "Can I come in for a second?"

I hesitated. "Um...sure."

I think I took his breath away. He must have been expecting to see me in the robe. When he walked in, he took me in for longer than he should and closed the door behind him. But then he said, “Seriously, Val. Sorry you had to hear that shit in the other room.”

I smiled. “Not a big deal.”

He got close and wrapped his hands around my waist. “Only one girl I’m thinking about right now.” Oh...I hoped that was true. He brought his lips to mine in a soft, sweet kiss, but that only lasted for a few seconds. We turned passionate quickly, and before I knew it, my back was pressed against the wall. My hands that had been spread against his chest soon slithered up to his neck, and I slid my hands into his hair. His hands moved to cup my ass, and his touch sent a shiver through all my nerve endings. I was beginning to feel sensations that I’d rarely felt, but I was enjoying them.

He lifted me up, and in a natural motion, I wrapped my legs around his so he was pressing right into me. Oh...his penis was hard and pressing into that one area...the one that I’d had to ignore and deny my entire life. I had put it into a figurative box, locked away, trapped, and the only time I’d had contact with it was in the shower when I cleaned it. I’d only ever touched myself in the most clinical of ways, blushing when I’d do a breast exam and thinking about upcoming science tests or the cold weather when I’d wash my vaginal area. But now it was awakened. I’d felt the first tinglings before when I’d gotten overly friendly with Brad, but this was an intense sensation. He was pressing into me, and it made me feel desperate, urgent. I didn’t notice at first that my breathing had changed.

Ethan broke off our kiss and looked me in the eyes. He looked like an animal, fierce and needy, and I wanted him. Just seeing him like that made every single fiber in my body stand at attention, and I wondered if I looked like he did. I thought I saw an inkling of a smile in his eyes. “You like that?”

I knew what he was talking about, but the words were gone. I was breathless.

He ground himself into me, and I gasped. Oh, yes. Oh, *hell*, yes. I liked it. But I still couldn’t say anything. He knew, though, by the sharp intake of air into my lungs that I more than liked it, and he buried me in a kiss again.

I knew then what my body was made for, and now I knew why my mother and father had tried so desperately to hide it from me. Sweet heavens above, I wanted nothing else now, and as that boy’s manhood continued to awaken my hidden desires, I knew my virginity was soon to be forgotten.

Ethan broke off the kiss again to look at me. “God, I want you.”

My voice sounded foreign to my own ears—throaty, hoarse. “I want you too.”

I saw it register with him, and I guess I was lucky he didn’t take me right then and there. But he restrained himself. “Not now. Your first time...can’t be a quick fuck up against a wall.” His eyes looked tender when he said, “Soon. When the time is right.”

Now I felt desperate, but I hoped I didn’t sound brazen. “When will be the right time?”

His eyes searched mine. “Soon. I promise. I’ll take care of it.” He kissed me again and then held me close, my legs still around him. He nuzzled my neck, and that didn’t help. Then he looked at me again. “I should go.”

And then I wanted to ask him why he had to leave...why we couldn’t just make love right then and there. But I knew...I knew I didn’t want to lose my virginity when there were three other guys in the next room in an apartment with paper-thin walls. I was going to have to trust Ethan. He had a plan—I could see that in his eyes. He lowered me back down to the floor and



held me close, willing his hard on to go down, but he kissed me once more. Then he touched his nose to mine. “Soon. But get your rest.”

Yeah. Like I could sleep now. Instead, I lay in bed for hours, now intensely aware of Ethan’s nearby presence. I could hear his voice now and then in the living room. Knowing he was there, so close...well, it was next to impossible for me to sleep. All my nerves were on alert, and I couldn’t calm them down enough to sleep, even though earlier, I’d been ready to pass out for days.

I *did* sleep eventually, though, and the next morning, I slept later, but I still continued my job search. I spread my circle a little wider. I knew eventually I’d get to the point where employers were too far to walk to, but that would be a while, and I hoped I’d find a job before then.

I continued my job search all week but hadn’t heard anything. Our first show that weekend, though, was spectacular. The best part was being closer by. And Brad had lined up two shows that weekend, so we were busy, and I was tired. But I was happy.

Sunday afternoon, Ethan asked if I wanted to go for a walk, so we did. It was the first day since we’d moved that I could tell that fall was on the way. The temperature was mild, and the day was sunny but not too hot.

He grabbed my hand as we took our time walking down the sidewalk. “I have Plan A and Plan B,” he said.

I grinned, relishing the feel of his skin touching mine, even if it *was* just my hand. “Okay. And what would those be?”

“Plan A is to convince Brad that he needs to take Zane and Nick home for a day or two, visit family. Plan B is I take you out somewhere, and we find a place for a night—hotel or somethin’.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

“Plan C...we just go for it.”

“I don’t want you to have to spend a bunch of money on me, Ethan. We’re all strapped.”

He looked at me then, an intense, hardcore gaze, one that reminded me of why I was so smitten with him in the first place. I saw his pupils widen just a touch, and that was enough for my breath to stop for just a second. Then he took my face in his hands and brought my lips to his. He drowned me in a kiss, one that took me from zero to sixty in half a second...one that reminded me that I wanted more...so much more. I grabbed his t-shirt in my fists at about pec level just to try to keep myself in check. I didn’t remember ever wanting anything so badly in my life, and my breathing was shallow when he removed his lips from mine.

“Fuck it.” My eyes were questioning him. “Let’s do it. Tonight.”

“*It?*”

“Yeah. Let me make love to you.”

“Seriously? Tonight?” Now, though, I was starting to freak out. I was a little nervous, a lot excited, but Ethan talking about our roommates in the other room started making me feel a little weird about the whole thing. But he already had that figured out in his head too.

“Yeah. Let’s just go somewhere.” I know the look on my face had to be one of fear and confusion, because I was thinking a park, a bathroom stall, or wherever. But then he said, “We’ll go to one of the motels we stayed in while we were touring this summer.”

*That* sounded much better. I felt a shy grin spread across my face. “Okay.”

“Would you rather go out to eat or just get takeout?”

“Do we *have* to eat?”

He smiled. “No...”

“Takeout’s fine.”

As we walked back to the apartment—*quickly*—I mentally whispered a silent *goodbye* to my virginity. She’d worn out her welcome, and I was ready to become a real woman. I could hardly wait.

## Chapter Twenty-two

TRYING NOT TO make a big deal out of it was difficult. Brad and Zane were working out some music in the big bedroom when Ethan and I got back, and Nick was on the computer. I couldn't be sure, but I guessed he was checking out some porn, just based on the abashed look on his face when we walked in. At least I was able to see his hands.

Ethan followed me to my bedroom, giving me another long, luxurious kiss, maybe to remind me that I really wanted to follow through. I grabbed a small bag and put a change of clothes inside, but I didn't imagine I'd need much of anything else. I didn't even know if we were going to spend the night. Ethan said, "Wait just a minute," and left my room, only to return a few minutes later. He had half a bottle of vodka and a grin on his face. "Can you fit this in your bag?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

We left a few minutes later, and as we were walking down the stairs toward the parking garage, Ethan said, "I didn't say anything, except to tell them to not make us dinner and not to wait up for us."

I let out a long, slow but quiet breath. "That was probably enough."

"Stop it, Val. This is gonna be fun."

When we were in the truck and on the road, Ethan suggested Chinese takeout. And I recognized the motel when he parked there. "Want me to pay half?"

He looked at me for a second as though considering it. "Nah. Wait here."

I hated being left alone, because that's when I got really keyed up. As it was, I felt on edge. The anticipation and not knowing exactly what to expect had me feeling nervous and hyper. But Ethan didn't seem to notice.

When we got in the room, we used the plastic forks he'd gotten and just ate straight out of the cartons. I didn't even know what he got, but I wasn't hungry, and I only picked at them anyway. He wound up eating a lot more than I did. When we finished, he said, "Relax, babe." He got the bottle of vodka and persuaded me to take just one big gulp. He promised it would help take the edge off. Then he sat behind me on the bed and massaged my shoulders for a minute like he had a few days earlier. "Seriously, Val. Relax." He pulled my hair back toward him and started kissing my neck. I tilted my head the other way so he could kiss it more easily. I exhaled, enjoying the feel of his warm lips against my skin. My nipples grew rigid fast, as though it were cool in the room. But it wasn't cold at all; in fact, it felt like it was starting to heat up.

He brought his lips to my ears, sending another vibration through my body. "Hey...I just want you to know...we don't *have* to do anything if you don't want to. I don't want you to feel any pressure. Just...stay with me tonight."

I nodded and turned my head, and he kissed me on the lips then. Oh, I wanted to do everything, but it made me feel a little better that he wasn't in any hurry, and he wasn't going to force me to do anything. He moved his lips back to my ear. "Why don't we take a shower?"

I didn't have to think about it, even though my hesitation might have made him think I was pondering it. But I said *okay*.

And he led me in that tiny, plain bathroom with the bone-colored shower curtain. He leaned over and turned the water on, holding his hand under the stream to check the temperature. Then

he stood up, and his eyes drilled into mine. He grabbed the tiny bar of soap off the counter and ripped the paper off, then set the bar on the edge of the tub. He returned his gaze to me and pulled his shirt off, letting it drop to the floor. I felt my mouth filling with saliva, hungry for him, but I felt awkward, not knowing what to do or where to start. My inexperience was showing, and that made me feel even more out of place.

But I didn't mind looking at his naked upper body. Ethan might not have made working out a priority, but he didn't have to. He had a naturally masculine physique, and he wasn't bulky. He already had the *rock star fit* look down. Not thick and muscular, but lean and solid. He had very little hair on his chest, but he had a line down the center of his abdomen, leading down under the waistband of his jeans, and I almost blushed, thinking I'd be looking at it in a minute.

He smiled at me as though he could work out what I was thinking. And maybe he *did* know, because as he kicked off his sneakers, he was unbuttoning his jeans. My eyes were riveted. Fortunately, he didn't seem to mind. It was like I was frozen, though, fascinated and curious as hell. Before I knew it, he was peeling off his underwear too, and there it was, big and thick and engorged.

I'm sure my eyes grew wide. Remember, I was naïve and had been sheltered. The only penises I'd ever seen had been in art books or the occasional flash in a movie. And those ones were flaccid. And I'd always wondered exactly how they could fit inside me. Yes, I understood the basic concept, but I didn't expect a penis to be so...*big*. So my nervousness ratcheted up a notch, but I knew it was natural. And, besides, I'd had friends joke around about wanting them bigger, so surely it was okay...right?

Yeah, I'd been staring, and Ethan seemed fine with it. He got close and slid his hand over my cheek, pulling me into a kiss. Then he stepped back—just a little—and started lifting my shirt up over my head. I raised my arms. I know I was still kind of in a state of shock, but it wouldn't have surprised me if I'd been grinning. I finally was able to move again, and I started fumbling with the button on my jeans. He smiled at me, ever patient, and reached behind me to undo the clasp on my bra. He was pulling it down my arms before I could even start shimmying my jeans down my thighs.

“God, you're beautiful.”

I swallowed and felt my cheeks grow warm. He pulled me into a kiss again, and my nipples brushed against his chest. *Oh*. I liked that. That feeling was nice. It was stimulating, and I felt a shiver travel up my spine.

“Let's get these off,” he said and started tugging at my jeans. He dropped to his knees and pulled them down to my ankles. Then he slipped first one of my shoes off, then the other. Like I was a child, he took off my socks and slid my pants the rest of the way off. Then he stood and kissed me one more time. He turned the knob to start the shower stream and pulled the curtain closed, then leaned over to pull his own socks off. When he stood, he said, “Valerie, you don't need to be ashamed of your body. You are fucking incredible.”

I wasn't sure why he'd said that until I'd realized my arms were wrapped around my breasts, holding them tightly against my chest. And, really, he'd called it. My parents were good people, but they were the very definition of puritanical. My body wasn't made to be appreciated. Anything potentially prurient or arousing had to be covered up, and—thus—bikinis and revealing tops were out of the question. Yes, I was young and probably would have chosen to avoid clothing like that anyway, simply because I *was* young and shy about my body. But even thinking about it had been out of the question, so I knew covering my breasts had been a subconscious reaction to Ethan's overt admiration of my body. Even so, with his

acknowledgement of it, I didn't immediately remove my arms. He could tell me not to be embarrassed or ashamed all he wanted, but I had to get over whatever hang-ups I had first...and I also had to accept myself as a sexual creature.

I gave him a small smile, and he pulled me close once more, immersing me in a scorching kiss that took my breath away, and by the time he was done, I had relaxed my arms to return the embrace. He led me into the shower where we both stood halfway under the cascading water, and I was buried in a flood of sensations. He just kissed me for a few moments, maybe to help me relax. Oh, but it did nothing to relax me. I was wound up—I didn't know that my nerves had been so full of foreign chemicals before, and I wasn't quite sure how to handle the feelings.

He reached over to grab the bar of soap, and he rolled it in one of his hands to work up a lather. Then he rubbed his soapy hand across my collarbone at first, sending new tingles throughout my body, but he didn't linger there long. With another broad stroke, he ran his hand over the tops of my breasts and then in another sweep ran it across the center, brushing both nipples as he passed over. I was immersed in a flood of sensations, overly stimulated, and I couldn't keep up. I hadn't been touched this way before—*ever*—not even by myself, so it felt good but confusing too. I decided to try to focus my attention on him instead of the weird way my body was reacting.

I wanted to touch his chest. It had been beckoning to me anyway, and I placed my tentative fingertips on his pecs. I liked the flesh there—how it was smooth but firm. And I'd had the right idea. Yeah, I was still aware of how his hands on my naked body felt, but giving myself something to do somehow grounded me, made me feel like I could keep up with what felt like a crazy race. I continued a path, working down to his abs where that tempting trail of hair was, almost like an arrow pointing down to one of my main points of fascination, that body part he had but I didn't. It was then that, while I could see his hands gently cupping my breasts, I noticed the stark contrast between his skin and mine. His was darker but mine was milky white, and I wondered if it was because this skin now exposed to the man about to become my lover had never—*literally never*—seen the sun. There wasn't a freckle or a blemish on my skin, and it was oh, so pale. But then I noticed my nerves again...probably because I'd taken my attention off him and back to myself and that delicious but unfamiliar feeling of having a man tease my nipple. So I ran my fingers over his abs a few times, trying to zero in on the feelings I was creating.

"You can touch me there."

I looked at him. Oh, that. Yes, that. That gigantic cock that kept poking me, kept wanting to find its way inside me. *Oh*. He was giving me permission, encouraging me. He wanted me to do what I knew I'd been considering in the back of my mind but just hadn't had a moment to fully process. So why the hell not?

I looked at him and grinned...just a small one, and I took the soap from him. I rolled the tiny bar in my right hand and then put it in the soap dish jutting out of the shower wall and touched him. It was a tiny touch at first, because it was something I'd never done before, so I was hesitant, and I also wanted to relish it for the first time. I touched his cock with both my hands, loosely holding it at first, but then taking first one hand and then the other down its length.

I looked at him, and his small smile was overshadowed by what I could see in his eyes—desire, hard and furious, ready to consume me. I might not have quite known what I was doing back then, but I wasn't stupid. I knew he appreciated my hands on his penis, no matter how inexperienced they were. "Like that?"

“Any way you want, babe.”

And I felt another chill climb my spine like an electric pulse. I liked how he’d been calling me *babe*, like it was a term of endearment. It made me feel special, even though in the darkest corners of my mind I suspected he’d called many a woman that very same name. I continued to stroke the length of his penis, now with more control and firmness. Then I looked at him to see most of his hair plastered to his head and neck from the water of the shower, and his eyes were dark, almost possessed. He pulled me close, enveloping me in a deep, powerful kiss, my hands still wrapped around his unrelenting cock.

He turned off the water and grabbed one of the white fluffy towels hanging on the shiny silver rod next to the shower. He dried off my front first, with little pats all along my body, but he rested on his knee as he dried my legs, and then he kissed my belly, just above my navel. And as he wrapped the towel around the back of my legs and started to stand, he licked one of my nipples and then drew it into his mouth, and I pulled in a sharp breath of air. He kept drying off my back until he’d reached my neck and then rubbed it against my hair to absorb most of the water dripping off the strands on the end.

He toweled himself off too but without the attention he’d just given me.

Gone was the notion of not doing anything, of the pretense earlier of just spending the night together. He and I, at this point, both knew that the shower activities were about to culminate in one thing, and it *wasn’t* going to be just lying next to each other on the bed like a couple of grade school kids watching TV.

Still, when we got to the bed and he pulled back the covers, inviting me to lie down and warm up underneath the blanket, he gave me the option. In spite of the fact that the weather wasn’t cool, I felt chilly. My wet hair was clinging to my back and neck, making it worse. But he slid under the blanket right next to me. We lay on our sides, facing each other, and he got close to me, wrapping his arms around me. “You’re cold.”

“Yeah.” My teeth were almost chattering, but I knew it wasn’t just the temperature. It was my excitement.

He kissed me again, and the heat and passion from his kiss, from his skin, from his body warmed me up. No...I knew I was as ready as I was going to get, and even though I was nervous and had no idea what to expect, really, I wanted to. He kept kissing me, and his penis was pushing against me again, making me want him.

And he was so patient. “Val, you sure you wanna do this?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Well, I hadn’t even noticed that he’d prepared already. He had a condom on the nightstand, and he grabbed it, ripping the package open. Now was the moment of truth, the moment I’d been waiting for. He sheathed that beast and then moved on top of me. My breathing had turned shallow as my nerves threatened to turn my entire body into a puddle of jelly, but he kissed me again, helping me to relax once more. “Ready?”

Why would he even ask that? “Yeah.” And I gazed into his green eyes, now dark with desire yet filled with a tenderness I’d never seen from him before. His legs were between mine, but I hadn’t spread my legs apart or bent them or anything. I felt awkward again and embarrassed by my inexperience. He kissed me again and I closed my eyes, allowing myself to be consumed again by the desire I felt, and then he thrust himself into me. I cried out. I hadn’t expected it to hurt that badly. But it did, and it felt like he’d hit a wall inside me, one that was ripping as he forced himself against it. “Oh, shit!”

He stopped. “Does that hurt?”

“Fuck, yes.” I swallowed, now feeling a wave of panic overcome me, but then I closed my eyes again and took a deep breath. In theory—yes, *only* in theory—I’d known it would hurt; I’d known to expect pain; I just hadn’t been prepared for how badly it would hurt. But, logically, I knew it would have to be done. I wasn’t going to spend my entire life as a virgin.

“Do you want me to stop?”

Another deep breath. “No.”

“Do what you gotta do to make it through, babe. Bite, scratch, claw, scream, whatever.”

I didn’t plan to take out my pain on him, but it was nice to know I had an option. And then he forced himself through that barrier that, once broken, changed me from child to woman. I felt it give way, but my walls had to collapse to his girth as well. He wasn’t rushing, but each thrust wrought fresh pain. And it was like he was moving in slow motion, so it felt prolonged. My breath became jagged as I tried to fight the pain, and I just squeezed my eyes shut, hoping he’d be done soon.

He *did* stop soon after, and as he lay there catching his breath, I noticed my fingers *were* digging into the flesh of his back. I pried them off, straightening them out and opening my eyes. He was still inside me but not moving, and I wasn’t complaining. The fact that he was still was a relief. He looked at me then. “You okay if I pull out now?” Well, I knew it was going to bring a new wave of raw pain, but then the healing process would begin. For now, it was like a splinter stuck in my foot. Yes, stepping on the splinter had hurt and digging it back out would cause even more pain, but it would start to feel better once removed. So I nodded, my lips pursed together, braced and ready.

I didn’t cry out, although my natural inclination might have been to do just that. I was biting my lip as he pulled himself out. He wasn’t going too slow or too fast, and it didn’t hurt as much as I’d been expecting. I let out the breath I’d been holding in as he rolled onto the bed.

I just lay there, concentrating on my breathing, focusing on relaxing. He removed his condom and then rolled on his side to face me, so I rolled on my side as well. *That* felt like fresh hell, but I tried not to let it show on my face.

And the look on his face was rare and...beautiful. He looked *happy*, and that wasn’t a typical look for Ethan. He looked peaceful. He stroked my hair with his hand. “You okay?”

I nodded. The way he was looking at me made everything okay. I smiled at him, letting him know I was fine. “Yeah. Had to be done, right?”

He grinned. “No, not really. You could’ve decided to become a nun. They don’t have to do this, you know.”

I smiled again, sliding my arm under the pillow. “I think in the long run that’d be more painful.”

“How?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t want to tell him what I was thinking. But I knew now. I’d been experiencing some kind of awakening, and for all I knew, all girls went through it, but maybe I was a late bloomer. Whatever the case, there was a sexual creature inside me that had been trapped, and once she’d discovered there was an escape, she would have pushed to get out. I knew sex wouldn’t ever hurt like tonight again. I knew there was some sort of sensual nirvana waiting for me, some revelation I had yet to discover. Inside, I realized that. And to deny that to myself my entire life would have hurt far worse than the temporary pain I’d endured to pass into womanhood. And I wasn’t kidding myself either. I knew I’d be hurting all night long, but it would soon pass. I looked in Ethan’s green eyes, softer than I’d ever seen them before, and maybe that was due to the shitty lighting in the motel room, but he seemed open and vulnerable

then. Part of me wanted to tell him all my thoughts, but I too felt too exposed. And after all we'd been through, another part of me felt like I couldn't fully trust him. Oh, I wanted to. After all, I'd trusted him with one of the most sacred parts of myself that night. But I wasn't ready to tell him of my growing self-awareness, of my awakening identity. I didn't know that I wanted to tell anyone, because I didn't fully understand it yet. My smile was shy. "I dunno. Could you imagine spending your whole life not having sex?"

He stroked my hair again. "Yeah, but *my* first time was nothing like that." He got closer and kissed me on the forehead.

"I'm okay."

He rested his hand on my neck. There was something in his eyes, but I just couldn't read it. What the hell was he thinking? "I love you, Val."

*Oh.* Oh, wow. Yeah, I loved him back, but for him to *say* it...and to say it *first*. Holy crap. Everything I'd ever heard about dysfunctional relationships (which I'd suspected we had) had made me believe I'd be the only one to ever say it, to ever really feel it. But there it was. He'd said it, and it took my breath away. I don't know that I was able to smile because I was so overwhelmed. But I said it back. "I love you too, Ethan." And then, seeing how his eyes lit up, I *did* smile.

He pulled me closer then, holding me in his arms, and after a while, I heard his breathing grow quiet but rhythmic. His chest rose and fell slowly at the same intervals, and I knew he'd gone to sleep. I shifted, but just a little, because every motion below my waist reminded me of the pain that was still with me. I wished he was still awake, because I wanted him, needed him. I wanted to talk to him, but then I realized I also just needed time for me.

I was overwhelmed with so many emotions, the first of which was my feelings of love for this man that had intensified. Before, yes, I had felt love for Ethan, but nothing like this. It was multiplied now and heavy, stretching into the deep caverns of my soul. I wasn't sure how to process it.

And then I was also almost giddy that I had just made a passage. I was no longer a girl. Truly, I'd been moving to womanhood already. I'd been responsible for my own care for more than a year, what with living on my own at school, but somehow losing my virginity not only symbolized that process but affirmed it.

Lying there thinking about that, I then thought about my dad of all people. I was no longer daddy's little girl. I was no longer his precious pearl, and he could no longer protect me from the world, from the beauty and wonder nor from the pain and torment. I wondered what he and my mom would think if they knew. I knew from the experiences over the past summer that they trusted me. Whether that was due to realizing that they had to let go and let me make my own mistakes or if they just thought I was a young woman of incredible self-restraint, I didn't know.

There was no clock in that hotel room, so I had no idea how long I lay there. Ethan rolled over after a long while, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Between them and the pain, I lay awake until what I was sure was early morning...all by myself.

\* \* \*

I heard that annoying ringtone. It wouldn't stop. And then I realized it was my cell phone on the nightstand next to the bed. By the time I had my bearings and sat up, the ringing stopped.

Oh, the bed was too soft. I didn't want to get up. I noticed Ethan wasn't in the bed anymore, and I wondered where he was until I heard him running water in the bathroom. I blinked a few times and picked up my phone to see who was calling. I didn't recognize the number, so I wasn't going to worry about it, but then I saw that I had a message. I listened to it



and found it was a man from a sub shop I'd applied to the week before, wanting to schedule an interview with me.

I smiled. No, I didn't want to work for a sub shop, but I *did* want a job. Sexually, I might have started my journey to womanhood less than twenty-four hours ago, but in terms of worries and the need to survive, I'd become a full-fledged adult the week before. A job, no matter what kind of job it was, would make me feel like I had more control over my destiny. Until we were earning serious money making music (which might never happen), I wanted a backup plan, and I was starting to wonder why I was the only one—aside from Brad, of course—who seemed concerned about it.

I decided I'd call when we got back to the apartment. I wasn't anywhere near being in a state of mind that would allow me to sound professional or capable. I was still half asleep and emotionally charged.

Ethan came out of the bathroom. "Was that your phone?"

"Yeah. I need to schedule a job interview." I stood up...slowly. I felt better than I had the night before, but the pain was still raw. I'd want to take my time, but I wanted to brush my teeth, wash my face, and put on some clothes. Yes, clothes first. My body wasn't used to being bare, and the air on my skin felt strange. I found my bag on a chair near the front door and picked it up.

"You okay, Val?"

I stood up and smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine. What about you?"

As I made my way toward him (and the bathroom door behind him), he met me halfway. "I'm fine, but I didn't go through what you did. Maybe we should get you some Tylenol or something."

I let out a small chuckle. "I'll be fine."

He grabbed me around the waist. Unlike me, Ethan had jeans on again. And, truth be told, he didn't know how desperate I was to get clothes on. He kissed me on the forehead. He looked worried. "You sure?"

"Yes. I just want to get cleaned up a little."

While in the bathroom, in spite of the discomfort, I allowed my mind to drift back to the night before. I knew it was an experience I wouldn't soon forget. I'd seen a side of Ethan that I'd never seen before and that, frankly, I doubted very many people ever had or would. It was a sweet, tender side, one that was okay with being a little vulnerable. I didn't anticipate seeing it very often either. That was all right, though, because I'd seen it and wanted to hold that memory in my heart.

And, so, while I brushed my teeth and finger-combed my hair, I found myself smiling more and more. I was glad I'd done it and glad it was with Ethan. Somehow, I knew this was just the beginning of a beautiful journey.

## Chapter Twenty-three

I WAS LOOKING out the windshield at the red light. Ethan had asked if I wanted any breakfast. I told him I didn't, but coffee would be great, so he'd just pulled into the drive-through at a McDonald's and ordered two coffees. I was blowing on it because it was crazy hot, even with the creamers I'd poured in.

"Hey...I wanted to ask you about something." God, he was beautiful in the sunlight filtering through the windshield. His eyes looked like a paler green than they usually did, and he had gorgeous stubble on his face.

I was still in a partial dream state. "Hmm?"

"How would you feel..." His foot touched the accelerator to start the truck rolling through the green light. "Uh...how'd you feel if we just kinda kept it low key for a while?"

I cocked my head and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Just...with all of us under the same roof. Just...I think maybe we shouldn't say anything to the guys for a while."

"Oh...you mean...about *us*?"

"Yeah."

I thought about it for a few moments. "Why?"

"Why not? If we make a big deal about it, then they'll give us shit about it."

"So?"

"So...I'm not in the mood to deal with it." He sighed. "Wouldn't it just be nice to explore things without being under scrutiny?"

"You think it would really be that way?"

He grinned and looked at me. "Let's just say I've known these guys a lot longer than you have." He turned the corner at the next block and said, "Besides, I don't really want to slap Brad in the face with this right now."

I thought I was okay with that. I was still in a state of hormone-induced happiness. As long as I knew we had days, weeks, months ahead of us to explore our relationship, he could be as under the radar as he wanted. And he was right. I too didn't want to have that awkward exchange with Brad...even though the guy had seen it coming a mile away.

And it wasn't hard, at least not right then. Brad wasn't even there when we got to the apartment, and the other two guys were still sleeping. Ethan squeezed my hand and then I walked to my room. I wanted to shower. I felt like I needed it. As I unpacked the bag, I came across the bottle of vodka Ethan had barely touched, and I set it on the kitchen table before I went into the bathroom. Ethan was nowhere to be found, so I thought maybe he was in the big bedroom doing something—composing music, maybe.

I felt free and alive as I stepped into the tub...except for that one area, but even that was starting to feel a little more normal. I didn't know if I should just rest and take it easy or if I should push through the pain. I knew I didn't want to walk around the neighborhood, though, but I'd let life dictate what I'd have to do, based on a tiny phone call.

When I got out of the shower and into clothes, I called the manager of the sub shop. Lucky me. He scheduled the interview for the next day, so I decided to take it easy and hope my body felt better the next day. I lay on my bed, writing out new lyrics, and drifted off to sleep, and I knew it was because I hadn't slept well the night before. When I awoke later, I heard Nick,

Zane, and Ethan talking in the kitchen, so I got up. I debated about going out there and then decided to walk as normally as I could, and our place was small enough that I thought I could pull it off.

Zane was talking. "I think he actually started work today."

"That's stupid. He's set up so many fucking dates for us to play, if he's working too, when does he plan to practice?"

"You know Brad. He'll figure it out."

Ethan said, "Nick, you should talk to him. You're always able to reason with him."

"The fuck I am. That's *your* bag, Ethan. Brad does what Brad wants." Nick looked at me and acted guilty that I'd overheard him. He shouldn't have, though, because I knew that Nick—although quiet—didn't say to Ethan and Zane anything he wouldn't say to Brad. Nick might have been quiet most of the time and obnoxious and out of control when drinking, but he'd always seemed upfront and honest in all his dealings with his friends. So I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders and sat at the other empty chair at the table.

"It's probably my turn to cook dinner, right?"

Zane shrugged. "Hell if I know, and the slave driver's not here to tell us who's supposed to do it."

That was enough. We hadn't been living together long enough to start getting on each other's nerves and holding grudges yet. I wondered to myself if it was pack behavior and since Brad, the guy who seemed most likely to be the alpha, wasn't there to keep the dogs in check, they were yipping at each other. "Hold it, now. Brad's just trying to find a way to make sure we all do our fair share without getting into fights about it." Zane sneered at me. "Would you rather do it all yourself?"

He raised his eyebrows. "No."

"Then shut the fuck up already."

His raised eyebrows told me my words had had the effect on him I'd hoped. If he had that big a problem with it, I thought he should talk to Brad about it instead of complaining behind his back. And I actually appreciated that Brad was trying to keep some kind of order in our small home. I knew he'd already known what to expect from his friends, and he was trying a preemptive strike to prevent misunderstandings and spats. Zane started laughing. "Jesus, Val. When the hell did *you* get so mouthy?"

I wanted to tell him he had no idea...that I'd done a lot of growing up recently. But I wasn't going to. "Got your attention, didn't I?" He shrugged but acted like he was done complaining. "So I'll cook dinner. What all do we have?"

"Your meal...you figure it out."

I let out a laugh and shook my head. The guys started talking about music and wound up going into the big bedroom to play out a couple of songs Ethan had been working on, leaving me to my own devices in the kitchen. I was glad, because then I didn't have to worry about anyone noticing I wasn't one-hundred percent yet. We didn't have much in the way of groceries, and I'd never been much of a cook, so I wasn't sure what I could make. I needed to buy a cookbook.

For now, though, I had to make do with what we had. I found potatoes, hamburger, lettuce, and tomatoes, and a couple of packets of brown gravy, so I made (kind of) Salisbury steak, baked potatoes, and salad. I determined then and there that for the nights I was cooking, I'd do the shopping myself and look for recipes online. I already missed my mom's cooking.

The guys liked it, though, and that was good enough for me.

I hated sitting so close to Ethan and not being able to touch him or stare at him or even talk to him about our *secret*. I longed for the day when we could be open about it, and I hoped it was sooner rather than later.

I slept alone that night, but I thought about Ethan the entire time.

The next day I had my interview at the sub shop that was just three and a half blocks from our apartment building. I did okay, but I was even happier that I wasn't having a hard time walking. I was still a little sore but nothing like I'd been the day before. After my interview, the manager told me he'd call me by the next day if he decided to hire me.

We had three shows the next weekend, all in the same area of the city, and we hadn't played anything new in a while. Ethan, Zane, and Nick ran a song past Brad and me. It was different, but it was hard and heavy, and it was fantastic. Ethan asked, "Think you can pen some words to it pretty quickly?"

"How quickly?"

"By our next show?"

"Well...probably...but getting it down is another story. We'll need to practice it together some like we always do."

Brad was quiet. "I need some time too...unless you're wanting me out of this one, man."

I saw something in Ethan's eyes, but I wasn't quite sure what it was. There was a flash, and I knew Brad saw it too, but then it faded. "Nah. I'm just excited to play this one."

Brad took it in stride. "Me too. It's fuckin' awesome. Good stuff. Maybe we could shoot for next weekend."

We all agreed that would be the best idea. I wanted to know what was going on between Ethan and Brad, but I thought I'd let it go. I suspected I was part of the problem, and I really didn't want to be. As much as I was growing to care about Ethan as a lover, I had begun to love Brad as a friend. Out of all the men in the band, he understood me best, and we'd always gotten along. I never wanted there to be anything awkward between us. And that too was part of the reason I *didn't* care for keeping my thing with Ethan under wraps. It felt dishonest. But I knew that Ethan and Brad were like brothers, and Ethan probably wanted to tell Brad when he was ready.

That night I lay in bed working out words to the new music. It was in my head rolling around, so I tried thinking of some good lyrics, but I knew I'd need a good night's sleep to really solidify my ideas. I'd want to work with the guys on that some the next day, but I also wanted to do more job seeking. Sure enough, Brad had already found a part-time job working in another oil-changing place, just like he'd done back home. I felt bad, though, because it seemed like Brad was doing everything.

Those were my thoughts when I finally shut off the light and lay my head on my pillow to sleep. A few minutes later, though, I heard a slight tapping on my door. Before I could even get out of bed, Ethan peeked in the door. He whispered, "Care if I come in for a few minutes?"

"No...that's fine." He left the light off and closed the door quietly behind him. "You can turn the light on."

I heard him getting closer. "No. I'm good." He felt for the bed and I sat up. "I'm just gonna lay down next to you. Can I get under the covers?"

I grinned, even though he couldn't see it. "Sure."

He slid under the sheet and that was when I could tell he was just wearing jeans—no shirt, no socks. I felt excited suddenly. I hadn't been expecting his company, and soon I would have

started wondering when we'd be together again, but here he was. It wasn't too loud in the living room, but it sounded like the guys were watching movies or videos on Brad's laptop.

"I miss you."

I giggled. "I'm right here."

Then his voice was serious. "How are you feeling? Are you better?"

"Yeah. I think so. A little sore, but nothing I can't handle." I wondered what it would feel like the second time.

He kissed me then, a sweet, gentle kiss, but I felt myself growing amorous just the same. I wasn't nervous anymore, because I knew it wouldn't be painful like the first time. And maybe, after that, it would be everything I'd heard it could be, some magical promised land. I hadn't talked much about sex with any of my girlfriends in the past. Most of what I'd learned I'd read about in magazines and online, and so I knew part of what I'd read might have been filled with disinformation as well. I was less hesitant this time...eager, in fact. I wanted to try again. I wanted to be filled with Ethan over and over, wanted to spend all my free time with him, have his mouth on mine most of the day.

I knew none of those fantasies was even remotely possible, but if he at least felt comfortable coming into my bedroom a few nights a week, I could feel like we were truly growing together. More than that, though, I had my awakening sexuality I was going to have to contend with. I ran my fingers over his solid pecs, thrilled that he was here in my bed, lying next to me. When he ended the kiss and I took a big breath, I said, "So what are you doing in here anyway?"

"I just wanted to spend a little time with you." I smiled and slid my hands up to his neck, and he wrapped his hands around my waist, pulling me close. "You're just wearing a t-shirt and these tiny things." He slid his hand around to my ass, feeling the back of my lacy panties. "I like that." He kissed me again and slid his hand under my panties to cup my ass and then push my body into his. I sucked in a deep breath and then his tongue wrestled with mine. I may not have experienced anything earth shattering in the realm of sex yet, but I was still feeling some of the most intense sensations of my life. Just like the other night, I was revving up—for what, I didn't know, because it hadn't been exactly spectacular. Oh, yes, up until we lay in the bed, I'd enjoyed one of the most amazing, overwhelming onslaughts of feelings I'd ever felt, and I'd known the first time would be difficult, but it ended on a painful note. And while I'd never take it back, I wanted to try more, feel more, to know what the hype was about. So to feel his hand begin to explore started that overloaded feeling again, and it was one I wanted to enjoy for as long as I could. Like the other night, my nerves were standing at attention, every piece of flesh on my body primed for his touch.

He wasn't wasting any time now, and he slid his other hand up under my t-shirt and found my naked breast. I gasped again, feeling unprepared for whatever was going to happen next, but unprepared or not, I wanted to move forward. I wanted Ethan to touch me wherever he wanted.

My fingers were coiled through his hair, and he began kissing my neck. He rolled me onto my back and started grinding up against me, just like he had the week before against the wall. My legs were spread apart with his legs in between, and I hoped this time would be better. No, I knew it would be. But Ethan didn't take his jeans off. Instead, leaning over to kiss me again, he slid his hand into my panties and began feeling his way around.

Just having his hand in that forbidden place made my arousal jump through the roof, but every little thing he touched set me on fire. Finally, he made his way down my slit and found the body part I'd read so much about but had never become familiar with—my clitoris. Oh...as soon as he touched it, I knew what all the hype was about.

His lips were on my neck as he first touched me there, just a delicious stroke across its surface. Holy fuck, was that incredible. So *that's* what the big deal's about. That's where all this was heading. Whew. He kept sliding his finger up and down. It was deliberate and rhythmic. He kissed me on the lips again, but I had a hard time keeping up because all my focus was on that tiny little spot between my legs, the one he was gratifying beyond imagination. Each stroke felt wonderful, and I didn't want him to stop. I wondered, with what little mental capacity I had left, if I would know when I climaxed or if it would just be over. How would he know when to stop?

That thought flew out of my head as my attention again riveted on what he was doing to me. He was kissing my neck again and that felt wonderful too but nothing could beat the climbing sensation he was creating with each caress of his finger.

I noticed my breathing had grown deeper, and I took another breath deep into my lungs. Then I noticed that just by taking that breath that I was getting closer to...something. And it felt so right. So I just let my body tell me what to do. I continued sucking in the air, and I tilted my pelvis too, adjusting myself to where my body told me to be. One more gulp of air and

*Oh. My. God.* "Oooooohhhh..." As though I were outside my body, I heard a loud moan escape my mouth as my mind was jolted with perhaps the sweetest sensation it had ever felt. Ethan became a god in my mind at that moment as he brought me to heaven. He just kept up the pressure, and every stroke brought a new wave of pleasure. And it seemed to last forever, but when it finally did stop, I noticed my legs clamping onto his hips as though I were a trap he'd never be able to escape.

It was then that he kissed me on the lips and pulled my panties back up on my hips. Then he kissed my neck and whispered in my ear, "That's how you made *me* feel the other night, and I wanted you to know what that was like."

I was still catching my breath and trying to focus on reality. I'd never felt that way before, almost like I wasn't totally in my body and definitely like nothing else on the planet mattered. I was somewhere else entirely. So my first thought was *I made you feel like that?* He hadn't seemed to completely lose it like I had. But maybe that was just because I'd been in my own little world of pain. I'd have to pay closer attention next time. All I could say was "Wow."

"Yeah." He placed a quick kiss on my lips and then rolled off of me onto his side, facing me. He pulled me close and, even though I'd planned on talking, I fell fast asleep.

\* \* \*

It didn't surprise me the next morning to find that Ethan wasn't sleeping next to me, but as I sat up and stretched, I wondered how big a secret it would really be if he decided to pay me a visit now and then. I knew now in vivid retrospect that I hadn't been quiet when I'd been in the throes of my very first orgasm. I wasn't fully in my own mind, so I didn't know exactly how loud I'd been, but I knew I hadn't been quiet. I had to push that thought out of my mind, though, because I otherwise wouldn't be able to look the other guys in the face anymore.

Everyone was asleep when I got up, though, all except for Brad, and I heard him closing the door to the apartment as I made my way into the kitchen. He'd left half a pot of coffee for anyone who wanted it, so I poured a cup and then got in the shower, ready to search for a job again. But when I started putting on my makeup, I got a call from John, the manager at the sub shop, asking me if I could start work on Friday. "I can work until five."

"I might need you some nights," he said.

"I understand. I told you I have another...*job* I'm working around, right?"

"Self-employment, right?"

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to tell him *what* I was doing, at least not right off the bat. Once I was working there, I might feel better about telling him what I was doing on the side—actually, the work I *wanted* to be doing full time—but for now, all he needed to know was that there would be nights I wouldn’t be able to work.

So I started work on Friday, learning how to prep all the vegetables and assemble the sandwiches. There didn’t seem to be much to it and I knew already that the work could become boring pretty quickly. So I hoped we could start making real money with our music. I trusted Brad to lead us there.

Friday, I got off mid-afternoon and walked home quickly. I wanted to shower before getting ready for the show. A lot of time, shows would leave me feeling too warm and sticky anyway, so I’d probably want to shower again, but I wanted to feel fresh for our show.

I’d already been doing this long enough that many of the venues started looking the same. We were playing in taverns, lounges, theaters, and all manner of spaces, large and small. And we were starting to play with some of the same bands. Anymore, I didn’t even look over Brad’s master list. I just got in the van when it was time to go.

We didn’t talk much on the way there. Brad looked tired, like he was regretting the move, regretting his entire life. I was sitting in my usual spot as co-pilot. “What’s wrong?”

He shrugged but wouldn’t make eye contact. “Just under the weather. Not up for doing this. Not really liking the day job.”

“Well, we’re working on getting rid of the day jobs, right?”

“Yeah.”

Except he didn’t seem too sure. I could tell he didn’t feel like talking, but I knew him well enough to know that no matter how he felt, he’d be great onstage.

Once we got there and settled in, Brad asked me to work our merch table with Nick. I’d never done it before, but Nick had, so I knew I was just going to be the backup, and I’d try to learn what I could. I knew it couldn’t be that hard—sell something and collect the money. I didn’t know what we had, though. We hadn’t recorded a CD yet, although Brad promised me that would be next. We had mostly shirts with the logo Brad had had designed. It was just the words, but the letters looked like they were fashioned out of polished black metal, like each letter was part of a gun, with bullet holes through them. We had t-shirts of various sizes and colors, but the logo was either black or white, and there were also baby doll and long-sleeved tees, beanies, and hoodies. There were also buttons and bumper stickers, and I thought it would be really cool to see one on a car someday soon. We needed CDs, though. I was convinced of that.

