6:49 a.m.

"He's mine," Lauren Delaney screamed as she pushed through the crowd, shoving the innocent bystanders that separated us violently out of her way.

Her famous face, painted to perfection by a team of high-priced Hollywood makeup artists, was psychotically twisted like a woman possessed by the Devil himself.

Instant terror crept through my veins and spread throughout my entire body just from the sight of her. My muscles locked down, instinctively preparing for an altercation that was long overdue.

Despite her hellish demeanor, the conniving bitch still managed to look glamorous in her shimmery silver gown and stilettos as she charged straight at me. The blockbuster hit starlet obviously had no intentions to fight fair tonight. The crowd parted and it took a fraction of a second after that for me to notice the bright lights gleam off of long-bladed knife clenched in her fist.

My mind ordered my body to run.

A girl-fueled screaming match I could handle, although the verbal bitch-slapping I secretly desired to unleash on her would be best delivered in a much more private setting. I could even deal with some hair pulling and feeble punches, if she left me no choice but to defend myself from a physical altercation. Lord knows I wanted to rip her to shreds and dance on her grave for all of the problems she had caused. But at this moment, I was in no way prepared to fend off a knife attack.

Thousands of flashes of light blinded me as the photographers swarmed like angry bees, stinging my eyes with each click. As I raised my hands to shield my face from the relentless paparazzi, Lauren plowed into my chest, knocking the air from my lungs and my feet out from underneath me. The back of my head slammed onto the red carpet, sending an instant message of overwhelming pain throughout my skull.

Speckles of white blended in with the sea of crimson as I tried to refocus through the blur.

"Get off of me!" I screamed as she straddled me. I caught her by the wrist as she raised the blade, straining to remain within inches of being stabbed.

"You really think you belong with him?" Lauren taunted as she pressed the blade closer to my face. Planted on top of me, she definitely had the upper hand and the advantage of leverage. The sting from cold steel made me wince when the sharp tip scraped over my cheek.

"Are you prepared to die for him, bitch?"

Little did she know, when I thought I had lost Ryan, a vital part of me did die for him that day. But it was the risk that I took, knowing that the possibility of my heart being returned to me in pieces existed.

Thankfully, the miracle of my reunion with Ryan breathed new life into me, and my fractured heart and soul were well on their way to full recovery. I knew I could survive anything now.

As I struggled with her, darkness loomed around the edges of my thoughts, sending a chill throughout my veins. Foreboding gray block walls suddenly formed and surrounded us, bringing a sense of overwhelming dread over me as they encased us in. New panic from the fear of impending death swelled as we were being entombed.

I tried to scream but Lauren's fingers tightened around my windpipe, cutting off my flow of precious air.

A vision of my father, more so resembling a faint memory, ghosted and solidified into view. His fury was palpable, appearing ready to go on a murderous rampage. His angry fists slugged into the hazy figure of a lesser man.

His bloodied hands wrapped tightly around a young man's throat, mimicking the choke hold Lauren had on me. The two men continued to struggle, knocking things over in their wake. A large metal object flew from the wall and crashed heavy to the floor, causing a scream to tear from my throat as it missed my head by inches. My tears burned as they dripped uncontrollably from the corners of my eyes.

I strained through the haze trying to see the young man's face, but no matter how hard I tried to focus, his features remained obscured by long, straggly, jet black hair.

Suddenly, for no explainable reason, I didn't care about myself anymore. Or my father. Or Lauren. I wanted to help the young man. I needed to help him, defend him. I had to stop my dad from killing him.

The guy looked right at me and he spoke in an echoed rush as my dad continued to strangle him. "I love you, baby girl. I would *never* hurt you."

A tiny voice inside me knew that he spoke the truth. Still, my body shook, watching his white teeth turn an ominous red when he smiled at me.

"You will never touch her again!" my dad shouted.

A bloodied tear fell down the young man's cheek. And then another. I wanted to go to him and wrap my arms around him because that's what you do when people are sad. Big teddy bear hugs always make the tears stop.

Lauren's clenched hand shook my neck, instantly reclaiming my attention. With a snarl, she raised the blade high in the air.

As I watched the blade come down, reluctantly resigned to let Death take me and the darkness claim me, one last word echoed through the air.

"Cut."

Chapter 1 - Eye-opening

Eye-osening

"What the hell?" Ryan's head flew off his pillow.