We had a few people approach the table, mostly girls wanting to flirt with Nick. One of them asked for his autograph. I almost laughed out loud when I saw him write his cell number next to it. He was flirting with those two girls when someone else approached the table.

I peered up at the guy in front of me. He looked familiar. He was about Ethan’s height and several years older than I was. He was definitely a metalhead, though. His arms were painted in tattoos from shoulder to wrist, and he had shoulder-length dark brown hair. But as I continued taking in his details, I remembered where I’d seen him before. It was the snake bites that gave him away, just two small studs beneath his lower lip on both the right and left sides. Yeah, I’d met this guy before, less than a year ago.

I smiled. “You guys playing tonight?”

The guitarist from Last Five Seconds smiled back. “Yeah. I didn’t know *you* were in a band.”

Oh, God, *really*? He *recognized* me? “Yeah. Been with these guys since June.”

"I've heard a little buzz around your band, and I've seen 'em once or twice, but I haven't had the pleasure yet. I think you guys are on right before we are." Yes, we were. We were second in a lineup of four bands.

I remembered last fall when I'd gone with Ethan to the concert at The Cave. The hot older guy standing in front of me had been making eyes at me at that concert, but I thought it was bizarre that he'd remember me. There was nothing memorable about me. I had to know. "So you actually remember me?"

I loved his grin, and if Ethan hadn't been so close to my heart, I would have flirted with this guy a lot more. "How could I forget you? You were totally into the show, and you were with the other guitarist in your band—not Brad, but the other guy. You dressed the part, but you looked so... Little Bo Peep."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Where are your tattoos, your piercings, the heavy black makeup around your eyes?"

I grinned. "I'll be working on the tattoos soon. I promise. I just need to save up enough money."

"When you're ready, let me know. I can send you to my tattoo artist. He's fucking brilliant." He moved his arm to halfway between us so I could get a better look at the canvas in front of me. It *was* great work and beautiful—lots of color and detail.

"Yeah, he *is*."

"Name's Clayton, by the way, but they call me *Jet*."

"Jet?"

"Yeah. Speed of light, you know."

I nodded and grinned. "I've seen you play. It suits you." I took the hand he offered. It was warm and dry and reluctant to let mine go. "Valerie."

"Got a last name, Valerie?"

"Quinn. What about you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. You'll never forget it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's Smith. But even if you find a thousand Clayton Smiths, I promise you won't find one like me."

Oh. That gaze... struck something inside me, melted something in there. And I believed him. Wow. Ethan was a lucky guy, because had it been anyone else, I would have been flirting with this guy hardcore. I smiled. "I think you're probably right about that."

"So what do you play?"

"I sing."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be front row." He reached behind him to pull his wallet out of his pocket. He had a large silver chain attached to it, and he whipped out a twenty. "I'll take a large short sleeve in black."

I reached over in front of Nick where the regular tees were and handed him the cash. "I need a five back."

I handed the guitarist his change and he said, "Be right back." He walked away, leaving me wondering what he was doing. He had captured my attention, but I was back in the moment. Yeah, he'd been flirting with me, but I didn't want Ethan seeing or overhearing and thinking something unsavory was going on. I looked around while I waited for Clayton (or Jet?) to



return, but I couldn't see Ethan anywhere. And Nick...well, he was still charming the girls at our table.

Clayton came back, black shirt in hand, which he handed to me. "I'd be honored if you'd wear this onstage." At first, I'd thought he was handing me the tee he'd bought from us, but when I unfolded it, I saw in big red letters *LAST FIVE SECONDS*. The lettering design was intricate and artistic, almost gothic but not quite.

"Tonight?"

He grinned, small dimples forming in his cheeks. "Yeah."

I couldn't help but smile back. "Okay." He nodded. "So what do I call you—Clayton or Jet?"

He shrugged. "You decide. I go by both." He started to back up. "Have a good show tonight."

"You too." I looked at the shirt unfolded in front of me. It was a small, and I usually wore a medium, so I knew it would be snug. If I'd had smaller breasts, it wouldn't have been a problem. Still...I'd promised. So I asked Nick if he could cover the table for a few minutes, and he said he could. I went into the bathroom. Yeah...it was snug, but I thought I'd be okay with that. I knew, though, that I could make it cooler and more comfortable with a pair of scissors.

I went to the front counter, and there were a girl and a guy selling tickets to the show. The girl looked at me with disdain but the guy said, "Fully Automatic, right?" I nodded. "Everything okay? Need anything?"

I smiled. "Do you have a pair of scissors I could borrow?"

"I think so." He rifled through a bunch of junk on the shelf underneath the counter and handed me an old pair of orange-handled scissors. "I don't know how good they'll be, but give 'em a shot."

He was right. Once in the bathroom, I started modifying the shirt. The scissors weren't as sharp as I was sure they'd been back when they were new, but with effort, I was able to cut through the fabric. This was metal, for God's sake. It didn't have to be perfect and, besides, I didn't have a lot of time to play around. I cut off the arms and then I cut a slit down from the neck to my cleavage. Then I cut a few triangle-shaped patches out—one in front of my navel and three on the back in various places and put a few fake rips in it. And as I finished, I knew Clayton would either love it or hate it. He'd either love that I'd made his shirt my own and wore it with pride onstage, advertising for the next band, or he'd think I'd desecrated it. I just hoped the guys wouldn't ask about it.

They didn't. They were used to me wearing a variety of ripped shirts, and I'd been wearing just another t-shirt that night anyway. Before we took the stage, Ethan grabbed my hand and squeezed it but didn't say a word. I looked over at him and smiled. *Oh, shit*. He was fucked up. I didn't know what he was on, but he was messed up. That worried me. Yeah, I knew Brad could hold his own onstage if he needed to, but I didn't like knowing Ethan was blasted out of his mind.

The first three songs were spot on. We were on fire, and the audience was eating us up. It was pure magic. But then, in the middle of the fourth song, Ethan started missing notes and just flubbing up in general. I didn't think the audience noticed, and Brad maintained, but it was throwing *me* off. So, in between songs, I looked over at Brad. Fortunately, he knew exactly what I was thinking. He gave me a look of assurance, urging me to keep going and just disregard Ethan. I looked over at the man to whom I'd given my heart, but—as usual during a

concert—he wasn't with us. He was off in musical nirvana...exactly where that was for Ethan, I didn't know, but he certainly wasn't there with us.

We persevered, though. The next song, I'd decided to focus as much on the rhythm as I could, trying to ignore the guitar. That proved to be impossible but not unmanageable. It was during that song—"Metal Forever," a song that had become my personal anthem—that I noticed Clayton/ Jet at the edge of the stage. Oh, God, was he cute, and he smiled when he caught me looking. I was in the middle of singing a line, so if he caught my acknowledgement back, it was through my eyes only. But after the song was over, I winked at him.

No, I don't know *why* I did it.

When we were done, we hauled our equipment off stage to make room for Last Five Seconds to set up. Ethan was too far gone by that point, and Brad cornered him off stage. Ethan wandered off somewhere while the remaining four of us emptied the stage.

Clayton/ Jet stopped me before his band started loading their equipment onto the stage. "Nice show, Valerie. You stayin' to watch?"

"We usually do. Gotta support our friends, right?"

"That's what I like to hear." He started walking up the stage. "I'll be playing tonight for *you*."

Whoa. That was heavy. And here's where having a *secret* boyfriend—if that was what I could even *call* Ethan—presented some trouble. I couldn't exactly tell him right there that I was seeing someone as he was walking away from me and my friends/ bandmates were right beside me. But chances were this was the last of it. I was just nice flirting material for him for the evening.

The four of us—Brad, Zane, Nick, and me—stood near the front. Nick had his arm around the girl he'd been talking to earlier, and I was surprised he wasn't already making out with her, knowing his track record. I noticed the guitarist onstage looking around, and he kept it up until he spotted me. He pointed his left index finger at me from under the shaft of his guitar and grinned at me.

Brad noticed, because he looked over at me, but he didn't say a word. I just looked back at him and tried to deliver as innocent a smile as I could.

My God, could those guys rock. Jet—that's who he was when his guitar was in his hand—was one of the best live guitarists I'd ever seen. It was like he and his guitar were one. His fingers were like liquid, gliding over the strings, even when he was shredding. He was amazing to watch. He was sexy too. The energy he exuded, moving around the stage, singing backup when needed, looking down at me on occasion. Those looks gave me chills.

But I had to push those thoughts out of my head. Oh, my God. It was true, everything my parents had ever told me. I'd finally given in to my deepest desires, and now I was full of lust.

Honestly, though, I would have found him gorgeous before; in fact, I had. And, no, I still wasn't to the point where I wondered what he'd be like in bed. No, but I *did* appreciate that he was a fine specimen of man.

When their show was over, they were lugging their equipment off stage so the last band could set up. Brad said to the three of us, "I'm gonna check on Ethan."

Yeah, where *was* he? Brad was still gone when the fourth band started setting up, and after a few minutes, Last Five Seconds's guitarist tracked me down. His hair was damp, and he'd run his fingers through it, pulling it away from his face. He was swigging on a bottle of water as he approached me. "What'd you think?"

I smiled. "Even better than the last time I saw you."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I give you some advice?”

I was curious. “About what?”

“On stage.”

I was hesitant but wanted to know. His band had been performing for a couple of years. He had oodles more experience than I did. I wanted to know. “Sure.”

“You have a great voice, Valerie. Not a lot of women can pull off metal. And you do some great stuff with your voice. But...I’d love to hear you scream more.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...try a deep growl or just a crazy scream. You don’t want to do it through the whole thing, but it could really punctuate a lot of the other cool shit you got goin’ on.” I nodded my head. “You ever hear In This Moment?” I raised my eyebrows. “You know, Maria Brink.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“There’s a woman knows how to do metal.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Thanks.”

His eyes twinkled. “I’ll be listening.”

I looked over for my remaining two bandmates. Nick had disappeared, and Zane was talking to two girls beside him. “So, seriously...do I call you *Clayton* or *Jet*?”

He got a huge grin on his face. “Well, it depends.”

“On what?”

“Do you want me sweet or dirty?”

*Oh.* Wow. He really *was* pushing all the right buttons. But I was a good girl.

“Well...considering I have a, uh, well, um, I’m kind of seeing somebody, I think I’ll have to take you sweet.”

He raised his eyebrows. “*Kind of* seeing somebody?”

I’m not sure why I told him, but I said, “Yeah. He’s my *secret boyfriend*.”

“*Secret* boyfriend? If you were with me, the whole world would know it.”

I wanted to change the subject. My relationship with Ethan was off the table, and I didn’t want Zane overhearing our conversation anyway. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

His eyes grew serious, but I could see the playfulness in them. “Then I guess you’d better call me Clay. You want the bad boy, ask for Jet. He’ll come running, secret boyfriend or not.”

Well, if *that* didn’t make me just love this boy, nothing would. I felt almost winded, but then Brad showed up. “Val, we gotta go.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He noticed Clayton. “Hey, Jet. How’s it goin’, man? Great show, by the way.”

“Thanks. You too.” He tipped his head toward me. “Nice addition to your band.”

Brad grinned at me. “Yeah. We thought so too.”

To me, Clayton said, “By the way, I really like my shirt on you.”

Brad noticed the shirt then. “Cool. Didn’t even notice.” He looked back at Clayton. “See you around.”

I gave Clayton a tiny wave and smiled. He smiled back, and then I realized he probably thought Brad was my boyfriend...not that it mattered. Nothing could happen between Clayton and me, no matter how cute he was. *Nothing.*

## Chapter Twenty-four

ETHAN WAS SERIOUSLY messed up. Brad, Zane, and I stood outside the van while Ethan was passed out in the back. He'd just thrown up, and Brad had told him to sleep it off.

"I don't know if I should take him to the ER or not."

I asked, "What'd he take, Brad?"

"No fuckin' idea."

"Why the hell does he do this?"

Brad gave me a look, and I knew why. We'd discussed this before, and he wasn't willing to talk about it again, no matter how much it bothered me. Zane broke the ice. "Nick coming?"

"Nope. He's got a ride."

"Yeah, I bet he's got a helluva ride. Lucky motherfucker."

Brad asked, "So do we take him to the hospital or not?"

"How's he doing?"

"Better than before."

"Can I talk to him?"

"I guess." Brad looked over at Zane then back to me. "Good luck."

I opened the van door and stepped in. I heard Brad and Zane talking quietly, and I didn't know if they were trying to keep their conversation from Ethan or from me. But I knelt in the tight space between the driver's seat and the bench seat behind it, near where Ethan's head lay. I put my hand on his forehead. It was cool and clammy. I whispered, "Ethan?"

He moved his head toward my voice. "Hmm?"

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"You sure? Should we take you to get help?"

He was quiet for a moment. "No. I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine."

He opened his eyes. I could see them only because of the dim dome light. "I'm *fine*." He took another breath, but it didn't seem normal. His breathing seemed shallow. "I just wanna go home." He seemed halfway coherent, but I still didn't feel sure.

I kissed his cheek. "I just worry about you. I love you."

"Then just take me home, okay?"

I don't know what kind of response I'd expected, but I hadn't expected abrupt. Still, he was under the influence of *something*, and I was willing to let the rudeness slip. "Okay." I stepped back outside the van and told Brad and Zane what Ethan had said.

So we made the trip back to our apartment. We were quiet. Brad even had the radio turned down low. I sat in my usual seat but kept turning around to look at Ethan. His head was rolling back and forth with the motion of the van, but he seemed to be passed out for the most part.

When we got home, Brad and Zane helped Ethan inside. Both wrapped an arm over their shoulders to help him. I was still worried, but Ethan forced a smile, so I thought maybe he'd be okay. Once upstairs, Brad said, "I'm gonna put him on the couch so we can keep an eye on him."

"Then I'm sleeping out here too."

"You can have my cot."

“No. I’m not taking your bed. I’ll just sleep in the chair.” The one soft chair in the room. I didn’t plan on sleeping much anyway.

Brad insisted, but I wasn’t going to budge. I just smiled and then brushed my teeth, slipped off my boots, and changed from jeans to sweats. He and Zane were in the kitchen talking, but I walked past them into the living room. I sat on the couch beside Ethan. “You sure you’re doing all right?”

He blinked at me. He had a little more color in his face. “Yeah.”

“Want something to drink?” He nodded. “Be right back.”

I went back in the kitchen and grabbed a glass. I poured him some water. Brad asked, “He still seem okay?”

“He said he wanted something to drink. That’s a good sign, right?”

He shrugged. He looked worried, and I knew why. Ethan was like his brother, and Brad was torn. I was too, but Ethan talking and looking a little more coherent had alleviated my worries a little bit. When I got back to the living room, I sat next to him again. “I have your water here.”

He opened his eyes again and lifted his head a little. I placed my hand on the back of his neck and brought the water to his lips. He sipped and then rested his head back. He focused on me. “Where’d you get that shirt?”

I wasn’t going there...not now anyway. “At the show tonight.” That was all he needed to know.

“Oh...looks good on you.” He lay his head back and, within seconds, started snoring softly.

I didn’t sleep well that night. I would drift off and then wake right back up, then check on Ethan and sit back down. Sometime several hours past midnight, Ethan’s breathing seemed completely normal, and I started to relax. And, at some point after that, I drifted into a deeper sleep.

The next morning, I woke up feeling stiff and uncomfortable all over. Ethan wasn’t on the couch. Brad and Zane were still sleeping on their cots. I got up, hoping Ethan was okay. As I moved to the other end of the apartment, I heard the shower in the bathroom. It might have been Nick, but then I realized the big bedroom’s door was open. I tapped on the bathroom door.

“Yeah?” It was Ethan.

“Everything okay?” I asked through the door.

“Yeah. Be out in a minute.”

I went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. Brad came in. “How’s he doing?”

“He said he’s okay.”

There was an uncomfortable silence between Brad and me, and I wasn’t sure what the cause of it was. Looking back over the past week, I knew it could have been caused by anything. But Brad had become my closest friend here. So, after I poured us both a cup of coffee and I sat at the table, I asked, “Everything okay with you?”

He nodded, but his eyes said something different entirely. I raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem too sure.”

“It’s cool, Val. It is.”

I knew it wasn’t, but I wasn’t going to press my luck. I only wanted him to know I cared. “I just...worry about you too. I know you’re doing a lot for all of us, and I appreciate it.”

He smiled then, but it looked weary. “Thanks.”

Without even thinking, I grabbed his hand and squeezed it, but I wrapped that hand around my coffee mug as I heard Ethan open the bathroom door.

He walked into the kitchen, wearing jeans only, his damp hair matted to his head. “Man, did I get fucked up last night.”

“Jesus,” Brad muttered.

“How are you?”

“I told you I’m fine. Not one-hundred percent, but I’m fine.” He walked over to the cabinet and pulled out a mug, pouring himself some coffee.

“We were worried about you. What did you take?”

“Stop, Val. Christ. You’re not my mom.”

That struck a nerve. I took in a deep breath. I so wanted to say something bitchy, like telling him to take care of his own damn self next time. Instead, I just bit my tongue. Brad looked at me as if to remind me of the conversation we’d had months ago. I had tried to forget about it, but every word came clear this moment. Brad had said Ethan did drugs to cope...to cope with some kind of hell he’d gone through. And, at that moment, I realized that my love for him couldn’t save him. But maybe, like Brad had said, we’d be there to catch him when he fell. I just hoped he wouldn’t *keep* falling. My heart couldn’t take it.

\* \* \*

We had another show that night, and late afternoon I was putting on heavier stage makeup in my room when Ethan rapped on the door. I didn’t know which guy it was but told him to come in. When he came in the door, he closed it behind him and eased up closer to me to where I stood in front of the full-length mirror, putting on blush.

He rested his chin on my shoulder and looked at my reflection. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

I smiled then. I loved when he was sweet. But he wasn’t only sweet. He was hot. He was all decked out for our show, and he was even hotter than usual. Having him press up against my body from behind, remembering how the other night he’d given me my first orgasm only accentuated my attraction for him.

I turned around as he wrapped his hands around my waist. “I wouldn’t worry if I didn’t care.” I tossed the blusher on the bed.

“I know.” He was wearing eyeliner. I wasn’t necessarily into it when guys wore it, but it made Ethan look sexier than usual. He kissed me firmly on the lips.

I decided to be honest. “You look really hot tonight.”

He grinned. “You think so?”

“Yeah.”

“You think I’m hot?”

“Oh, God, yes.” He backed me up against the mirror.

“When are we leaving?”

I suspected I knew why he was asking. “Half hour maybe.”

“What have you got left to do?”

“Not much.”

He started kissing my neck. Oh, that was nice. I let out a small breath and tilted my neck. All was forgiven...my fear and upset, my worry. As I inhaled a deep breath, my breasts pushed into his chest, and I let out a small sigh. Remembering when he had me up against this same wall not long ago pressing into me, making me feel aroused and then recalling how he’d made me feel better than I ever had in my whole life just a few short nights ago made me wet with desire. I wanted him to touch me again, to make me feel like this was what I was made for. Our

lips clashed together, and I groped for the button to the leather pants that were molded to his skin. I could feel his cock pressing against the fabric.

I wanted to touch it. I'd only touched it the other night in the shower, but now I was fascinated by it. How would it feel inside me now? I wanted to know. And so I unzipped his pants and found my way inside his underwear. Oh...it was hard and throbbing, smooth and hot, and it was that way for me. All for me.

His kiss was harder then, and he unzipped my jeans in response. "You want me inside you, babe?"

I opened my eyes. God, his were on fire. "Hell, yeah."

He assaulted me again with his lips, and I grabbed his ass to press him into me, but his hands were in the way. He grinned. "Good things come to those who wait." I let out a small laugh until he stuck his hand in my panties. He ran his finger down my slit, brushing over my clitoris and feeling lower, and he said, "Fuck. You're ready, aren't you?"

He knew just by touch. I nodded, now serious, as I gasped at the motion of his finger. I closed my eyes and realized I was almost panting.

"I don't have a rubber, Val. You're on the pill, right?"

"Yeah." So it was stupid, especially in light of the fact that I knew Ethan had had multiple partners, but I loved him and wanted him, and I didn't want to wait.

"You okay going without?"

Well, I didn't have a choice, did I? Maybe I'd have to start keeping them around. It might be a little embarrassing to buy them myself, but I knew how stupid it was to have unprotected sex. "Are you safe?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I swear." He punctuated his words with another stroke of his finger against me, making it impossible for me to deny him. My gasp told him all he needed to know, and he pulled my pants halfway down my thighs, then pulled his own down and lifted me up against the wall, my legs wrapped around him. In just a few short moments, he was inside me, filling me up. At first, I still felt discomfort. But as he continued to drive into me, it began to feel good, and that was when my desire ramped up again. I started breathing heavily once more, enjoying the sensation of him inside me, driving me wild.

But, perhaps because I was new at the whole thing, I didn't even come close to orgasm. Ethan came inside me before I even got close. I hoped he didn't feel bad about it. He was breathing in my ear. "Didn't you like that?"

"Yeah...I loved it." As he pulled out and set my feet on the floor, I could feel the evidence that he'd come inside me. He was kissing my neck again when there was a knock on my door.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah?"

Zane asked, "Have you seen Ethan?"

Fortunately, Ethan didn't make me lie. "I'll be out in a sec."

Guess it wasn't a secret anymore.

He was whispering in my ear again when he said, "I'll take care of you tonight, babe. I promise."

He zipped up his pants while giving me a hasty kiss on the lips. He swaggered out the door, leaving me in that state. And the rest of the night, I felt like I was on edge, and my damp panties just reminded me that he'd been inside me earlier. Somehow, onstage, it made me feel empowered, free, and fully feminine. It made me feel sexy, wanted, and for the first time ever, I felt in control of my sexuality. I'd have to try incorporating Clayton's suggestions for vocally changing my singing voice, but this night I was breathier, cooing some lines, adding seduction to

my words. I hoped Ethan could actually hear me in spite of the hold his guitar had over him, because *he'd* done that to me.

I got the rest of the band's attention, though. On our way back to the apartment, Nick of all people said, "What the hell was that you were doing with your voice tonight, Val? Holy shit."

Zane joined in. "Yeah. That was some cool shit."

Brad: "It *was*. But just make sure the audience can hear you."

Zane: "They could."

"Was I too quiet?"

Brad: "Maybe a little too breathy." So...Brad was more objective. I nodded, not sure what to do with the contradictory information. "But I liked it. It needs a little work, but keep doing it."

I smiled. Still nothing from Ethan, the man I had really wanted to hear from. He was being quieter than usual. I shouldn't complain, though, because at least he wasn't on anything tonight.

Once we got to the apartment and got settled in, the guys wanted to talk about the show. There had been some weird things going on with rhythm, but it didn't affect me, and I was tired. And, based on Ethan's reticence, I figured he could make whatever it was he'd wanted to make up to me the following day.

So I changed my clothes into another short nightie, but I left the panties on. Ethan could be with me all night long in that way, and part of me was pissed that I'd not only let him go without a condom but that I'd then been further aroused by the evidence of it.

I was thinking way too much, so I made myself get up and take a shower. The guys were still discussing the concert over a round of beers in the living room.

After my short bath, I lay in bed just thinking about Ethan and wasn't really surprised when I heard him rap on the door and open it before I could even say a word. "You asleep?"

"No."

I heard the smile in his voice. "I promised to take care of you. You too tired?"

The fact that my body was already tingling at the sound of his voice assured me that I definitely wasn't too tired. I felt bashful when I said, "No."

He turned on the light. God, he was gorgeous. The eyeliner he'd had on earlier was smudged, and his hair was a little mussed, but he was a vision. He looked wild, untamed, like an animal, and he was hungry for me. He peeled off his t-shirt and dropped it to the floor, then pulled off one boot, then the other, followed by his socks. Then he walked closer to the bed, unzipping those goddamned tight leather pants that were wrapped around him like skin, and he peeled them off next to my bed. I sat up a little, anticipating him, wanting him.

He slid under the sheet and laid his hand on my tummy underneath the nightie. He didn't even look under to see that I wasn't wearing panties. But he leaned over to kiss me while his hand roamed upward to find my breast. Oh...now that was nice. His touch was light, teasing, and I felt my entire body respond, my pussy getting wet again, hoping he would finally put me out of my misery. After the long, sensual kiss, he moved his lips to my neck and then to his hand to lick the nipple that had pebbled up at his touch. My back arched, pushing my nipple farther into his mouth, wishing he could consume me fully. I heard a loud sigh escape my lips, and I shoved my fingers in his hair.

His mouth released my breast to my dismay, but he began kissing a trail down my abdomen, moving farther down. *Oh*. I felt my muscles tighten in anticipation of what I thought he might be considering.



He kissed down the side of my hip, down the top of my leg, and then placed his hands on my thighs to gently urge them apart. Oh, there came that overwhelming sensation again, that one of feeling like too many nerves were being tantalized at once, that one of my brain not being able to keep up. And as his thumbs parted my labia, I thought I would jump out of my skin. That first stroke of his soft, warm tongue...

That blew me out of the water, and I already thought I couldn't take anymore. I made some kind of groan and wrapped my curled fingers into the bottom sheet. But he licked me again, and the muscles in my inner thighs clenched and my breathing grew deep, hitting the bottom of my lungs with the force of forty horses. And yet his touch was gentle, maddening.

One stroke, then another, and I could feel myself climbing. This time, though, I knew what awaited me on the other side. I moved my hands to his head, winding my fingers into his hair, and then I could feel the motion of his head as he delivered those delicious sensations to that sensitive area, and somehow that intensified the feeling.

He sped up and I gasped. I wasn't ready for the change, but then I could tell orgasm was inevitable. I felt my legs spread farther apart just out of instinct, and I tilted my pelvis and *holy shit*. I sucked in another deep breath only to be hit with one of the most powerful sensations I'd ever experienced in my short life.

Oh, yes, it was only the second orgasm I'd ever experienced, but it couldn't compare to the first time. This time I had a better handle on what to expect. I still had no control over what he was doing to me—I was writhing, moaning out of control, and probably nearly pulling his hair out—but the feeling was at least familiar. And I held on as long as I could, but I finally said, "Oh, God, stop." I thought I was going to lose my mind. I couldn't handle the intensity anymore.

It took him a few seconds to register, but then he did stop—quite possibly because I was pulling up on his head. "What?"

I was breathing hard, as though I'd just run five miles. I tried to catch my breath. "I can't take it anymore."

His eyebrows furrowed. "Doesn't it feel good?"

I felt my heart rate starting to slow. "Oh, yeah. It feels out of this world. But...*too* good, if that makes any sense. I can't stand it anymore."

He looked confused. "*Too good*? Is there such a thing?"

"Yeah. Oh, God, that was unbelievable."

He cocked his head and sat up, but he wasn't quite done. He kissed my belly again, making a path up to my cleavage. Then he looked up at me, and the way his head tilted made his eyebrows shadow his eyes. He looked mysterious, dark...tempting. "I really wanna be inside you. Do you think you could take that?"

I smiled. "I want to try." And then I remembered. "Do you have a condom?"

He looked dismayed. "Next time. I promise."

So I nodded, in spite of my hesitation. In seconds, he pulled down his underwear and entered me, and I realized I had again underestimated my body's reaction. I took in a sharp breath, hit with the revelation that my orgasm was going to continue under the blows of his cock, whether I wanted it to or not. With his second thrust, I felt my thighs quiver in response, and they clenched his hips. I tilted my pelvis to take him in as far as he would go, but it had the added bonus of making me feel like a goddess. My gasps turned to audible groans again as he inflicted wave upon wave of heavenly delight upon me. But it couldn't be stopped. I had no

control over my body's reaction. Maybe with time...but right now, it was so new, so unexpected, so freeing, all I could do was to let it overtake me and enjoy the ride.

\* \* \*

Like the last time, Ethan wasn't lying next to me when I awoke the next morning, and it wasn't because he'd awakened before I had. When I got out of bed, I saw he was sleeping on one of the cots in the living room.

It was quiet as the guys slept away, but Brad was already up. I heard him in the shower, and he had already made coffee. I poured a cup and took it back to my room so I could put on makeup and do my hair before going to work. I didn't want to do my makeup without washing my face, but I could at least fix my hair. While I worked on it, I thought about Ethan. Was he not sleeping with me because he really thought he could keep his involvement with me a secret, or was something else going on, something I couldn't fully understand? Much as I loved Ethan and thought I knew about him, I knew there was far more beneath the surface than I'd ever touched. Even Brad had said as much to me.

But I couldn't talk to anyone about that. Not a soul. Sure, maybe I could try emailing Jill or even Jennifer or messaging either one of them on Facebook, but I didn't know that I wanted to talk with anyone about it. And even though Brad had become my closest friend in this new life, there was no way in hell I'd discuss Ethan and me with him. I didn't know, didn't think Brad still had feelings for me in that way, but whether he did or not, this was not a topic of discussion between the two of us. Ethan was like his brother, and I thought Brad had said as much about Ethan to me as he'd ever cared to, but more than that and something I didn't want to think about was the possibility that he might still have deeper feelings for me.

I'd have to broach the subject with Ethan himself. I did know Ethan well enough to know that he wouldn't want to talk about it, but if he really cared for me like he said he did, I'd tell him he had no choice. I wasn't going to allow myself to be hurt or lied to, so he was going to have to explain. Besides, even if he *did* think he could keep us secret, he needed to know that wasn't going to happen. I almost blushed remembering how vocal I'd been the night before.

I heard Brad exit the bathroom, and I gave him a little bit to clear out of the hallway before I walked into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. I returned to my room quickly, and by the time I left for work, I heard him strumming a tune on his acoustic in the big bedroom. It sounded sad. Part of me wanted to go hug him, but another part of me thought maybe I was the reason for that sad tune, and I hurried out the door, not wanting to dwell on that thought and ruin my happiness with Ethan.

## Chapter Twenty-five

MY SHIFT WAS over early afternoon and I walked home, noticing for the first time that cooler weather was on the way. It was still pleasant and warm, but it wasn't scorching hot like it had been all summer long.

I walked up the stairs to our apartment, feeling tired. The work at the sub shop wasn't hard, and even standing on my feet for hours on end wasn't bad, but it was boring work. The only time it felt stimulating was when we had customers who needed us to make something for them. I knew—whether music would become my entire life or not—that food service was not for me. I'd stick it out, but I didn't plan to be there for years.

As I walked down the hall toward the apartment, I realized I could hear voices. And they were voices I knew. The guys were having a heated discussion. That was nothing new. They were all passionate about the music and they all had strong opinions, so to hear their voices raised didn't completely surprise me.

But I paused outside the doorway. They weren't talking about *music*.

No.

They were talking about *me*.

I couldn't make out the words at first, but it didn't take long. I heard Brad shouting. "You don't deserve her."

Okay, so that grabbed me around the heart and rattled me. Then I knew why Brad had been quiet and sullen the last several days. Whether or not he still had romantic feelings for me, he obviously objected to Ethan's pursuit of me.

"Fuck that. I make her happy." Something I couldn't hear...but I resisted putting my ear up to the door. Then Ethan again: "You heard her yourself."

It was quiet for a few seconds and then I heard, "Ethan, you're a mess. You know it and I know it. You wanna *make* her happy? Get your shit together, man."

I took a deep breath. Should I go in or not? Should I wait until they were done or leave and come back later? Well...maybe they didn't know I could hear them, and maybe if I entered now, I could make them stop fighting. I really didn't want to hear the conversation, but I hoped my presence would end it.

Sure enough, as soon as I opened the door, they stopped yelling at each other. Brad and Ethan were standing facing each other, and the atmosphere was tense. Zane was standing next to them as though he was there to break it up and Nick...I wasn't sure where he was at first until I heard the muffled sounds of his drum kit pouring out of the bedroom.

The two men stood toe to toe until I closed the door behind me. The sound somehow pulled them out of their stances. I wanted to ask them to calm down, but I didn't want them to know I'd heard part of their conversation. So, instead, I tried slapping a concerned look on my face and asked, "What's going on?"

Brad was the first to back away and then he and Ethan both looked at me. Brad said, "Nothing. Just a little misunderstanding."

"Yeah." Ethan looked away. He looked pissed.

Brad didn't look much better, but he'd managed to bury the emotions a little deeper. "How was work?"

I shrugged. “Nothing exciting.” Oh, it was tempting to start asking questions, but I instead asked about dinner plans and buried what I knew of their conversation deep in the back of my mind. I couldn’t let it eat at me.

But it did. It was cradled in the back of my mind.

\* \* \*

The summer drifted into fall with little fanfare. As September flowed into October, Ethan started out almost every night in my bedroom but left before morning. And, thanks to our hectic schedule, my need to save money, and walking to and from my job, I lost a few pounds. Nothing dramatic, but I was suddenly svelte for the first time in my life. The extra ten or fifteen pounds I’d been toting around since becoming a teenager had melted off, and I felt slim for the first time as an adult.

Brad noticed.

He and I were the only ones up early in the morning, probably because we were the only ones who’d managed to find day jobs in addition to the band. We were drinking coffee one morning and he said, “Please, Val...please tell me you’re not indulging in any of the shit Ethan does regularly.”

That seemed to come out of nowhere. “What? Why would you even ask that?”

“You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

I tried to smile. “That’s not why.”

“Something I should worry about?”

I let his words sink in. “Oh, no. No. Hell, no. I’m just...not eating as much and I’m exercising a lot. I’m not starving, and I’m definitely not doing drugs.”

He nodded. “Okay. Good. Just...you really *are* our muse, Val. I...” His voice drifted off, and he stared in his coffee.

“What?”

I saw his jaw clench but then he forced himself to look at me. “I feel the need to protect you.”

This time I did smile. “From what?”

He shook his head. “Lots of things. I...just want you safe.”

“I *am* safe, right?” He raised an eyebrow. “Right?”

“Yeah, sure. You are.” But he didn’t believe it, and I knew it stemmed from my torrid relationship with Ethan. I’d gotten a little better about keeping myself quieter, but those walls were thin, and we lived in tight quarters. Brad knew exactly how hard I’d fallen for Ethan, and I think that’s where his concern came from. “Just...” He blew air out of his mouth, almost as though he were tired. “Just remember you have a friend here, okay?”

I smiled and placed my hand on his. “I know that.” Of course, Ethan *would* walk in just as I did that. His eyes narrowed, but he sat down at the table without saying a word. I pulled my hand back to myself and took a sip of my coffee. “Hey, how’d you sleep?”

He shrugged. “For shit.”

Brad said, “There’s plenty of coffee if you want it.”

“Nah. I *know* what I want.”

Brad and I glanced at each other. I knew what he was thinking. He might have been right, that Ethan was craving some synthetic pick-me-up, but I thought he might have also been talking about sex with me. He hadn’t even looked at me in any such way that would indicate it. It was just a feeling I had.

Brad was in no mood, though. “Think it through, man.”

Ethan rolled his eyes. "Fuck off, Bradley."

I was starting to grow weary of the constant friction between the two alpha males of the household. I felt like I was walking on pins and needles while they continually picked at each other. Before Brad had a chance to say anything else, I said, "Can we please stop?"

Brad sighed. "I gotta go to work anyway." He stood up and rinsed out his coffee cup. "Nice talkin' with ya, Val."

I was a little ticked with Ethan for pushing Brad away. I knew Brad cared for Ethan just as much as he did for me, if not more. But Ethan just couldn't see past his own ego. After the front door closed, Ethan wrapped his hand around my neck. His eyes were intense. "So what's going on with you and my bro?"

Was he *jealous*? "Nothing. You know Brad and I are close."

His voice was low. "I know you *were* very close. Anything I should be worried about?"

"No. Of course not." I sighed. "Don't be that way, Ethan."

"*What way?*"

"Possessive and covetous."

He raised an eyebrow and sported a cockeyed smile. "Covetous?"

"Yeah. I'm with *you*, Ethan. I *love* you."

His smile turned lascivious. "Then let's go fuck."

I didn't know that I cared for his crude way of asking, but the look in his eyes changed my mind. I'd finally bought my own stash of condoms that I kept in the nightstand next to my bed, and I insisted on using them. In the past month, I'd enjoyed multiple orgasms and had had sex in several different spots in our apartment, in various different positions. I'd even managed to successfully deliver in the blowjob department. I was enjoying exploring my sexuality with Ethan, and he was open to anything I suggested. When I needed him to, he took it slowly, and he somehow knew exactly what I needed—how and when.

So, even though I'd need to get ready for work in the next half hour, I thought I could give him that time. So I stood up and grabbed his hand, leading him to my bedroom.

The door wasn't even closed when he had his hand wrapped around my neck again and started kissing me hard on the lips. Just like always, though, I was primed and ready to go. It didn't take much anymore. Just looking at him or thinking about him was enough to get me aroused.

He kissed me a few times and then I started unbuttoning his jeans. He reached under my robe and pulled down my panties, and I wondered...the floor, the bed, the stool by the mirror? But no. He grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me around to face the wall.

Now...I was game for trying new things. This whole thing had been entirely new to me a month ago. But this didn't feel like play. It felt like punishment, particularly because it felt like he'd slammed me up against the wall without any regard for me. He was inside me in a matter of seconds, pounding into me with fury. Yes, maybe I was reading it all wrong, but it didn't feel right. It felt like he was angry with me.

But then, just as I was getting ready to ask him what the fuck was going on, he held me with passion. He kissed me on the neck ravenously, one hand massaging my left breast, the other moving below. He continued pumping into me, but he was stroking my clitoris and, no matter how upset I was that I felt like he was taking his frustrations out on me, I couldn't help that I was going to orgasm. There was no stopping it.

My hands had been splayed up against the wall, but as I gave in to my basest desires, I reached behind me and drove my fingers into his hair. In seconds, I cried out as I climaxed. He

slowed as he came too and leaned me into the wall. His hot breath was in my ear, his hands holding me aggressively and as though he didn't want to let me go. It wasn't until he withdrew that I realized he hadn't worn a condom.

And then *I* was angry. I didn't want to be like my friend Jill. I didn't want to have to make the decision to have an abortion...or not. I didn't want to have to beg Ethan for his help with an unwanted baby. No matter what the press said, I knew the pill wasn't one-hundred percent reliable. I didn't want to have to worry about that—or if Ethan's indiscretions would give me some nasty STD I'd have to contend with. I was pissed. We'd had this conversation before, too many times.

I struggled against his rough hands and finally managed to turn around. "Ethan, what the hell? Where's the condom?"

He wasn't with me. His mind was off somewhere else. He looked angry...and then he looked far away. He didn't answer at first. He looked like he was going to start yelling. And that's when I said, "Oh, my God. You're high, aren't you? What the hell?" I reached down and pulled my panties up from where they were sagging against my ankles. "Get out of here, Ethan. I have to get ready for work."

"Come on, babe. Don't be mad."

"Seriously. Get the hell out." And when he finally left, I leaned against the door. I couldn't make the tears stop falling.

\* \* \*

We didn't have any more incidents like that during the fall. It was back to business—and love—as usual. Yeah, we were uncomfortable in the apartment, but we were playing some good gigs and getting to know a lot of fellow bands. We even played a wedding reception. The happy couple liked to bang their heads, as did a good many of their guests. I felt out of place without any tattoos or piercings, and that inspired me to get my first tattoo—just a simple tribal armband on my upper right arm. But in addition to the usual venues, we played a few strange gigs like that. I wasn't complaining—Brad kept us working. The money from the music wasn't great, but it was something. We were making just as much off our merch as we were the playing the shows themselves.

Money was tight, and Brad sat the guys down one day, urging them to find jobs. "It's no problem for *me*, man, to withhold your part of the rent, utilities, and groceries, and then give you what's left."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "So just *do* it. If we need more money, we'll figure it out."

Brad kept his cool. "You better hope I'm able to keep booking enough that it *does* cover all that shit. Otherwise, I'll kick your ass out."

Ethan just glared and lit up a cigarette. Oh, yeah. That was something else. I knew he'd smoked on occasion, but he undertook it as a regular activity that fall as well. I suppose it was a cheaper addiction to feed when compared with some of his other preferred activities. I didn't know for sure, though, because I'd never purchased them myself.

One afternoon when Brad was at work and I had the day off, Nick and Zane had gone somewhere—to pick up some beer for that night after the gig maybe. I thought maybe it would be a nice chance for Ethan and me to just talk. Things were feeling strained between us, and I just wanted to discuss what was going on.

He was on Brad's laptop in the living room, and he was oblivious to me as I walked into the room. It didn't help that he had some Chelsea Grin blaring out of the speakers. He did that a lot, and I wasn't sure why or how he was able to tune me out. He sat on the couch, and so I was able

to walk in and sit next to him. He was absorbed, and so I decided to kiss his neck, get his attention. But that's when I noticed what he was doing. He had up some Yellow Pages-type listing, and he had an entire page of people named *Richards*.

"Looking for family?"

As though he were pulled into the moment, he slammed the lid of the laptop down.

"Nothing you need to worry about."

I was taken aback. "I was just asking." He set the laptop on the floor and kissed me with a hunger...or a vengeance. I'm not sure which. And he started unbuttoning my jeans. "Not here, Ethan."

"No one's here right now, Val."

"I don't care. They could be back at any minute. I really don't want them walking in if we're in the middle of making love."

"Oh, is that what we're calling it? Making love?" I just looked at him and then stood up. "Don't you like it when I fuck you?"

I could feel the anger rising in my chest. He was being a dick, something he'd been taking a shine to. "Fuck *you*." I walked away, straight to my room. If nothing else, my relationship with Ethan inspired some killer lyrics and writing about it was good therapy, so I intended to do just that.

I heard him following me. Odds were he'd grab me by the arm and kiss me hard until I relented and grew amorous. It had happened enough by now that I knew that was usually how it played out.

Instead, right outside my room, he touched my arm. "Val, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm such an asshole sometimes."

I was still stinging. "*Sometimes?*"

He answered me with a kiss, and it was sweet and soft. "I'm not really an asshole *all* the time, am I?"

I pursed my lips together, trying not to smile. The last couple of weeks, yes. He'd been a constant asshole. I raised my eyebrows but managed not to say a thing.

"Really?" He pulled me close, resting my head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Val. I just let everything get to me." He kissed the top of my head. "I guess it makes me a real jerkwad." He held me close. "Let me make it up to you."

I muttered up against his chest. "And just how do you plan on doing that?"

I could hear the smile in his voice. "I have my ways." He lifted my hair up off my shoulder and back and kissed the exposed skin on my neck. Damn it. In the short time I'd even been sexual, he'd figured out what buttons to push. Kissing my neck always made me melt and there went the anger. And his hands went straight to the button on my jeans again. I was at a melting point and wanted to insist we go to my room, but I was so hot at that moment, I *did* just want him to fuck me. So I too was clawing at the button on his pants and not worrying that we still stood in the hallway just inches shy of my room.

He ripped my panties down, just barely enough for him to squeeze in. And he tried to sneak in without protection. "No, Ethan. Condom."

He rolled his eyes. "Fuck me."

"That's what I'd like to do...but *with* a condom." How I found the wherewithal to insist, I'd never know. And he was pissed, but he whipped his wallet out of his back pocket and snatched a condom out. He threw the wallet on the floor and tore the condom out of its package. Yeah...he was as desperate as I was.

I could still hear the music coming from the living room. It only added to my feeling of desperation—the hard, driving beat, the heavy guitar.

He lifted me up and slid me in and I gasped. Oh, God, yes. That was it. I heard a tiny moan form in my throat.

“Play with yourself,” he said.

In between breaths, I asked, “What do you mean?”

God, his eyes were sexy. “Touch yourself. Pretend I’m going down on you.”

I looked at him. Oh, God, yeah. That would make for an amazing orgasm, wouldn’t it? So as he slammed his lips down on mine, I did his bidding and shoved my hand between our bodies, snaking it down to the area that I knew now ruled me, dominated me. My head was shoved against the wall. His lips were mashed into mine, his hands holding me up under my arms, cutting into my skin. And yet it all felt so good. Then I crawled my fingers the last few inches until they were in that tight, sweaty space. As I felt my way around and discovered that little nub I’d never touched before, I let myself imagine Ethan working his magic on me. And how fucking intense that was. He was in me, but I was lighting myself up. Holy shit. It was more than I could take, and I screamed in pleasure.

“That’s it, babe.” I kept rubbing myself as wave after wave caused me to clench against Ethan’s cock and even he yelled as he came. “Oh, my fucking God,” he said as we finished, almost in unison.

I fought to catch my breath, and he rested his forehead on mine. I opened my eyes and smiled at him, still breathless. Then we heard Nick in the kitchen, clapping. “That was fucking awesome, guys. Do it again.”

I was horrified. And then I remembered it was Nick, the guy I’d realized over the past year had no shame. I looked at Ethan again and saw the twinkle in his eyes and laughed. But then I got my pants back on...fast.

\* \* \*

That night we played a gig at a venue we’d played in the summer and hadn’t seen since. It felt comforting to be somewhere familiar. It just so happened that Last Five Seconds was playing that night as well. The night started out fine—Ethan was still feeling loving, and now that our relationship wasn’t *secret* anymore, he had no problems putting a possessive arm around me when a guy so much as looked at me. He definitely had no issues with laying a heavy kiss on me when I least expected it. It wasn’t long, though, before I realized that his PDA that particular evening was thanks to a little bit of something he took. And, as usual, I didn’t know what it was he’d taken, but I knew it had loosened him up.

By the end of our set, he was done for. He refused to rest it off in the van, though, and walked off into the crowd in front of the stage while the rest of us hauled our shit offstage so the next band could set up.

Outside, I asked Brad if we should find him and talk reason to him. “He’s a big boy, Val. He makes his own choices, no matter how fucking stupid they are. So you track him down in the crowd. *Then* what? You make a scene, telling him he’s too jacked to be out there? That’ll go over well. Yeah, why don’t you guys have another obnoxious fight like you always do, but this time why don’t you do it in front of the whole crowd? That’ll win ‘em over and make ‘em fans for life.”

I had no words. It hadn’t occurred to me that Ethan and I had been arguing loudly, but Brad’s words hit home. I knew Ethan had been pushing my comfort zones and smothering me, and I’d been pushing back. I hadn’t realized I’d been so vocal about it. Just hearing Brad say



that made me realize I wanted to put a lid on it. I found it embarrassing, and I just nodded and dropped it. Out of all the people in the world, Brad was the last one I wanted upset or angry...especially if it was because of something I'd done.

I knew we'd stay and watch the other two shows, and I was glad about that. Last Five Seconds had become one of my favorite local bands, and I looked forward to hearing them again. They'd gained enough prestige that they were—for lack of a better word—the headliners of the show.

I left my encounter with Brad, trying to focus not on his words, not on Ethan's problems, but on me. And, for now, I just wanted to lighten my mood. I wanted to just rock out for a while, and I planned to head out to the audience myself to do just that. But I decided to go around to the front by walking outside, rather than going through the backstage area. I didn't want to face Brad—or any of my other bandmates—again for a while.

I approached the corner of the building. It was dark, but I saw a couple of guys standing by the side. There was intermittent light from some of the tall parking lot lights, but I couldn't make out faces. I heard, "Nice tat," and I knew it was directed at me, even though I wondered why the big deal over the one skinny tattoo. I looked over at the two guys and started walking toward them.

As I got closer, I was able to make them out. Zane was one of them, but the person who'd said something to me was Clayton. And even in the dark, he was as cute as ever. "You talking to me?"

"I'm talking to the sexy chick with the secret boyfriend who went and got herself a hot tattoo."

Sweet Jesus...talk about forward. If I'd been single... "Ah...I see I'm talking to Jet."

"The one and only."

Zane grinned. "Hey, catch ya later. I gotta go see what pussy I can score."

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Yeah, Zane was probably going to see if he could score a little action in the van before we bailed, but I knew he was leaving because he was uncomfortable with the flirting going on and probably didn't want to be a witness in case Ethan asked later.

I leaned my shoulder up against the wall. I saw no harm in flirting. I'd never cheat on Ethan, but Clayton was cute and sweet and irresistible. He said, "So...I feel pretty fucking stupid. I should have figured out who your secret boyfriend was a long time ago. Not so secret."

I shrugged. "Yeah...not really secret, I guess. Uh...he'd just wanted to keep it under wraps for a while."

The look on his face told me he wasn't going to venture any further. "So you finally got some ink. Planning to get more soon?"

"Probably. When I can afford it."

"Ah, yes. There is the cost. If you want quality and cleanliness, you should pay well."

I nodded. "So...got any new songs I should listen for?"

"Fuck, yeah. We always have new shit to play. Keeps it interesting."

"I'll be listening for it."

"Front row? Should I look for you?"

"We'll see."

He smiled, but there was nothing friendly about it. Oh, no...it was dangerous. It was his Jet smile, and it made my toes curl. "Boyfriend be with you?"

I smiled back, but I hoped mine seemed as innocent as I tried to make it. “Guess we’ll have to see.” I stopped leaning on the wall, intent to get the hell out of there. “He’ll definitely be around, so behave yourself, Clayton...I mean, Jet.”

“Got that right, sexy. See ya around.”

Oh, God...the way his voice purred. It was a good thing he wasn’t vocalist for his band too, or Ethan might have had a hell of a time keeping me close. Fortunately, as I got a little farther away, I had an easier time controlling myself. Whew. I needed a bottle of water and the fresh air was helping too. What was it about Jet that got my engines revving?

## Chapter Twenty-six

I MANAGED TO stay faithful...through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year, even seeing Jet at the occasional concert, including one of ours at which he *wasn't* playing. I guess he was trying to gauge the seriousness of my relationship with Ethan.

Well, it *was* serious, even though it was heated and stormy. Ethan was often moody, and he continued indulging in various substances. He managed to maintain from day to day, but there would be days he'd just lie on the couch, seeming to contemplate the meaning of life, and I knew he was just baked out of his gourd. I took Brad's advice and didn't lecture Ethan about it, much as I'd wanted to.

I was in denial, though, if I'd thought he was staying faithful to me. The fact that he never had a condom on him should have been my first clue, but it wasn't. That he couldn't be found frequently should have been another. There were no undeniable signs—no times he'd be on the phone and push me away or hang up suddenly, no weird hickeys on his neck, no girls getting in my face to challenge me. There was just the tiny doubt in my mind that I easily pushed aside.

But at a particular show we were playing in January, I could deny it no longer...not that I had a choice. Ethan was trashed—he'd been drinking, that much I knew, but he'd taken something else and was in one of his near-comatose states, one of the ones that made me nervous for his well-being. He'd stumbled offstage and nearly passed out, but Brad and Nick helped him up and out. When I went to the van to check on him, though, he was gone. And when I asked Nick about it, he just shrugged his shoulders.

I made my way back through to the front of the house. The next band hadn't started yet, and I started asking people I knew if they'd seen Ethan. I was getting worried. What happened if he passed out somewhere and really *did* go into a coma, or what if he lost consciousness and choked on his own vomit? I'd read too many stories over the years of musicians killing themselves with their drugs, and if I could help it, Ethan was *not* going to be one of them.

I went backstage again near the bathroom area. There were some musicians hanging around talking, guys I'd met multiple times before. I asked them if they'd seen Ethan. I think by then most of them knew we were a couple. All the guys said *no*...except one. He didn't say anything but kept looking at the bathroom door.

The backstage bathroom was a unisex one, a tiny, cramped space with just a toilet, a small sink, a mirror, and paper towel holder. Even the trashcan was small. I walked over to it and knocked on the door. I didn't want to make Ethan uncomfortable or make him feel like I was invading his privacy, but I had to know he was okay.

There was no answer, so I knocked again. I heard a moan, and it sounded like Ethan, and I just assumed the worst—that he was lying in a pool of vomit, dying.

I tested the doorknob, grateful it wasn't locked, or I'd have to beg someone to help me knock it down. The room was so tight, I almost accidentally rammed the doorknob into the redhead's skull. Yep, that's right. Ethan was up against the wall with a skinny thing on her knees, his dick in her mouth. And not only did I see it, I know a lot of the guys behind me saw it too, and I'm sure a good many of them were cheering him on in silence.

I felt...so many things. The first was anger. I was angry that I'd been worried when I really hadn't needed to. And then I was embarrassed...which I wouldn't have been (at least as much) if other people hadn't been around. Last, though, I felt betrayed. Alone. Unloved. This man

had sworn his love to me. No, he'd never promised fidelity nor had we even discussed it. I'd just kind of taken it for granted. I'd given him my virginity, for heaven's sake. The least he could do would be to tell me he planned on drinking from other wells.

I didn't say anything. I just closed the door and backed away. Yeah, he *saw* me but all he did was roll his eyes.

I just went to the van and cried. Hours later, the guys joined me—long after the tears had stopped—and Brad asked if everything was okay. They'd been looking for me, and Brad was worried. I shrugged and told him I was sorry.

Nothing from Ethan. *Nothing.*

So I decided it was over. But he had some stupid hold over me. The next day he begged for my forgiveness and told me he loved me. He called me his *muse*, for God's sake, something he hadn't called me in a long time. His eyes even welled up with tears when he said it was the drugs—they impaired his judgment. He couldn't quit them, though, and that's when he also said he couldn't quit me.

I considered it for a day or so. Did I really want to send him the message that it was okay to shit all over me?

I loved him, though, and poison or not, I couldn't turn him away.

He tried to be better. For the next month, he'd eased off on the drugs and been close to my side, but I was stupid to think he would change. I believed it, though, with everything in me. It would take more than a little indiscretion to change my mind.

\* \* \*

My eyes were closed. Oh...that felt nice, so tantalizing. A warm mouth on my nipple, my areola, the tongue teasing its tip. And somehow it was all magnified, more intense than usual. *Oh, God.* And I heard hard and heavy music in the background...maybe Suicide Silence. I couldn't quite tell.

I felt fuzzy, surreal, as it continued. I moaned in pleasure and felt my back arch upwards toward the source of pleasure. Then I felt a tongue trace a trail down my cleavage as I heard Ethan's voice in my ear.

Wait. Something wasn't right.

I opened my eyes. The light was dim. There were some candles lit across the room, and I tried to get my bearings, but I was having a hard time focusing. Nothing seemed real. But in the shadows, I could see a young woman with short blonde hair leaning over me, looking up at me from my breasts. Ethan was closer, right by my face, talking in my ear, but I couldn't make out his words.

My heart was pounding in my chest and I sat up. "Stop." My voice came out weaker than I'd intended, but I couldn't get my bearings. Nothing was as it should have been. I didn't know where I was or how the hell I'd gotten here.

The blonde placed her hand on my breast and kissed my shoulder. "Oh, don't leave."  
"Val..."

This time with more force. "Stop." My mouth felt like terrycloth, my eyes like sandpaper. I blinked a few times, trying to focus, and then decided *to hell with it*. I groped my way to the edge of the bed and got up, still feeling the girl's hand on my shoulder. Once on my feet, I stumbled toward the door. I placed my hand on the cool doorknob and looked behind me to see Ethan and the blonde in an embrace, their tongues clashing. They weren't missing me much.

I twisted the doorknob, feeling the beat of the music inside me. It still didn't feel quite real, and I thought to myself, *I know this goddamned song*, but I couldn't figure it out. Maybe if I could get into some real light, maybe if I could figure out where the fuck I was, maybe...

So I opened the door and, just as I'd suspected, I was hard hit with light and sound. It was overwhelming. The light...so bright, so overpowering. And the sound—like a concert in my soul. I couldn't process it all...it was way too much.

But then my brain forced itself to work, and the edges of my reality became clearer. I was in the hallway of my apartment facing the kitchen. And the music was coming from beyond there, maybe the living room. Maybe from the new sweet stereo Brad's mom had bought him for Christmas. The kitchen was full of people, loud, boisterous, laughing happy people, none of whom seemed familiar to me in the least. And they were all staring at me. This must have been a bad dream.

It was then that I realized I was completely topless. No wonder they were staring at me. Especially the guys. And this was real...right?

*Fuck.*

Still, it didn't feel completely real. But I wrapped my arm over my breasts just the same.

That's when Brad appeared. He looked concerned, and he rushed to my side. "Val? You okay?"

I'm sure I looked like an idiot, just staring at him. Was I okay? I didn't know. But he wrapped his arm around me and led me to my room.

He sat me on my bed and then started looking around my room. He found the robe I hung on the closet doorknob and brought it over, wrapping it over my shoulders. "What happened?"

"I don't know." That was my first response, but tears started falling down my cheeks. I didn't know why. But then it all came back to me as Brad pulled me into his chest, just letting me cry.

It was mid-March, and we'd just finished our biggest show ever. The audience was huge and on fire, and we'd made the most money we ever had. I started to think I could start to consider quitting my job. There were two other bands playing that night—one that we'd played with multiple times (and, truth be told, probably the one that had really drawn in the crowd)—and another that we'd never played with before. Brad was happier than I'd seen him in a long time. In fact, he was ecstatic, and I could see in his eyes what I felt deep inside.

He knew I didn't have to work the next day, and neither did he, so he invited both bands and their guests to our place for a party.

We'd never had a party at our place before, but we knew it was acceptable in our building. We'd had to try to sleep through parties on our floor before. Brad had just turned twenty-one, so I suspected it was also a reason for him to make his first liquor store run.

Back at the apartment, people started filling in fast. Brad set up a bar of sorts on the kitchen counter, along with plastic cups and a bag of ice in the sink. Ethan was drinking and had taken something to go with it. He was on the couch, talking with a girl with short blonde hair. He hadn't cozied up with her, but I figured it was inevitable. I'd have to go over there and insert myself at some point, but first Brad had requested my presence in the kitchen.

"I know you're not comfortable drinking, Val, but I bought this with you in mind."

"What?"

"Butterscotch schnapps."

"Why for me?"

"It's smooth. I thought you might want to get a little buzz on. You helped propel us to where we are now."

I smiled. "Why do you want me trashed?"

"I don't. I just want you to feel good...just a little. You deserve it."

I nodded my head. "Okay."

So we did a shot together. Brrr. It warmed a trail down to my tummy but made me shiver. "How's that feel?"

"Pretty good."

"Okay. Just one more. As tiny as you are, I don't dare let you drink more than that."

Tiny? That almost made me laugh, but he was right—I'd become thin...not scary thin, but it was definitely different from when he'd first met me. So I did a second shot with him. I started to feel a little relaxed but just figured that was the power of suggestion.

In my ear, he said, "Now...half an hour from now, you don't feel like you've got a buzz on, come back. I'll hook you up." He hugged me then, a warm embrace, and I hadn't fully expected it. Yes, Brad and I were close, and it wasn't the first time he'd hugged me, but I wasn't quite sure where it was coming from. "In the meantime, though..." He grabbed one of the clear plastic cups he'd bought for the occasion. He put a handful of ice inside and poured water in it. Then he handed it to me. "Nurse this."

I grinned at him. "Thanks, Brad." I had a mission, though, and that was to make sure Ethan's cheating ass was behaving itself. I couldn't trust him anymore. "See you in a while."

I made my way through the bodies toward the couch. Sure enough, Blondie was closer to Ethan, her hand on his thigh. Damn it. That was my man. I was tired of girls staking their claim when he was not available, and I was tired of him taking them all up on their offers.

So I walked straight over to him and sat on the other side of him. "Hey, babe. Glad you could join us."

*Us?* That was a great way to piss me off. But he just grabbed me around the back of my neck and pulled me into an erotic kiss. Jesus. It felt like he was going to fuck me right there on the couch.

Typical Ethan. But I didn't stop him because it was sending a message to the little skank trying to steal my man.

His tongue didn't stop. He thrust inside me with aggression more than once until I felt a little spark, but then he stopped. "How you feelin', babe?"

I tried not to look sad. "All right."

The girl leaned over Ethan, placing her hand on my thigh instead of Ethan's. Well, maybe she was just a handsy individual. I took a gulp of my water. Ethan said, "Kandy really likes the band."

The girl named Kandy purred. "Oh, I *really* loved you. You are so sexy onstage."

Was she talking to *me*? I took another gulp of water, feeling nervous again. What the hell was Ethan up to? I managed to squeak out, "Thanks."

And that's when it hit me. My vision started to get black and fuzzy around the edges and things started to feel...not quite real. My grip on what was going on was loosening. I blinked a couple of times and took another sip. "You okay?" Ethan asked.

"Um...maybe." Whoa. If this is what alcohol did, I'd have to avoid it or drink less. But I'd drunk it before, just not a couple of straight shots. This was hitting me harder and faster. Kandy snaked her hand around behind Ethan's shoulder and started playing with my hair. Okay...that was overly friendly. She was starting to creep me out a little, but nothing seemed real.

I looked over at the poster-sized print of the Eiffel Tower I'd bought last fall to decorate in our Spartan living room. I kept staring at it as time seemed to slow to a crawl. It appeared to hover a foot away from the wall. And then my eyes were glued to it, fascinated. How was that happening? It was just hovering there, as though magnetically propelled away from the wall. And that was the last thing I remembered.

But sitting there on the edge of my bed, Brad's arms around me, the tears continuing to fall, more came to me. Ethan and the blonde named Kandy helping me walk across the living room. Then lying on the bed clueless. Then drifting off because it was the easiest way to cope with the perceptual overload.

"Brad, what the hell kind of proof is that schnapps?" I finally asked.

"What? Why?"

I just confessed. I told him what I'd felt, what I'd seen, and I saw the look on his face as he slowly grew angrier and angrier. Brad asked, "What'd Ethan give you?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit." He stood up. "You okay here by yourself?"

"What are you gonna do?"

"Find out what the fuck he slipped you."

"He didn't..." But I stopped there, because Brad was right. Nothing felt real, like it should be. Something wasn't right.

He didn't wait for an answer, instead standing up. He was more pissed than I'd ever seen him. He opened my bedroom door and stormed down the hall to the other bedroom. All I could think was *No!* But I just followed him, the edges of my reality still black and fuzzy, like dark spider webs.

Brad didn't knock. He just shoved the door open. *That* was a lovely sight. Ethan had her on all fours, and he was on his knees behind her, fucking her doggy style. He still had his shirt on, and he was holding a bottle of something. He seemed even hazier than I was, hands clinging to the robe draped over my shoulders.

Ethan stopped but didn't pull out. Kandy was pleading with him. "Fuck me. God, why won't you just fuck me?"

Ethan just looked at Brad. Brad asked, "What the fuck did you give her, Ethan?" Ethan's eyebrows were raised, but he was having a hard time finding an answer. Brad leaned over, and his voice was dangerously low. I could barely hear him over the music. "Goddammit, answer me, man, or I'll beat it out of you."

Kandy looked up then and acted like she was going to cry. But then she started laughing. "She's tripping. Don't you feel great, sweetie?"

I couldn't focus on her, and she seemed like a dream.

Brad asked, "Acid?"

Ethan let out a breath but didn't change position. "I guess."

"Yeah. Now would you please either get out of here or help him fuck me?"

Brad gritted his teeth and then asked, "What the fuck is wrong with you, Ethan?" When Ethan didn't answer, he said, "I should beat you anyway, just on general principle."

Ethan took his hand off Kandy's hips and held it and the one still holding the bottle out to his sides as if to tell Brad to go for it. I was pretty out of it, but I was starting to feel infuriated...full of anger not only because Ethan didn't give a shit but also because he had the nerve to not stop screwing that girl in front of me. And that realization was all it took for me to lose it.

Before I could even stop it, my right hand was out of the robe and my finger was pointing at my boyfriend. “We are *over*, Ethan Richards.”

“Babe—”

“Go fuck yourself.”

I turned around with what little dignity I could muster, pulling the robe back up and over my naked torso, and left the room. And the tears were falling again. Brad didn’t care about his party anymore. He just held me until the tears stopped, and I’d become sleepy. Then he laid my head on my pillow. “You gonna be okay tonight?”

I tried to smile. I really did. It was just so damned hard. “Yeah...”

He squinted his eyes. “Talk to me.”

I took a deep breath. “I feel so weird. This is scary.” And it was. I still felt like I wasn’t in my own body. What if I died? My parents would find out I’d been drinking...and that an entire crowd of people had seen my naked boobs. It was horrifying.

That was when Brad stretched out next to me and just held me in his arms until I fell asleep. And I didn’t think he’d stayed there all night, but he was there when I woke up the next morning.

I didn’t even want to see Ethan, let alone interact with him. I was wishing I’d had to work. I considered getting out of the house, but I’d eventually have to return, so I shut myself in my room and just wrote and did stuff on my computer—catching up on emails and that kind of thing. But sometime in the afternoon, he decided to knock on my door anyway. He caught me off guard because I hadn’t heard him up at all, hadn’t heard the stupid blonde girl with him. In fact, the apartment was eerily quiet.

I should have asked who was at my door, but instead I said, “Come in.” When I saw Ethan’s puppy dog face, I said, “Oh, not you. Get out.”

“Val, just hear me out.”

“No. You had your chance. Get the fuck out.”

“Val...”

“Go.”

He turned around, his hand on the doorknob, but he didn’t open the door. He just stood there. And then he said, “I thought it was what you wanted.”

Oh...I just had to ask. “What? What was what I wanted?”

“You said it. You said you wanted to be with *both* of us last night.”

I took a deep breath. “What do you mean?”

“Kandy propositioned you...*us*...and you said *yeah*.”

I *had*? I’d wanted to have sex with Ethan *and* that girl? I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. I shook my head. “So...it was my idea?”

“No. But you agreed to it. Val...babe...I wouldn’t have done it if you’d said you didn’t want to.”

“Bullshit.”

“No. I mean it. I wouldn’t have.” He got brave and moved closer to the bed. “I just thought you wanted to have fun.”

I clenched my jaw and scrutinized him. “So then...why were you fucking her after I left?”

“Christ, Val...I was fucked up.”

“And what the hell did you give me?”

“I swear—I didn’t give you anything. Kandy gave me a hit, and I think she slipped some in your drink when you were kissing me.”

“A hit?”



“LSD.”

I considered it, and when he sat on the edge of the bed, I let him take me in his arms and hold me close. And he comforted me as the tears began to fall.

And thus began chapter three of our fucked up relationship.

\* \* \*

Spring is a time of renewal, and Ethan treated me better than he ever had before. He was loving, sweet, and attentive. Did Brad have something to do with that? I wasn't sure, but I suspected, only because I caught my friend giving Ethan looks once in a while...looks not meant for my eyes.

But Ethan opened up more to me than he ever had before, and—in spite of my tiny twin bed—he started spending the night with me once in a while. One night after making love, he was holding me closely in spoon fashion, and he said, “I *do* love you, Val. It's hard to admit, but there it is. I love you.”

He'd said it before, and maybe it hadn't meant much to him because all the other times he'd said it, he'd been under the influence of something. This time he was as sober as could be. I rolled over and kissed him, just a soft, gentle kiss, but I wanted to communicate to him that those words meant a lot to me. I touched his cheek. “You know I love you too, right?”

He smiled. “Yeah.” He stroked my hair, but his eyes got a faraway look. “Everyone thinks love is so great, and I guess it is sometimes. But it hurts too. I mean...just look at my mom.”

The last time I'd seen his mother, she was happy *and* in love, so I had no idea what the fuck Ethan was talking about. She was still with Jason, a man who appeared to love her back and only wanted the best for her. So I just said, “What about her?”

“My dad...he abused her for a long time, and she just took it. She laid down and took it. Over and over. Love isn't a good thing, Val, no matter what the fuckers tell you. It makes you vulnerable and weak.”

“It doesn't have to be that way.”

“No, but it is. Just look at me. I'm so fucked up, it's not even funny. But I love you so much, Val, I'd do anything for you. *Anything*. I'd even take a bullet for you. And that's fucked up.”

I tried not to get judgmental on his ass, but his thinking was messed up. “It doesn't have to be, Ethan. You still have your values and your own good sense. If I asked you to kill someone just because you loved me, would you?”

He just looked at me, and his eyes scared me. *He would*. And, yeah, that was fucked up. So I quit talking. Instead, I rested my head against his chest, one of my favorite things in the world to do, and rubbed the smooth skin on his pec. “Val, you and me...we come from different worlds. I'd bet you never had to wonder if you were gonna get breakfast after not having dinner the night before or how the hell you were gonna hide the big bruise on your arm so your teachers wouldn't see it. You didn't have to dread the fuck out of coming home one night 'cause you got another D in class...and the very person who made sure you couldn't study the week before was the *reason* you got the goddamned D in the first place.”

He was right. I might have complained about being sexually repressed, but my parents had been loving, kind people who had wanted the best for me. I'd never known starvation, neglect, or abuse, some things Ethan had apparently survived. But these were the kinds of things he rarely talked about. So I just nodded my head slightly, but I didn't want to say a word. After a few seconds, he said, “I'll bet you never had to see your mom getting the beating of her life, just laying helpless on the kitchen floor, while you had to watch...and just listen to her begging that

he wouldn't touch me. Jesus...you're little, but you try. You grab him around the knees and cry and beg, but he just swats you away like a fly. Like you're nothing. And you watch while he just unleashes on her. Her eye gets so swollen she can't see through it...it's black and purple and so ugly, you don't even want to look at her. It makes her look...ugly, so ugly. But at least it blocked out the scared animal look in her eyes.

"And I'll bet you never had to hear that the only reason why they ever got married in the first place was 'cause the stupid cunt let herself get pregnant. And so that makes you the most worthless little stubborn sperm alive."

He was quiet for a while before he resumed. "But...one day he left her for dead. She was on the concrete floor in the garage...blood everywhere. I called 911 first, then my grandpa, and Burt was never to be seen again. I find that fucker, though...he's dead." He whispered, but I heard him say, "And I'm comin'."

What should I say? What *could* I say? Anything would sound lame at that point. He was right. I'd never seen or felt any of those things. And, knowing what little I did from basic psychology courses in high school and college, I supposed I should count myself lucky that he didn't think beating women was normal. What the hell kind of relationship would we have had then?

But I felt like I had to say *something*. I couldn't just say nothing. I wanted him to feel like he could talk to me and that I was there for him. I stroked his chest again and said, "I will never hurt you, Ethan."

Then he snorted. Actually snorted. "Yeah, 'cause women are innocent, right?" I took in a breath, but I didn't want to look in his eyes. I knew the look that would be in them—that distant, angry, mean look, the one his face reverted to when he wasn't trying.

"I didn't say *all* women, Ethan. But *I* will never hurt you."

He was quiet. I was too. He was in a dark place, a place I couldn't save him from. I knew that already. He was too far away. Only Ethan could choose to save himself. And he had to reason it through without me. So I decided I'd be there, but I wasn't going to say another word. "Heidi...she was a hot little thing. She liked to wear these short skirts, and she'd drop her pencil in front of me and bend over to pick it up, just so I could see how her underwear hardly covered anything. She didn't have a reputation as a bad girl. I know. I would have known, because...we dated. For a long time. I found out later how much she liked older guys. Lots older guys. Teachers, coaches, some guy at the bank. But she just had to make a move on Brad. I hadn't said a word.

"She started sleeping around on me...but she stayed with me, still trying to get to Brad. She knew my weakness, and...I guess she was right. As long as you love somebody, why should you let it bother you if they're with someone else? But Brad...that was like a punch in the gut."

Did he not see how he was doing to me what this girl had done to him? I stayed quiet, hoping he would come to that same conclusion himself. But he didn't say anything else, not a word, and I fell asleep wondering if he would ever see that he had become that which he hated. In the back of my mind, though, I also wondered how long I would be able to hold on, to fight to keep him...to fight to keep on loving him.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

### Present

THE BABY WAS a year old in what seemed like no time to me. He'd already passed so many milestones in his short life, and I was glad I'd been home with him to enjoy them all.

Now, though, he was experiencing one of his worst illnesses. He'd been feverish and throwing up, and I called the pediatrician. It was evening and, while I knew I could take him to the emergency room, I wanted to find out if that was actually warranted or if there was something I could do at home to care for him. It was cold and snowy out, and if I could keep him out of the weather and then take him to the doctor in the morning, I'd feel better about it.

The doctor on call asked me lots of questions and gave me plenty of advice too. Bottom line—I needed to keep my baby hydrated or I *would* have to rush him to the hospital. The doctor recommended that I give Christopher Pedialyte, among other remedies.

Unfortunately, I didn't have Pedialyte at the house, so I was back to square one: taking the baby out in the cold. Ethan and the band had started getting together two or three nights a week again as they started working out new songs, writing and practicing before recording. I decided to call Ethan to ask him if he could pick up some Pedialyte on the way home. Maybe I could persuade him to come home early too, explain that the baby was sick. I could use his moral support if nothing else. I'd been nervous and almost sick myself with worry over my precious child.

I held Chris in my arms as I speed dialed Ethan's cell phone. It went straight to voicemail. That wasn't surprising because he hated to be interrupted when they were working on music. I'd always known the music was the most important thing in Ethan's life. I respected that, but I knew he would want to know what was happening with his child. I left a message, but called again fifteen minutes later. Impatient, I finally decided to call Brad. He could let Ethan know what was going on.

Unlike Ethan, Brad answered his phone after two rings. "Val. How are you?"

"I'm doing fine. What about you?"

"Can't complain. And what about the little guy?"

"Well, actually, that's why I'm calling. He's been really sick tonight, and I can't get hold of Ethan. I wondered if you could pass a message on to him."

His hesitation was palpable. "I haven't seen Ethan since Tuesday, Val."

My heart sunk. I didn't want to give away the ideas already forming in my head. "Uh, well...if you see him, would you please ask him to call me right away?"

"Yeah, sure."

Goddammit. I knew what Brad was thinking, because I knew his mind had already formed the thoughts mine had about where Ethan was and what he was doing. It had to be one of two things: either drugs or women.

Knowing Ethan, it was probably both.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

### Past

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time, but now that it was here, we were nervous as hell. An indie paper reviewed one of our concerts. Jet called Brad to let him know. Brad pulled up the paper online and found that we'd have to find the actual fucking hard copy to read the review. The website listed locations of where the paper version could be found, one of which was at a nearby Chipotle. Ethan and Nick couldn't be bothered to get out of bed, but Zane, Brad, and I got in Brad's van. We had to wait a few minutes for the restaurant to open, but as soon as they did, we went in and found their newspaper racks.

The little paper was free. To be cool, we all bought a drink and then sat down to find the review. It might have been excessive, but we each had a copy.

I was painstakingly turning each page, afraid I'd miss it. Zane finally said, "Found it. Page forty-four." Brad and I both turned the pages of our copies in haste.

But I was nervous too. I got there and saw a grainy black-and-white photo of us onstage. *Wow*. That was pretty cool. I read through part of the review and wasn't sure if it was positive or not. It described our band sound as *gritty* and *raw*, *unrehearsed* and *unpolished*. I started feeling angry. And then I saw my name. "Oh, God...I can't read anymore."

That didn't stop Zane. "At first, Quinn seemed to be holding back. By mid-show, however, her vocals were strong. Her style alternates between singing and screaming, and she can hold her own doing either." It also mentioned that by about song three, I'd whipped the crowd into a "headbanging frenzy." *Whew*. That was it. Short and sweet. There were also some other small compliments about the band and some of our songs. The reviewer mentioned that (as I'd observed in the past) it seemed like Ethan was in another world while onstage but he didn't say if that was good or bad.

But the reviewer heaped the praise on Brad, complimenting him on his precision, his energy, and his shredding abilities. But Brad was humble about it. He almost acted embarrassed by it. "Brad," I said, "you should be proud. Everything he said about you is true."

He looked down at his hands. "Not everyone in the band is going to be as enthusiastic as you, Val."

"Yeah, well, he needs to get the fuck over it. It didn't say anything bad about him, and you deserve every word the article said." I smiled and patted his hand, resting mine on his. "I'm proud of you and glad to be your friend."

He smiled back. I looked over at Zane. "And you too, Zane."

Zane rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but the article didn't gush about me like it did Mr. Guitar Man. I know. I get it. Guy who plays bass is the low man on the metal totem pole." He chuckled. "At least it doesn't affect how much pussy I get."

I snarled at him. "Yeah. God forbid."

Brad looked at us both. "Let's get the fuck out of here and let the guys know. This is just one of many things that will help us get recognized. No time to rest on our laurels, ladies."

And that's why Fully Automatic would never die—because Brad kept it alive. Every move was calculated, and not only did he have us working steadily, he was constantly pushing us to add to our repertoire, to try new things, to learn something different.

And we'd survived our first review. That felt pretty good.

\* \* \*

One day late spring, Ethan was in a worse mood than usual. He'd been suffering from one of his bouts of depression, where he'd be glum and quiet most of the day. He'd also sleep a lot, but that's when he'd indulge more in the illicit substances too. I was never sure what triggered those spells, but they seemed to be coming more and more often, and I didn't know how to handle them.

He got up that afternoon, and it was a day I wasn't working. After playing around on Brad's computer a bit, he got dressed and announced that he was going out. I was convinced he was going on a drug run. I didn't know how to stop his self-destructive behavior, but I thought maybe I could play his conscience. "Want some company?"

He scowled. "No. Not really."

I wrapped my arm around his. I was trying to be playful, but it wasn't working. "Come on, Ethan. I'm your girl, remember? Why wouldn't you want to bring me along?" It was time to call him on his behaviors. If his drug and women habit were nothing for me to worry about, then he could bring me along.

"I don't want you to come."

I just stared at him. It hurt at first...a lot. But then I grew angry. Not only did he have no problem doing things that were damaging to our relationship, but he was mean about it too. I don't know if it was the look on my face or the fact that I just backed away without a word, but he relented. He sighed and grabbed my hand before I got completely out of reach. "Okay, okay. You can come. But you're not gonna like it. And keep your fucking mouth shut."

I wasn't going to say a word...not now, at any rate. But he couldn't stop me later. So I quit talking, right that second, and just followed him to his truck. We drove for a long time. I wasn't sure exactly which city we were in, because one just blended into another in the Denver Metro area. I'd seen that already in the short time we lived there. Aurora and Lakewood might have been their own cities, but if you weren't paying attention to the signage, you'd have no idea you'd crossed a border. All I knew is we'd gotten off the interstate a while back and were in an area I'd never been in before. Well, maybe in the dark driving to a new concert venue, I might have. I wasn't always paying attention when we were getting ready to play, but I usually caught most of it. Riding shotgun had afforded me a better view of the city than the other guys.

We parked in front of a bar, and I just knew Ethan was going to conduct a drug transaction. He threw his cigarette butt on the ground and joined me on the other side of the truck on the sidewalk. I was shocked when he laced my hand in his and led me *not* into the bar, but toward a door beside the bar. He had a piece of paper in his hand, and he glanced down at it. Satisfied, he pulled on the door and let me pass through first.

It led to a tall staircase. Next to the door was a series of mailboxes, and that's when I realized there were apartments above. Of course. A drug deal wouldn't take place in a bar. Once again, my naïveté was showing.

And I couldn't believe he was going to go through with it with me right there. Unbelievable.

Well, I thought, at least I'd know some of what he was taking.

As I'd promised, I didn't say a word. I just held on tightly to his hand and followed him up the long flight of stairs. When we got up the stairs, I let my eyes adjust. The hallway was dark—or was it dingy? It was probably both. But it *was* so dark in there, it was hard to tell.

It was quiet. As we walked down the hallway, I could feel boards give under the threadbare carpeting. That carpet had once been a rich mix of beiges and burgundies, but today it was stained and thin and only my imagination helped me see its former beauty.

We stopped near the end of the hall, and Ethan looked at the number for several seconds as though trying to make sure he was at the right room. Then he lifted his hand and, with deliberation, made it into a fist...a fist so tight, his knuckles turned white. I wanted to ask him why we were here, why he was tormenting himself. Maybe he was finally agonizing over his addiction and wanted help.

That was a conversation for another time. For now, I was trying not to regret my promise to be quiet.

At last, a man answered the door. He had brown hair, although it was thinning a little, and he was probably about twenty pounds overweight. He wasn't bad looking, though, even though he was quite a bit older than we were. He examined Ethan and then glanced at me. His eyes were cold. He looked back at my boyfriend. "You Ethan?"

Ethan just nodded, his jaw clamped closed, his eyes glinting. The man stood back, inviting us in. We stopped just inside the doorway, and as the man closed the door, Ethan asked, "Burt?"

The man acknowledged his question with a nod, and then realization washed over me, why this man had seemed familiar. This man was Ethan's dad. And then I understood why Ethan was angry.

We stood in a tight doorway that led two ways—one to a living area and the other to a kitchen. The man led us into the kitchen and asked, "Can I get you something to drink?"

Ethan shook his head. I thought it would be polite for Ethan to introduce me, but I wasn't going to worry too much about it. He was struggling with a lot at the moment.

I tried not to look around the kitchen, tried to keep my judgments to myself. This was a guy who knew how to not accumulate a lot of clutter, but it was evident that he wasn't much into cleaning. It *looked* clean enough, but it felt...sticky and dusty. Maybe it was just my perception, but I didn't feel comfortable there. Burt looked at me. "Would *you* like something?" I shook my head. Nope...I didn't want to be rude, but I imagined there would be a thin film of grease on any glass he handed me. "Please, sit down." He waved us at the table. Ethan seemed reluctant but he did and I followed suit. Once Burt sat down, he asked, "How's your mother?"

I hadn't expected Ethan's reaction. "You fucking bastard. You don't give any kind of a shit. Not one. Why are you even asking?"

His father was calm. "Why are you here?"

Ethan processed it as though he hadn't fully considered it. He blinked twice and then said, "You're lucky I don't kill you."

His father stayed cool and folded his hands together on the top of the table. "We all have our crosses to bear, Ethan. You don't know me. Oh, I'm sure you think you do, because everything you've ever known about me you've condensed and warped and carried around as a little ball of hate for most of your pathetic life." Ethan's eyelids lowered. Yes, his father had it right. Ethan was full of hate for this man. "But you don't know me. You remember a few ugly scenes from your childhood before I left. And those, to you, equate to knowing who I am. You probably don't remember me playing in the backyard with you, rolling the ball. You probably don't remember when we went out for ice cream after you got your shots one day or the time I took you to a Rockies game." His quiet stare penetrated Ethan, and they were quiet for a few seconds. But then he said, "Do you?"

Ethan's voice was low. "Obviously, your killer nature made a deeper impression on me."

“Yeah, and your mom’s a perfect angel.”

Ethan stood up and acted like he was going to grab Burt around the collar, but his father stood too, so quickly that his chair tipped over. He was up for the challenge, and even though the guy might have been overweight, he was still imposing and scary. And, if Ethan really did have horrible memories (I had no doubt, just based on what little he’d shared), he might have equated this man with pain. “Don’t you say *shit* about my mom.”

Burt’s voice was just as calm as it had been when he’d started. “Ethan, I will say just one thing. You had the perspective of a child. You couldn’t know everything, and I haven’t been able to defend myself. Frankly, I don’t want to. I can admit it. I was an asshole, and no matter what was going on, I had no right to touch your mother the way I did. Notice I have no women around here. I know myself. But that’s beside the point. Why are you here? What do you want? If you want your revenge, I suggest you get over it. Live your own goddamned life. Your mother has moved on and so have I. If you want some kind of relationship with me, we can try that too, but you’ll have to get over whatever shit you’re holding onto.”

I looked at Ethan. I knew. Something inside him had thought he was going to be able to resolve his feelings by seeing this man. He’d once said he wanted to just kill his father. Ethan was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a murderer. The problem was seeing him and talking to him was resolving nothing. When Ethan spoke, I could barely hear him and his voice was like a growl. “I just wanted to come tell you I’m not your son.”

“I suppose you think that’ll hurt me.”

Ethan shrugged. “I don’t give a shit.”

“Look...you want a *sorry*? Fine. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I hurt your mother, and I’m sorry it hurt you, and I’m sorry I wasn’t a part of your life. But it’s nothing I can go back and change now.” He placed his hand on his chest and sat down. Ethan regarded him for several seconds and then sat down as well.

I couldn’t help myself. “Are you okay?”

I could tell he was lying when he said, “I’m fine.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. What’s your name?”

I tried to smile. “Valerie Quinn.”

“Are you Ethan’s girlfriend?”

“That’s none of your goddamned business,” Ethan said. He stood up again. “Come on, Val. Let’s go. I have nothing else to say.”

Ethan was already walking toward the front door before I could even stand. I’m sure I looked sheepish as I stood to follow him. I wanted to apologize for Ethan’s rude behavior, but that was between him and his father. I knew I needed to stay out of it. So I tried to smile and then caught up to Ethan. In the hallway, he wrapped his hand around mine, and we walked down the stairs in a hurry. It wasn’t until we were at the truck that he squeezed my hand again. Before he kissed me, he said, “Valerie Quinn, you make me a better man.” And as I drowned in his kiss, I wondered exactly what he meant by that.

\* \* \*

Brad, along with Last Five Seconds, organized some traveling concert. There was another band involved, and they managed to set up nine concerts in nine different cities over the course of fourteen days. Brad managed to get the time off from work, but my boss told me if I took that much time off, he couldn’t promise my job would be there when I returned. I told him it was something I had to do, and I hoped the two months’ advance notice I’d given him counted for something. He said my timing was rotten. But no way was I going to let my bandmates down.

Brad said he was sorry. “We have a couple of days off in the middle. Maybe I could drive you back so you could work those days so maybe your boss would go easy on you.”

“Are you kidding? That wouldn’t even be worth the gas. And we’ll need rest. That’s what those days are for.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ll do it if it’ll help you out, Val.”

I smiled. “Brad, that’s really sweet, and I appreciate it. But who cares? If I lose this crappy job, I’m sure I’ll be able to find another.”

And I wasn’t worried about it. We weren’t making loads of money, but every month, we made a little more. That was all I could hope for, and we were getting more and more fans. By branching out into other states and farther out of our usual spots, we’d only gain more fans. I didn’t see how focusing on the music was a bad move.

We had two new songs we planned to debut on the road too. I was excited. Truthfully, I’d been getting comfortable doing what we’d been doing. I was used to most of the venues now, and I even recognized faces—we *did* have a fan base. That was good, but just a fan base in the Denver area wouldn’t be enough so that we could make it our full-time job for the rest of our lives. We had to go further, push harder, get more recognition for that.

So we made plans. We changed our set list, added new songs, switched things up. I bought some new clothes because I wanted to wear some new things. I added more vinyl and skimpier outfits, mainly because it was getting warmer out. Most venues were hot under the lights anyway, especially because we were working our asses off, but add higher temperatures and there was no way to stay cool.

As we made preparations and got excited, Ethan once again grew distant. He was stoned more often than he was not, and—even though I didn’t catch him in the act—I was starting to suspect he was sleeping around on me again. Until I could prove it, though, or I was convinced beyond all doubt, I wanted to trust him.

Honestly, when he’d told me after leaving his father’s house that I made him a better man, I felt almost obligated...that Ethan would deteriorate into a shit of a human being if I didn’t stick by his side.

At our last Denver concert before hitting the road, I caught Ethan doing what he called *Special K* with a girl in the van. I would have sworn the girl was still in high school, but Brad chased her off before I could grill her for information. And Ethan just got that stupid ass puppy dog look on his face. He swore they didn’t do anything, but I wondered where it would have gone if the rest of us hadn’t arrived, ready to leave.

I was also pretty sure Brad was seeing somebody, but—in typical Brad fashion—it was something he didn’t talk about and definitely something he didn’t flaunt.

The three bands had a meeting at Village Inn the night before we left. It was kind of weird seeing Clayton in daylight. He was still good looking; don’t get me wrong. It just made me realize that a lot of these guys I’d only seen at night with spotlights flooding down on them. And now we were going to spend a little over two weeks together.

Clayton sat across the table from me and just smiled. He’d said, “Hey, Val,” earlier but didn’t say anything else. Ethan sat next to me and draped his arm over the back of the chair, but I felt like he was doing it out of habit, not because he felt loving. Clayton kept his distance, though, and it was probably a good thing, because Ethan was sober for the first time in a month.

I caught him smiling at me once or twice, though.

And then I knew Ethan was being possessive when all three bands stood outside in the parking lot, chatting, reluctant to say goodbye, and Ethan decided to slam me up against the van



for a pretty raucous PDA. It wasn't like we'd been talking about anything sexually arousing. But no...he was playing alpha and challenging anyone who dared. And I would have been okay with it if that had meant he was going to stay faithful to me. But I should have known Ethan just couldn't rein himself in. Not before and certainly not on our mini tour. But I had yet to find that out.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

IT WASN'T FORTY-EIGHT hours on tour that I was convinced Ethan was sleeping around. No, I still had no solid proof, but he hadn't slept with me in a week, high or not, and when we'd finished our first show, he disappeared for several hours and showed up at our room long after I'd gone to sleep. Yeah, we were sharing a motel room, but I don't know why. I didn't anticipate our making love anytime in the near future, not at the rate things were going. And talk to him? He'd have none of it. It was always, "Not now, Val."

The next day we were on the road to the next town, and we played that night, but I think we were all feeling tired. Still, we all decided we wanted to party together. We were all having so much fun, and being in new places with new audiences just made it all the more enjoyable. That night, we'd had an even better reception than usual and were feeling too excited to just sleep it off.

When Ethan didn't show up to the party, I knew something was going on.

And I decided in that moment that we were done. I'd had enough. I was tired of having my heart tugged around like a useless piece of meat.

The biggest band out of us three (some guys who called themselves Spanky's Kids) went all out and rented a suite in the hotel where we stayed, and it was a big place so we were all able to party together. We'd made our reservations long in advance, and Brad had taken care of ours, keeping our band down to two rooms, something more affordable. We were playing in a fairly large city in New Mexico, but the days blended together, and I wasn't quite sure where we were this particular night. Anyway, I was drinking a beer and talking with Clayton and Brian, the bassist for his band, but Brian was called off to smoke some weed in the bathroom, and Clay and I wound up sitting down on the sofa just talking. He told me about his love affair with music, how he was going to do it till he died, even if that meant he'd just keep playing smaller venues like he was now. He loved it. He *was* music.

And I believed him. What impressed me most was the love and the passion in him for it, and it showed when he talked about it.

As the night wore on and the party started to dwindle, it didn't escape my notice that there was still no Ethan to be found anywhere. I wasn't going to say a word, though. And Clay wasn't getting handsy or anything. We were just enjoying talking with each other. At one point, I asked, "Okay, so...you love music. I'd go so far as to say—after talking with you tonight—that it's *the* most important thing to you, that no woman would ever compare. True?"

He grinned, and that's when I noticed again he had the slightest of dimples. Over the past year, he and I had done a lot of flirting, but this was the first time we'd actually talked for any length of time, and all it did was make me more attracted to him. "Let's just say I don't always make the best boyfriend. At least that's what my last girlfriend said."

Oh, that wasn't good. I'd made a mental note that he didn't *have* a girlfriend right now. Yeah, not good at all that I was keeping score.

Still...he was easy to talk to and fun, and I'd already decided Ethan and I were through. I was fairly certain Ethan had already made that decision days ago. Clay pulled me out of my trance. "What about you, Val? Think you plan to make a career out of it?"

I shrugged. "I'm loving it. I'm gonna do this as long as I can."

He nodded. "By the way, I never told you. I love what you're doing with your voice nowadays."

I thanked him, feeling a little bashful. "You gave me some great suggestions." I drank the rest of my beer. He'd finished his several minutes earlier.

"Can I get you another one?"

I shook my head. "No. I shouldn't be drinking anyway. I'm not legal."

He raised his eyebrows. "Not legal? What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

I giggled. "The drinking age is twenty-one."

"Oh, yeah...I forget that." He inhaled and then grimaced as though he didn't really want to know the answer to his next question. "So how old *are* you, Valerie?" He cleared his throat. "If you don't mind me asking."

I smiled. "No. That's cool. Actually, I'm close. I'm twenty...ish." No way was I going to tell him I wouldn't actually turn twenty until summer. I didn't want to scare him off.

He raised his eyebrows and appraised me. "So you're not exactly a *kid* or anything."

I laughed again. "I don't feel like it."

He shifted on the sofa and stretched his legs out. "So...tell me about you and Ethan. What's going on there? The other day at our meeting, he was all over you, but now he acts like you're a hot potato. Or...is that just my imagination?"

I felt uncomfortable talking about it, but I didn't see any harm. Clay was easy to talk to, and I felt like he understood. And maybe the two beers I'd drunk were loosening my tongue. But I doubted it. I hadn't really talked to anyone about how I felt, and Clay had opened that door, so it was like it had to come out. I sighed. "Don't get me started. I don't think Ethan knows what he wants. One second, he's all over me and telling me he wants to make it work. The next second he's taking some new drug and screwing a new girl, treating me like shit. I don't get it."

"I've heard a few things."

I sat up. Now I was feeling pissed. "Like *what*?"

He grinned. "Nothing *you* want to hear."

That figured. I'd never be part of the boys' metal club, no matter how good I was. I should have known. And that he thought it was funny made me angrier. "I *asked*, but now you're gonna be an asshole?"

He raised his eyebrows and sat up. "Whoa, Val. I'm an asshole just because I'm trying to save you from embarrassment?"

I let out a slow breath. "Confirming that my supposed boyfriend is sleeping around on me won't embarrass me as much as it'll make me pissed."

He chuckled. "Goddamn, woman. That's not what I'm talking about."

I felt my cheeks grow pink. I gave myself a few seconds to let my blood pressure lower. "Then what *are* you talking about?"

To himself, he said, "I guess in a roundabout way, I am. But..." He looked down at my hands, then back up to my eyes. "I heard about the party at your apartment a few months back where you just waltzed into the room topless...something about Ethan slipping you some drugs you weren't aware of, pulling you into a threesome." He looked at my lips. "And I guess that *was* pretty shitty, but I still wish I coulda seen that."

I felt a chill shudder down my spine. "You're making fun of me."

His smile was gone. "No, I'm not." He shook his head. "Sorry I made you feel bad. I just can't get that image out of my head...of *you*. I don't know how Ethan can just...do what he does to you. In case I never told you before, Valerie, I think you're sexy as hell...and I'm glad you're

*legal*. A woman can get up on that stage and do what you do has all my respect...and my attention.” He set his bottle on the coffee table in front of us. “And Ethan’s a stupid fuck for doing what he’s doing. He doesn’t deserve you.” He sucked in a deep breath.

I’d heard that before, but I couldn’t remember when or where. I wished Ethan felt the same way. But I wasn’t going to talk about *that* with Clay or anyone else. Before I could speak, he said, “And if that makes you pissed at me, so be it.”

“I’m not.” But back to what he’d said earlier. Even though I didn’t plan to talk about my relationship with Ethan, I felt the need to explain, even if only on a superficial level. “Let’s just say Ethan has a lot of issues he has to work through.”

“Sure...but why does it have to affect you?”

That was a good question but again nothing I wanted to discuss with someone else. I shrugged. “Ethan has some growing up to do. Were you perfect in your early twenties?”

“Oh, hell, no. But I didn’t have a steady girlfriend either.”

I smiled and looked at him. “I’m wondering why you’re so worried about my problems.”

His return smile didn’t look so innocent. “I’m not going to lie to you. I have ulterior motives, and I think you know exactly what those are. But, Val, you need to think about yourself too. Your life isn’t just about the man you’re with. You’re a woman with desires and passions that need to be fulfilled, and you need someone mature enough to handle the relationship that ensues.”

Yes, he had a point there. Clayton was in his late twenties. He’d sown a lot of his wild oats. Ethan, though...he was still tasting life, had barely started. He didn’t realize that emotional commitment was important too. Clayton did. But my head stopped me. *Wait. You can’t be sure this is a good idea.*

I looked in his beautiful dark green, almost brown, eyes for lots longer than I should have. “Clay...you are tempting, but... We’ll both respect each other more for deciding not to.” I took a deep breath and placed my hands on my thighs. “I can’t. I’m heading to bed.”

He pursed his lips and looked at me. Then he nodded. “Your decision. But...if you change your mind, I’m in room three-oh-seven. *Anytime.*”

It was hard tearing myself away. He was difficult to resist, but I knew as soon as I could get out of his magnetic field, it would be easier.

I went to my room and took my shoes off. Just as I’d suspected...no Ethan. And there was no evidence that he’d even been to the room. His suitcase was still by the front door where he’d left it when we’d arrived that afternoon. I sat on the bed, thinking of the past week and how angry I was with him. It was almost as if he enjoyed trashing my heart.

And then my mind wandered back to Clay. God...he was so cute...and sexy. And then I started asking myself...*what would it hurt?* Just one night. One night with a guy who *wanted* to be with me, who wouldn’t be looking for the next woman, wouldn’t be thinking of someone or something else while I was in his arms. As I considered it, I felt my heart start beating a little harder, and I tried to think of ways to talk myself out of it.

But there were no good reasons not to.

I put my shoes back on and found my key. Three-oh-seven?

As I made my way up the flight of stairs, I started questioning myself. What if he’d changed his mind? What if he wasn’t even there? What if he’d instead decided to go to bed?

In spite of my shaking hands and numbing toes, I continued the journey, and I made myself knock on the door before I changed my mind. But as I stood there and the seconds dragged on, I

started chickening out. I felt my heart speed up again, like a drum at a thrash concert, and I decided if he wasn't at the door in ten more seconds, I was outta there.

But then I heard the lock turn, and my heart started fluttering again.

He opened the door. *Holy shit*. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Why the fuck had I never seen him without a shirt? Jesus Christ. He was gorgeous...rock hard and tight and tattooed all over. Pierced nipples too.

Okay, so, I was nervous as hell but no longer did I regret my decision. I know my eyes scoured him and I'm pretty sure my pupils got bigger. I don't think my jaw actually dropped but it might have. I *do* know I lost every thought in my head...every *real* thought, that is.

He smiled at me, and if he *had* noticed, he wasn't giving it away. "Well, hello, Valerie. What a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you?"

I swallowed and found a reserve of courage. When I was able to make my lips move, I said, "Actually, I'm here to see Jet."

He blinked but didn't miss a beat. He pulled the door open and stood back. "Please...come in." I made my feet start moving again and walked in his room all the way. Then he closed the door and stood next to me. "Can I get you something to drink or...?"

"Thanks, but there's only one thing I want." Wow. I said that?

And thank heavens he didn't need any more encouragement. He placed his hands on my cheeks and pulled me into a kiss.

Okay...so Jet's kiss was unlike any other I'd ever experienced before. It was hot and slow and breathtaking. And his snake bites...Jesus. The metal touching my skin was cooler than his hot lips and the contrast was sensuous. It brought me back to the first time I'd been with Ethan, how my mind couldn't keep up with all the sensations. These different feelings were arousing me quickly.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and splayed my hands on his lower back. Shit. He was literally hot, and he was hard as a rock. His muscles were tight and firm, and he felt absolutely incredible. But his kisses...smoking. He was slow and deliberate. If he was in a hurry or hornier than hell, I couldn't tell. It was like he had all fucking night, and he was going to enjoy every second.

Lucky me.

And then he moved his lips to my neck, and it was sensual all over again. The cool metal along with his warm lips made me feel insane. My panties were already wet, my muscles taut. This had been the best decision I'd made during this entire trip. A rush of air pushed through my throat out my mouth and to my ears it sounded not like a gasp, but a cry, like I was hungry, desperate. And I guess I was. But as he moved his hands down, he didn't touch a thing...not yet. I felt as though I were his last meal, and he planned to savor me. Every last square inch. I can't tell you what that did to me. It was like the entire experience was brand new.

And, really, it was. I'd only ever been with Ethan, so I had only one person to compare Clay...er...*Jet* to. And while I wasn't thinking it at the time, I didn't think the comparison would be fair. Clay had had lots more time to perfect his techniques.

But he was sober too. I was sure that also had a lot to do with it.

In the moment, though, I was trying to push Ethan out of my mind. This was not about Ethan. It was about me. It was about who I was and what I needed. What was it that Clay had said? That I had passions and desires? Yeah, I did, and I was just beginning to understand my deep needs, the ones that I'd denied myself for so long. Ethan (and Brad before that) had just started to awaken them. That was not the time to just leave me alone.

But I'd come to realize that Ethan was going to do what Ethan wanted to do, no matter what I had to say about it, and that was why I'd decided earlier that night that we were done. My heart couldn't take Ethan anymore—his hot-and-cold nature, his callousness except when it suited him, his fucked up priorities. I couldn't do it.

Should I have felt guilty about being with Jet before my break up was official? I didn't think so, particularly because—somewhere deep in my gut—I knew Ethan was doing the same thing...or worse. Probably much worse.

Jet's lips returned to mine, and I decided to take advantage of his lack of shirt. His body was beautiful, and I wanted to touch it. I felt just a little hair above his waistband...and a six pack. That was nice. The guys in my band were in shape, but they hadn't worked on making themselves hardcore ripped. Jet had. But I couldn't even pay attention to touching his skin because he was making me breathless. The way he kissed me made me feel like I was a well that he had to draw from, only every time he had to drink from it, I'd be knocked down from the sheer intensity alone.

My God. He was the best kisser ever.

I think he knew what he was doing to me too, which was why he was in no hurry. Either that or maybe he wanted to make sure I knew he was what I wanted. Whatever the case, after just being kissed like that, there's no way I would have said no to him.

Somehow my fingers managed to continue their journey without my consciousness being fully involved. I found his pecs and his piercings and my fingers felt it all. And that's when I felt his fingers on the bottom of my shirt. Was I ready?

Well, apparently my body was, because I not only raised my arms, I also felt behind my back, looking for the clasp on my bra. I saw his eyes. Jesus. He was intense. Yeah...this guy here. He *wasn't* Clay. Clay was long gone, replaced by a sex machine, and he was all mine for the night. I saw a flash of a wicked smile pass over his face as he dropped my shirt to the floor and his hands joined mine to assist, but his mouth moved down to the flesh of my breasts not covered by the bra. And working my hands behind my back made me push out my breasts that much farther.

I got the stupid clasps undone and he took it from there, pulling it off in a quick motion. And then he touched my right breast, cupping it in his hands as though it were a precious gem, lapping at it until my breathing changed yet again. My toes curled inside my shoes and I shoved my fingers into his hair. I wanted him *now*, but I knew he was bound and determined to take his time.

I moaned again and he kissed down the side of my breast to my cleavage where he licked in swirls. God, that felt just as good or better. My fingers tightened their grip. I didn't want to wait. I felt his fingers touch the top of my pants as he brought his lips back to mine and he said, "Now I know what the big deal was about."

I didn't know what he meant at first as his tongue found its way back in my mouth, but then I remembered he was talking about the incident he'd mentioned earlier, the one where lots of guys from bands (and their girlfriends) had seen me topless at my apartment. My breasts were a big deal?

If I hadn't been so aroused, I might have laughed. But his mouth on mine was serious business, and I couldn't help but respond. After he had my pants unzipped, he eased his fingers inside, and I could feel his warm hand on top of my panties.

*Oh.* I'd thought I was aroused before, but he sent me over the top. A year ago, I hadn't even experienced sex, let alone an orgasm, but I was already becoming so tuned in with my body

that I knew where to gauge myself in the process. Just thinking about it could get me feeling warm and kissing could get me closer. Foreplay wasn't always necessary with me, and in this case it got me so close before he even had to try to get me off.

I let out another heavy sigh and he had to know what he was doing to me. My hands were on his back now, appreciating the musculature there. I felt his breath in my ear. "Last chance, Val. You want Clay or you want Jet?"

I smiled in spite of my feelings of desperation, and I could hear it in my voice. "Why? What's the difference?"

"Clay would bother to take you to that bed over there, make sure you were comfortable, relaxed, ready, kiss you longer." He kissed my neck again and I gritted my teeth.

I already knew the answer, but I nipped at his neck. Oh, God, did he taste good all over. I licked the bottom of his earlobe. "And Jet?"

He shoved his fingers inside my panties and found me, throbbing and desperate. "He takes you right here, right now."

"I think you know what I want."

*Oh, fuck.* I don't know to this day if I actually said it out loud or just thought it, but I came right that second with just his fingers barely starting to swirl that little nub. My back was up against the wall and somehow I'd wrapped my leg around his, so he had no problem squeezing in there. And what the fuck was he doing? Jesus Christ. The words streaming out of my mouth...they were unholy, desperate, pleading, and nasty. Nasty as hell.

I thought I really liked Jet.

A lot.

As I struggled to catch my breath up against the wall, he said in my ear, "You good, baby?"

My voice was throaty. "If by *good* you mean I've died and gone to heaven, then yeah. I'm better than ever."

I felt his breath against my neck as he chuckled but he took a few seconds before removing his hand from my panties. He reached into his wallet, and I knew it was time for round two. I'd just had an incredible orgasm and yet I was primed and ready. I knew my body well enough already to know that I had a few waves left. So I shimmied my pants down my hips to my knees while he pulled down...

*Oh, my fucking God.* His cock was *huge*.

I swallowed. Yeah, okay, so I was only comparing him to Ethan but *shit*.

And I couldn't help myself. Fuck the pants.

"Well, hello there." I grabbed him, my hands wanting to explore his unfamiliar girth. I stroked him up and down and touched the tip with my finger. He was already oozing, and I swirled the liquid into the head with my thumb, rubbing him as I imagined he had me. I could tell he liked it by the twinkle in his eyes. His jaw was tense as he held that condom at the ready, patiently waiting for me to finish playing.

Like it was an effort. His only effort was not losing his load too soon.

His lips slammed into mine, and he assaulted me with another deep kiss, taking my breath away once more. I think it was a distraction technique. It worked. He started pulling the condom on, and I once again focused on getting those damned tight pants down. Then I realized I wouldn't be able to wrap around him like I wanted unless I got them off all the way, so I fumbled around, pulling the right leg down. I had to take the shoe off, and by the time I had the pant leg off, he was ready to go.

Who was I to argue?

He kissed me again, and his tongue invaded my mouth just as his cock found the warm, throbbing confines of my pussy. “Ohhhhh...” Yeah. Just as I’d suspected. Here came the next wave of my orgasm, and my God, did he fill me up. “Oh, fuck. Oh, God. Oh, Clay...” I didn’t call him *Jet*, and I don’t think he gave a shit at that point because he was near the end of his rope too. My fingers were digging into his back as though he were my only lifeline, and I couldn’t stop it. He slammed into me with the force of a dozen horses, and his eyes...they were wild. I clenched my legs around him when I realized he was holding me up against the wall.

When he finished, he rested his lips on my shoulder, and I felt his hot breath against my skin. My nipples got pebbly again in spite of the fact that I was satiated beyond belief. He kissed my neck and then, after what seemed like several minutes, he gently pulled out and set me on the floor as I unwrapped my legs from around him so I could stand.

Even his act of withdrawing gave me chills and made me suspect I could go one more time.

But I was exhausted, and my legs felt wobbly. It had been a long couple of days already and his fucking was...well, athletic might be a good word. No, no...that was rock star fucking. Up against a wall, fast but incredible.

He brought his hand to under my chin, urging me to look up in his eyes. “How was that?”

I smiled, feeling shy all of a sudden. “You couldn’t tell?”

He grinned back. “I’d like to think I’m all that, but I want to make sure.”

“Let’s just say I think I’m having an out-of-body experience now.”

He laughed and kissed me again. “You called me Clay, so I think maybe you want to be snuggled.” He took me by the hand and led me to the bed.

Oh...if that wasn’t sweet.

And at some point, I fell asleep. Fast asleep...and dreamed of nothing.

\* \* \*

That was nice. Wow. Waking up in Clay’s arms was sweet and touching. And he was running his hand over my hair. He must have gotten up during the night, because the air conditioner was on. It was cool and being under the blanket wasn’t uncomfortable. He must have seen my eyes flutter. “How’d you sleep?”

“Pretty well, I think. What time is it?”

“Around ten. Guys want to leave at noon. It’ll take us three hours to get to the next venue.”

I nodded and felt his lips on my neck. “So I guess we have just a little time for a shower and breakfast.”

“I was kinda hoping you’d want to meet Clay this time.”

I giggled and considered it. “I haven’t brushed my teeth. I’m thinking I need to stick with Jet for a while. He doesn’t need to kiss me, right? And I’m already easy to access...”

“My God, woman, I love the way your mind works.” And I felt him grow hard right behind me, as though just my words had been all he’d needed to hear. He kissed the back of my neck and touched my breast. I sucked in a deep breath, not having realized how desperate I had again grown for his touch. But he paused and I realized he was sliding on a condom. That made me feel better too, that he wasn’t like Ethan in that regard. Ethan was sloppy with his sexual habits more often than not, and just worrying about it would impede any orgasm I might have built up to.

Clay then began nipping at my neck as he wormed his arm underneath my rib cage to touch my other breast. His other hand he slid up my neck and then he stuck two of his fingers in my mouth. As though it were the most natural thing in the world for me to do, I sucked on them. He



let out a small groan and slid inside me, filling me up again, but then those fingers...oh, what he did with those wet fingers. He was too good at manipulating my clitoris and in no time he had me moaning again, issuing all manner of filth from my once innocent mouth. My mind was transported somewhere else, because it didn't seem to be with me anymore. And even after his fingers stopped rubbing me, my body continued to experience the pleasure his cock was giving me. I wrapped my arms around the back of my head and thrust my fingers into his hair. His lips were on my ear, his hands cupping both my breasts, now even easier to access. And my orgasm continued.

As I came down, I had two thoughts in my mind. The first was *I could get used to this*. The other was *Holy shit—could I survive this?*

I only knew one thing: I was willing to give it a try.

## Chapter Thirty

CLAY AND I took a long shower together after, and I made sure I brushed my teeth with my finger so I wouldn't feel weird about kissing him. Then he ordered up some breakfast, and I didn't realize it until the food was there that I was ravenous.

Before I left, he pressed me against the door and kissed me with one of his slow, pondering, thoughtful, toe-curling kisses. Yeah, I could definitely get used to this. It had been nice being held all night. I felt special, truly special, and Ethan hadn't mastered how to do that. Clay, though...it seemed to be second nature for him.

He was still holding me when he asked, "So...do I have to be a secret boyfriend too? Is that how this works?"

Whoa...that hit me in the gut. First off...that he was already ready to take that step, to commit to me in a way like that, something that Ethan had always seemed hesitant to do...that thought almost winded me. And then it made me realize that this man had a pretty sensitive side. He needed my validation, needed to know I cared. So I held him tightly and kissed him back and then said, "You'll only be secret for a while. But by the time we get to the next stop, no secrets. I just need to break the news to Ethan."

He got a look on his face that was pure Jet. "I can tell him for you."

I smiled. "Thanks, but...I need to do this."

"I know." God...one last soul-wrenching kiss. He was killing me.

I walked to my room, a spring in my step, and as I turned the corner down the hallway to walk into the elevator, I looked back. He was still standing outside his door watching me. I smiled and waved, then giggled and finished my trek to the elevator.

I was dying to change clothes. I had my panties tucked in my pocket. I didn't so much mind wearing the rest of the clothes after showering, but just the idea of putting the panties back on grossed me out, especially after I'd been so wet the night before.

I was soaring so high when I stepped out of the elevator on the second floor to make my way to my room. I pulled the key card out of my other pocket and swiped it in the reader. The little light turned green, and I heard the familiar *click* that told me I could enter.

I don't know why I'd expected the room to be empty. Probably because that's what I'd been used to.

But there was Ethan. He was packing a bag.

And then I realized my hair was still damp. I wondered how long he'd been there.

"You didn't sleep here last night?" Well, that made me feel a little better that he was unsure, but he wasn't a dummy. The beds were made, untouched, in pristine condition. And I needed to talk to him anyway. No better time than the present.

"Ethan...I need to tell you something." I waited for him to look back up at me. "I'm breaking up with you...if that's what you'd call it."

I saw a flash light up his eyes...that glint, that chip he carried with him everywhere that he tried to hide. "What do you mean *if that's what I'd call it*? What the fuck does that mean, Val?"

"That means that we've never been *official*, Ethan. But make no mistake. We're over."

His eyes narrowed and his voice got low...like the growl of a dog protecting a piece of meat. "Why?"

"Because I'm tired of you treating me like shit."

He blinked. “No...it’s ‘cause you’re fucking somebody else.”

I took a deep breath and tried to keep the anger out of my voice. “No...we were over *before* that.” *Oh, holy fucking shit.* I’d just admitted it by not denying it. Well, so much for finesse. Guess he was going to find out anyway.

He stomped over to me. I flinched. He was dangerous. I could feel it. I was blinking my eyes and cringing like I was expecting to be hit. He stopped in front of me. “What the fuck, Val? I’m not going to hit you.”

“What are you gonna do?”

He grabbed me about the shoulders and looked in my eyes. “I thought you loved me.”

I stared at him for a few moments. “I thought you loved me too, but...”

“But *what*?”

“You’re the one who’s sleeping around, Ethan. I tried to pretend like you weren’t, but you know it and I know it. And I’m tired of you cheating on me. And you can’t expect me to just stand around, happy to let it happen.”

“Christ. I’ve tried to include you in on it.”

The breath escaped my lungs, and it took me a few seconds to form the words. “Don’t you get it, Ethan? I don’t want to share you. I never agreed to an open relationship.”

He just stared at me for a little bit. “You never said we had to be exclusive either.”

“What the...? Are you serious? Ethan, I gave you my fucking virginity. My *virginity*. I saved that *for you*. For *you*. Why would you even expect me to be happy sharing you with every girl out there? That’s just...narcissistic, thinking the world fucking revolves around *you*. Well, guess what? It *doesn’t*. And we’re done.”

He pulled me close and kissed me, and I was surprised at my lack of response for the man that, deep down (I knew), I still loved. But I had been able to shut it off, tuck it in a box and file it on a shelf somewhere deep in my heart. And so I was able to not respond, to not feel hot and bothered, to not need to put my arms around him and hold him close. None of those things. I was able to stop myself.

In fact, I placed my hands on his chest and managed to push him away. He looked at me, unbelieving. “I said we’re *done*, Ethan. You get that?”

*Oh, God.* He looked crushed. But he took the hint. He let go of me and nodded his head. He walked back to his suitcase, his shoulders just a little droopy, and started to pull the zipper to close it. I let out a breath, feeling guilty as hell, even though I knew I shouldn’t. He’d done this to himself. I didn’t expect him to say another word, but he surprised me again. “So...who’s the guy? Anyone I know?”

He should have been able to figure it out...not the guy, necessarily, but the idea that I wouldn’t just start indiscriminately fucking around just because that’s what he’d consider doing...*had* done, multiple times in the past, probably more than I knew. “Why? You don’t really care, do you?”

He pulled his suitcase off the bed and held it next to his side. “Actually, I do.”

Oh. Yeah, I knew why. He wanted to make sure I wasn’t with Brad. “It’s not anyone from Fully Automatic, okay?” Apparently, Ethan had forgotten that Brad had put the kibosh on any hanky panky to keep the band solid. Ethan and I were the idiots who’d ruined his plan, but Brad was an aboveboard kind of guy.

He grunted, and just from the way he was acting, I knew he suspected he might know who it was. But he’d find out soon enough. Part of me—the sympathetic part—wanted to say *sorry*, but the responsibility was with Ethan. If he hadn’t pushed and pushed and pushed me away, I

never would have considered Clayton, no matter how big a flirt he was. Ethan didn't say a single word as he lifted the suitcase and walked out the door.

And I was so angry with myself that his action actually made me cry.

But I got it together and got packed for the next trip. I'd learned from our summer tours the year before that it didn't pay to actually unpack. If you lived out of your luggage, it was easier to not forget things and simpler to get ready for the next stop. So I gathered up what few things I *did* have out and placed them in my luggage. Then I walked out the door, believing this would be the last room I ever shared with Ethan.

All three bands had parked together in parking lot. We'd all had trailers to tote our instruments and equipment in, so we had to park farther away than most guests. I got near the van and stood aside while Brad adjusted things in the very back to make room for all the suitcases. It would all fit; I knew that from experience, but it sometimes took a little maneuvering, and Brad—as usual—was the expert.

I felt uncomfortable. Ethan was leaning against the side of the van smoking a cigarette, looking sour. I glanced over at the Last Five Seconds van. It was a lot like Brad's, only it was newer and in better condition. I was pretty sure theirs had air conditioning unlike ours, but I wasn't going to complain. Ours got us where we needed to go.

But I was looking over there, because I wanted to see Clayton again. Once I'd gotten my emotional shit together, I couldn't stop thinking about him. He had my loins all in a tizzy, and I couldn't wait to be alone with him again. I saw him and felt my heart start pumping harder. Yeah...this guy did it for me. I could tell he was avoiding looking at me, and I knew why. He didn't know if I'd already broken the news to Ethan, and he didn't want to draw attention to us. But I think he could feel my eyes on him, because then he looked over at me. I smiled...and then I winked at him. He raised his eyebrows at me, so I gave him a thumbs up. That's when he smiled back and he started walking over.

*Oh, please, no.* I was imagining another very public display of affection like Ethan had done the other day, a kind of territorial marking thing, and I was going to be pissed. But Clayton instead gave me a pleasant surprise. He just came over and talked so quietly that no one—not even Ethan, just feet away and probably curious as hell—would hear what he said.

“So...everything's cool?” I smiled again and just nodded. “See you tonight after the show?”

“Oh, hell, yeah.”

He chuckled and walked back to his band. All I could think of was that big goddamned cock stuffed into the front of his jeans...and how happy it was gonna make me later.

\* \* \*

“What the hell *is* that?”

“It's called a *cock ring*.” I started giggling at the purple device with a ring that I assumed would fit over his penis. “Well, more specifically, a *vibrating* cock ring.”

“What does it do?”

His grin was sly. “Don't you wanna find out?” Yeah, actually, I did. But then he said, “Unless, of course, you're wanting to spend time with Clay tonight.”

The whole Jet/ Clay thing was getting a little silly, but I was starting to feel like it was important to him...like maybe he had a *huge* sensitive side I had no idea about it, and by asking for Jet all the time, I was deflating his ego and making him feel unloved. So I said, “I leave it entirely up to you. I think I'm pretty partial to them both.”

He kissed me then with unrestrained passion. My God, the heat coming off of him made me feel like summer was already in full bloom. It was just a matter of seconds before his lips were on my neck, and he was pulling my shirt over my head.

And I couldn't resist. He'd already teased me with making me wonder about this vibrating ring. Holy hell. What could it be? I was excited to find out. So I tugged at the button and zipper on his pants and worked my way inside.

"Whoa, girl," he said. "Ah, what the fuck? Why not? The ring'll slow me down anyway."

I kept rubbing his penis in my hands. I was fascinated by it. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he really liked it. "Slow you down how?"

"That's the whole point. I'll be able to stay hard for hours."

"Hours?"

"Maybe not that long with you..."

I kissed him and laughed. "Let's test that theory, shall we?" He raised his eyebrows. "Just put it on."

He grinned and slid it over his penis. It looked like it was too tight. "That doesn't hurt?"

"No."

He looked bigger than ever. I was feeling playful, something I'd never felt with Ethan. With Ethan, sex had been serious business, but Clay...or Jet...made it okay to play. So I shoved him so he fell backward onto the bed. But he was lying down. "Sit up."

"Oh. Bossy. Are you a little bit of a dominatrix?"

Boy, was I naïve. Really naïve. I had no idea then the kinds of things I could have done to him that night. "Why? Would you actually like that?"

"Once in a while..."

Shit, was this boy kinky. But he sat up like I asked, and I got on my knees. I kissed him on the lips first. His tongue tasted so much better without the beer like it had tasted last night. Clay had a flavor all his own, and I'd never be able to describe it, but I knew his cock would taste just as good as the skin on his neck, his tongue...

"Oh, Jesus Christ," he said as I licked the tip of his penis. God...it had a bluish tint to it, and I knew it was because that ring was acting like a tourniquet. But I did a tongue paintbrush for a few seconds, just wanting to tease him, and he wound his hands through my hair up against my skull. It felt nice...almost domineering but sexy. And then I ran my tongue down the shaft to the base and back again, but then it was time to see how good this ring really was. So I took him in my mouth and sucked long and hard...and that was just the first time. I pushed my tongue against him too, hoping to mimic the tight confines of my vagina with my mouth. He let out a long breath of air, so I knew I was doing just fine. But, slowly at first, I started pulling him in and taking him out, and I increased my speed a little at a time. "Fuck." I kept it up for several minutes until he said, "Come here."

I looked up at him. "But I wanted to see if I could—"

"That was awesome, Val, but I want to finish inside you, see your face."

How could I say no to that? So, between the two of us, we stripped off my clothes quickly, and he lay back on the bed. "You on top, okay?"

I grinned. Ethan and I had done it all kinds of different ways, but I didn't think I'd ever been on top for very long at any one time. I'd stood up a lot, been on the bottom, lots of oral, but I was pretty sure my time on top had been limited. God, this guy was empowering me sexually, and it made me that much more aroused.

He did something with that silly little ring and then I could hear it humming. Ah...the vibration. "You're gonna love this."

He pulled a condom on and then I straddled him and slid him inside. *Oh*. That was...

"*Ha ha ha!*" I started giggling uncontrollably.

Clay looked at me, a huge grin on his face. "What?"

"Holy shit. That tickles!"

"It *tickles?*"

"Yes!"

"You want me to take it off?"

"No...but—" I started laughing again as my body came down against his.

Yes, I giggled a lot but then...then I was able to start appreciating it. Every time I met with him, I got a little purr against the whole of me and then I gasped. "You like that, baby?"

My voice was but a breath. "Yeah..." My hands were on his pecs, his piercings grazing my palms. I looked down at him. Jesus, he was beautiful...and unbelievably sexy. Just looking at him got me near the brink. "Are you close?" His eyes told me he was. I bit my lip. He licked his fingers and touched them to my nipples and then I lost all control. "Oh, God!" And that's where that vibration came in handy. It prolonged my orgasm more than I would have thought possible.

But he came then too, and he moved his hands from my breasts to my hips, and he palmed them like he needed to hold on for the ride. And I kept pumping—it just came naturally to me. I did it until I couldn't anymore, and Clay looked pained from the whole thing.

I started giggling again as the ring was vibrating up against me constantly now. I slid off and watched, fascinated, as Clay turned off the ring and slipped it back off his penis. I almost breathed a sigh of relief, seeing that his penis was okay.

He pulled me close to his chest and kissed my forehead. What was that look in his eyes? It looked kind of serious, but I didn't want to find out. Instead, I lay my head on his chest while my fingers played with one of his nipple rings. I heard him breathe, "Last Five Seconds, my ass."

"What?" I propped my chin on the back of my hand so I wouldn't dig into him and looked him in the eye.

"Last Five Seconds."

"Yeah...? And I'm Valerie with Fully Automatic. I think we've established who we are by now..."

He laughed. It was cute the way his eyes crinkled up. "Why do you think we're named that?"

I did a mini shrug. "I dunno. Maybe because that's what we hear for the *last five seconds*...your kick ass music."

"That'd be a great story. Wanna know the *real* story behind the name?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"We were sitting around one night several years ago after we got together. Actually, our lineup has changed a little since then. But Devil"—Devil was the stage name of their lead singer—"was teasing Rat, the guy who was our bassist at the time. Rat kept talking about all the hot pussy we were gonna get by being in a band, and Devil told him he wouldn't be able to last five seconds with a hot chick. So that's it. Last Five Seconds."

I started laughing. I never would have guessed that would be the meaning of their name. I'd always thought it was making fun of the things younger kids would say, like, "Oh, my God. That is *so* five seconds ago." I liked the real meaning better, and I told him so.

He looked sleepy but happy. "You're staying here again tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah...that's a given, isn't it?"

He smiled again and closed his eyes. "I guess so."

I felt contented and happy myself as I wrapped my arms around his belly and rested my head on his chest. Yes...I could definitely get used to this.

\* \* \*

Our next gig was in a place where we were going to stay for two days. I was glad because we were all feeling tired and needed the rest. I was feeling guilty, though, that my band was spending extra money on a room I didn't use—no one used it, not even Ethan, but I also didn't want to assume anything by taking my luggage to Clayton's room. So...it was going to be a bit of an uncomfortable conversation, but I had to have it.

I cornered Brad after we'd put our equipment away. I said, "We're spending money on an extra room, but I'm not using it. Well...I'm using it to put on makeup and get dressed, but that's it."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

I took a deep breath. Yep. Harder than I'd thought. "Nothing. I've just...been spending the night in someone else's room. And I figured we were wasting money. You can either just not get it or one of you guys can share it with me."

I could tell he wanted to ask about me and Ethan, but he already knew we weren't together. "That makes it mine now, and I'm kinda glad. It was hard enough sharing a room with two other guys, and now we're back to four in a room...well, mostly." I knew what he meant. Sometimes the guys showed up for the night...and sometimes they didn't. He took a deep breath. "So...you and Jet...pretty serious?"

He *knew*? I shrugged. "For now, I guess."

He nodded. "Come here." He hugged me, holding me close. "You know I'm always here for you, right?"

"Yeah. Same here." He let me go and I said, "It's okay if I leave my stuff in your room, right? And if I dress and all that stuff, but the bed's yours?"

He didn't seem completely happy with the arrangement, and I wasn't sure why, but he said, "Yeah, we'll make it work."

I don't know why, but I felt more like shit talking to Brad about Clayton than I had telling Ethan. It was probably because I knew Brad really *did* care.

The next day we could sleep late, because we were going to leave late afternoon and drive leisurely to our next destination, and we wouldn't have a show *there* until the night after. I was looking forward to the day off. I hadn't realized how exhausting traveling and performing would be. I wouldn't have traded it for anything, though.

That night, we had another fantastic show. I stood in the audience after Fully Automatic was done, close to the stage, and even had a couple fans talk to me, telling me they loved our band. But when Last Five Seconds came onstage, my eyes were focused there and on the man with the guitar. He spotted me near the end of their set and he winked at me. I kissed the air back at him and when their show was done, I went backstage waiting for them to clear their instruments for Spanky's Kids.

This particular auditorium was the largest I'd ever performed in. Not only was the house huge, the stage itself was incredible. It had curtains, both at the front of the stage and in the back, and there was a lot of theater equipment in the corners and behind the back curtains. I imagined the space was used for all manner of performances. The acoustics were incredible. I'd never quite heard our music like that, but we sounded better than ever, and I didn't think it was just because we were on that night.

Spanky's Kids started playing, and Clayton and I were just hanging in that cavernous space backstage listening to the music. It sounded incredible there. It was loud and raw and frenetic. He grabbed my hand and led me to the back wall. It was cooler there and mostly dark, although light spilled around those gigantic curtains. There was a lot of stuff back there, but he managed to avoid it all as his eyes adjusted. Once we'd reached the destination of that back wall, he pulled me close and kissed me hard.

But that wasn't the only thing that was hard. I could tell he was growing stiff under those leather pants too. We still had a while before we'd be back at our motel, so he was only tormenting himself. He moved those sweet lips of his to my neck, and I asked him, "You sure you wanna get us all worked up right now?"

He lifted his head and pressed his forehead to mine. "Ever fucked at a rock concert?"

In my short sex life, of course I hadn't. More than that, though, I didn't know that I wanted to engage in sex where someone could stumble upon me at any minute. So I said, "No...and I don't plan to start."

But his hot breath was in my ear, stirring up my passions. "It's fun. Trust me. There's nothing like it. You can feel the music in you." He kissed my neck, my Achilles' heel, and then I knew I was game for whatever he wanted to do. My fingers were already in his hair, pulling his mouth back to mine, inviting him to take me. In the back of my mind, I hoped no one would appear backstage, but I couldn't resist him.

I figured we should do it quickly if we were going to do it. Then there would be less chance of getting caught. So I reached for the button on the top of his pants. His lips were on my ear again. "What are you in such a hurry for? Feel the music." He kissed my neck then and said, "Let it take you places."

Well, who was I to argue? So I said, "Fine. I'm letting you drive then." Apparently, I was too impatient and not well suited to sex in a public place. I was too worried about if someone would see us or if I would climax at that moment in between songs and everyone in the entire venue would hear me. So I felt taut from head to toe—and not in a good way. But I was going to trust him and try to relax and even enjoy myself.

As he licked my neck and moved down to the vee in my shirt, continuing to kiss his way down, I rested my head against the cool brick and wrapped a leg around his. I wanted him up close so I could feel him, and I hoped the friction between our bodies would heat me back up again. His lips weren't hurting. Then he returned them to my mouth and buried me in one of his classic slow, deep kisses, and that's when I experienced what he was trying to tell me about—getting in the zone with the music.

Yeah...it was hot. I could feel the music pouring through my body, and his kisses were arousing. Those two things together made me primed in no time. And that's when I felt his fingers on my zipper, and his lips back on my neck. I allowed myself a glance around the space, and I saw no one and no movement.

I took that as my cue to help myself, and I started unzipping his pants too. He was reaching for his wallet, so I knew that meant it was time. God, I could feel the bass drum pounding in my



chest, the twin guitars screaming in my ears, and they set my body on fire. I was ready to feel Clay inside me once more.

In the almost dark of the backstage area, I saw him sheath his cock, and I expected he would hold me up again, but instead he had his hand wrapped around his penis, and he spat on himself. It took me a second to figure out what he was doing, but he was going to use his cock like a finger, rubbing it into my slit. And *oh*...it was like a natural lubricant so he could glide over me. I let out a long, heavy sigh that I knew he couldn't hear, but he felt so good up against me. We both moved our bodies in a way that made it easiest to connect, but we were both bent at the knees, and my pants were damned constricting. Pulling them down farther just made it worse, though, so I stopped messing with them and just enjoyed how he felt against me.

I could tell he was getting off as much as I was because he quit kissing me, instead focusing on the intense feelings grabbing him below. At that point my fingers were wrapped around the longish hair at the base of his neck, and I was probably pulling it too hard, but he didn't seem to mind. And when I came, I placed my open mouth on his shoulder in case I had to muffle my cries at any moment.

And that's when he shoved himself inside me, lifting my legs up and driving himself home. My fingers then dug into his back just below his neck, and I became a quivering heap. He came shortly after and I could feel his heavy breathing against my neck. It wasn't but a few seconds later that the song onstage ended, and the singer started talking to the audience. As soon as they started playing their next song, I started laughing.

Clay placed me back on the floor, and I could barely see the huge grin on his face. In my ear, he asked, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I just...feel like laughing. Endorphins, I guess. I feel better than I ever have in my whole life."

Then he laid another passionate kiss on me. "Shit—you don't know what *that* does for my ego. Ready to get out of here?"

Yeah, I was, and I hoped the audience area was dark enough that no one would be able to see the ridiculous grin on my face, because if they did, I suspected they'd figure out exactly what I'd been up to. And I felt quite satisfied.

## Chapter Thirty-one

TWO NIGHTS LATER, we were in another state, another town, and I'd lost track of where we were in our schedule. Halfway done with the tour maybe? All I know is I never wanted it to end.

Again, I woke up in Clay's arms. He was out cold, so I rolled over and just looked at him. God, he looked so peaceful, but he was hot. The piercings, the tattoos, the longish hair. He was a sexy guy, and every time I looked at him, I felt so lucky.

I decided to go ahead and get my shower and makeup and all that good stuff out of the way, but I had to go to the other room to get my shit. I texted Brad, as per our usual custom, to ask if I could come by and shower. It took him longer than usual to respond and, when he did, it was in person. He popped out of the room and met me in the hall.

I was grinning. "Look at you." Jesus...Brad was and always would be a good-looking guy, and apparently some woman had snagged him for the evening. Frankly, I found that refreshing that Mr. Restraint had experienced a moment of weakness. He frowned. Okay, so that wasn't good. "What?"

He looked a little...embarrassed, something I'd never seen from Brad. Ever. I could tell he was clenching his jaw. "Would it be too big an imposition to ask you to come back in a while?"

I tried to force myself not to smile wider. "I'll do you one better. Can you just bring me my suitcase? I think I have everything else I need." Like my phone. Everything else I had with me was in that stupid suitcase, including the dirty laundry I was going to have to wash soon.

He nodded and I saw hope in his eyes. "Be right back."

I'll admit it. I tried to peek in and see what girl had actually caught Brad's eye enough to share his bed. And...oh, shit. Was that a pang of *jealousy*? No...it couldn't be. And, besides, I had no right. None whatsoever.

Brad came back out, my luggage in hand. "What the hell do you have in here, Valerie? Lead?" I laughed. "Seriously...you need me to carry it?"

"No. I've got it. It has a handle and wheels."

"Okay. And, uh...thanks."

I couldn't stop the smile this time. "So what's gotten into you, Brad?"

He grinned back in spite of himself. "I got needs, Val, just like any other guy."

"I know. Just givin' you shit. You know I respect the hell out of you, right?"

He cocked his head and rubbed the back of his neck. He pondered it for a minute and then said, "I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

I pulled the handle out of my suitcase and started rolling down the hall. "Well, don't let it get to your head. Get back to your lady friend."

I peeked back and smiled, and I could tell he wanted to say something else but he couldn't find the words. I waved as I turned the corner.

When I got back to Clay's room, I rapped lightly on the door. I hadn't thought this through. What a dumbass. I had no way of knowing for sure that I could get back in. I knocked one more time and decided I'd just sit on the floor and lean up against the wall to wait for Clay to let me in, but then he opened the door. Poor thing. He looked tired.

"What're you doing out there?"

“Long story.” I walked in through the door with my luggage. “Do you care if I shower here?”

“Why would I care?” I shrugged, feeling shy. “Can I watch?”

I laughed. “You can join me.”

He kissed me on the nose. “Seriously...why don’t you just bring your stuff to my room anyway? You know, to begin with. We both know you’re gonna wind up here anyway, right? I don’t care if you do *all* your shit here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He was holding me close, and he squeezed my ass. “*Especially* if I can watch.”

\* \* \*

A day later we were playing at another venue. We’d been sleeping as late as possible, and I was glad for that, because performances were exhausting for me, but the sex was even more vigorous and tiring, and no way was I giving that up. I didn’t know how long Clay and I would be together, but I knew things would change—for better or worse—once we got back home, so I wanted to enjoy it while I could.

Last Five Seconds finished loading their equipment, and we were down to the obligatory hanging around to watch Spanky’s Kids perform. I didn’t know about everyone else, but I had memorized both the other bands songs (even if not all the words) and the order in which they played them. Sure, every night was a little different, but the shine was off. We’d settled into a routine. It was still exciting but becoming predictable.

Clay found me in the mosh pit and grabbed my hand. “Come with me.” He smiled at me and said, “Love your outfit tonight, by the way.” I knew he was talking about the tight black vinyl miniskirt. I usually wore pants or jeans onstage but thought the skirt would feel cooler and more comfortable. Of course, having Clay like it was a nice unexpected side effect.

Just outside he held me up against the wall and planted one hell of a kiss on my lips. Then he held a little tablet up to my mouth. “Here.”

“What is that?”

“It’s just Ecstasy.”

I remembered my horrible LSD trip. “No, thanks.”

“Come on, Val. You’d like it.”

“Really, Clay. No thanks.”

He put it on his tongue and then waggled it at me, the little pill still clinging to the tip of it, trying to entice me into a kiss. It was dark, but I could see what he was doing. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged, then swallowed the tablet. “I’ll still make you *feel* like you had one.”

“What’s it feel like?”

“Fucking incredible.” He pulled me close and whispered in my ear. “Wanna feel incredible?” He started open-mouth kissing my neck, not waiting for a response.

My body responded immediately, though, and my fingers found his hair and then his tongue was in my mouth. We kissed for a while until I felt his hands on the sides of my thighs. I knew where this was headed, and after the thrill he’d given me backstage a few nights ago, I knew he didn’t have the inhibitions I had. I was loosening up, but I still wasn’t willing to engage in a little naughty behavior where anyone could see us.

But he grinned at me, a wicked little grin that sent a chill up my spine, and he grabbed my hand. We started walking across the dusty parking lot. Way out in a field that constituted as the end of the parking lot was their van, and he opened the passenger door. Okay, so maybe if we were in a more private area, in the front of a van in the middle of nowhere, I could be persuaded.

He sat down first and then pulled me up inside, inviting me to sit on his lap facing him. Yes, it was uncomfortable, and I had to straddle him with my knees bent, but I didn't mind. He slid the seat back.

We spent a few minutes just making out. He started with his slow, deep kisses, but they grew more passionate, lots hotter. After several minutes, he slid his hands up the sides of that tight skirt and started tugging at my panties. "These have gotta go."

I giggled but there was no easy way to get them off in the position I was in. I was going to have to maneuver off his lap. So I slid off the seat in that cramped space, and by the time my feet were on the floor, he already had them down to my knees. I stepped out of one side and then the other, and the stupid lacy things snagged on my boot. I left them there and waited for his signal to climb aboard. I grinned at him. "Aren't you gonna unzip your jeans?"

He gave me a wicked smile back. "In good time. Get up here."

God, the look in his eyes made me want him more. So I climbed back on his lap and just kissed him. He left my lacy little tank on although he made a pass at my breasts once through the shirt. Then he slid his hands under my ass and lifted me up a little and at an angle until my head was pressed into the windshield. "Shit. Not gonna work." I knew the look on my face was one of confusion. He reached over the right side of the seat. He found a lever and pushed it and then the back of the seat lowered so he was more reclined. Then, even in the half dark, I could see a devilish twinkle in his eye and he wrapped his arms under my thighs. *What the hell was he doing?*

My skirt was riding on my hips now, and it wasn't until he'd pulled me up farther that I realized what he was doing. Oh, my God. He was going to give me oral right there. Shit. The windows were tinted, and it was dark or I might have protested.

Oh, no. As soon as I felt his breath down below, I knew he was once again irresistible to me. He didn't waste any time and thrust his tongue into my slit where he found my aching clitoris. I sucked in a deep breath and groaned. Oh, holy shit. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I groaned, knowing I was already on the brink.

He stopped and looked up at me. He was breathing a little heavier too, but that impish glint was still in his eyes. "Try to prolong it, baby. Fight it."

I was breathless. "Why?"

"I told you I wanted you to feel incredible, right? Delay it. You have no fucking idea how good it'll feel when you can't stop it anymore."

I smiled and decided to try as his tongue went back to its position. Oh, fuck. That was easier said than done because his tongue was soft and gentle but he was putting just enough pressure on my clit to build it up to the brink, bring me so close to the edge, where I was teetering, fighting. One of my hands I wound through my hair and just pulled while the other I bent into a fist and shoved in my mouth, hoping the combination of the two actions would help me hold off. And I did. I also tried holding my breath and willing it off. But it got to the point where I just couldn't anymore. I'd known it was inevitable, but not like this. I came crashing down hard, and I knew I'd never been this loud before. Clay had been right. My orgasm was out of this world, and it didn't want to end.

And, oh, God...it lasted forever. It wasn't until I regained my senses that I really noticed how uncomfortable both the windshield and the dash were against my head, neck, and shoulders. The rest of me felt awesome, though. Completely relaxed, contented, satiated. Well, partly. I wasn't done with this incredible guy.

I leaned forward and onto him, and he moved his arms so I could drop in his lap. I shoved my tongue into his mouth and my fingers into his hair. I felt great, relaxed, and yet wild. I wanted to rock his world like he had mine. So once I was sure he was up for it, I brought my hands to his zipper, and this time he let me release his beast.

And when I asked for a condom, he even let me try to put it on him. I failed, and he took over, but he barely had the thing on and I was maneuvering him up and inside me. I groaned, loudly again, and rode him hard. It felt almost like a dance, but each pump was a sweet sensation, and it wasn't long before I was in the throes of an orgasm again. Every time I came down I was hit with another crazy wave, and I think just my enjoyment alone fueled Clay's pleasure. He was louder than usual too, and I had no doubt when he climaxed.

When we finished, I rested my forehead on his. We were both glistening from the heat, but it was more from the heat of our bodies than the temperature outdoors. I smiled at him and rested my head on his shoulder.

I'm not sure how or why I fell asleep in that position. Even his cock was still inside me, although it wasn't stiff like before. I realized I'd only been asleep for a minute or two, but Clay's bandmates banging on the cracked passenger window made me startle and brought me back to reality.

Oh, fuck. So...not caught in the act so much, but still. But Clay was cool. I felt him breathe me in at my neck, his hands still holding the bare skin on my back where he'd pushed up my tank top. "Fuckin' pervs. Two minutes."

The two guys at the window started laughing and walked to the back of the van, but I could hear them talking. I'd recognized their faces...they were the bassist and drummer of Last Five Seconds, and my guess was they wanted to pull the van closer to the building to load up their equipment. It only made sense. The sooner they got it loaded, the sooner they could leave when we were done.

I half sat up. "Where are my panties, Clay?"

He snickered. "I much prefer you without them."

I gave him a look. "I'm sure you do, but I've got everything on display here. I really need them." Then I remembered, feeling grateful, that the stupid things had been snagged on my boot. Sure enough, when I felt down my legs, there they were, attached to the metal eyelet. It was hard sliding them back on in that position, though, so I turned around, sitting between Clay's legs, but sitting up more as I pulled them up my thighs and over my hips. I felt him zipping up behind me.

When I finished, he pulled me close again and nuzzled my neck. He acted like he was going to say something, but he didn't. He instead breathed me in again like he had earlier and then said, "Guess we should clear out."

As we stepped out, the drummer said, "Bout time, man."

Brian, the bassist, was almost giggling. "The love machine."

"You're just jealous." Clay tossed something at him and draped his arm over my shoulders. I just wanted to get out of there.

"Sick. You motherfucker." That's when I realized Clay had tossed the used condom at his bandmate. It looked like he'd tied it off at the top, but it was still gross. I felt the heat of a blush crawling up my neck and was grateful when we left, and that's when I decided sex in public places was off the table from that point forward.

\* \* \*

I could hear a tinny strumming breaking through my dream, and it took me a few moments to realize I was lying in Clay's motel bed, holding his pillow as though it were his body. I smiled. This was the first time I'd heard him playing outside of a concert. I sat up and saw him at the foot of the bed. He had a pad and pen beside him and was writing something, then he'd play a few chords and write again. I was pretty sure he was working out a new riff or two, so I just pulled my knees to my chest and listened.

It was harder to tell what he was playing, because it was an electric guitar unplugged, but I was still able to make out the tune. When he kept playing the same notes over and over, I figured he'd worked out what he'd wanted to, and I crawled to the end of the bed and hugged him from behind. "Morning."

"Did I wake you?"

"I dunno. Whatcha doin'?"

"Woke up with a tune in my head. Had to get it down. It'll be a song in a week or two once the guys and I have at it. Wanna hear it?"

"Sure." So he played for me what he had, and I'd apparently missed a good part of what he'd worked on earlier. It wasn't as hardcore a song as they usually played, but I wasn't going to say a word. It was still good, a lovely melody...it just didn't sound like Last Five Seconds. But what did I know? I knew nothing of their songwriting process. For all I knew, they all started out similar to this one. I kissed his neck. "It's really good."

He grinned at me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I felt a little sad. This was our last morning together. We were heading home later that day, and I wasn't quite sure how I was going to go back to what I'd considered my *normal* life for the past several months. But, *oh*...maybe he was feeling it too. Maybe that's where the song had come from. I had to try to lighten the mood. I didn't like the funky sad feeling in my chest. I leaned over and kissed his neck. "So...if I keep this up, who do I get this morning? Clay or Jet?"

I paused, waiting for his answer. "I don't know, but would you like to find out?"

And that last morning, feeling like I was in a horrible funk, I got Jet in the shower begging me to talk dirty to him, but Clay holding me close in bed, and he said, "We're gonna keep seeing each other once we're back in Denver, right?"

I smiled, feeling better already. He said aloud what I'd been thinking all morning, but I guess I felt the need to play it cool anyway. "Why wouldn't we?"

"God, I'm glad you said that."

But it was still hard to get out of bed that morning.

\* \* \*

It was weird returning. I still had my job, but my boss wanted to lecture me for ten minutes about how the team had suffered on my behalf. My coworkers weren't quite so dramatic and even asked if I'd had a good time. One of my coworkers said she was happy she had more hours while I was away.

Brad called a meeting to discuss our living quarters. After being on the road for two weeks in even tighter spaces, he was over our apartment and wanted to discuss future plans.

I think we were all a little sick of each other. I couldn't even imagine what a real tour would do to us, although I'm sure—had we been a "real" band on a "real" tour—we would have had more days off and professional drivers plus roadies. But we were doing all the work ourselves,

and Brad was often picky about who drove. He let me drive once or twice, but he tended to be pretty overprotective of that van. I didn't blame him, really. He'd sunk a lot of money into it.

He acted the diplomat that day, though...just another way he earned my respect. We all sat in a circle in that little living room and Brad said, "Guys, we just finished something huge. Did we make a lot of money? Hell, no. If you're feeling like me, you're tired and can't even begin to settle back in. I'm sorry about that. But I hope that taste makes you hungry again. I feel like we've just kinda been sittin' on our laurels the past few months."

I surprised myself, because at first I agreed, but then I said, "In all fairness, Brad, I haven't stopped writing. I'm constantly coming up with new stuff."

"Yeah. I give you that. Hell, we're *all* doing some writing. I don't think that's the hard part. But how many of you are contributing around here?" Ethan sat up. "I'm not talking about doing the shit on the chore chart. That just keeps you in." Ethan's eyebrows shot up his forehead, but he was smart enough to keep his trap shut. "I'm sayin'...how many of *us*—myself included—go around promoting our shows, trying to sell advance tickets? How many of you guys ever even log onto our Facebook page and post to our fans?" I knew I hadn't done that, even though Brad had made us all admins so we could post anytime we wanted to. "Did you guys know we actually have over five hundred fans?"

Zane said, "Fuckin' serious?"

"Yeah. But we can do better. Val and I are busting our asses earning extra cash for if we need it. Don't want a job? Fine. Then represent us...on Facebook. Get a Twitter account going. Make flyers and pass them out around town. Ethan, you have that fuckin' sick computer and software, and I've seen some of the shit you can do. You should be all over that. But then get the word out there. Talk us up. Find new cool merch for us to sell. That's a steady stream of money, even when we play free gigs. But I can't keep doing it all, guys. I book us the shows. Help me out."

Nick looked guilty, but both Ethan and Zane nodded. Brad continued. "I'm not saying the music's not important, but if we don't do this other shit, no one will care what we're writing."

Zane said, "We need to record more of our stuff too."

"That we do, so why don't you find a place for us to record on the cheap?"

"On it."

Brad got quiet, and I could tell he had something else to say. He took a deep breath. "As for our living arrangement...I just can't take this anymore. It's too close, too tight. I feel like I'm constantly on top of one of you motherfuckers. I need some space. This just ain't cuttin' it."

Zane piped in again. "Agreed, man, but you know the price of rent. No fuckin' way we'll survive here in separate apartments."

"That's not what I'm saying. You guys know we're on a month-to-month here. I found a three-bedroom apartment. It's more than what we pay here, but I don't give a shit. I can't do this anymore. This place is also unfurnished, meaning we'll have to buy our own stuff, but these bedrooms will fit twin beds. That means we'll all have a real bed. I need that, guys. I really do."

Zane said, "Yeah...that'd be nice."

Nick, Ethan, and I nodded. Yes, I'd already had my own room, but I had to share closet and drawer space. An arrangement like this might mean my room would completely be my room. So I smiled but kept my trap shut.

"A lot of the shit we'll need, we'll have to go to secondhand stores to get or buy some of that cheap-ass assembly stuff at Walmart, but I need this." We all nodded our heads again,

letting Brad know we approved. “You guys already got some money from the past two weeks, right?” He waited for us to nod again. “I socked away the rest. We actually made a lot, even after the motels, gas, and food were taken out, and I think it’ll get us started.”

In Brad I trusted. And with good reason. The guy had a good head on his shoulders, and he was constantly thinking ahead.

He couldn’t have anticipated that we’d go for a few months without a couch, and we’d only have one dresser for a while. But it was all okay. The new apartment not only had another bedroom, but it also had bigger spaces all the way around. It had a fridge and a stove, and we’d get everything else later. It was just in better shape from all angles, and I was glad to pay more for it, because it was worth it. But—not knowing these things at the time and hopeful anyway—we packed, excited for our new home.



## Chapter Thirty-two

CLAYTON AND I were tentative, not knowing really how to continue our relationship now that we were back in our real lives. I lived in Denver, but Clay actually lived in Centennial. It wasn't too far away, but I couldn't walk there, and I still had no car. We talked on the phone but my work schedule and his life were having a hard time meshing. Half a week we'd been back, and we still hadn't seen each other. Finally, though, it was a Thursday night and I got off earlier than I'd thought I was going to, so I thought maybe we could make it work.

I called his phone and waited for him to pick up. When he did, he seemed distracted. "My girl. What's up?"

"Got off work early. I know we planned on hooking up Sunday, but I'm *dying* to see you."

"Oh...I, uh...I really can't, Val. I'm sorry."

I felt like I was getting a blow off, but I also realized I was probably just being emotional and feeling insecure. After spending two intense, mind-blowing weeks with the man, going just four days without him was like torture. I felt like I was experiencing withdrawal symptoms, and to have to wait longer...

Well, still...I couldn't help it. I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my voice. And I was on the verge of tears. I couldn't keep that out of my voice, hard as I tried. "Okay. I guess I'll see you Sunday then." And I hung up the phone before the first tear really *did* fall. Maybe I could keep myself from crying by doing that. I heard him say my name before I was able to punch the *End* button, but I closed my eyes and willed the tears back.

Rather than have a blotchy, tear-streaked face, I jumped in the shower and held my face under the warm stream. Home early or not, I decided I was just going to hit the hay. Again, the guys and I still needed some time apart, so I didn't feel like socializing. I wouldn't have wanted to anyway, because I was feeling sorry for myself.

So once I towed off and combed out my hair, I threw on a pair of panties and a t-shirt and crawled into bed. But it wasn't five minutes later that I heard a knock on my bedroom door. "Yeah?"

"Val?" It was Brad. "Jet's here. Did you wanna see him?"

My heart leapt into my throat, and I found it hard to speak. But *yes*. Hell, yes. I wanted to see him. And I probably looked like complete shit...a drowned rat. And after being all pathetic, I didn't want to go psycho girl on him. So I just said, "Yeah, okay." It was early summer, still light in my room, so I just got up and walked to the door.

When I opened it, he was there, right there, and I couldn't help the smile that crossed my face. So I took him into my arms and just held him close. He said in my ear, "I missed you too." I felt two tears squeeze out. I couldn't help it. He kissed me and then he said, "Are you crying?"

I pursed my lips together. I was *not* going to be pathetic. I smiled. "No."

He squeezed my shoulders. "I need to tell you something. Can we sit down?"

*Oh, shit.* I didn't like the sound of that. But we sat on my bed, and he took his hands in mine. "Val...there's something I haven't told you, something you don't know, and I need to just tell you and get it over with. And I'm sorry I never said anything before, but *fuck*. I didn't expect us to get so serious so fast." I nodded. I hadn't either. He held my hands and looked me in the eyes, but his expression was pained. What the hell did he have to say? He took a deep breath. "I have a daughter." I blinked. *A daughter?* It took a few seconds for that to sink in.

Okay, though, that was okay, right? Clay was in his late twenties by my estimation (I'd never asked), so I supposed it wasn't too big a stretch that he could be a dad. "I have her two nights a week whenever it works in my schedule, and I'm picking her up tonight."

Okay, I could be cool about it. "How old is she?"

"Five."

I *had* to be cool with it. If I wasn't, well, then, we'd never work. So I asked, "What's her name?"

"Jasmine."

"Oh. That's pretty."

"She's a pretty little girl." Okay. I could do this. I *was* doing this. *We* could survive this. "But there's something else you need to know."

It couldn't be worse, could it? I nodded. But I knew it would be. Why else would he save it for last? "Okay."

I saw him clench his jaw. "I'm married."

I blinked again. Surely, I hadn't heard him right. But I searched his eyes. He was serious. I looked down at his left hand. No ring. What the hell? I felt confused. *Shit*. That was why he'd been avoiding me since we'd gotten back. He was hiding me from his wife. Oh, fucking hell. I could feel the blood begin to boil, and I was ready to go apeshit all over his ass.

But he saw that in me and he said, almost in a panic, "It's not what you think, Val." He started talking rapidly. "We've been separated for three and a half years. We just never paid for the divorce. It costs a lot of money, and it's a pain in the ass. But I'm on the up-and-up. I swear. I pay child support for Jas. We've worked out visitation. And my ex has had the same boyfriend for two years. It's a marriage in name only now. I swear." I nodded slowly, taking in the info. I believed him. Why wouldn't I? It was just weird. And it wasn't like I wanted to marry him. It was just a lot to take in. He kissed me on first one cheek and then the other. "Don't cry, baby. I swear I'm telling you the truth. I can take you to meet Abby anytime you want, and she'll verify everything I'm telling you."

"The wife?"

"The *ex*...yes."

"No, I believe you. It's just...a shock."

He kissed me and then pulled me close to his chest. "It's not a secret. Most people who know me know about it, and I didn't think to tell you. And then we got back and real life hit and...I just realized I needed to tell you now. When I heard you on the phone..." He still held me up against his chest and he was stroking my damp hair. Finally he said, "Jesus...I want to make love to you right now. This is killing me. But I gotta go pick up Jas, or Abby'll be ragging my ass again about how irresponsible I am."

I nodded. "Yeah, go. You gotta go. It's okay."

"You sure?"

I nodded again, a deliberate move. I *had* to be cool about this, even if I decided after he left that I really wasn't. For now, though, he needed to be a good dad for his daughter, and he couldn't be if I was falling apart, bawling all over him.

"Yeah, of course." I didn't realize how tightly I was clamping my jaw until he placed his fingers under my chin so he could coax my lips to his.

I did my best to relax, but it was hard. "You're not okay with this, are you?"

"I am, Clay. I just...need some time."

He nodded, his eyes searching mine. “I can do that.” And his next kiss...whew. I think we both felt the passion simmering underneath, but he had to go and I needed some time. So after, I just placed my head back on his chest and held him for a little bit.

“You need to go.”

“Yeah.”

I asked him to wait a second, that I wanted to walk him out. I wasn’t sure who was still home and who wasn’t, but I didn’t want Clay having to deal with Ethan. I threw on a pair of sweatpants and then grabbed his hand, walking him out.

Zane and Ethan were in the living room watching a movie on the television we got a couple of months earlier. There was a girl next to Zane. That was interesting...and cool. But I focused on my guy, and we walked into the hallway. I didn’t want my potentially emotional goodbye broadcast to my roommates. But it was fine. He kissed me one more time and then said, “You’re okay, right?” I nodded. “Still on for Sunday?”

“Yeah.” I made myself smile. He walked away, but I could tell it was hard for him. I didn’t know how I felt. Should he feel guilty for not telling me before? Maybe. But I couldn’t hold that against him. Our time on the road really did feel like another world, and we’d never talked too much before we’d hooked up—teasing innuendos, flirtatious back-and-forths, but never any serious talk. There was so much we didn’t know about each other. We’d just spent time letting our passions consume ourselves and now, back in the real world, I wondered how much I didn’t know...and if I could learn to live with it. Only time would tell.

I turned around and placed my hand on the doorknob. I had a lot of thinking to do, but tonight I just wanted to sleep. So when Ethan was right there when I came through the door, I was not in the mood. He was just staring at me and standing in my way. I could go around him, but it would have made our interaction that much more overly dramatic. “*What*, Ethan?”

“Seriously, Val? You’re *still* seeing him?”

I let out a breath. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone knows there are people you fuck on tour, whether it’s groupies or some shit like you’re doing. But then you go back home and things go back to normal.”

I stared at him. “If you think you and I are resuming our relationship, you’re seriously mistaken.”

“But you’re gonna see that asshole?”

“He’s not an asshole, Ethan.” I hadn’t planned to say more than that, but the look on Ethan’s face—the one that made me want to punch the shit out of him—spurred me on. “He’s a sweet, considerate guy, and he actually gives a shit about my feelings.”

I saw something in Ethan’s eyes shift, as though they could grow colder while I watched. His voice was low when he said, “That why he made you cry?”

Oh, God. He could tell I’d been crying? Well, of course, he could. I knew my face would get blotchy and red, and my eyes were probably lined in red too. Had I been crying *that* much? I just said, “That’s none of your business,” and pressed my hands to his chest as though to push him away. And that’s when I realized I still loved Ethan too, no matter what a shit he had been. But I made myself go to my bedroom where alone I could deal with the mess that was my life.

\* \* \*

Clay and I actually survived his revelation, and he even pitched in to help us move when the time came. Our relationship cooled a little, mostly because of real life obligations. Not only was he not close by like he’d been on tour, but we both had other things going on. I didn’t know, for

instance, that Clay worked in a music store three days a week. A very cool job but one that made him less available...not that I would have ever felt like he should be at my beck and call.

But if it had been just real life pressures, our relationship would probably have weathered them. Instead, it turned out that he and I were quite different. It's not that we didn't try. God knows it's not because we didn't try, because what I appreciated most about Clay was the woman inside me he'd invited out to play. When I'd been with Ethan, much as I'd enjoyed the sex, I'd felt like it was all for him. Yes, he made sure I climaxed most of the time, but the act wasn't focused on me (not that it always had to be). In fact, I felt like sometimes I was lucky to be in the same room. With Clay, though, he was all about me...or *us*, really. And he liked to play. He was fun. And it was about both of us. I even started experiencing some deeper, crazier emotions for the man, and I didn't know how to stop feeling that way, didn't want to...but I did eventually. The more time we spent apart combined with getting to know each other better did that. I started to feel like our passion had been like a star burning bright—hot and white—but we were now cooling, slowing down, adjusting...and on tour we'd been perfect for each other. Away...not so much.

It started the first time I went to his apartment. Now, I know guys are into porn, but Clay took it to a new level. He seriously had a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in his room filled mostly with porn. We're not talking just a DVD here or there. I mean he had *hundreds* of videos. He could have opened a rental business for his collection and survived just fine. And he couldn't even blame part of the movies on his roommate because they were in *his* room. I even watched a few of them, but I soon discovered that once you've seen one, you've seen most of them.

I learned to ignore the wall of shame.

Our relationship continued strong through the summer. The sex was less frequent, but it was still intense. We tried to see each other twice a week when we could, but it didn't always work.

We started seeing each other less, and I don't know that I could put the blame on either of us. But Clay did have more distractions than I did. Clay had been watching a lot of football, which was not my cup of tea but fine, but then he'd forget we were going to be spending time together when he'd get distracted because he was hanging at a strip club.

Okay...so he was really into naked women. I didn't let it bother me, because *I* was the woman he was with...even when I wondered if he was thinking about someone else when he was making love to me.

One day, we were at the mall. He liked going to different music stores—not just to get ideas to help out the store where he worked, but I think he secretly liked the thrill of being recognized once in a while. He downplayed it, but I could see the twinkle in his eyes when a girl would squeal and say, “Oh, it's Jet! Omigod, I *loooooove* you! Would you sign this?” *This* was usually a piece of paper or a t-shirt...but once in a while it was a pair of panties or even a breast. What the hell would it be like when he became famous nationwide? And I knew he would. I was surprised he was pushing thirty and hadn't made it big yet.

On this particular day, we were getting ready to leave the music store and somehow he had gotten away with signing a girl's butt cheek in broad daylight. She said she was going to have it tattooed along with the words *Property of*. I forced a smile and knew Jet was loving it. I couldn't blame him really, and I wasn't going to hold it against him.

Once the thrill had worn off and we were done browsing, we started walking out of the music store. While we were still at the mall, I told him I wanted to peek in the bookstore. “What for?”

I grinned at him. “Oh, I dunno. To look at books maybe?”

I thought he was joking at first. “Books? What would you wanna look at books for?”

I giggled. “Oh...maybe to *read*?”

I grabbed his hand, and we kept walking toward the bookstore. He was quiet and said, “I don’t read much. Really never saw a reason for it.”

“Never been lost in a book?”

“Nope. Real life’s too fascinating.”

Real life talk from the guy with a thousand pornos. “Well, that may be so, but what about nonfiction? You can learn a lot by reading.”

He smirked. “That’s what they said in school too.”

Oh...so we had completely opposite views when it came to school and education. I started feeling uncomfortable. When we got to the front of the bookstore, I said, “You don’t have to come in with me if you don’t want to.”

He looked grateful and walked across the way to go into a shoe store. I’d stood by and watched him sign a girl’s ass, but he couldn’t follow me to look at a book or two? I wasn’t sure why it pissed me off, but it did.

Still...it wasn’t worth a fight. Clay was a sweet, gentle soul, even when he played Jet. It wasn’t worth arguing over.

That’s what I told myself anyway, but looking back now, I think I knew I didn’t love him...or didn’t love him enough to fight. So when we found the food court and sat down to eat, I tried to find something to talk about...and came up short. And that’s when I knew our relationship was doomed.

I still wasn’t ready to give up, though. I think he knew it too but felt the same way. I think we were both trying to recapture what we’d experienced on tour.

So, a few days later, we had some hot and dirty sex, Jet style, followed an hour later with some sweet Clay-style sex, and he held me close in his arms. I had wanted to talk to him since the mall. If he was feeling like I was—that the sex was incredible, but there was no future for us—then I wanted to talk about it. But I wasn’t sure how to broach the subject.

I rolled over. He wasn’t asleep. I knew because he was humming ever so lightly, something I knew he did when he was working out a new guitar riff in his head. That was one of the things I really liked about Clay. He *was* music—he breathed it, lived it, felt it. I loved music and it was an inextricable part of my life, but it couldn’t compare to the relationship a guy like Clay had with music. Brad and Ethan were the same way. I often felt as though the rest of us were hacks compared to the likes of them. Clay/ Jet...a one-of-a-kind guy, and I was angry with myself for not finding a way to make it work. But, even though I couldn’t identify it then—*wouldn’t* recognize what was in my mind—I knew he didn’t fully possess my heart, no matter how much I cared for him. And make no mistake—I cared for him deeply.

I stroked his cheek and he opened his eyes. Oh, God, those beautiful eyes of his—dark, honest, but mysterious. Could I say this? The words wouldn’t come. They got stuck in my throat, and I felt like I was choking. Somewhere in the back of my head, I heard a mournful song, played in minor keys, one I couldn’t place, but it made me want to cry. I just had to make myself start talking. My voice was a whisper. “Where do you see yourself in the next year or two?”

He was sleepy. I could see that. “Goddamn. I better be recording the next biggest album the world’s ever heard by then.”

I smiled. I hoped he would be. I took a deep breath. “Where do you see *us* in the next couple of years?”

He looked quizzical but not upset. That was all the confirmation I needed. He looked a little wistful like I felt, but I could tell he thought the end was inevitable too. Still, he said, “What do you mean?”

God...if all we ever did was make love...we would have been the most compatible couple in the world. But I was feeling like I needed more, so much more. In the hustle and bustle and lack of freedom we’d had on tour, I hadn’t noticed all of those other things I’d needed. Now, though...I felt like I was missing something. I looked at those cute little snake bites on his lower lip. “Do you ever feel like...maybe we, uh, weren’t meant for each other?”

I forced myself to look back in his eyes, and there I saw clarity. He was sleepy, but it was there. “I care about you, Val.”

I nodded, the side of my head rubbing against the pillow. “I care about you too, Clay. So much. But...you know what I mean, don’t you?”

I could see that split second where he considered protesting, as though he was fighting with himself. He didn’t want to admit it any more than I did. But—and I think this is *because* we respected the hell out of each other—it was inevitable. The fact that we cared but didn’t love each other was undeniable. Could I *grow* to love him? I probably could have, but if I had forced myself to stay, I would have always wondered what it was I’d given up. Because I knew, just *knew*, there was something missing. He was chewing on his cheek, but he nodded, just a little. His voice was hoarse. “Yeah, I do. But why?”

I kept my voice low and soft. His walls were thin and his roommate was home and quiet for a change. “I’ve been trying to figure that out myself. And I don’t exactly know why. It makes me sad.”

“Yeah, me too.” He placed his hand on my cheek and kissed me, a slow, sweet kiss, one that was trying to reignite whatever the hell magic we’d once shared. And it was a great kiss...but it wasn’t enough.

“We’ll always be friends, right?”

His voice was soft again, and I could barely hear him. “Fuck, yeah. This time with you...the last few months...Jesus. Some of the best times of my life. I don’t ever want to forget you. I want you to be in my life forever.”

I smiled. “You too.” I felt that grin finally move to my eyes and I said, “Just don’t pretend you don’t know me when you finally make it big.”

He kissed me again and said, “Spend the night? One last time?”

I nodded and felt my body respond to him. My body would always want to be with him, and I savored the feel of his lips on my collarbone, the way his shoulder tasted, the feel of his cock inside me one last time. And even though we’d been civil—friendly and compassionate, even—I still felt tears sliding down my cheeks as I drifted off to sleep, his arms holding me close.

\* \* \*

The next morning felt so much better. I left feeling a weight off my shoulders. Clay had insisted upon making breakfast—pancakes, sausage, and eggs—and we laughed and joked. It was like a huge weight was off our shoulders. He even kidded—well, maybe not so much—that we could hook up now and again whenever we needed a friend with benefits.

I laughed. “You know, Clay, you’re a lot of things, but you’re not a slut.”

He grinned, sliding two pancakes off the griddle onto my plate. “It’s *not* being a slut if they’re your friend, right?”

But as we cleaned up the dishes before I left, he said, “Anytime you need me, call.” He placed his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look in his eyes. “That prick Ethan...if he *ever*

does shit to you, you come to me.” I nodded, but I don’t think he believed he had my attention. “Jet’s a bad boy in more ways than you know. He’d like to knock Ethan’s teeth out, and the only reason he never did was because of you.”

If he hadn’t been so serious, I would have started laughing at how he was talking about himself in the third person, as though the Jet part of himself were another personality entirely. I realized then that Clay felt safer being Clay, but Jet really was the part of himself that he needed to be sometimes...when he needed to blow off steam or wanted to do something the rest of society didn’t approve of. “Thanks, Clay.” I hugged him. “And Jet.” And then I hurried up and got dressed and got out of there before both of us changed our minds.

## Chapter Thirty-three

### Present

CHRIS WAS ABOUT a year and half when Fully Automatic went on tour again. The first leg was in the U.S., but I knew they had some international dates too. I would have worried if I hadn't known the band was in good hands with Brad.

Ethan denied it. Completely denied it. And maybe it was because I loved him so much, I wanted to believe him, but I was positive he was using again. I had no proof, though. None. Just suspicions. And even though I had plenty of historical evidence to support those suspicions, I chose to push them to the back of my mind. I know I did it because of the baby. I wanted our marriage to work. I wanted Ethan to be a good dad. And I'd seen glimpses of that man. I knew he was there. I just had to find a way to entice him to stay.

I knew that was foolish too, though, because I knew Ethan had to decide he had a problem and also decide he was tired of living that way. Until he did, he'd continue to victimize himself, me, and his son...even if he wasn't using.

But those thoughts were hidden in the back of my mind where I didn't want to go. It didn't help that I was fully absorbed in being a new mother, both the wonderful and not-so-great parts. I felt like a bad mom half the time, because it seemed like I was inept when it came to so many things. Other things, though, like holding my son when he cried, were instinctive. And, when Ethan wasn't around, I gave that child my everything. He was a joy to watch, to love.

One night—or, actually, it was early one Friday morning, sometime after three a.m., my phone rang. I wasn't fully awake when I sat up in bed and answered it.

It was Brad.

Oh, no. This couldn't be good. "Sorry to wake you."

"What's going on? What's wrong?"

I already knew. Something had happened to Ethan. No. God, no. In the space of those few seconds before Brad answered, my mind conjured up every horrifying scenario I could think of—the tour bus crashed or a crazed fan tried to kill him or the scenario most likely: "He OD'd on H."

The air escaped my lungs. Jesus Christ, Ethan. I knew he'd been hooked on heroine before, but hadn't he promised to never take it again? He'd called it a siren...she beckoned to him, urged him to follow her to his demise, but because he knew his demons, he'd said, he knew he could never ever ever do it again. Never. So why the fuck was I getting this phone call?

I kept my voice calm even though inside I felt like quivering jelly. "So...how is he? Is he—?" I couldn't even finish my thought.

"They've got him stabilized now. He should pull through, but he's in a coma right now."

I swallowed. I heard Chris starting to fuss in his crib and got out of bed, but I said, "Coma?" I took another breath. "What the hell happened?" I propped the phone between my ear and shoulder and reached into the crib to lift out my son. "He told me he wasn't using."

I heard Brad sigh into the phone. "Apparently he was lying. Like that's a first. You know him as well as I do, Val. Ethan's gonna do what Ethan's gonna do." Yes, I knew that, but I didn't need to hear it. "We were partying, and you know Ethan parties harder than anyone else."

I tried to concentrate. I couldn't even remember how many weeks they'd been on tour. "Where are you guys right now?"



“Spokane.”

“I’m gonna book a flight. Not sure when I’ll be there.” In less than eight hours, Chris and I were in the air heading to Washington, and I was praying harder than I had in years.

## Chapter Thirty-four

### Past

SUMMER DRIFTED INTO fall. Yeah, I missed Clay. I missed the hot sex, and I missed the sweet playful guy I'd grown so very fond of. But I felt like I was able to refocus on what I was in Denver for in the first place—the music. And Clay would have respected that.

Brad managed to find a studio where we could record four or five of our best songs and put together an EP. Not just the shitty little garage-band type demo we'd been selling at our gigs but a professional-sounding, high quality CD that would maybe get us noticed. I thought it would be cool to hear ourselves sounding clean and polished. Like everything, though, that EP was going to cost us a pretty penny, so we wouldn't be able to record right away.

Brad had written an insane song. He played it in the living room of our new apartment one day, having perfected it. It was tight and hardcore, but what I appreciated most was the solo. Brad had never until now invested too much time in solos, but this time, he had so much to say through his guitar, and it was the most mature playing by him I'd ever seen. He'd been practicing this song for a long time; I could tell by watching him play. His fingers were flawless and flying so quickly across the fretboard that I could barely see them. More than that, though...it sounded *different*. It was hardcore, yeah, but there was something different. It was more melodic. I could literally hear more emotion in it.

I just stared. It was impressive. Brad had changed so much in past two years since I'd first met him. Not as a person. No, Brad was even more solid, more trustworthy, and even harder working than when I'd first met him. But instead of looking like a kid fresh out of high school, he looked like a rock god. He had a few more tattoos and his hair was rock star long. When he worked, he pulled it back into a ponytail and even sometimes at home, but at concerts, he let it flow. Nothing in his wardrobe looked out of place on him. Even the coveralls he had to wear for his day job seemed to fit somehow.

And that was a good thing, because after listening to that solo, I knew it was just a matter of time before we got noticed on a bigger level. I was still working on my own performances, because I wanted to sound as hardcore as our band. There were times, though, that my throat would be sore after a particularly grueling performance. Yeah, I should have taken that as a clue to get vocal training or at least cut back on what I was doing, but I was young. I wasn't thinking. I just figured after all I was putting my voice through, a little discomfort was natural. It came with the territory, and I just had to suck it up and drink some warm tea with honey and lemon.

Brad kept us booked. We were becoming recognized locally and so we started earning more money as the venues figured we were actually drawing crowds. And then I thought back to Brad's lecture to our bandmates last spring, where he asked them to contribute somehow. I wondered how, aside from writing, singing, and working another job I was contributing to our success as a band. More than that, I wondered how I could do more.

After pondering the thought for several days, I hit on what I thought was gold. In a profession filled mostly with boys (that of heavy metal music), I decided to play up on the difference. My singing would earn me respect. But my plan would get me noticed.

I had a little money tucked away and decided to use it to go shopping. I spent my money in lingerie shops this time. I knew we had a few female fans, and I hoped my new image wouldn't offend them, but I hoped to win the admiration of the males. I was going to show some skin. I

was twenty now, what I thought of as almost fully legal, and I had grown into feeling okay with my body. I bought camisoles, bustiers, and a red panty and bra set with a garter belt. I also bought some of the tallest, shiniest black boots I'd ever seen in my life. I was going to sell my sex appeal, and I didn't plan to tell the guys till I was ready. I also got a three-month membership at a local gym. I paid for two sessions with a trainer, because—even though I wasn't a chubby teenager anymore—I wanted to look solid.

I got another tattoo as well, this one on my lower back—not a tramp stamp. It was smaller. I got a three-dimensional red heart on my right hip. I also got my ears pierced twice more and an eyebrow piercing. Three days later at our next show, I decided to unveil my new look. I hadn't even let the guys know what I was doing. I'd also bought a used trench coat, and I was glad it had been raining that cool October morning. No one suspected I was hardly wearing anything underneath. And then I realized this look would only work in warmer weather or indoor venues. Fortunately, the first show was in an indoor theater where we'd played before.

While we were setting up our equipment, Brad said, "Val, you'd have an easier time with your coat off. Are you still cold?" I just smiled and said nothing. I wanted to work it to my advantage.

Before it was time to go on, I asked the guys if they would start playing and let me walk on after they'd started. Ethan asked, "Why?"

"I want to try something new."

"You're not gonna ditch out on us, are you?"

"No, of course not. Just trust me."

This was also going to be the first show where we played Brad's new song. Like with all our other songs, I wrote lyrics and the guys added to it, but it was still Brad's baby. We wound up calling it "Primeval," and we were opening the act with it. There was a thirty-second lead in, long enough for me to take the trench coat off and inhale a deep breath, getting up the gumption to go through with it.

My mind raced. What the fuck had I done? And I hadn't just eased into it. Oh, no. I'd worn red heels with the panty, bra, and garter set. I should've worn something a little less revealing the first time. Ah, well. Why not? At this point, though, I had to admit a drink would have been good. Now I could halfway understand why the guys would sometimes have a drink or something harder before a show. I figured it would take the edge off.

But I had to do it. Ethan had already asked if I was going to bail, not even knowing what I'd planned. I couldn't let them down. Time to grow a pair...a figurative one, of course. One more deep breath, and I strutted onstage to the mike stand.

Someone slipped and hit a wrong note. *Shit*. If I had that effect on my own bandmates, then I knew the audience would love it.

And they did. If I'd had any doubts, the screams, howls, and wolf whistles were all I needed as affirmation. I didn't want to acknowledge that they were doing exactly what I'd wanted them to do. I still had to act tough, so I threw up the devil's horns with both hands before grabbing the mike.

*Holy shit*. The energy of that show was amazing. We were getting more electricity off our audience than ever, and it was so easy to throw it back at them. And once my bandmates got over their initial shock, they fed on it too. It was to that date one of our best shows ever.

After the show, I was asked for a crazy amount of autographs. I'd been asked once in a while before, but this time was above and beyond anything I'd ever experienced before. I finally felt like I was earning my keep as their vocalist.

No one said a word, though, not until we were in the van. I expected Brad to say something first, but it was Ethan who talked. “What the hell inspired *that* shit, Val?”

I wasn’t going to play coy, as much as I wanted to. I half turned in the seat and said, “The outfit?”

“Yeah.” I could see his smile, even in the darkness. “Not that any of us are complaining.”

I shrugged. “I dunno. I just thought if I looked kinda sexy, it could only help us.”

Zane said, “It worked. I think half the audience had hard ons for most of the show.”

“Okay, I didn’t need *that* visual, Zane. Thanks.” Brad still hadn’t said a word. I knew what that meant. He hated it, but he hadn’t been able to find a diplomatic way to say it yet.

Nick...well, for *him* to not say anything was nothing unusual. “I guess I might as well warn you guys—there’s plenty more where this came from.”

“Jesus Christ.” Ethan? Ethan was going crazy. He’d seen me naked. He already knew what was underneath the lingerie, so why was he acting like that? “Please just tell me you don’t have any more garters. My heart can’t take it.”

Zane started laughing. “I think I’m gonna ask Tanya to buy something like that.” Oh...that told me Zane’s girlfriend was serious. The fact that I was hearing the girl’s name was significant.

“Why don’t you buy it *for* her, stud?”

He laughed again. “Wouldn’t she find it insulting if I bought her something and then asked her to wear it? Like she’s not good enough on her own?”

“I dunno. Why don’t you go shopping together?”

He considered it. “That’s a great idea.”

We were all quiet for a few moments and then Brad was ready to talk. “Val, I’m not gonna tell you what to do, but are you sure you want to go down this path?”

“What do you mean?”

I saw him shrug as he turned the steering wheel. “There’s always a chance people won’t take you seriously. They’ll think you’re just a cupcake.”

“A cupcake?” I giggled. “Why would they think that? I sing and rock out.”

“I’m just sayin’. It’s a chance you’re taking.”

“So what should I do, Brad?” I turned a little in the chair again. “Was it just me, or was the audience insane tonight?”

“You think that was all you?”

“You think I had nothing to do with it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Ethan—the one guy I didn’t expect to be on board with my sexy transformation—said, “Bradley, man...you know they were eating it up because of Valerie. I know you don’t want to hear it, but she stole the show. And goddamn. If we get that kinda reaction just ‘cause she’s showing a little skin, then I say we let her.”

Nick finally spoke up. “I’m for it.”

“Me too.”

That left Brad as the odd man out. I was pretty sure he was pissed, but he didn’t say another word. He just clenched his teeth together and kept driving.

That fall, the guys got used to the skimpier outfits and so did I. I wasn’t so freaked out by it after a while. And, as we started earning a little more money, I invested in more. I bought short shorts and started doing different things with my hair. And one of the times I was in the mall in a lingerie shop, the clerk showed me a schoolgirl outfit. It showed less, but I could unbutton it to

show some cleavage. The guys (except for Brad who refused to weigh in on any of my clothing choices) liked it too.

As winter neared, I was glad we didn't have to play at any outdoor venues. I'd been tempted to switch back to leather pants or jeans just during the coldest months but changed my mind every time I got onstage and got the reactions I was used to. I *had* taken to wearing sweat pants to and from our apartment, though, just so my legs stayed warm.

Working out was starting to pay off too. I saw definition in my upper arms and abdomen. I wasn't overdone by any means, but I'd obtained the hard body look I'd wanted. And that was when I decided to get a tattoo on the top of my right breast—a small one of a gun to represent Fully Automatic.

We were playing a show in mid November, the first one we would be playing with Last Five Seconds since Clay and I had split. I was feeling a little weird about it, but the fact was we'd parted friends. And a small part of me was looking forward to seeing Clay.

We were up first, and LFS wasn't even there yet. It was a long show, four bands. We were first and Clay and his guys were third. So, by the time we were done, I'd long forgotten about Clay. Well, that wasn't entirely true, but I wasn't worried about him anymore.

We loaded all our stuff up like usual, and then I slipped on a pair of jeans, leather jacket, and boots so I could watch the rest of the show. When I was walking out of the women's restroom, backpack in hand, I heard a voice behind me calling me by name. I knew who it was before I saw his face. "I see the rumors were true."

I was smiling before I even turned around. "Glad you're still not believing everything you hear."

Clay had a huge grin on his face. "Val. How the hell are you?"

I walked over and hugged him. It just felt natural. Oh, I'd forgotten how nice his body felt. "I'm doing great."

"So *what* the hell have you been doing?" He tugged at my jacket...underneath I was wearing just a thin pink camisole. "What inspired this?"

I shrugged. "We need to stand out of the crowd, you know. Just because we're making good music doesn't mean anything. I mean...I look at all the other bands out there. So I asked myself what I could do to make an impression on our audience."

"You definitely did. The buzz out there right now is insane."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Trust me—you've forced your audience to step up a notch. I was out there. I felt it."

I was feeling like a bug under a microscope, and I was pleasantly surprised, because I hadn't thought Clay had seen our show. "So what's new with *you*, Clay?"

Oh, that smile was his happy smile, his truly contented and okay-with-the-world smile. I'd hardly ever seen it, but I loved it. "We're pretty sure we've got a contract with a major label."

"Yeah? Which one?"

"I don't wanna say...don't wanna jinx it. But we won't know till next week. I'll tell you then."

I nodded. "Good luck."

"You sticking around for the whole show?"

"I think so. Got any new tunes?"

"Always."

When I watched his band that night, I was impressed. It had only been a few months since I'd seen them, but they were even better. There was something...and it took me a while to figure out what it was. They seemed more cohesive, more in tune with each other, like they hadn't been on the same wavelength before and now they were. They seemed to play almost intuitively, as though if one of them decided to veer off the worn path, the others would sense it and follow. It was amazing to watch, and if I hadn't seen them play together so much before, I probably wouldn't have even noticed.

After they played, Clay tracked me down in the audience. I'd never before seen the fourth band who was playing next, and they were good, but I thought they were having an off night. Or maybe they just couldn't hold a candle to Last Five Seconds. So when Clay said in my ear, "Let's go talk," and he grabbed my hand, I agreed.

This particular venue had more backstage room than a lot of other places we'd played, and we were actually able to find a couple of chairs. We sat and talked for a long time. He caught me up on what had been happening with LFS and what had led up to the possibility of recording a real album that would be in stores nationwide.

"Wow. Sounds like it's really gonna happen."

He grinned, "I think it is, and if it does, I want you to know...if we have any influence—you know, any pull—not just you but a lot of other bands will come along for the ride."

"That's awesome, Clay, but you guys worry about *you* first. I'm sure there's a lot that'll happen that neither of us have any clue about." I don't know why I did, but I just grabbed his hand that had been resting on his thigh in my two smaller ones and squeezed. Clay, one of the most genuine guys I'd ever met, and I felt like he needed a little extra support. He was excited about what was coming...but he was nervous too. I could tell.

"Yeah..." I saw that look in his eye and my body remembered...remembered all those hot sweaty nights and days together. It didn't take much and suddenly I was primed. So when he leaned forward to kiss me, you better believe I responded. I was on his lap and his hands were under my jacket, touching the skin on my back under the camisole before I was fully in the moment.

Oh, God, I'd forgotten what an incredible kisser he was, and I'd forgotten all the sensations I'd never tired of with him. So when his lips moved to my neck and I felt my nipples turn rigid, like bullets ready to drill through his chest, my fingers entwined themselves in his hair, and I was ready to give in to every animal desire in my body.

But something...something inside me grabbed my consciousness and told me to wake up. It was then that I knew I loved Clay, but it wasn't the kind of love I knew I needed to feel to sustain a relationship. And if I let myself go down this path, this time would lead to heartbreak. I knew that. I'd already felt a large empty hole after we'd decided we weren't working before. How would I feel if I just let myself go?

I don't think he felt the same way, because he said, "Stay with me tonight."

We were still locked in a tight embrace, but his words were a jolt. I was at a crossroads, and I had to make a decision. Oh, I wanted him. I wanted him just as badly as I ever had. And I would have loved a man's touch. It had been a while, and my body craved nourishment that only a man could give. But...

It took everything I had to loosen my grip on his hair and slide my hands down to his chest, holding them as if in a defensive motion. I had to be honest. I had never lied to Clay, and I didn't plan to now. "Part of me really wants to." I sighed, absorbed by that intense gaze. "But I can't, Clay. I just..."

His eyes were dark, but he managed a smile. “Just can’t do the one-night thing, can ya?”

He knew me too well. I smiled back. “Oh, I’m sure I could. I just think I’d regret it.”

“Yeah, I know you would, and that’s what I love about ya.”

So, deep down, I think Clay and I both knew we had a mutual admiration, respect, and even love for each other, but we knew there was nothing permanent in the cards. And while I wouldn’t have minded one more night with Jet, I’d finally started feeling good about being single for a while. Being with him—even just one night—would have wrecked it. I would have had to start all over, and I didn’t think my fragile young heart could take it.

And, I thought, that was that. But the next day, before I got ready to leave for work, Ethan knocked on my bedroom door. “Can I come in for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.” I was standing at my dresser, pulling my hair into a ponytail.

He sat on my bed, and I could see his face through the mirror. “You and that Jet douchebag getting back together?”

“Why would *you* care?”

“Ah, come on, Val. You know exactly why.”

“It’s really none of your business, but *no*.”

He nodded slowly, taking in my words, letting them sink in. “Why didn’t we work out, Val?”

Was he fucking with me? Or did he really not remember? Had he been so high for months and months he couldn’t remember the morning I told him we were through? I wanted to scream at him, *Because you were a cheating asshole!* But I didn’t. I maintained my composure, and my voice was as calm as a lake on a balmy summer day. “Because you couldn’t keep your dick in your pants.”

He gave me a cocky grin that—had I not been remembering how he’d broken my heart—would have melted my thighs. “I thought you preferred it out.” I turned around and sneered and then sat on the edge of my little twin bed so I could put my work shoes on. I could have kept up the clever banter all day, but I was over it. I decided not to say anything. “Would you consider trying again?”

I couldn’t believe he wanted to have this conversation...right here, right now. Clay and I might have once again walked away from each other and saved ourselves a little heartache, but that didn’t mean my heart wasn’t feeling *any* pains from it. Still...deep down I loved Ethan more than I had any right to. It wasn’t rational, but I did, and part of me hoped that maybe someday it could work. After tying one shoe, I rested the other ankle on the opposite knee to slide the last shoe on. I said, “Not right now.” After tightening the lace, I set my foot on the floor and turned so I could look Ethan in the eye. “Ethan, you’re still in love with the shit you take. I can’t handle that. And until you give it up, we will never work.”

“What do you mean *the shit I take*?”

“You know what I mean—I’m talking about the stuff you smoke, drink, snort, shoot up. Am I forgetting anything?”

His mouth wrinkled up. “I thought it was the other girls.”

Ah...so he *did* remember. The bastard. I just nodded and stood. I had a job to go to.

“What if I gave them up?”

I felt the air leave my lungs. “The drugs or the girls?”

“Both.”

I grabbed my purse off the floor by the door and said, “See me when you do. Then we can talk.” And I left. But don’t think my walk to work was a fun one. All I could think about was

Clay...and Ethan. But that wall I'd put up to protect myself from poisonous Ethan? It had to stay up. That boy had the potential to trash my heart for good, and it was my responsibility to see that it didn't happen.

\* \* \*

We made it through another holiday season, and the fans were still loving my new look. I didn't regret it for a moment. That I was surviving some of the coldest months wearing that skimpy stuff was just short of miraculous, and I knew in the summer I'd appreciate it.

As a band, we were maturing and growing, much as I had imagined Clay's band had. And, yeah...they had a contract with a major label and were getting ready to record a real album. My band? We started to sense each other, and I think my brazen move emboldened my bandmates to try new things. Ethan started doing weird guitar tricks onstage, always performed with more skill when he was sober, and the fans ate it up. And Brad—my most reliable second vocalist—started talking more. It started out just as the occasional *thank you* to fans, but he and I started joking around with each other...and before you knew it, the jokes became sexual in nature. At first, I'd gotten a sense that we shouldn't, that any fandom earned because of my sex appeal would be lost if they imagined Brad as my guy, but it wasn't like that, and I think it's because our fans knew Brad and I were just teasing, just having fun. Brad and I had become close friends over the years. I respected and admired the man and his drive, and I knew he felt the same way about me. And as we noticed the fans loving the repartee, I relaxed and stopped worrying about the reception.

The problem? All that flirting we did in January and February just started to remind me of what a hot guy Brad was. We'd spent some breathtaking moments together in the past, and I'd never forget them. I think if we hadn't had that past that my brain never would have gone there. We were still just "buddies" offstage like always, but Ethan hated the onstage antics. He never said a word, but I could see it in his eyes. The biggest problem with that was I knew it could potentially detract from the illusion. Or maybe that was part of what the audience liked about it—watching Ethan simmer and roll his eyes might have been funny.

In March at a concert, I sang "Happy Birthday" a capella to Brad, and I did it a la Marilyn-Monroe-singing-to-JFK. In the third line, I exchanged "Mr. President" for "Hot guitarist." By the end we got a lot of cheers, but I could hear the girl fans going wild too. I even saw one girl in the audience lift up her shirt.

Once the noise died down, I heard a guy with a bass voice yell, "Whatcha gonna give him for his birthday?"

I cocked an eyebrow and smiled and then said, "I bet you'd like to know, but it's not something we should talk about in public." And then we went on to the next song.

And all that had done was make the flirting worse, because I'd actually *seen* how Brad looked at me when I sang him the modified *Happy Birthday* song. So it was starting to get to him too. And what drove that point home even more than the way he'd looked at me was the way it was starting to spill over into our personal lives. In fact, I'd known for a while that Brad had an occasional night away. He was a young man with needs and desires, but unlike the other three guys, he never brought them home. As I started paying more attention, I noticed that he hadn't actually stayed the night elsewhere in months. What did that mean?

Well, I knew, but I chose to ignore it. Unlike the way I'd ultimately felt about sweet Clay, I thought Brad and I had a lot more in common, were a lot more compatible in a lot of ways, and I based that on the fact that we'd been friends and even roommates for a long while now. But



Brad and I had made that agreement so long ago, that we wouldn't fuck up the band with a relationship.

Still...Ethan and I had gone there, and it hadn't ruined the band.

No...but Ethan was so fucked up that we all just worked around him, and his relationship with me had been just another one of those *things*. Something with Brad, though...that could be a potential wreck. Why? Because if we didn't work out, one of us would be hurt. I was still young, and I believed it would be a bad idea, so I didn't even want to try. And I got the feeling Brad felt the same way, that he didn't want to even have the chance to hurt me, so he kept his distance.

Onstage, though, there was no stopping us.

One night in April, we had just finished a song, and someone threw a condom onstage and it hit me on the arm. It was still in its wrapper, and when I went to pick it up, I realized I had been showered with them. There were several on the stage around me. I said into the mike, "Glad to see you folks are practicing safe sex."

Brad coozied up to his mike but looked over at me. "Not very safe if they're throwing them up here instead of hanging onto them."

Some guy in the audience that I couldn't see yelled, "Let me at 'em. You'll never be the same, Valerie!"

Wow. That was huge...that a fan knew my name. That meant people were paying attention. They must have been logging into Facebook and also checking out the new website Nick had designed for us. They might have even been buying our CDs. So I smiled but was at a loss for words. Brad was still poised and ready, though, and didn't hesitate. "Now why the hell would she want you when she's got my sexy bod?" I started laughing as the women in the audience went wild, screaming and tittering. "And she's never been the same since."

I regained my figurative footing and looked over at him, eyeing him up and down. Jesus Christ. Yeah, he had a beautiful body, and he was sexy as hell. If I hadn't been on display, I might have sighed. Instead, I winked at him and finally grabbed onto some words. I waggled the condom package at him and said, "You know, Brad, I don't think this would fit you anyway. You need the large size, right?"

He started laughing, and I knew no one in the audience could tell, but I actually made him blush. The screams from the girls died down and he said, "Hit it, guys." *Guys* actually meant Nick, who'd have to lead us off with the beat. But the song started with Ethan on the guitar—Brad would join a little way in. Brad walked right over to me and took my face in his hands and laid a smoldering kiss on me. He caught me totally by surprise.

But I let him. And, aside from seeming like an even better kisser than he'd been before, it was as though no time had passed between us. He let go and started shredding on cue, and I doubt he or anyone else knew how he'd left me breathless. In fact, the effect he'd had on me was cool, because I usually belted the beginning of this particular song and all the way through, but instead I sang it low and breathy for the first verse, trying to get a hold of myself.

Maybe flirting with Brad onstage wasn't such a good idea after all.

## Chapter Thirty-five

BRAD WAS ONCE again working on something big, and that was a good idea. The energy was waning again, and I'm sure it was because most of our audiences were familiar with us. They knew our music—even when we threw in some new stuff—and had seen us enough that we weren't exciting anymore. I figured if we were playing the same venues month after month, it was bound to happen. So Brad, once again, was looking to broaden our scope. He asked me if I could afford to work fewer hours at my job. I knew I could, especially if we continued to make more money playing gigs. He was going to branch out to other states then, but he knew we'd need extra time for travel. The band was my number one priority, I told him, so he could do what he needed to. My boss was a bit of a pain, but I could always trade shifts with coworkers when I needed to, and he wouldn't say shit about it.

But Brad, as usual, played band manager too and arranged a four-day multi-state tour much like we had done the year before. This one would be in July, and the first show would be in Nebraska, the last in Texas. We'd leave a day before to get there. Brad also managed to get three other bands to join.

In the meantime, Brad too was feeling our audience's lethargy and started taking us out of the Denver Metro area into other Colorado venues. Again, though, it meant more travel, but it was nice to be exposed to new audiences and new energy. It did mean we were spending more money on gas, but our merch revenues went up again, so it seemed to pay for itself. Brad was socking away money for that professional-sounding EP, and I knew he was getting us closer, but we'd never get there playing the same old places, no matter how much our audiences loved us.

"Wanna go see Fully Automatic again?" I imagined one of our audience members saying.

"No, we just saw them last month and the month before. Let's go to the movies instead."

We wanted to be something people relished and looked forward to, and if they were tired of us, it would never happen. Yeah, sure, we had some hardcore diehard fans but not thousands of them. We had to make them want us again, so we had to branch out and expose ourselves elsewhere.

Mid-July arrived before I knew it, and my twenty-first birthday would arrive right after our four-day tour. I wasn't looking as forward to the birthday as I was to the tour. I was jazzed. I didn't know the last time I'd been this wired about a show. As for the bands that came along, I knew the guys, their music, and their faces, but we'd only played a few shows with any of them. I knew, though, like the last mini tour we did that we'd know each other a lot better afterward.

Brad planned out everything to the final detail, including a driving schedule. Zane, Brad, and I would take turns driving. When I asked Brad why just the three of us, he was brutal. "I plan to sleep when I'm not driving, and you're the only two I can trust to be sober when you're at the wheel." When he put it that way, I was glad he was a bit of a control freak. And I wasn't complaining—he'd gotten us this far.

That tour passed quickly. We were lucky to sleep five or six hours a night before hitting the road for the next show. Our time schedule was tight, but none of us were complaining. I discovered Starbucks in Omaha and fell in love. It kept me awake enough to easily drive my entire shift, and when it was time to turn the wheel over to Brad, I couldn't sleep to save my soul.

But finally the last night arrived. Brad and the other bands had sprung for three suites—each suite had two bedrooms and two baths as well as a living area that had a foldout sofa. And each bedroom had two beds. Most everyone figured we'd be partying all night long anyway, so no one cared much about the arrangements...except me. I wanted to make sure I, as the sole woman in the group, had a little privacy. A couple of the guys bitched that it wasn't fair for me to have a bedroom with two beds and a bathroom all to myself, so I decided to just pay for my own room. It was down the hall from the suites, but that was okay. I understood where the guys were coming from, especially since a couple of them might have to even share a bed or sleep in a chair. And when I was too tired to party anymore, I'd be able to escape from the noise.

The party started as soon as we'd arrived back at the hotel. I was hot and sticky and jumped in the shower first. I considered not joining the party, but it was our last night as a group, and I wanted to have a little fun.

I was feeling a little worn out, though, and I knew if I drank, I wouldn't last very long. So I poured a glass of water when I got to the suite where the party was. Of course, true to form, it was being held in the suite where my band—along with three or four guys from one of the other bands—was staying. We had to, once in a while, maintain our rep as party animals. I'd still hear on occasion about how I'd once been "so baked" I stumbled into my kitchen topless. I'd quit correcting people long ago. They believed what they wanted to believe anyway, and I sounded like less of a victim if I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders than if I admitted that my then-boyfriend (or, probably more accurately, the chick my then-boyfriend wanted to fuck) had dropped acid in my drink.

At this party, though, I was low key and mellow. I wandered around, making a point of mingling with as many folks as I could. I knew there would be a chance we'd play with any number of these guys again, and it never hurt to be friendly. There were a few fans in the suite too, mostly girls, so the place felt a little tight.

After an hour, I walked back in the kitchen to get more ice for my drink. Ethan sat at the table with some other guys playing quarters. As I started to walk behind his chair, he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me down onto his lap. I spilled a little water on his shoulder, but he just laughed.

God, he was wasted...but he looked cute. He winked and then said, his voice a little too loud, "Isn't Val just gorgeous up on that stage in that cute shit she wears?"

A few of the guys smiled and nodded, and I said to Ethan quietly, "Please...don't."

He lowered his voice and his brows. "Don't what?"

"Just...don't."

He placed his hand on the back of my neck. "I love you, Val. I want you. I need you." His other hand wound around my waist.

My eyes searched his. Oh, no. He was just fucking with me. But why? His lips were on mine before I could even figure out what was happening. I put my hand on his chest while setting down my glass on the table. When he stopped kissing me, I had both my hands on his chest. "You're drunk, Ethan. Let me go."

"Don't you love me back, Val?"

"You're my friend, Ethan. And you're drunk." I didn't want to embarrass him, but I did want him to release me. "Let me go." His eyes searched mine, as though he couldn't understand me. He wasn't just drunk. He was on something else too, but damned if I knew what it was. I was no drug expert, but I could tell just from his eyes that he was on something. I raised my

eyebrows, trying to silently communicate with him, begging him to let me up before I had to make a scene. And then Brad walked in and sat in the empty chair next to Ethan.

I could barely hear his voice, but he said, "There a problem here?"

Ethan smirked. "No problem. Just tellin' my girlfriend what she means to me."

I struggled against his arm. "I'm *not* your girlfriend, Ethan. I haven't been in a long time."

"Why can't we be again?"

"Why don't you ask me when you're sober?"

"You heard her, Ethan."

"Fine." He loosened his grip on me, and I stood while I had the chance.

I grabbed my glass of water and started walking away. I mouthed to Brad, "Thanks," and kept walking.

"Aw, c'mon, babe." *Oh, Ethan, I thought. Sober up, for Christ's sake.*

I went into the living area of the suite. The place was almost bigger than our apartment, and so—even though there were a good dozen people in there—it didn't feel crowded like it had earlier. In fact, there was room on the love seat and I sat down. I was going to finish my water and then head back to my room.

Brad joined me a couple of minutes later. "Sorry Ethan was being such a dick."

I laughed. "Like you have any control over him. But seriously...thanks for the save. I appreciate it."

"That's what friends are for." He had a shot glass and a bottle of spiced rum and he poured a shot. "Want one?"

I shrugged. "Yeah...just one, though." He handed me the glass, and I knocked it back. As it traveled down my throat, I shivered.

"Sure you don't want more?" He poured another shot.

"Positive. But thanks."

He drank the shot. "So...you still love him?"

I felt my eyebrows jump up my forehead. "Ethan?"

"Yeah...who else? Jet?"

No, it wasn't the rum making me consider being completely open with him. It hadn't even begun to affect me. It was the fact that Brad had felt like the closest friend I'd ever had. Still, though, I'd been thinking of him in a more-than-just-friends way again lately, and I didn't want him to know how I really felt about those other two men. "Ha. Love is a thing of the past. I don't plan to ever give my heart to a man again."

"Oh, stop that shit, Val. You're talking to *me*. I'm your friend, and I know better. I know you've been hurt and you're afraid of risking love again. Am I right?"

Yeah, so...he'd figured it out. Was I afraid of risking myself again? No...I didn't think so. With Ethan, yes. But Clay...he'd helped me past that. Even though he and I hadn't worked out, the man had made me believe that it was okay to risk, to take a chance. We'd had a beautiful thing, even if it hadn't worked out to be permanent. Still, though...I didn't feel comfortable talking about it with Brad. "That's not it. I just don't have a place in my life for a man. That's all. Especially right now."

He smirked. "You forget...I actually *read* your goddamned lyrics, Val. And I sing some of them. I don't just give them lip service." He started pouring himself another shot. "You are a romantic, whether you want to admit it or not."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay...so I'll admit it. All right? But...so far, all real life romance has done for me is break my heart."

"Makes for some good songs, right?" I smiled and shook my head, then took a drink of water. "And so now you're playing this sex-starved goddess onstage. Does that validate your feelings? Or do you think you'll find the perfect man by doing that?"

"What? Are you drunk too?"

He started laughing. "Hell, no. Not even close."

"Well, bottom line...I'm not looking for the perfect man. I don't *want* a man right now, perfect or not. That's not on my agenda."

"So what is?"

"Making our band successful, and..." He raised his eyebrows, waiting for me to finish. "And having fun."

He smiled then, and I saw the twinkle in his eye. "What kind of fun?"

Oh...so stage Brad was visiting. I felt my heart start to thud in my chest. No. *No*. I couldn't let it happen. I couldn't fuck up what had become the best friendship I'd ever had...no matter how badly I thought I wanted to fuck him. But the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Any kind."

He was sitting up, his elbows resting on his thighs, his hands pressed together in a praying fashion, his lips resting on his index and middle fingers. He grinned. "Any kind, huh?" He turned his head to look me in the eyes. "That could get you into trouble, Valerie."

I sat up too, my face close to his. My voice was throaty when I said, "Don't I know that." And I couldn't help but look down at his full, sensual lips. God...when was the last time we'd kissed? Like I could forget. It was in the back of his van that one summer night, before I'd joined the band. He'd promised to do incredible things to me then...then when I'd been a naïve, unknowing virgin. Now, though...I knew exactly what to expect, and just from what I'd remembered about Brad, I knew he'd be worth every second.

So did it surprise me when *I* was the one to make the move? It wasn't the rum. It had been one shot, not enough to affect my judgment and barely enough to loosen me up. But I set my glass of water on the table and leaned forward. My lips just barely brushed his. Holy shit. He smelled so good. He must've showered before the party too. Not only did he smell clean, but he had some spicy cologne on that I hadn't noticed until I got close. And I could taste the rum on him when I ran my tongue on his lower lip.

Oh, I'd grabbed his shirt into my fists and pulled him closer. What the hell? Maybe I *was* becoming my stage persona. I felt his arms wrap around me as he responded to my kiss. God, was he filled with passion. I imagined he had the power of a thousand horses in his body, and they hadn't been out driving for quite some time. I could just *feel* that, and then I wondered when was the last time he'd gotten laid.

Hell, when was the last time *I'd* been with someone? That had been Jet, and that had been a helluva long time ago. I was coming up on a year. No wonder I was so brazen.

No, it was more than that. It was Brad. For far too long, I'd denied my true feelings for the man, sublimating them into this *best friendship* I'd wanted to work so desperately, but as I felt his tongue enter the warm confines of my mouth, I knew I'd always wanted Brad...from the first time I'd met him.

But he stopped and pulled back enough to look in my eyes. "We can't do this, Val."

I felt confused. "Do what?"

"This. Us. We can't."

I was feeling desperate now, but I didn't dare show it. "Why not?"

"Ethan, for starters...and he's right over there."

“Are you kidding? Ethan? The guy who fucked around on me more than once? We haven’t been together in a long time, Brad. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

“And then there’s Jet...”

“Jet? Seriously? Brad, he and I broke up...almost a year ago.”

“Bullshit. You guys hooked up again last...November or December, wasn’t it?”

I sighed and tried not to roll my eyes. “We made out. That was it. And we decided friends only.”

“And the band, Val. That’s why we stayed away in the first place.”

“That was *your* idea, and if mine and Ethan’s fucked-up relationship hasn’t ruined the band...” I was starting to feel pissed. I took a sip of my water. “Know what? You don’t want to, just grow a fucking pair and say so.” I stood. “Jesus.”

“Val, that’s not it—”

“Good night, Brad.” I walked to the front door and left without looking back.

I stormed down the hall the few feet to my room. God, was I angry. It made me remember that saying, that hell hath no fury. Yeah, but I wasn’t just a woman scorned; I was a woman spurned. And, yeah, it stung. And from all people.

When I got to my room, I decided I was going to brush my teeth and go to bed, and I’d play some angry music on my iPod to help me drift off to sleep. So when I got done brushing, I took off my shoes and peeled off my pants and turned back the covers.

There was a knock at the door.

And I was pretty sure I knew who it was before I even got out of bed. Still, just to be sure, I looked out the peephole. Yep, it was Brad.

So what should I do? Should I answer it and let him explain to me what he’d wanted to say back there? Or should I just pretend I didn’t hear the door and go to bed? He could still say what he had to in the morning.

But Brad and I didn’t have a relationship like that, and that’s why I opened the door. We’d always been open and honest with each other, even when it hurt, and I wasn’t going to stop now. I took a deep breath, trying to remove the sour woman-scorned look off my face, and pulled it open.

I could tell just from his expression that he hadn’t expected to see me without my pants. But he was cool about it. Frankly, he’d seen more of my skin onstage, so I wasn’t concerned. “Can I come in?”

I nodded, pulling the door open enough for him to pass through, and then I closed it. I wasn’t going to say a word. I was going to let him spit it out, get it off his chest, and then let him go. There was no sense in prolonging the agony.

We walked to the center of the room and faced each other. “I *know* you’re not with those guys now, but that doesn’t mean your heart’s not.” I just stared at him, hoping my face looked unamused if nothing else. “And I promised your dad.”

I couldn’t help myself. I started laughing. “That was over two years ago, Brad.”

“I don’t know what’s so funny.”

I cocked my head. “Seriously? Brad, he was worried about my virtue and of some guy forcing me to do something I didn’t want to do.” I couldn’t help myself. With him there and my mind roaming back to what I’d been considering earlier, my eyes wandered back to his lips. “Do I look unwilling to you?” I stared into his eyes again, challenging.

He was struggling. I could see it. Time to kick him while he was down. I continued, “I might not remember what he said word for word, but three words stuck in my mind—*without her*

*consent*. Know why I remember that?” He shook his head. “Because up until that point in my life, I’d been told how premarital sex was a sin, and I should save my virginity for marriage, although my mom decided to spring on me right before college that if I loved a boy, it would be enough.” I inched toward him. Holy shit. Why was I being so ballsy? “For my dad to throw in that he’d kill anyone who touched me without my consent...well, that kinda blew everything else out of the water.” I was just a breath away from Brad when I said, “So give me one *good* reason why we shouldn’t do this.”

His voice was soft. “I can’t.”

That was all I needed to hear. I snaked my hand around his neck, but I didn’t force him to bend his head down to kiss me. He did that all on his own.

His lips touched mine, but this time it didn’t stop there. His kiss was passionate, just as I’d suspected it would be. There had been so much between us for so long, so much we’d denied and buried and pretended wasn’t there, and now we were just going to let it play out. So I wasn’t surprised when our kisses weren’t sweet and tender and were instead forceful and demanding. And I was pulling the bottom of his t-shirt up before I even realized I was doing it.

He helped. I’d seen that chest a lot over the last few years, because he would take it off onstage a lot, especially during summer months. I knew he was rock hard, and I’d noted each new tattoo as it had appeared on him. Brad had always had a beautiful body, but I’d tried to pretend it didn’t affect me at all.

Now, though...now that I had unfettered access, I was going to play. But he wasn’t fucking around either. He too started pulling my shirt over my head, and I lifted up my arms and helped throw it on the floor once it was at my wrists. As soon as it was off my head, Brad bent at the knees and, hands on the back of my thighs, lifted me up. My body seemed to fit his perfectly, my legs wrapped around his torso as he walked toward my bed.

He lay me down on the bed so that my knees draped over the edge. I felt like I was going to melt into the mattress. He kissed me on the lips again, and then he moved to my neck and just by touching the skin there, my breathing grew more erratic. But he moved down, his moist lips brushing my collarbone, then the top of my breast. I sighed and arched my back as he reached behind me to undo the clasp.

One of my hands was in his hair, the fingers lazily looped in his locks, but the other hand was helping me maintain control. The tips of my ring and middle finger were in my mouth, and I was biting down on them just enough to keep me from losing it and either grabbing Brad by the shoulders and ordering him to fuck me or just doing my best to rape him. No...I had to hold it together. And so, as he pulled the bra off my shoulders and arms with excruciating slowness, I wasn’t surprised when first a sigh escaped my lips and then a groan as his mouth touched one of my nipples.

It was maddening, and I wondered now why I’d told Brad no all those years ago. But as his lips moved to my cleavage and his tongue traced a thin trail down my belly, that thought flitted away. Sweet Jesus...he wasn’t wasting any time, and yet I still felt impatient and needy. It had been too long since I’d been with a man and to have it be this one in my bed...my brain couldn’t process it.

His hands were on both sides of my panties, and I lifted up my hips to help him slide them off. I was so glad I was wearing some of my cuter panties. If they weren’t on display onstage, I wasn’t always so worried, but tonight I’d been wearing a pair of lacy black boyshorts. I knew they were flattering on me, and some subconscious part of me was grateful they were what I had on.

I highly doubt he even noticed the damn things, though. And then I realized that—*oh, my God*—he was going for the coup de grace. He wasn't going to take his time and introduce me to mini Brad. No...his tongue was headed straight for my pussy, and I wasn't going to stop him. I just hoped I'd be able to keep it together enough to not orgasm after one touch.

He slid off the bed, and he moved his hands under my ass to pull my bottom to the edge. I was close to writhing, but I managed to keep it together. Then I felt his fingers manipulating my labia, and I let out a sigh that was louder than it should have been, somehow laced with a bit of a desperate cry. I wanted him. I needed him, and I doubted I'd ever been this desperate for a man's touch before.

That first tongue stroke. Delicious. Maddening. Made me cry out for mercy. But he didn't stop. No. And it took me a second to figure out what else he was doing, because he was creating a sensation I'd never felt before. And then I puzzled it out. Holy shit. Somehow, he was sucking on my clitoris, that tiny little flap of skin down there and it was excruciating. I was already ready to slip off the edge into that wild abandon of orgasm, but I gritted my teeth and willed myself against it. I felt my hands balling up the sheets into my fists, fighting against it, not wanting it to end so soon, but then I thought of Brad again and that was it. I gave in to the pleasure and moaned aloud as a wave of nirvana took over my body and transported my mind into outer space.

As one wave after another came crashing over me with each delicious tongue stroke (for he'd stopped the technique that had driven me out of my mind), I was more aware of him. He had one arm on my right thigh and it felt possessive; the other hand was splayed on my belly, just underneath my left breast. I didn't see them; I felt them. And then the orgasm began to wave, and that's when I was aware that I was probably the loudest I'd ever been, and I was crying his name over and over in between grunts of some other language I'd never learned but surely communicated what I was feeling.

Yeah...I could die now.



## Chapter Thirty-six

GOD, BRAD HAD never looked so cute, so sexy, so fucking gorgeous than that moment when I opened my eyes and saw him moving in for the kill. I thought, *Take me. Yes, take me.*

He was over me on all fours, straddling me, having dragged me back up to the middle of the bed. I wound my fingers through his hair. I didn't want to be crude or demanding, although inside I *was* brimming with demands. Suddenly, the night was young. The best, the sweetest request I could make was to tell him, "I want to feel you inside me, Brad." He was already on it, though, reaching for the wallet in his pocket, hanging on the chain draping off his jeans.

He leaned over to kiss me, and my free hand was sliding over his chest, appreciating the feel of the hard muscle under the smooth skin against my fingers.

He threw his wallet on the bed next to me and broke away from my kiss. "Just a sec." I looked to see him peering into and feeling in his wallet. "You fucking kidding me?"

I felt the expression on my face change. I knew what he was referring to without even asking, but somehow I had to hear the words for it to become a reality. "What?"

He looked pained. "I don't suppose you have any condoms, do you?"

Shit. When I'd been with Ethan, I'd trained myself to carry them so Ethan's concealed weapon couldn't harm me, but Jet had always been prepared, so I had gotten out of the habit. I winced. "No." I took in a deep breath as he continued to look in his wallet, hoping against hope he'd miscalculated and surely there was one more there...right?

Well, that shouldn't stop us. No, I didn't want him coming inside me, but I saw no reason for a lack of condom to interrupt us. "I could—"

He shook his head. He was fighting it. His jaw was clenched. "No." I saw him swallow. "I can go buy some. I wonder if there are any here in the public restrooms in the hotel."

I was still breathless from my orgasm. "I bet the gift shop would have some."

"They're long since closed, Val. Gotta be."

He was pretty calm for a guy on the edge. I'd give him that. "Well, uh...a convenience store, maybe? There's gotta be one nearby. I saw a Walmart too. They'd have one for sure."

"Yeah. Okay. You don't mind waiting?"

I almost laughed. I'd just had a crazy orgasm, and he was asking me if *I'd* mind waiting? "I'm coming with you."

I saw a smile touch the corners of his eyes. "You will?"

"Yeah...only fair, right?" I kissed him. That probably wasn't the best idea, but I couldn't help myself. His eyes...they were wild. "You sure you can drive?"

He nodded, but I didn't know that he was too sure. He sat up, and I jumped off the bed. I pulled my t-shirt up off the floor and slid it over my head and then dashed to the bathroom where I knew my jeans were and slid them up over my hips. Fuck the underwear—no bra, no panties. We were in a hurry. I glanced at myself in the mirror. My hair was a little mussed but *damn* did I look satisfied. And I knew it was probably just the beginning.

Back in the other room, I searched in my luggage and found the one pair of sandals I'd brought with me. Every other shoe I had was mostly for the stage or too-hot-for-July metal stuff—boots, mostly—too much for a sultry summer evening.

By the time I had the shoes on, he was ready to go, save adjusting himself in his jeans. "You gonna be okay?"

He chuckled, and it seemed such an easy laugh, in spite of what I knew he must be feeling. "Thanks for being a good sport, Val."

I'd grabbed my room card and stuffed it in my back pocket, then grabbed his hand to lead him to the door. "*I'm* the good sport? Do you not know what you just did to me?"

He turned me around so that my back was against the door. He was pressing up against me, and I could feel him. Yeah, he was still hard, straining against me, his jeans. His voice was low when he said, "I'm gonna do it again."

Oh, my fucking God, we couldn't get out of there fast enough.

\* \* \*

It turned out the Walmart was close enough, and we knew they'd have what we needed. I'd kept my hands to myself on the ride there, even though I'd really felt like getting handsy and keeping him hot. But I knew he wouldn't want to try walking through the store with a hard on. And it was almost impossible not to start giggling when we went through the express lane with just a box of condoms and nothing else. The clerk was an older lady who'd no doubt seen the same thing dozens of times. Two years ago, I would have been mortified, but now? I was having so much fun, and I was so excited and hornier than hell that I didn't give a shit what she or anyone else thought.

I did start laughing once we were in the parking lot. Brad unlocked the van and started to open the passenger door for me, but I touched his hand. I couldn't stop the sly grin on my face. "Let's get in the back." The van was in a shadier part of the parking lot, and it would be taking a chance at being caught. But I didn't care. I wanted to take care of this gorgeous man.

He raised his eyebrows. "Seriously?"

I just nodded, a sly grin on my face. He shook his head but slid the door open and then gestured for me to hop on in. I got in the backseat. I probably hadn't been in the very back since the time he and I had gotten hot and heavy back there, because Brad usually insisted I ride shotgun. During this tour, Zane had been driving a little, so I'd sat in the middle, but the back was full of nothing but fond memories for me.

Brad got in after me and slid the door closed. I said, "This feels kinda familiar, doesn't it?"

He smiled. "It does." He sat down next to me, and I swung my leg over and straddled him, much like I had years ago. "You're not wasting any time."

"Nope." I whispered in his ear. "Time to take care of *you*." I felt his response bulging against me.

I brought my lips back to his and nibbled on his lower lip until his tongue snaked out, and he closed his eyes. I knew this soft, slow business wouldn't last long, but I knew Brad was a great kisser, sensual, sweet, and I wanted to savor him for a little bit. And like I'd remembered from before, his kisses felt like more than just kisses, like he was trying to discover something about us, about me. I slid my hands up under his shirt to feel his skin, feel his hard musculature. Then I moved my lips to his ear and whispered, "You ready?"

I could barely hear him say, "Whenever you are." I sucked on his earlobe and then nibbled at his neck as my fingers groped for the button on his jeans. God...I could feel the power of his cock pressing up against me, and it was like a monster was in there, needing to be unleashed. I felt myself get wet all over again, but this wasn't for me. No, this was for him, and I wanted to make him feel incredible.

He was wearing button fly jeans. I don't know why I thought that was so goddamned exciting, but it was, and I was going to enjoy the hell out of unfastening each button. "Oh, what

have we here?" I said, a teasing lilt in my voice. "I think there's something down there that desperately wants out." I undid the next button. "Maybe I can help."

He was smiling, and I sucked on his lower lip. I felt a sigh ease out of his mouth. Another button. "I think I need to let him out." I planted a deep kiss on him, finishing off the buttons and working my hand inside, slipping it underneath his underwear. *Ahhh...* there the big boy was. I wrapped my hand around him in that tight space and smiled, appreciating his girth.

His hands had been rubbing my back, but he lost his concentration once I grabbed hold. He'd been in a heightened state for well over half an hour, waiting for this moment, and here I was, teasing the poor guy. I kissed him again and then let go, reaching for the button on my jeans. I sat up and realized that even if I pulled them down to my knees, I wouldn't be able to straddle him properly. "Shit."

"What?"

"I'm gonna have to take these all the way off."

"I'm not complaining."

I smiled. "I didn't figure you would." As I peeled the jeans off, I saw him reach for the Walmart bag and pull out the box of rubbers. By the time I was ready to straddle him again, he was rolling one over his cock. It was dark, but I could tell he was plenty big—big enough for me.

So I got back on his lap. "Scootch forward a little." He slid forward just enough that I was able to tilt and take him inside me. "Ah..." I slid my hands into his hair and kissed him again. And the fact that he wasn't able to concentrate much told me he was close. Well, no wonder. He'd been on edge for quite some time.

He grabbed the bottom of my t-shirt. "Mind if I pull this off?"

I didn't answer, instead just lifting my hands up over my head. I wasn't an exhibitionist, but there was something about having it all out there in the back of that stupid van. And before the shirt was completely off one of my wrists, he'd pulled my nipple into his mouth.

I'd thought this was all for him, but I was hot again, and I couldn't be denied. I thought back to the time Ethan and I were fucking in the hallway of our old apartment, how Ethan had begged me to touch myself. That had been a pretty fantastic orgasm, and by how quickly Brad was going tonight (and I didn't blame him), there was no way I'd be able to catch up, even rotating my hips the way I was. So I unwound the fingers of my right hand and lay my hand flat against my tummy. Then I slid it down, my fingers in the lead. And I found my clit and started moving index and middle finger in a circle against it. Yeah, maybe I could catch up.

I looked down at Brad's face. Fuck, he was hot, and he was looking at me with his smoldering eyes. He said, "Let me help," and stuck his thumb in my mouth. It was instinctive. I just started sucking on it, pretending it was his cock. God, the look on his face. He pulled his thumb out of my mouth and then—gently, of course—moved my fingers, and that digit of his hit my sweet spot and took me home a lot faster than my own fingers would have.

"Oh..." I was close, and I sucked another breath down. I felt pained as I started to pant, continuing to drive my hips, slamming down into him. But his thumb didn't leave my clit, kept the pressure up. I couldn't believe I'd caught up with him. "Oh, God, Brad..." And my second orgasm of the evening crashed down around me, making nothing in the world exist...nothing but Brad and my body, which was now on fire. And that's when I felt his other hand on the small of my back, offering support and love, while his thumb kept me feeling pleasure. I'm not sure when he came, only that he did sometime during that crazy climax of my own.

\* \* \*

We'd stayed wrapped in each other's arms for a while before I'd finally pried myself off him to get dressed. I hadn't noticed until after, but I was sticky and sweaty, and so was he. The summer heat of Texas had made us both pools of perspiration, and I for one couldn't wait to get back to the motel to shower.

We took our time getting back upstairs, though. He kissed me outside, right after we got out of the van; he pushed me up against the wall of the elevator and gave me some totally hot kisses as we made it to our floor; and he held me around the waist the rest of the time. When we stepped off the elevator, I asked, "You're coming to my room, aren't you?"

I could tell by the look on his face that he hadn't expected the invitation, but he wasn't going to turn me down. "Sure." We walked past the suites and could hear party noises drifting out. I prayed no one would bust out of those doors while Brad and I snuck past. I didn't really care if anyone knew, but I also had known Ethan long enough to understand that he could be a huge pain in the ass. Tomorrow, I could deal with him, but I felt like tonight belonged to Brad and me, and I would be pissed if Ethan or anyone else ruined it.

I quickly slid my card in the slot and turned the knob to push the door open when the little light turned green. Brad was right behind me, and I started giggling when I saw he was carrying the Walmart bag. "What?" He grinned. "I couldn't leave that in the van for the guys to see."

"It's not like they've never seen a condom before." He laughed and I threw the door card on the dresser.

"Yeah, but you know they'd ask where it came from. Would *you* be able to keep a straight face?"

I shrugged and smiled again. "I want to shower. I feel all sticky and gross."

"Can I join you? No hanky panky if you don't wanna. I just feel pretty sweaty myself."

I'd never actually *seen* Brad, not in the light, not fully naked, so hell, yeah, I wasn't gonna turn the boy down. I nodded and went in the bathroom and turned the water on. I didn't want a hot shower, so I got the water lukewarm and started stripping. Brad came in a few seconds later, shoes off. I debated if I wanted to stand there and watch or get in the shower and get my business done. I was already naked and ready to go. I knew I often felt self-conscious being admired, so I just grinned and said, "Meet ya in there!" I was tired and didn't plan for anything else anyway.

By the time he joined me, I was soaped down and rinsing off. He still acted hesitant and a little shy. I grabbed his hand and playfully slapped the bar of soap in it. We were both feeling a little awkward, I think. We'd been friends for a long time, had kept our distance, even though we'd always had that intense undercurrent of lust in our bellies, and now that we'd done that, I think we were both wondering, *Now what?*

Okay, so I looked. I couldn't help it. And Brad had nothing to be ashamed of. He wasn't an overgrown beast like Clayton had been, but he was plenty big, and he knew how to use it. I'd seen almost everything else on the boy, so that was all I wanted to see in the light. Or not.

"Turn around."

He gave me a quizzical look. "What for?"

"I'll wash your back." Yeah, sure, that's what I wanted to do. But he didn't question me and handed me the soap. No, I wanted to see his ass. That truly was the last thing to see. And I wasn't much into butts but his was cute. I did wash his back, and I appreciated the feel of his skin against mine. He was all sinew, not an ounce of fat on that boy. After rubbing the soap all over his back, I slapped his ass. "All done." He turned around. He was half-smiling but still had that weird look on his face. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Hmm. "You're probably as tired as I am." I handed the soap back to him. "Trade places? I'm gonna get out." He just seemed to need a little time to himself. I could give him that. He smiled and turned so I could get past him.

I stood, dripping on the bathmat while I reached for the towel I'd used earlier that evening. I'd felt awkward the first few moments after my first sexual encounters with both Ethan and Clay, but this was one was turning out to take the cake. That sucked, because the sex had been incredible...some of the best I'd ever had. But maybe if he had some time, it would be okay.

My comb was on the counter, and I ran it through my partially damp hair. Then I went in the other room. I was still warm, but the shower had done wonders. I could feel the air conditioning on, so I walked over to the queen-size bed and crawled under the covers. I heard Brad shut off the shower, and I wondered if he was regretting coming back to my room with me.

I just closed my eyes to rest my head. It would serve another purpose as well, though. If Brad was starting to feel as weird as I was imagining, he might appreciate the opportunity to duck out...or at least avoid conversation. But when he crawled into bed with me, he didn't shut off the lights, and I couldn't help but open my eyes. He rubbed my arm that was resting on top of the covers. I smiled at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

So what was bothering him? He was still turning something over in his head. Brad did that sometimes. He'd stay quiet until the right words came, and I knew that's what was happening. He was trying to find a way to say what he needed to. I couldn't stand the silence, the awkwardness anymore. "Is something wrong?"

He stopped rubbing my arm and smiled. "No." He looked in my eyes, and it still took him some time. "You...are so...special, Val." I blinked. He had more to say. "I just...never expected this, I guess."

I couldn't stop my hand from stroking his cheek. Little hairs were starting to poke out of his normally smooth, shaved skin. "Do you regret it?"

His eyes softened. "Oh. No. Fuck, no. I just...didn't expect it."

And then I understood. Tonight hadn't just been about getting his rocks off. It had been emotional for him. Wow. Deeply emotional. I was at a loss for words myself. I couldn't think of what to say. I hadn't regretted it either. It was weird *now* but...

He leaned over and touched his lips to mine.

And what the hell was that emotion burgeoning in my chest? It was so intense all of a sudden that I felt my eyes well with tears. I let it manifest itself physically as I wound my fingers into his hair and pressed myself into him. I felt as though someone else was possessing me, driving me, and I was letting it happen. I knew, though, that I was trying to overcome that heavy, raw emotion that I didn't want to name or even think about, and I was trying to override it with sexual desire.

He wasn't pushing me away, but his kisses were sweeter, more tender, less demanding than mine. Maybe I was being too aggressive for him, because he moved his lips to my shoulder where he kissed me, open-mouthed, and moved to my neck. Okay...so I could move slowly, but that goddamned emotion. What the hell *was* that? It was moving from my diaphragm and into my heart, piercing deep, and I don't know that I'd ever felt that way about anyone.

It couldn't be real. It had to be how tired I was. It had to be a response to how angry I was at Ethan. It had to be the heat. There were so many things it had to be, because it couldn't be that one thing it was pretending to be. No. It couldn't be that.

I just wondered why it felt that way and why it was wrenching my internal organs and refusing to let go.

But his kisses were pulling me away from the emotions, setting my skin on fire for him again. I could still sense that...deep feeling—it was there, but I was able to push it to the back of my mind as our lips met, crashed, melded, as our bodies united as one. I couldn't feel the air from the AC; I could only feel the inferno between us, the one that had always been there, burning, smoldering, consuming. And as he entered me again, driving, a sweet sensation unlike one I'd never known, I felt myself give everything over to him, all that I was. His hands laced through mine as he slid into me, again and again, making me breathless, until I cried out. There was a song in my head that played, one that would never be written, one I'd never sing, but one that my soul was singing for him, crying for him, one that would never not need him.

I drifted off to sleep in his arms after, forcing myself to ignore all those emotions threatening to consume me, drive me mad, and so I wondered if it was a dream or if I really heard him whisper that he loved me as sleep overtook me.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

“VAL? VAL! ARE you in there?”

It took me a few seconds to get my bearings. Okay...I was in my hotel room. There was Brad lying beside me, and he was waking up too. He looked as confused and out of it as I felt. I glanced at the alarm clock with the red LED display on the nightstand next to the bed. It was only twenty after four. God. I was sick of party animals ruining my good night's sleep.

“Yeah. What do you want?” I was pretty sure it was Nick, but I couldn't tell.

“Can I come in?”

I sighed and looked over at Brad, rolling my eyes. “Can't it wait till morning?”

“No. Please hurry up.”

It was then that I heard the panic in our drummer's voice. Brad whispered, “You want me to lay low?”

I shrugged. “Think he'd freak out with you in here?”

He smiled. “We're talking about Nick. Yeah. He'll freak. Or not.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I dunno.”

“Then just be quiet.” I raised my voice. “Just a sec.” I gave Brad a quick kiss on the lips and then got out of bed and pulled a fresh t-shirt out of the suitcase by the wall. I slipped it on and then fished out a pair of panties too and slipped into them. Then I walked to the door. Brad had already laid his head back on the pillow...but his eyes were open.

I opened the door. “Yeah. What's so frigging important it can't wait till morning?”

“It's Ethan.”

Of course. What now? But before I turned sarcastic, Nick's panic shook me. It shook me to the base of my spine. Oh, shit. “What? What, Nick? What the fuck?”

“I'm sorry to bug you, Val. I tried to find Brad. But—”

Brad was already behind me. “Spit it out, man. What the fuck happened?”

Nick *didn't* freak out about Brad, and maybe that's because he'd walked in on us in the van the time we'd started and never finished. Or maybe he was too panicked otherwise. But Nick *was* losing it about whatever was going on with Ethan. And *with* Ethan, God. It could be anything. He could be fighting, what with his volatile temper. He could be hanging out the window, playing reckless daredevil, fueled by his

*drugs.*

Oh, fuck, no.

“He won't wake up, man. He's like—”

“Where is he, Nick?”

“He's in the suite. He's passed out.”

Brad had his jeans on and was already out the door before I could even process what was happening. But his motion unfroze me, and I grabbed my card off the dresser and ran out in the hall. Brad and Nick were already back in the suite, standing next to Zane. There were a few other people standing around, and I saw a guy from a different band making out with a girl in the corner, pretending we didn't exist.

And there was Ethan, lying on the couch, his head just resting on the back. He almost looked peaceful. “How do you know he's not just sleeping?” Brad asked.

“He's not. *You* try waking him up.”

Brad didn't look so sure, but I was already walking over to the couch. I touched Ethan's shoulder. "Ethan. Ethan? Wake up." He didn't respond. I could feel panic rising in my chest, but I knew I needed to stay calm. I grabbed both his shoulders with my hands. "Ethan. Wake up." It was more a command that time, but his head just lolled around with the motion. I had no control anymore as fear set in. I could hear it in my voice. "Damn it, Ethan. Wake up. Wake up..." My words deteriorated into sobs, and that's when Zane grabbed my hands so I'd stop roughing Ethan up as though shaking him would pull him out of whatever had taken hold of him.

I heard Brad ask, "How long has he been like this?"

Nick said, "I don't know. We just tried to get him up a while ago."

Brad's voice was calm but firm. "What'd he take?"

"Hell if I know, man. With Ethan, it could be anything."

Zane added, "Or everything."

Someone behind us said, "I'm pretty sure he did some smack."

I wasn't sure what that was, but I was able to figure it out when Brad muttered, "Fuckin' heroin." He was louder when he asked, "What else?"

Zane: "He was drinking. We all were." Brad nodded. "But there might have been more. I don't know. He was with a couple of guys and a girl a while ago, and they're gone."

"Do you know their names?"

Zane's voice was dry. "You're kidding, right?"

I was losing it. "Shouldn't we be calling the ambulance?"

Brad looked at me. "Do you think they'd get here in time?"

I heard the panic in my voice again. "We have to do *something*."

He nodded. "Zane, help me load him in the van. Nick, you still have that GPS app on your phone?"

"Yeah."

"Then you're comin' with."

Zane said, "I'm comin' too."

I didn't say it, but I planned to come along as well. They couldn't stop me if they tried. But they didn't. I ran back to my room and threw on jeans and sandals and grabbed Brad's t-shirt and shoes for him and joined them at the elevator. No one said a word. Nick was Googling the address of the nearest hospital, and by the time we got to the bottom floor, I went in front to open the van doors.

They lay Ethan on the middle seat. Zane sat in the back, and I sat on the floor next to where Ethan's head was. Brad said, "Nick, I need you riding shotgun as my navigator." And I lost my sense of time and direction as my body swayed with the motion of the van. I didn't even know how quickly Brad was driving. I was focused on Ethan. I was brushing his long hair out of his eyes, rubbing his forehead. "Ethan, if you can hear me, don't give up. We're getting you help."

When we arrived at the hospital, Brad had driven into the ER entrance. It was all a blur to me, but later on I remembered hospital staff lifting him out of the van and taking him inside on a gurney. They rushed him back in a room and wouldn't let any of us back there.

A nurse asked us questions. Brad answered as many of them as he could. I felt like an emotionless statue. More than that, I felt numb, unbelieving, and the time seemed to pass slowly, but it actually flew by.

At one point, they told us Ethan was in stable condition...whatever that meant.

We went to the cafeteria for coffee. The guys were talking, but I wasn't listening. I was praying.



We waited and waited and waited.

At some point, they moved Ethan to his own room. They only allowed Brad and me. Why? Because Brad had told them I was Ethan's fiancée and said he was his brother. And that's when they told us Ethan was in a coma.

I asked Brad if anyone had told June. "She'd flip out, Val...and there's really nothing she can do."

"But what if he stays in the coma forever, Brad, and we don't tell her? Then what?"

"And how the hell do you think she could even get here?"

"The same way we did."

He sighed. "I'll make you a deal. If he's still like this in a week, I'll call her."

That was good enough.

I lost track of time. Nick and Zane had long ago checked us out of the big motel suite and had found a sleazy motel that was nothing more than two beds and a shower. More than once, they got Brad and took him back to sleep and shower. They brought snacks and once in a while brought some fast food. They all tried to get me to leave, to at least walk outside for a while, but I refused. They somehow even managed to get a nurse to encourage me to leave for a few minutes, but I heard her telling Brad outside in the hallway, "All I can do is ask her. She's in love, so of course she won't leave." No, I wasn't in love. That's not why I was here. I was worried about Ethan, and I felt guilty. It was guilt that had prompted me to stay and kept me there beside his bed.

But as the days wore on, I suspected maybe it was more than guilt.

Whenever I was alone with him, I talked to him. Could he hear me? I didn't know, but I talked just the same. I believed he was in there somewhere, and I thought he might respond, thought maybe hearing me, knowing someone hadn't given up would help him come back.

I was the only one there that afternoon. A nurse had been in to check his vitals or whatever it was she had to do. But then I was alone with him. I hadn't slept much the night before in that hard vinyl-covered chair. It was already routine for me—I'd slide that chair across the cold tile and take his hand in both of mine, his hand that didn't have the IV in the wrist and all manner of other crap, and I'd talk to him. I did the same thing on that day.

"Ethan? I know you're in there. I know you can hear me." I took a breath and grabbed the plastic cup of water off the nightstand, the one I'd been drinking out of for days. "When are you coming back? Did you know we're worried about you?" I felt the tears falling again. "I'm not mad at you. None of us are. We just want you back. We want you here with us."

I started sobbing again, something I'd been doing more and more frequently as the days wore on, and I became more tired. I just laid my forehead on his hand and let the tears fall. I felt a sting in my nose that just mirrored the sharp pain in my heart.

I felt my breath catch, though, because I felt his hand move. I held my breath then, questioning it. But then he moved his fingers again, and I sat up. I wondered if I should get a nurse. When I looked at him, he was fluttering his eyes. "Ethan?"

He tried to talk, but it came out as a breathy scratch. I realized his throat had to be dry, and I grabbed my cup of water. I held it to his mouth as my tears started to fall again. He was back. This was real, right? And then Brad, Nick, and Zane came in, and one of them called the nurse while a blanket of relief settled upon all of us.

\* \* \*

We were home a few days later. I'd lost my job. I hadn't even thought to call in. Brad had had the presence of mind to call his boss and also to cancel the upcoming gigs we had, including

the ones for the following week while Ethan recovered. But we all felt like we had to make up for lost time.

I knew I would have to start looking for a new job, but I had some recovery to do too. The first few days back, I just slept and showered and tried to feel human again. I'd also lost some weight because I hadn't been eating well.

Brad and I hadn't talked about what had happened between us. At the time, I wasn't sure why on his part, but for me, I was focused on Ethan.

Brad had gone to work the first Monday morning we were back, and Nick and Zane were sleeping. Ethan and I sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee. He broke the silence. "You were there the whole time, weren't you?"

"What?"

"You never left the hospital room. You stayed with me the whole time."

I was strangely calm. "Who told you?"

His smile was subtle. "No one. I just knew." He reached over to me and took my hand in his, much like I had his the week before when I was begging his comatose self to come back to me. He squeezed it. "I love you, Valerie Quinn. You are..." My breath was gone, and it was all I could do to just hang on. "You are the music in my heart, the breath in my soul. You *are* my reason to be here, my reason to stay. My reason to live." I blinked. I could barely believe what I was hearing. He stroked my cheek with one of his hands. He acted like he wanted to say more, but he didn't.

My voice was soft. "I love you too, Ethan." But I didn't trust him enough to try again. He'd hurt me so many times now, and I loved my own self enough to want to protect myself from the pain he'd learned to so easily inflict upon me. But I didn't know he was getting ready to pump a bullet into my heart, one from which I wouldn't be able to defend myself nor recover.

"Marry me."

My breath was gone. Where the fuck had *that* come from? "What?"

"Marry me. Val, I'm done with the shit. I'm done with the drugs." I could maybe believe that. He'd been in a rehab program since we'd returned. He'd tossed out all his shit—not just liquor and any stray drugs hiding in his room but even paraphernalia. So maybe I could believe he was telling the truth. But what about...? "And I'm done fucking around on you. None of any of the other women I've ever been with would have done what you did. Jesus, Val, when everyone else gave up, you were there."

Oh, no. I wasn't going to have him believing that. "No, Ethan, the guys never gave up on you. They just made sure they got a shower once in a while."

"It doesn't matter. You were *there*, babe. You were there, holding my hand, talking to me, pulling me through. You believed." His eyes searched mine. "So marry me."

I was finding it hard to breathe. "That's no reason to get married."

"You love me, right?"

I couldn't find any words to answer him. First of all, whether I believed him or not, whether I loved him or not, I didn't know that I wanted to marry Ethan or even if it was a good idea. Did I want to spend the rest of my life with this man? He must have been able to read my hesitation, because he took my face in his hands.

"We don't have to get married right away, Val. There's no law says we have to do it right now. Just..." This was a turning point. If I told him no right now when he was in this fragile state, it could very well send him running back to his self-medicating ways. I could see it in his eyes. Somehow I'd transformed from his so-called *muse* to being his entire fucking lifeline. It

was a huge responsibility, one I didn't want but one that Ethan had thrust upon me without any regard for what I wanted.

Truth was I *did* love the man. I knew that and he did too. I had for a long time. And even if I said yes, it didn't mean I'd have to actually marry him down the line. No...once he was strong and himself again, then, if I didn't feel comfortable with the prospect, if I knew we weren't ever going to make it, I could break it off. For now, though, I was obligated...or I might as well have just stuck the needle in Ethan's arm myself.

When I gave him an affirmation (I don't remember if I said *yes* or *okay* or something entirely different), he took me in his arms and kissed me. Yes. I knew right then that I still loved him...more than I ever should have allowed myself to.

\* \* \*

It was several weeks later, long after the secret was out, that Brad approached me on a Saturday morning. "Let's go to Starbucks."

Part of me was thinking that—now that I was a woman engaged—it would be inappropriate, but there were two things that made me want to do it. The first was that Brad and I were friends, first and foremost, and there was nothing Ethan could do to stop it. Brad was *his* friend too, and I didn't think Brad would intentionally hurt his friend, not when I clearly had chosen Ethan. The second was that we had a lot to talk about, and we'd never had the opportunity. If I told him no, not only would I be a Grade A Bitch, but I'd also destroy the trust and openness he and I had always shared.

I wasn't about to do that to Brad, whether Ethan was my fiancé or not.

All the guys were still asleep, Ethan himself still in my bed. So I pulled my hair back into a loose ponytail and grabbed my purse.

I was finally working again, this time waiting tables at a café during the graveyard shift three nights a week, but Brad insisted upon buying. "Mocha, right?" I nodded, and I missed what he got for himself, but it wasn't anything fancy like mine.

We sat at a table outside in the warm sun. I could tell it was going to get hot later, but this early in the shade it was beautiful. Brad slid his sunglasses back on. I didn't like that. Brad telegraphed so much through his eyes, and I suspected he was putting his sunglasses on to hide from me. It was bright outside too, but under that umbrella, it shouldn't have bothered him so much.

He really was a gorgeous guy. He was fully a man now, and—Ethan or not—I appreciated Brad's beauty. His hair was long now, way past his shoulders, and his jaw was firm and strong. His normally clean-shaven face had a shadow that made him look that much more attractive. And his display of tattoos grew season by season. I saw a new one, an arrow on his forearm, and I wondered what it meant.

But I wasn't going to ask.

"Val, I don't want you to feel bad, okay, but we need to talk."

I nodded. "Yeah, we do."

"That night...did it mean anything to you?"

Oh, God, no. No. Why did he have to ask? Why did he need to know? I started clenching my jaw, trying to stop the tears from filling my eyes. But I knew Brad could sense it just by looking at me. I blinked, hoping the tears wouldn't come. My voice cracked. "Yes."

He nodded. God, I wanted to see his eyes. But I wasn't going to ask him to take his glasses off. He swallowed and then sipped his coffee. "Do you love him?"

Jesus Christ. Why was he asking me all these things? Was he trying to hurt me, hurt himself? I couldn't do this. It was raw. It was too much. "Why? Why do you want to know?"

His voice was calm, steady. He let out a smooth breath. "I *need* to know."

"Why?"

He was at war with himself. I could see that the part of him that was just my friend wanted to tell me everything, but the part of Brad that had made love to me just a few weeks ago was protecting himself. He was vulnerable. "If you love him, I'll support your decision, and I'll never say anything about that night again. Ever." He took off his sunglasses and looked at me. How he managed to make his eyes look so emotionless, I'll never know.

"But if you tell me you don't, I'll fight for you."

I sucked in a deep breath, because I suddenly felt like the star quarterback who'd just been tackled by the other team's entire lineup.

I too was battling myself inside. I couldn't lie to Brad. By the same token, if I told him the entire truth—that, yes, I loved Ethan, but I wasn't sure where it was going to go—he'd do what I knew in the back of my mind he'd already been doing. He'd told me so long ago, when we'd first met and we both recognized that there was something inexplicable between us, that he would wait for me. He would ride out whatever feelings I had for Ethan. And I knew...right now I knew just looking in his eyes that if I was completely honest with him...if I told him the truth, that I didn't feel like I could completely trust Ethan, that I couldn't completely give myself over to Ethan, and that deep down I wondered if it would work...I knew he would continue to wait. And that wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair to me, to Ethan...but, mostly, it wouldn't be fair to Brad. He deserved more. He deserved better. And I wasn't going to do that to him.

So I had to tell him the truth, but I wasn't going to tell him about my reservations. I swallowed. "I love Ethan."

He nodded. Then he took a deep breath and a sip of coffee and looked out at Colfax Avenue where the cars were whizzing by, in a hurry to go somewhere. He was quiet. Really quiet. And I dared not say a word. I wasn't going to make it worse by talking and saying something stupid and fucking insipid. He had to sort through this, and if his insides were only half as jumbled as mine, he was a mess. He needed to process, didn't need a stupid girl talking while he had to do that.

I rested my chin on my fist and just looked down at the metal table. I wanted to stop being an adult now, but this was a mess I helped create, and I needed to deal with it. I just had to make sure I didn't cry right now.

After several minutes, Brad said, "Thanks for being honest with me, Valerie." He took another deep breath and slid his sunglasses back on his face. He stuck out his hand. "Friends?"

I took his hand. "Of course. Forever."

And I meant that. Brad had been and would always be the best friend I'd ever had, and I was so grateful that wasn't going to change now.

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Several months passed as Ethan eased into sobriety. He was taking baby steps. I wasn't a part of his rehab, but he attended a couple of classes a week, and he had someone he could call when things got tough. And, as Fully Automatic, we literally banded together, foregoing parties and drinking altogether in support of Ethan.

For a while, things between Brad and me were stiff. We'd made the pledge to be friends, but that didn't mean it was easy on either of us, but for him in particular, I knew it had to be hard, and, frankly, I questioned my decision at times, but when I saw how strong Ethan was

growing from day to day, and I saw the changes he was trying to make in his behaviors, I was glad I'd done it.

In November, both Brad and I heard from Clay. Last Five Minutes had just wrapped up recording on their first studio CD, one they called Point of No Return, based on one of my favorite songs of theirs, now the title track. That particular song was also being released as a single later that month along with their first video. Clay called one night, and we talked for a while. I was excited and happy for them, and I told Clay that. Of all the indie bands I'd met in the last couple of years, his band was one of the most deserving.

"So, how have *you* been, Val?"

"Oh, you know...not much has changed since I saw you last."

"You seeing anybody?" Oh...how could I tell him? I couldn't forget when he'd said he wanted to punch Ethan's teeth out. But I was too slow in forming the words. "Okay...I guess the better question would be *who* are you seeing?"

I let out a breath. God, I was transparent to everyone. "Ethan and I are back together."

He didn't say anything at first. His silence was damning...either that, or I was feeling guilty. "You happy?"

I tried not to hesitate. "Yeah."

"Was it true—he was in a coma for a couple weeks when you guys were playing a show in Texas?"

How had he heard that? Well, it didn't matter. "Yeah, it's true."

"Promise me, Val. Promise me you'll always choose yourself over Ethan's bullshit."

"Lot of faith you've got, Clay."

"I have faith in *you*, Val. But I also know what an asshole Ethan has been to you. Sorry. No offense. I shouldn't say shit."

"It's cool." But it was time to change the subject. "What about you? You seeing anyone?"

"Eh...no one worth mentioning. When I told her she had a long way to go to live up to my last girlfriend, she got a little pissed."

"Jesus, Clay. I wonder why."

He laughed. "Heh. She wasn't talkin' to Clay. That was her first mistake."

We talked and laughed for a while longer, and when I hung up, I realized how easy our friendship had become. I hoped Brad and I would eventually get back there too. We had to.

## Chapter Thirty-eight

THAT NEXT JANUARY, Brad booked a Winchester-Colorado Springs-Pueblo circuit so we could play a few places where we hadn't been in a while. It was also, I think, his way of helping me out. He knew Ethan was pressuring me on actually starting to arrange details for a wedding, and the only way I'd do that was with my mom. Due to our touring schedule, I'd only been home for a couple of days at both Christmas and Thanksgiving, and I'd spent time with Ethan's family during the holidays too, so no planning had happened then. It was just too busy.

I think I was also putting things off a bit, but if you'd asked me then, I would have denied it. But we were in Winchester Saturday night and all of Sunday before heading back to Denver, and mom and dad put us all up for the night. I'd demanded Ethan respect my parents' wishes, which meant we did *not* sleep together while we were there. In fact, I begged him to not say a word about it. Just because they suspected and probably knew was no reason to flat out tell them. I didn't want my parents praying for my eternal soul. It was cool enough that they didn't beg us to go to church with them on Sunday morning. They knew we were tired from our concert the night before. Danny was already back at college so he missed our concert, but mom and dad actually watched a couple of songs, even though the music wasn't their thing. And, yeah...I was fully dressed for this concert. I was back in my old hometown and didn't want my parents or old friends giving me grief about what I looked like. If we ever got a recording contract, I knew they'd figure it out, but for now, I didn't want the hassle. I wanted to enjoy visiting.

I actually *did* get to see a few old friends after the show and introduced them to my band buddies, but afterward we headed to my house and visited with my parents before hitting the hay. The next day we started talking wedding plans. Even the guys got in on it, and we settled on a date in July. Brad hadn't booked any shows yet, so we chose a week and a half where we wouldn't do any shows.

I watched Brad as we worked through the process. He seemed okay with it. We still weren't where I would have liked us to be friend-wise, but I supposed that would still take a while. Obviously, our stage act suffered. I was still wearing the skimpy stuff, but Brad and I were no longer flirting. I just couldn't bring myself to do it, and I think Brad felt the same way.

By the time we left to go back to Denver, I was mentally exhausted. I hadn't realized there was so much to a wedding. After all that, I considered just standing in front of a Justice of the Peace and calling it done, but another part of me wanted the fairytale wedding, the one with lace and flowers and personal vows. And that was the wedding I was going to get.

Brad had already agreed to be the best man, and Nick and Zane were going to be the groomsmen. I managed to contact Jill through email, and she agreed to be my matron of honor. I hadn't talked with her in a while, and I discovered she and Chad were expecting their first child. She would already have the baby by the time the wedding rolled around, so she said she wouldn't want to be fitted until May. My mother was going to contact my closest female cousin (who lived in Grand Junction) to see if she would be a bridesmaid, and I was even able to get a hold of Jennifer Manders, my old college roommate who was finishing up college.

We also looked at dresses online, but mom insisted I buy one in person. The only way to get it right would be that way. So she planned to visit me in Denver the next week, and we'd find a dress together. I couldn't have done any of it without mom.

I was already hating it all, and I don't think there would have been any way I would have enjoyed it. And Ethan sensed that.

That night, back in our apartment, Ethan curled up next to me after we'd made love. "You act like you're hating this. Are you getting cold feet?"

"No. This is just so complicated. Why can't we just get married and be done with it?"

He grinned and pulled me close. "Let's do it."

I considered it for a moment. "No. My mom would kill me, especially after everything she's done already."

"She's your mom. She'll forgive you."

But I could tell that just that tiny conversation put Ethan's heart at ease, and as summer approached, I found that my love fully blossomed for the man. He was staying sober, and he was treating me well. Some days were harder than others, and more than once he complained that sobriety ruined his creativity. But he did it, and I could see the love in him.

The wedding arrived quickly. My dress was a beautiful traditional white, and it fit like a glove. The church was full of people I hadn't seen in years, and some were people I'd never met, people from Ethan's side of the family. And as we darted through the flying birdseed our loved ones were showering on us, I was pretty certain I'd spotted Ethan's dad in the crowd. I hugged one person after another and planned to talk to him afterwards, but he disappeared before I had the chance. He looked sick, but I found it heartening to see him there. If he and Ethan could bond, I knew the relationship would do so much for my new husband. But he'd never have the chance.

Obviously, Ethan and I didn't have enough money to get our own place, but my room in our apartment became *our* room. We didn't have much of a honeymoon either, but my mom and dad did spring for a two-day stay at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. They shouldn't have blown all that money because we hardly left the room.

It wasn't long, though, before we fell back into a routine. And about a month later, Brad said we needed to get our asses recording. He'd heard from Jet, and things were promising for our band, but we needed to send a CD for Clay to pimp around to the people who mattered. It was expensive, even finding a cheaper place to do the recording, but we wanted high quality. Brad was almost ready to sacrifice quality for something, *anything*, but we managed to scrape together enough money.

I was unfamiliar with the process, and maybe the guys were too. I don't know. But Nick was first. He had to lay down all the drum tracks upon which we'd build the songs. We chose fourteen songs—our best and favorites, the ones that showed off our skills, and we picked ones that highlighted our range. Because we couldn't afford a ton of time in the studio, Brad insisted we practice, practice, practice. Yes, we were good simply because we'd been playing live for a long time, but he wanted us to be tight. And we weren't used to doing things alone, but we'd have to do it that way when recording...one person at a time, doing his (or her) thing. And it all started with Nick laying down the drums.

I started practicing a lot. I had to sound good—I had to sound more metal than ever. I even called Jet, because he was the one who'd originally encouraged me to refine my sound. And he gave me rations of shit, asking why a married woman would be calling an ex-lover, but once he was done giving me grief, we had a great conversation about how to sound on different parts of different songs. I took notes.

I wanted to ask him why he hadn't come to my wedding, but I knew why. Aside from the fact that we *were* ex-lovers, I knew he hated Ethan, and he wasn't happy that I was marrying

him. It wasn't because of our previous relationship. He'd always thought Ethan didn't deserve me, and that might have been true a long time ago, but not anymore. Ethan had gotten his shit together, and we were at the beginning of a beautiful journey together.

So I thanked him for his advice and asked him how things were going. They were, in his words, "fucking fantastic!" He then said we needed to hurry up with the demo, because he wouldn't be able to keep his contacts interested forever.

We had four gigs in a row that week—Wednesday through Saturday nights—and it was Saturday morning that I first started noticing problems. I was sounding hoarse by the end of the show that night, but I just thought maybe I was coming down with a cold or maybe I'd stressed my voice out too much.

But I only practiced for about an hour the next afternoon and noticed the same problem. And every day my voice would wear out sooner and sooner, so I did my warm tea with lemon and honey trick, but it wasn't working anymore. So I decided to rest my voice and save it for shows, but it wasn't getting any better. I could get forty-five minutes out of my voice at the max before it started croaking.

I was starting to worry, but I didn't say anything to the guys...not yet, although I'm sure they were starting to worry about it too. After all, they heard me singing too. The hoarseness worked okay short term for a song or two, but when I had to carry a melody, it just didn't cut it. But I kept resting my voice and quit practicing altogether. I saved my voice for concerts only.

The time came when all the music was recorded, and I had to start singing. I started with "Metal Forever," and after an hour of recording and re-recording, I broke down in tears. Well, crying didn't help either. Brad and Ethan were there, and I finally had to tell them what was going on.

"It sounds okay, Val," Brad said.

"Yeah...works for the song."

"Maybe so," I said, my voice scratchy, "but it'll never work for 'Just Another Stupid Love Song.' My voice has to be clear for that." Brad frowned. I could tell he agreed. But I could see Ethan, trying to be the loving, supportive husband, trying to be encouraging. He started to talk, but I interrupted him, even though I shouldn't have said a word. "No, Ethan, you know it and I know it. I can't sound like I took a fucking emery board to my vocal cords for that one. I have to sound sweet and soft and sexy, or it doesn't work when I scream at the end." I started crying again. "Goddammit."

That's when they knew how upset I was. Brad said, "So you take it easy tonight. You drink extra tea and don't say shit. Nothing. If your voice is still fucked up, you go to the doctor."

"I—we can't afford the doctor."

"Bullshit. You're goin'." I started protesting when he said, "You're going, Val. Don't piss me off." He looked at Ethan. "Talk some sense into your wife, please."

"Yeah, because I'm really good at persuading her." Ethan rolled his eyes, but then he looked at me. "Val, he's right. If your voice is still sucky tomorrow, you should go."

"And then what? You know how much money it'll cost just to be seen? And then what? What if—"

"Stop it. We cross that bridge when we come to it. For now," Brad said, "you go home and rest."

But we hadn't anticipated the worst. First of all, I wasn't able to get into the doctor the very next day, and when I did get there, it wasn't pretty. Not only was I suffering from some pretty serious damage which the doctor blamed on crappy vocal techniques (and he asked why I hadn't



ever sought out any vocal training), but I had some pretty nasty scar tissue to boot. I could have surgery—laser or otherwise—but it would cost. And, on top of surgery, I'd probably also need vocal therapy.

We didn't have the money.

Worse, though, we didn't have the time. We knew time was of the essence. If we didn't get this CD off to Clay, we could kiss our chances at the big time goodbye.

So we had a huge band meeting, and I tried to put on the bravest face I could. All I wanted to do was bury my head in my pillow and cry forever. I wanted to scream, but I didn't even have the voice for it. I know I couldn't keep the tears from wetting my eyes, but I was at least able to keep them from falling down my cheeks. We all agreed that Brad should take over. He knew the songs, had been singing most of the backup with me ever since I'd joined, and he had a better voice than he'd ever admitted.

They all wanted to keep my rendition of "Metal Forever," raspy or not, and that's when I lost it. I couldn't stop crying. So I went to my bedroom and lay on the bed, just letting the tears flow again and again.

That night, Ethan made love to me and tried to make me feel loved, but I needed time. Just when we had our shot, the universe decided to flip me the bird, and I wasn't happy about it. I needed time to adjust. Add to that I was still working a shitty waitressing job, and I was miserable.

They finished the recording, and it sounded fantastic. I tried not to cry, hearing Brad's voice singing when it should have been mine. But he sounded great. I remembered that first time I'd met him in his garage all those years ago, how he'd talked like he had the worst voice in the world, but he'd always had a great voice. And it was metal. God, I just knew...as soon as the people who made the decisions heard the CD, they'd sign Fully Automatic.

Brad shipped it off to Clay who'd promised great things. Clay said he was sorry to hear about me. I'd been one of the selling points, he said, but I called him later and begged him to still give it a fair shot. I told him what was going on with me. He said, "Yeah, I know Brad's a good singer, but..."

"Just fucking *do* it, Clay."

"I promised you, Val. You know I will."

I thanked him before I lost my voice again.

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Before we heard about the powers that be and what they thought of the CD, Ethan learned that Burt Richards had died. He'd had some kind of cancer and Ethan said, "Like that's a big surprise. Motherfucker deserved it."

But I saw his face. I saw his pain. I could sense his guilt. He didn't really mean it, and I suspected Ethan was now wishing he'd forgiven his father and developed a relationship with him.

Three nights in a row, he didn't sleep well. He was up late, then up early again, and when he *did* sleep, he woke me up continually with his constant motion in the bed and talking in his sleep. I told Ethan he needed to forgive himself, and he just looked at me.

And the next night he was drinking. For the first time since we'd rushed him to the ER, he was drinking. And I knew Ethan—I knew that was just the beginning.

I decided I couldn't just stand back and let him destroy himself—destroy *us*—again. I had to talk to him before it got bad. He was sitting at the kitchen table when I came home from work one night. My voice was scratchy from talking all night, but I was going to push it a little longer.

I needed to get through to him. I sat at the table and set my purse on the floor. He looked tired. His eyes were droopy, and he hadn't shaved around his goatee in days. He was even wearing the same clothes today that he had the day before. I touched his hand that wasn't holding the glass and said, "Ethan, I know you don't want to, but we need to talk. This guilt you're feeling is—"

"Talk? The last thing I want to do is talk, Val." He took another drink.

"It's not healthy to keep this shit all bottled up."

He snarled. "I suppose walking around the apartment crying all the time is so much healthier."

I just stared at him and withdrew my hand. I swallowed. "I know you're hurting, Ethan, but you don't need to be an asshole."

He just kept looking at me with contempt. "Stop pretending to know what I feel, Val. You don't know."

*That* hurt. That he couldn't support my feelings but then just withdrew into a cave and started the old stupid habit of drowning in liquor...that didn't feel like love to me. "You know what, Ethan? I might not know what it was like for you growing up and how you feel...*felt* about your dad, but I know what it's like to feel guilty. I know what it's like to be disappointed and hurt. And it's killing me to watch you do this to yourself." I stood up and went to our bedroom.

And he stopped drinking again a few days later when I threatened to leave.

Shortly thereafter, Fully Automatic got a recording contract.

And when their first CD was released to the world, it shot up the charts with a bullet.

And the rest, as they say, is history. But there's still more left to my story if you can spare me the time.

## Chapter Thirty-nine

### Present

I'D BEEN FEELING down. I couldn't focus on even the most mundane housework...which I'd never been that thrilled about anyway, but it had just seemed harder lately. What was the purpose? Sure, I liked having a clean house, and I certainly didn't want my child getting dirty just walking through the house, but I couldn't find the motivation to do everything that needed to be done.

Ethan moped around the house, never showering, never picking up after himself. He wouldn't talk to Chris or even look at him. He hardly ate anymore but when he did, he ate way too much. Still, he was losing weight. When he bothered to speak, he'd curse at me or the world. He was drinking, smoking, and God knows what else. When he bothered to leave the house, I suspected he was sleeping around on me, and—unbathed or not, in poor shape or not—he was a rock star. There would be some girl somewhere happy to fuck him. I knew that much. If I even so much as tried to get him to talk to me, he'd just tell me to leave him alone.

And then I noticed he'd stopped wearing his wedding band.

All I could think of for days was how marriage was supposed to last forever...*till death do us part*. And I knew it was bullshit, but I just couldn't get up the courage to decide to end it for good. I wanted my child to have his father, to know him and love him.

But it was a joke. Even when Ethan was there in body, he wasn't present in mind. He was no more a father to Chris than I was.

I'd finally had enough. I couldn't take it anymore. Ethan was still in bed, and it was past two in the afternoon. I'd just laid Chris down for a nap and so I went into the bedroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed. "Ethan, wake up." No answer. "Wake up, Ethan." I kept my voice low and calm, because that was the kind of discussion I wanted—rational and calm. "I can make some coffee if you want."

He stirred but kept his eyes closed. His voice was thick when he said, "Just leave me the fuck alone."

"Ethan, it's two o'clock. You should get up."

"What for? Just leave me alone, mom."

God, I hated when he called me that. It was a blow off. But I'd promised myself I'd stay calm. "We need to talk, Ethan. Please. Please just get up for a while."

"If I have to tell you one more time..." He fell back asleep. I wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily.

"*What*, Ethan? You'll *what*?"

"Just get the fuck out of here. I'm tired. You and that little brat were so goddamned noisy this morning..."

Oh...that did it. "*Brat*? You're calling your son a *brat*? That precious child who wants nothing more than his father's love? Did you know he's talking now, Ethan? He says real words, communicates. But I suppose you think that's just noise." I inhaled, trying to calm down again.

"Goddammit, Val. Just get the fuck out of here."

I took a deep breath. I had to try a different tactic. My voice was low. "Can we talk about your depression, Ethan?"

He muttered into the pillow. "Who says I'm depressed?"

"What would you call it, Ethan?"

"You're bothering me. You're *always* bothering me. That's what my problem is."

I shouldn't have let that comment get to me. But it did. Still, I tried to maintain. "How am I always bothering you?"

"The kid constantly screaming. You constantly harping on me about shit. I just want to be left alone."

To this day, I'm not sure how I managed to keep my cool. It was as if the angrier I felt, the more I buried it. "A little solitude is good for a person, Ethan, but you're taking it to the extreme and you know it. Fine. You can treat me like shit. You always have. But you need to spend time with your son."

His voice was almost a growl, but he still didn't open his eyes. "Goddammit. Just leave me the fuck alone, Val. How many different ways do I have to tell you I don't want you around?"

My voice was cool. "Fine. I'll leave." I got up and started to walk toward the door. He understood the tone of finality in my voice, because he bolted out of bed and grabbed me by my upper arm, swinging me around.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

His fingers were digging into my flesh. I could tell I was going to have bruises without even looking. "Let go of me, Ethan. That hurts."

"Not until you answer my question."

"I'm getting away from you. That's what you wanted, remember? How many times did you tell me to just leave you alone?"

He glared, but he let go. I could see the anger rising inside of him, and I think I preferred it to the lethargic depressive state he'd been in. At least it was *something*. I turned to leave, but he grabbed me again. He pushed me against the wall, his face in mine. "You still love me, don't you, Val?" But it wasn't a question. I tried getting away from him, but he grabbed my arm again. "Val?"

I could feel my nostrils flaring. I didn't like how he'd cornered me. "Let me go, Ethan. You wanted me to leave you alone, so I am."

His eyes searched mine. There was something there that I'd never seen before, something base, something feral, something I would never be able to reason with. I knew that looking at him. It scared me. He pressed his hand against my neck, and at first I thought it was just to scare me more, because he'd seen the look of fear in my eyes.

"Stop it, Ethan." Having said it, though, it was as if the real Ethan was whisked away from me. I couldn't see him inside his face anymore. His eyes were clouded, masked, and his fingers started pressing in on me. I started pushing against him, slapping at him, trying to get his attention, but it was almost like he wasn't there...and like he wanted to shut me up by choking me to death. I beat on his chest with my fists, and then it was like he snapped back. He took a deep breath and loosened his hand. He bent over to kiss me, and I shoved him away.

This time, he let me go. I went into Chris's room and pulled the big diaper bag out of the closet. I made sure there were plenty of diapers and also put a couple pairs of clothes in it for him. I didn't want to go back in my bedroom, so I went to the bathroom and put a few things in a makeup bag. But on the way back to Chris's room, I decided I'd just walk into my room and quickly grab a couple pairs of jeans and t-shirts. Ethan was already out of there, though, so I took my time and chose two clean sets of clothes, including underwear. I put my things in a backpack hanging in my closet.

Last, I grabbed Chris's car seat and lifted him out of his crib. I felt bad, but he barely stirred as I lay him in the seat. I draped his bag and the backpack over my shoulder along with my purse and walked out of the bedroom. As I walked toward the front door, I saw Ethan sitting in a chair in the living room. He looked sullen and brooding. His eyes were cold and frightening. I half expected him to come after me as I walked toward the door, but he didn't.

Another part of me thought Ethan might get up, beg me for forgiveness, say he was sorry. But he didn't do that either.

It was a warm, bright afternoon, one that would have made me normally enjoy being outside. But inside, I felt cold, cut off, distant.

I hurried to my car and strapped Chris in his car seat in the back. Once I got in, I locked the doors, hoping Ethan would stay in the house.

I drove to a Starbucks, and Chris and I just sat outside for a while. I watched traffic and just thought about my life. For some reason, I wasn't hurting as badly as I would have expected. Yeah, I was hurt and upset, but not like I would have thought I should. Maybe I was just finally sick of Ethan's shit.

Chris started getting fussy—he was hungry and bored, so I went to a restaurant. I had iced tea and a salad and asked for crackers for Chris. I wasn't very hungry, but I was feeling a little better as the day wore on. By late afternoon, I was content in the idea that life goes on, and as I looked upon my son who was blissfully unaware of what had happened earlier, I realized that beauty and happiness could be found if I only looked for them.

We left the restaurant, and I sat in the car for a few minutes. We needed a place to stay. I was tired and hurting, inside and out. I knew I would always be welcome in my parents' house, but that was a two- to three-hour drive, and I didn't want to have to tell them what had happened. I wanted to talk with someone who cared, and my parents would have been good to talk to, but I also knew my dad would probably want to kill Ethan when he saw the bruises on my arm.

My thoughts went immediately to Brad, the man who'd been at one time my best friend...or the closest thing I'd had to one. We hadn't had much of a friendship since Ethan and I had married, though, and I think it had been a mutual decision on the part of us both. To continue our friendship would have been inappropriate and disrespectful. But, after my parents, he was the first person I thought of. He was *the* person I wanted to talk to, to see, even if I didn't tell him exactly what had happened.

But I couldn't let him see me this way. I found my foundation in my bag and covered the discoloration on my neck. I would slip on my jacket before I knocked on his door to hide the nasty purple ones on the inside of my arm. It wasn't that I wanted to lie to Brad, but I didn't want him to look at the bruises and not hear a word I said.

And still...I sat in the car for a while longer, debating if I wanted to see Brad or if I just wanted to go to a hotel. I looked back at Chris. I knew Brad hadn't seen my son in a few months, so I knew he'd like that if nothing else. Brad had become "Uncle" Brad to our son, and I wanted to encourage that relationship, considering Ethan had no siblings and I only had one. So I decided I would go, but I could find a hotel afterward if need be.

When I got to Brad's house, it was almost dark. I felt relief when I saw a light on inside and no sign of Ethan's truck. It would have been easy enough for Ethan to come cry on his friend's shoulder, but he wasn't there. I remembered too that Brad's girlfriend Karen was living with him too, had been living with him for about a year. Karen hadn't seemed to like me much, but we'd maintained a civil acquaintanceship. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

I sat in my car, feeling torn. Should I ask to be invited inside and take comfort in my friend or leave and cry myself to sleep in a cold, uncaring hotel room? I really wanted to see Brad but didn't feel like I should. I had my child, and he was the most important person in my life.

That was it then. I would go. Just as I started to turn the key in the ignition, though, I heard a rap on the passenger window. I tried to smile. I really did. I hoped in the near dark, he wouldn't be able to tell. I turned the key so I could roll down the window. "Val, what the hell are you doing here?" His voice was friendly. "Why don't you come in?" He saw Chris in the backseat. "Oh, you brought the little guy." He looked back at me. "Come on in." Before I could say a word, he was opening up the backdoor and unbuckling Chris's car seat.

I grabbed my purse and the diaper bag but left my bag in the car and followed Brad to the front door. Once we got inside, he set the car seat on the couch and unbuckled Chris. He lifted my son out. "Hey, little buddy. How've you been?"

Chris smiled and babbled something. Yes, he'd been talking a lot lately, but I didn't understand *everything* my son said. God, that was cute, though. Chris placed his open palm on Brad's cheek and Brad said, "Boo!" Chris giggled, that happy baby giggle, and it was infectious. I smiled as Brad set my son down.

He looked over at me. "Have a seat." But then he cocked his head. I could tell he sensed things weren't right with me, but I didn't know that was what he was responding to. He came closer and looked at my neck. That told me my makeup job was shitty. "What happened?"

I forced myself to not cry, and Karen entered the room. She regarded me with an icy stare. "Valerie." No *hi*, no warmth, just a simple acknowledgement, and it didn't seem very happy.

I didn't want to be that way, so I forced that smile back on my face. "Hi, Karen."

"Brad, can I talk to you?"

"Just a minute." He looked back at me, and I saw a flash in his eyes. "Did Ethan do this?"

I couldn't answer, but I felt tears start to well up in my eyes. I heard Karen. "Brad. I need to talk to you, please." The tone of her voice indicated she wasn't happy with him at all. Brad just kept looking at me as though I had more answers to give. "Fuck it. I'm outta here."

"Karen... goddammit." He looked at me. "Give me a minute, Val. I'll be right back." He looked at Karen, and they went into the kitchen. I felt really uncomfortable now and was wishing I'd just gone somewhere else to stay. I got the feeling they'd been arguing before I'd even got there. For all I knew, that's why Brad had stepped outside to begin with.

I could hear them talking in the kitchen but, fortunately, their voices were low enough that I couldn't make out what they were saying. Chris was being cute, walking around and touching things. I would tell him *no*, to not grab something off a bookshelf, and he'd grin at me and run back to hug me. Then he'd get a devilish grin on his face and do it again.

That behavior was adorable, but it reminded me of Ethan. He kept doing the same things over and over and over again, and I let him. The fact that I kept coming back to him excused, condoned...hell, *encouraged* his behavior. Because I kept loving him in spite of all the shit he dumped on me, he thought it was okay.

It was warm in Brad's house, and I took off my jacket, laying it beside me on the couch. I kept talking to Chris quietly, and he'd answer and giggle, so it was almost easy enough for me to pretend Brad and Karen weren't in the other room fighting. But their voices started getting louder. Karen escalated first, and it took a while for me to hear Brad's words. "I'm done, Brad. I don't need this shit."

I couldn't hear Brad's response, but they were quiet for a minute. Then she said, "You're an asshole." I could hear Brad's voice but still couldn't make out his response to her. "You

know...I thought if I stayed, you could love me. I thought you could forget this stupid hang up you have over that...*twit*, but you can't. You just can't let it go, and this is the final straw."

"Karen..."

"No, I'm done."

"Karen."

"Fuck you, Brad. I am sick and tired of competing with the memory of someone else. I'm outta here."

I couldn't hear what Brad said next, but her words had gotten my attention. Still, I looked at my son and smiled and tried not to eavesdrop. Then Karen said, "It doesn't matter. I called Jimmy anyway. He's already waiting for me."

I heard Brad's voice again, but what he said? Not for me.

Karen stormed through the room toward the bedroom, ignoring us but barely avoiding my son. I grabbed Chris up off the floor and sat on the couch. Brad walked back in the living room with a sheepish look on his face. He looked apologetic. He stood, though, and after a few minutes, Karen rushed back out of the room, a large suitcase in hand. She said, "Don't bother trying to stop me." She marched over to the closet and pulled out her purse, then walked to the door. "I'll be back tomorrow to get the rest of my things." After she stepped out, she slammed it as hard as she could. Brad sighed. He looked tired.

If it had been anyone but Brad, the silence would have been uncomfortable. Finally, Brad looked at Chris and said, "Hey, little buddy." He looked at me. "Can he have a cookie?"

"Yeah...I think a little spoiling by Uncle Brad would be fine."

He forced a smile, and we started walking to the kitchen, Chris still in my arms. Brad said, "Sorry you had to hear that shit." When we got to the kitchen, he offered me a chair, and I sat with Chris on my knee. He got a couple of vanilla wafers out of his cupboard and handed them to Chris, tousling my son's hair afterward. "So...tell me what happened."

I looked down at my hands. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Come on, Val. I know Ethan did this. What the fuck was going on?" And that's when he noticed my arm. He reached over and touched the bruises. "What the hell?" His brows furrowed. "Did you call the cops?"

And that's when the tears just started to fall. I couldn't say anything. I didn't want to. I just wanted to let it all go. He pulled his chair closer and brought my head to his shoulder. Chris sat on the knee opposite that shoulder and before I closed my eyes, I saw him grab for a lock of Brad's hair.

I don't know how long I cried, but Brad wound up fetching a box of tissue at one point, and once my cries died down, he said, "Sure you don't want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't even want to think about it anymore."

He nodded. "You need some sleep." He tilted his head toward Chris whose own head was bobbing with sleepiness as well. "You can sleep on my bed."

"Oh, no. I don't want to take your bed."

"I have a couch, Val. It's no biggie."

"I can stay at a motel."

"Damn it, Val, just say *yes*."

I searched his eyes. "What if Karen comes back tonight? I get the feeling she doesn't like me very much."

"Don't worry about her. Just get some sleep. You need it."

Well, I might have needed it, but it didn't come easily. Chris lay next to a pillow in that queen-size bed, and I lay next to him, but I couldn't drift off. Instead, I spent that time examining my entire life. I felt guilty too, because I knew I'd likely caused Brad to have a sleepless night as well. His girlfriend was leaving him, and—unless I was mistaken—I suspected the other woman she was hinting about was yours truly. The main reason? Oh, I knew Brad had been with plenty of women, but he hadn't been serious about *any* of them. I rarely saw faces and never knew names. In fact, Karen was the only one who even came close, and his feelings for her hadn't ever seemed completely genuine to me. Of course, I figured I felt that way just because Karen was rude and snotty to me.

I reached over and brushed over Chris's hair with my hand. My precious child. He was probably the only reason why I was feeling any remorse over what had happened today. I felt angry with myself that I'd allowed this sense of love and loyalty to cloud my judgment. I was a child when I'd married Ethan, when I'd thought I was in love with him. And how many times over the years had I told him we were through and then I would come running back to him later?

Too many. Still, I couldn't completely regret being with him. I wouldn't have Chris in my life if not for Ethan. I wouldn't have experienced a lot of life the way I had if not for him. So...I couldn't regret my relationship with him, but it was toxic. *He* was toxic, and I had to break free. I had to do it now before I ran back one last time.

I also realized I wouldn't have met Brad if not for Ethan.

Every time I tried to drift off, I imagined Ethan's hands around my neck. What had I ever done to make him feel that much intense passion and rage? All I had ever done was love him and want to save him. But maybe he was past saving.

I heard Brad's front door close. At first, I thought maybe Karen had come back to make up, but then I heard Brad start up his car and pull out of the driveway. God, Ethan's scope had no end. My relationship was ruined and then my running to Brad caused him problems too, but I suspected he was trying to track his girlfriend down, patch things up. I wished him the best. Out of all the people I cared about, Brad had my heart the most. I wanted him to do what would make him happy, and if Karen was the way to his happiness, then I hoped he would be able to find her and fix whatever problems I'd managed to cause.

But I'd never admit there was a part of me that hoped Brad's relationship was over too. And it wasn't because misery loves company.

It was because of that one thing I still had yet to completely admit to myself.



## Chapter Forty

I AWOKED THE next morning and sat up in Brad's bed. God, that had been hard. I could smell him on his pillow, his sheets, and in between the painful dreams I'd had about Ethan, I dreamed of Brad as well. Not good.

My neck and throat were tender. I knew, though, that the pain was temporary. I stretched and tried to look around the room. It was still semi-dark, and I could tell the sun wasn't up yet. Chris was still asleep, and that was surprising, but I knew yesterday had been hard on him as well. He was usually an early riser, hungry upon waking, so I knew he'd be up soon. But since he was still asleep and not stirring, I decided to take in the sunrise. I had no idea what would happen today or what was in store for tomorrow, so I wanted—I *needed*—to enjoy the hope of a sunrise, of a new day. I needed some inspiration and hopefulness. I needed a recharge.

I propped the pillow I'd slept on close to Chris's side where I'd been sleeping just to prevent him from rolling off my side of the bed, and then I draped my legs over the edge. I'd slept in the shirt and underwear I'd worn the day before. I was going to want a shower at some point, but for now, I just grabbed my jeans off the chair in Brad's room where I'd laid them last night and slipped them on.

I wasn't sure what time Brad had returned the night before. I only knew that he had. As I walked through the living room, I saw him sleeping on the couch. Because it was still partially dark, I couldn't see him well, but I could see that he had his shirt off under the sheet draped over his body. I felt some relief that he was able to go to sleep after what I'd put him through the night before.

Brad's house was deep in the city so I didn't know if I could really appreciate the sunrise, but I wanted to try it anyway. As quietly as I could, I unlocked the front door and walked outside onto the front porch. I sat on one of the two plastic chairs there, appreciating the brisk air, and I squinted through the trees to see the first colors of dawn trickling through the leaves.

As I tried to appreciate the beauty before me, my mind wandered back to Ethan. I realized I had not only grown tired of the emotional gauntlet that Ethan had put me through, I was tired of the city. Part of me would always love her, love that she never slept and she brought great minds together, would always love that there were endless things to do, see, be, and explore, would always love the diversity and culture. But she was cruel too. There was no rest in a city, no peace, no quiet...and no mountains. I couldn't see the Rockies from Brad's porch, and I missed them. I missed them terribly.

My heart wasn't here anymore. I yearned to be somewhere quiet, somewhere by nature. Yes, that desire was diametrically opposed to everything I had been over the last few years, surrounded by electric guitars, espresso, fast food, and screaming sex. I still loved the music, but I needed a haven. I needed someplace to hide. I wanted a farm out in the middle of nowhere where I could just garden and chase Chris around a willow tree. I missed home.

I giggled to myself, just picturing that thought in my head, of chasing Chris around a tree in the middle of nowhere, and I almost wanted to share it with someone. And that made me think of Ethan, the man I used to share those silly thoughts with, but that wasn't the person I wanted to share with today. Truthfully, I knew I probably needed some time alone, some time to heal by myself.

I heard the door open and turned my head. Brad walked out, wearing a t-shirt and holding Chris in his arms. My son said, "Mama," as Brad sat in the chair next to me. Suddenly, my thoughts grew light again and I smiled.

"How'd you sleep?"

I shrugged. I kept expecting Chris to hold out his arms, wanting me to take him, but he didn't. That wasn't a bad thing, but it was an odd behavior for my son. "What about you?"

"Probably about the same."

"Did I wake you up?" I'd probably shut the door louder than I'd meant.

"No. Chris did. He might be hungry."

"Yeah, probably." I touched my son's nose with the tip of my finger. "My little pumpkin."

He grinned and touched his nose. "Pukkin."

I started laughing. My son could make the darkest day seem brighter, but seeing him there on Brad's lap was even better. Brad smiled at me, and I wondered if he felt the same way. "I can put some coffee on, or would you rather grab some breakfast somewhere?"

"I just want coffee right now. I hate to bug you, but do you have some cereal or something Chris could eat?"

"Can he do scrambled eggs and toast?"

"Yeah."

"Then let Uncle Brad make some breakfast too."

Without thought, I touched his arm, and the words rushed out before I could stop them.

"Brad...thanks for everything. You've always been my best friend. I can always turn to you. Always. And...I'm sorry I always get you involved in the middle of all my bullshit."

He chuckled. "Jesus. You have no idea." Wow. Okay...so maybe I was even worse than I thought, and my facial expression gave that idea away. He shook his head. "Come on...I'll explain over breakfast."

As we stood, I noted that the sun was fully up, even though I still couldn't actually see it, but it had risen and was lighting the city. Once we were indoors, Chris reached for me. "Oh...he needs a diaper change. Be right back." The poor kid was soaked.

So I went back to the bedroom and took a diaper out of the bag, and even though I spoke sweet words to Chris, I wondered what Brad had meant. Whew. I knew there had been times he'd been involved in shit between Ethan and me just by virtue of the fact that he was in the band and he was a friend to us both, and I could think of a couple of times when he'd been directly involved, but I didn't think it had been constant. I guess I'd been wrong, and I wanted to hear what he had to say.

Brad was scrambling eggs in a skillet when I walked in, and I set Chris on the floor to play with the toy I'd fetched out of the diaper bag. I gave my son a bottle of juice and then asked Brad, "Want me to make coffee?"

"Sure."

So I busied myself with making it, wondering what Brad had to say. He turned back from the eggs. "I don't have a high chair for the little guy."

I tried to think of how to take care of the problem. "Maybe a stack of books or something to sit on?" But having Chris up that high without being secure made me nervous.

"If you don't care if he's standing, he could just eat in the living room, and we could put his food on the coffee table."

I grinned. "Have you seen the way he eats?"

He shrugged and pulled the skillet off the burner. "Fuck it. You only live once, right? I own a vacuum."

"Your house. If you're sure."

"Little guy's gotta eat." He pulled a saucer out of the cupboard. "You want any?"

I shook my head. "No."

He pulled out a plate. "Suit yourself." He scraped the eggs onto the big plate and the little saucer he'd gotten for Chris and then put two triangles of toast on Chris's. "A spoon for the little guy?"

"Yeah, but he'll probably just use his hands." Brad smiled and took care of the silverware just as the coffee was finishing up. I asked, "Sugar and cream?"

He nodded, letting me know I remembered, so I poured two cups and found the creamer in the fridge and sugar by the coffee pot. While Brad was taking the food in the living room, I got our coffee just right. He came back in the kitchen. "Want me to get the coffee or Chris?"

I smiled. "If you don't mind getting Chris..."

"Come on, buddy," he said, bending over and scooping him up. Brad had thought ahead and spread out a bath towel under where Chris would be eating. Chris stood, leaning against the coffee table, and just as I'd suspected, picked up a scoop of eggs with his little hand and shoved it in his mouth. Brad and I sat on the couch next to each other, and if it hadn't been such a tense moment, I might have enjoyed how otherwise natural just hanging with Brad and my son felt.

Brad looked at the plate of food he'd made for himself and touched the fork, but he left it on the coffee table. "I don't know why I made any for me. I'm not that hungry." He looked at me. "Sure you don't want any?"

I nodded and took a sip of my coffee. "I'm sure." I wouldn't have an appetite until I heard what Brad had to say. "So what were you going to say about being in the middle of my crap?"

He smiled and shook his head. "It's not what you think." The light was streaming in through the crack in the curtains, highlighting that there were no telltale signs in the universe of anything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. I could have almost believed that this moment was years earlier when we were young, optimistic, and carefree. He took a swig of coffee and set his cup down out of Chris's reach. "I went to your place last night."

I swallowed. It took me a few seconds to register what he'd said. "You *what*?"

He sighed. "Yeah, Val. You're not the only one having Ethan problems. And...what he did to you yesterday. That's it." I narrowed my eyes but said nothing. "We're supposed to be rehearsing three days a week, and we're lucky if he comes to one. And when he bothers, he's argumentative and asinine. Nick, Zane, and I have been considering kicking his ass out, even though he was a founding member." He took a deep breath and looked at his hands. "He's a wrecking ball. He doesn't create; he destroys. He tells us our new material *sucks*, but he won't do anything to help. And know what? He couldn't, because it's the most perfect stuff we've ever written. But he wasn't involved in it, and that's why he hates it."

"That's his fault for not being there." Just like with me. He was never there anymore.

"Damn right. But he doesn't see it that way, and until he does, he'll never change." He grabbed his coffee and tried to look at me but was struggling with it. "I was lying here on the couch last night, and I was pissed. Pissed about what he did to you, even though you haven't told me exactly what happened. Pissed that he doesn't give a shit about his friends, his band, his kid. Nothing. He's so goddamned self-absorbed. When we were kids, you know, that was fine, but Ethan never grew out of it. I'd stood by and never said a word, but I'm done."

"So...I just told him he has a week to get his shit together or he's out."

I nodded. "That's fair."

"I don't want you worrying about income, Val. You're still writing most of our lyrics. You're in the loop. We'll take care of you."

"I'm not worried about that."

"I know. But..." I held my breath. I was worried about what he was going to say next. "I also beat the shit out of him, Val." He hung his head, resting his forehead on his fist. "I'm sorry. I just...am so angry."

I touched his shoulder, wanting to hold him, but I knew it wouldn't be right. "I know, Brad. I know."

He looked up at me. "If he ever touches you again, I'll probably kill him."

"He won't. Ethan and I are done. Forever."

It might have taken me years and a lot of growing up, but I knew in that moment, as I looked upon the man I really loved and then looked over at my precious baby boy, that I really was done with Ethan. I couldn't save him. All I could hope for would be that he would save himself before it was too late.

\* \* \*

Oh, God, I felt so good. I felt satisfied, endorphins rushing through my body, filling me with happiness after the pleasure rush I'd just experienced. He pulled me close, making me warm.

His hands were stroking my back, and I kissed his chest. My God, I could never, *would* never grow tired of this man.

"Mommy, mommy!" Chris ran in the room, and I almost panicked. I hoped my cries of satisfaction hadn't awakened him. We rarely ever indulged in morning sex, but having my neck nuzzled had made it impossible for me to contain myself this particular morning.

I was still wearing the loose t-shirt I'd slept in, and I was glad. My son wouldn't get a surprise if the sheet fell down. "Come on up, sweetie." He climbed up on the bed. Even through the sheet, the tiny bulge of my tummy was noticeable. Chris touched it. "Baby?"

"Yes, baby, honey."

"We love baby."

"Yes. We love baby."

"Daddy Brad?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"You love baby too?"

Brad chuckled. "Yeah, of course, I love the baby."

It was *his* child, so I knew he did, but I didn't see how he could love the baby more than he'd grown to love my son. Brad lifted Chris up over me and rolled on his back, resting Chris on his abdomen. I thought back over the last year and a half. So much had changed. After all my worrying, I hadn't needed to move out my house. Ethan did instead, moving in with some trashy woman who was just as into heroin and other crap as he was. And I worked on me. I finally had the throat surgery I should have had years before. Brad and I had kept our distance for a while, but I invited him over for dinner one night, and we wound up confessing our love for each other.

Ethan, though...he just couldn't stop hurting me. He refused to grant me the divorce at first, so we battled it out for months. He kept holding Chris over my head too, threatening to try to take custody, even though he and I both knew that was ridiculous. No judge in the country would give Ethan sole or primary custody of his son. But I *did* want Ethan to be a part of his son's life, no matter what he'd done to me.

Ethan finally hit bottom again and spent several months in rehab. He cleaned up, and he visited me...and Brad, because by that point, we were living together. Brad had put his house up for rent and moved in with me. Ethan didn't try to beg for me back like he'd done multiple times in the past. I think he was starting to see the light. I could only hope. He apologized and said he wanted to see Chris as often as possible.

And he finally granted me the divorce and wished me happiness.

A week later, he and Brad talked out how they would get the band back together. And then he took Chris for a weekend of father-son bonding. It was too late then, though, because I saw how Chris looked at him. Sure, Ethan was his father, but Brad had become his daddy. No, Chris didn't hate his real father, but he didn't understand how Ethan fit in his life. Brad was the man who'd been there for him.

Brad wrote me a song too, and it was then that I realized he'd never lied to me. Not once. He had fallen for me the first time we'd met and, just like he'd promised, he'd waited for me. The women, even Karen, weren't much more than something to pass the time in an attempt to fill that emptiness.

Yeah...he'd waited for me to realize that Ethan wasn't the man for me. And when that hit me, I started crying. He'd been playing the song on his acoustic and singing it to me from across the room. When he finished and saw me crying, he rushed to my side to ask what was wrong. I was overcome with emotion, and he swept me off my feet and made love to me.

I'm pretty sure that was the night I got pregnant.

And now we'd settled into some semblance of normalcy. I looked over at Brad bouncing Chris, and I laughed when my child laughed. Brad looked at me, that deep look in his eyes, and he kissed me and then sat up, bringing Chris into a big hug.

"So what are we doing today?" I asked.

"I'm doing band practice this afternoon." Fully Automatic was working on their third album, and the powers that be seemed to think Ethan's meltdown and rehab stint would actually *help* sales. Brad had also been hinting that he wanted me to sing a song for this one since I had my voice back. But that was a conversation for another time.

"So...breakfast in or out?"

Chris sat between Brad and me, and he said, "I want pana-cakes."

I tousled his hair. I loved how he said some of his words, and that was one of the cute ones.

"With maple syrup?" I was hoping to goad him into another one of his cute words.

"No. Boo-berry."

I smiled. "Well..." I looked at Brad. "Does Daddy Brad have all that stuff?"

"Nope. I think we'll have to go out for *boo-berry*."

"I get my shoes," Chris said and slid off the bed to walk to his room.

Brad moved closer and kissed me. "So...we're getting the little guy pancakes. What're we gettin' his mama?"

"A cup of decaf, I think."

"Is that all?"

"I'll figure something out."

"Uh...there's something else I think you should get."

I raised my eyebrows and grinned. "And what would that be?"

He flashed me a wicked, knowing smile and then rolled over and opened the drawer on the nightstand next to his side of the bed. "Close your eyes."

"Do you have hash browns over there?"

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Close your eyes, Val.”

So I did, but I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. I felt him roll back over and grab my hand. I opened my eyes and saw that he was holding a beautiful but simple platinum ring with a pear-shaped diamond. “Will you marry me, Valerie Quinn?”

I hadn’t thought I wanted to get married again. After all I’d been through with Ethan, I didn’t think I wanted that sense of permanency. But this was Brad...and in just the short time we’d spent together, I knew he would always treat me right, and I knew too that I would always love him. I smiled and kissed him. “Yes, yes, I will, Brad Payne. I will marry you.”

I don’t know that I’d ever seen him looking that happy. He slid that ring on my finger, and that’s when I knew he’d planned it all out. It fit perfectly, so I suspected he’d taken one of my rings to the jeweler to have it sized.

Chris came back in the room and placed his shoes on the bed before climbing back up. Then he grabbed them and came over to my side. I rolled over to look at him. “Why are you crying, mommy?”

“Because, I think, my life is finally perfect.” Brad touched my belly, and Chris placed his hand on top of Brad’s. “No, I take it back, sweetie. I don’t *think*. I *know* my life is perfect.” I knew now that—no matter what happened from here on out—my life would be as perfect as it could ever be. Brad would see to that.

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*The story doesn't end there...*

## **The Bullet series by Jade C. Jamison**

### ***Rock Bottom* (Bullet #2)**

The much-anticipated sequel to *Bullet*.

Ethan Richards has fought depression and a host of other demons all his adult life, and it's caused him to lose everything—his wife, his son, his friends, and he almost loses the one thing that means the most to him—his band. He hits rock bottom and believes there is no way out.

Enter Jenna McCormick, a feisty drug and alcohol counselor, a woman with her own share of troubles. She finds Ethan intriguing but keeps him at a distance while trying to help him face life without crutches. She feels a spark but denies it, knowing that a relationship with unstable Ethan could be dangerous for both of them.

Ethan knows what he wants, though, and isn't used to being told no. Jenna isn't willing to risk Ethan losing his tenuous grip on sobriety, however, and is prepared to deny her deeper feelings to help Ethan climb out of his hole, but he learns how to let go of his pain when he finds that someone is prepared to walk with him through the shadows. Can he convince Jenna that they should take a chance on love or will they forever deny their feelings in an effort to keep Ethan on the straight and narrow?

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### ***Feverish* (Bullet #3)**

...To be *loved* by the good guy

...To be *fucked* by the bad boy

He'll make you **FEVERISH** either way...

Clayton "Jet" Smith has enjoyed acting the part of rock star god / incorrigible bad boy since his breakup with rock goddess Valerie Quinn. He's racking up quite a score playing the field, and



he has no plans to settle down anytime soon. His biggest problem these days is meeting his obligations. He's so busy having fun, he forgets the important things.

To help him out, he hires recent graduate Emily Brinkman to be his personal assistant, and he quickly finds a fire burning in his belly for her. There are two problems, however. The first is that Emily is engaged to be married, a fact that leaves Jet unfazed. The second problem isn't so easy to surmount, though: Emily is disgusted and unimpressed by both sides of the man.

Will Clay find a way to persuade Emily to try him out, not just for one night, but for all time?

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### ***Fully Automatic (Bullet #4)***

You might think you know Brad's story, but think again. There's so much more to his story than what Valerie knew. See Brad before Valerie came into his life and, when he was playing back burner to Ethan, see what Brad was up to when no one else in the band was looking.

Valerie might have thought she and Brad were inevitable and maybe, in the back of his mind, Brad might have felt that way too, but he didn't just sit around waiting for her. See the secret side of Brad that you had no idea existed. What kept the driving force behind Fully Automatic focused even while his heart was breaking?

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### ***Christmas Stalkings: A Novella***

***(Bullet #4.5)***

Val, Brad, and the kids decide to take a short but needed winter vacation to get away from it all and enjoy each other's company, but one thing is stopping them from relaxing like they should. Since fronting her new band Val Hella, Val has discovered the darker side of fame—she has a stalker, one who seems intent upon stepping up his game to get what he wants, and the ruin of their vacation becomes the least of their worries.

Coming December 2014

***Slash and Burn***  
***(Bullet #5)***

Is theirs a match made in heaven...or hell?

Nick Channing, drummer for Fully Automatic, has never taken relationships seriously. He's had fun and met dozens of women—mostly one-night stands—and he prefers it that way. From his parents to his friends, he's witnessed love and relationships firsthand and believes women are nothing but a headache.

Nick, Brad, and Val team up again to launch her new band Val Hella. There's one problem, though: they still need a bassist. They audition dozens of women, trying to find the perfect one and settle on Sabrina, known onstage simply as Sinna, a bad ass metal head who's perfect for the band: pierced, tattooed, dressed in black from head to toe, and she handles her bass with precision. She is a force to be reckoned with and Nick is smitten.

When Nick gets her alone the first time to lay on the charm, he's met with a coolness he's never experienced. Sabrina is mysterious and thoroughly unimpressed with Nick and his behavior, and that's when he decides he has to have her. As he falls headlong for her, he discovers her secrets, one dark shadow at a time. He thinks she loves him back, but he can't be sure. By the time he's completely down the rabbit hole, his heart's so entangled, he fears he might not be able to save himself. Can she save him or will she wreck him for all time?

Coming January 2015

**Other rock star books by Jade C. Jamison:**

**The Tangled Web Series**

***Tangled Web***  
***(Tangled Web #1)***

Katie Logan has had a secret crush on her best friend Johnny Church since high school, but he's never looked at her the same way. So when Johnny—now a famous rock-and-roll guitarist—

comes home to visit, Katie can't bring herself to tell him she's engaged to be married. She should have, though, because she soon discovers that maybe the attraction is mutual...

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### ***Everything But (Tangled Web #2)***

High school English teacher Erin Lancaster is stuck with the unwelcome job of filling in for the injured cheerleading coach, but she wants to back out when she discovers she has to be auctioned as a date during the annual spring fundraiser. She's horrified to find her rock star crush Riley Schultz, former frontman of Spawn, will be playing emcee for the event, but she's even more shocked that he also happens to be the highest bidder for her affections, and sparks fly when she discovers that maybe their attraction is mutual.

Riley's been in the music business long enough to know that true love is not in the cards for him, but the cute blonde he's dropped a wad of cash on would be a welcome distraction during his vacation. He has no idea there's more to her than meets the eye.

Will one week together be enough for them to quell the flames, to enjoy everything but?

### ***Punctured, Bruised, and Barely Tattooed (A companion novel)***

Kory McCallister has had her eyes on tattoo artist Stone Bowman for quite some time—so long, in fact, that no other guy will do. Stone pushes every turn-on button Kory has—he's tattooed from head to toe; he's hot; he's funny and charming; and he's also mysterious. So when Kory's friends dare her to ask Stone out on a date, she can't believe she actually finds the guts to do it.

More surprising? He takes her up on the offer.

She discovers that, while his past might not be quite as dark or mysterious as she'd imagined, it's bigger than she'd expected, and it's something she will need to contend with if she decides she

wants to keep him around to color her life for good.

***Seal All Exits***  
***(Tangled Web #3)***

Heather Morrow has been fighting demons all her life, but the past two years have likely been her darkest. So when her friend Katie invites her to a reunion of sorts, Heather jumps at the chance, because Katie, one of the most down-to-earth people Heather has ever called friend, is the only person she has ever felt like herself around, and Heather realizes that she needs an ally to help her out of the shadows.

Kiefer Steele, vocalist for Shock Treatment, has been battling some demons of his own. He's been a nothing most of his life, but world-famous guitarist J. C. Gibson took him from his beach-combing, weed-smoking ways and helped him make something of himself...except life on the road has taken its toll. The only ray of hope in his life has been his continuing online friendship with Heather. The two met in person once, backstage at a concert, and their friendship has grown stronger.

They haven't seen each other in three years, though, and both have changed immensely.

When they discover each other's darkest secrets, will their friendship—and budding romance—survive, or are they destined to spend their lives apart...and alone?

***MADversary***

They make sweet music together, but can it last?

Megan Walker doesn't plan to attend her high school reunion, but her best friend Lisa begs her to come along. Megan doesn't want to risk running into her old boyfriend Tyler Green, a man who has since become rich and famous as the frontman of a heavy metal band called Madversary. Lisa convinces her that Tyler would never show up for something like a reunion, so Megan gives in, only to regret it. Because when Tyler does show up, the spark reignites, and she doesn't know that she can bear letting him go again.

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## ***Then Kiss Me***

Casey Williams has left a loveless marriage and is trying to rebuild her life. She finds that, even though you can never go home again, you can find lust again, and she finds a love interest in Scott, her coworker. She also discovers his secret, that he's a drummer for a heavy metal band, and falls hard for him...just in time to find that, between his questionable friends and psychotic maybe-ex-girlfriend, he might not be the right guy for her. But her heart beats like a drum for him, and she finds herself willing to play with fire to get closer.

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Other books by Jade C. Jamison:

### **The Nicki Sosebee Series**

The character Nicki developed out of Jade's need to read a strong heroine, and do we mean strong! Nicki has a sailor mouth and can keep up in that department with her rough-and-tough best friend, Sean Ramsey. And don't get her started talking about sexual freedom. She's all about it. Granted, it stemmed from a lost opportunity at love (with said best friend), but she appreciates sex as much as any man ever thought of. She's still finding her way through life too, but she's figuring it out.

#### ***Got the Life (Nicki Sosebee #1)***

Nicki Sosebee wants her first headline, but she doesn't want it to read "Reporter found dead."

Nicki Sosebee has been working low-paying jobs ever since she finished school, but now that she's older, she wants more. She's a novice reporter trying to learn the ropes. Just as she's getting her career goals on track, though, her love life gets worse and worse. Sure, she has no problems picking up good-looking guys for brief flings, but relationships? Out of the question. Maybe it's because Sean, her gorgeous best friend, just can't see her as more than a buddy. So when Sean encourages her as she pursues her first headline-producing story, Nicki realizes that her life's pretty sweet...if only she can live long enough to see tomorrow's front page.

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### ***Finger Bang***

Orgasmic Meditation? Therapeutic?! Kaylee Baker is horrified when her girlfriends suggest a trip to artsy Boulder, Colorado, to check out the latest craze. What her friends don't know about Kaylee is that she is a little repressed, bordering on frigid, and the idea of a complete stranger bringing her to orgasm—therapeutic or not—is horrifying.

Blaze Donahue has admired Kaylee from afar for quite some time, and part of the reason he's kept his distance is because he's had no indication that she might even be interested. But when he's given the opportunity to offer her his own version of OM with no strings attached, he makes an offer she has a hard time refusing.

When there are undeniable sparks between the two, Kaylee runs, afraid of the overwhelming feelings she has for this gorgeous, sensitive guy. Blaze feels compelled to convince her otherwise but wonders if he'll be able to crack through the ice surrounding this sweet girl. Can they find true love or will it just be a one-time O?

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***And more! Jade just won't shut up!***

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*Christmas Stalkings (Bullet #4.5)*

*Slash and Burn (Bullet #5)*

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**Stalk me! I don't bite (well, not too hard anyway)!**

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