I sat up and kicked the blankets away with my feet, panicking to untangle myself as I rubbed the phantom pain stabbing my chest. *Holy shit. Damn, that felt so real. Okay, calm down. It was just a dream. Just a dream.*

Ryan leaned up on the mound of pillows. I could see him scanning the room, looking for some sort of danger. "Tar, are you all right?" His hand grasped down on my thigh. "Taryn, what happened?"

I wanted to answer him but I was momentarily stunned and completely incapable of coherent speech, still caught in a freaked out haze between sleepy nightmares and reality. I tried to say something, but all that came from my mouth was the sound of a raspy, stuttered breath.

Fortunately it didn't take me long to realize where I was, for it had been less than twenty-four hours ago when I boarded a plane and departed out of Providence, Rhode Island. Now I was shaken and panting for air in a very luxurious hotel suite in Los Angeles, ripped from sleep because of my own ridiculous thoughts.

Ryan tugged my chin, his voice was franticly curt. "Look at me." His hand brushed my long hair out of my eyes. "Taryn, are you okay? Tar? Answer me."

I grasped onto his arm and managed a weak nod. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm... I'm so sorry I woke you."

"Don't worry about me," he insisted, curling up closer.

If his throbbing pulse in my hand was any indication, I'd say I had scared the shit out of him, too.

He smoothed my hair back, wrapping a few strands behind my ear. "What happened? You have a nightmare?"

I nodded, trying to save myself from having to explain.

"Jeez, baby." Ryan sighed. "Come here. Try to relax." He coaxed me back down to his chest and tugged the sheet and blankets over us again.

His skin was so warm; the hand that rubbed my back was comforting.

"It's okay. I've got you. You're safe. I won't let anyone hurt you."

If only he had that power. I had learned early on in this relationship that the scare factor grew exponentially when you're a famous person. And dating a famous person was no different – actually it was worse when delusional fans became obsessively jealous and wanted you out of the way.

Even normal, sane people lost their minds when it came to celebrities. Combine that with a world full of crazy people and the threat became very real.

I was thankful that Ryan was insistent, sending Mike into LAX yesterday to escort us safely out of the airport, or else the paparazzi would have eaten me alive. Ryan's public proposal painted a new, fat target on my back. It was one thing to be the local "fling" he had while on location; it was completely another once rumors started circulating that he actually put a ring on my finger.

How the hell they recognized me amongst all of the other people hurrying through the airport was mindboggling. Trying to get through the gauntlet in LAX was akin to sidestepping landmines. I still think the photographers only noticed me because they recognized Ryan's bodyguard first.

Heck, every public picture taken of Ryan lately had Mike in it somewhere - holding back fans, watching the invisible perimeter around Ryan with the expertise of a trained hunter. Between his gorgeous body and killer smile, Mike Murphy was becoming as famous as Ryan Christensen.

"You want to tell me what the hell scared you like that?"

Awe shit. I shrugged, not willing to start off my first morning finally reunited in his arms with stupid nonsense. "Not really. I don't even remember most of it anymore. I'll be all right."

Ryan huffed lightly. I was waiting for him to call me out on my little lie. "Did you dream about her again?" When I didn't respond, he hugged me tighter. "She's in jail, Taryn. She can't hurt us anymore."

I blinked with renewed awareness. Well, at least he had the psychobitch part right. Shame he picked the wrong one. Angelica, our incarcerated stalker, wasn't the one who had haunted my thoughts but I wasn't about to set him straight.

"I know. It was just a stupid dream."

"Why don't you tell me about it? Maybe you'll feel better if you get it out."

Part of me wanted to share, but what the heck would I tell him? I dreamt about your über famous, crazy bitch ex-girlfriend trying to kill me? Oh, and if that isn't bad enough, sometimes when I dream about my dead father, he's bloody and choking the life out of some teenager with pitch black hair? Some things are better left unsaid.

Ryan let out a lengthy yawn and stretched his legs, poking me in the rear end with the one part of his anatomy that was already wide awake. His two-day old beard felt wonderful on my back when he rubbed up on me. With a kiss on my shoulder, he said, "All right. I won't ask anymore. You talk about if only if you want to. What time is it?"

I glanced to the bedside table. "It's almost seven."

Cool air brushed my naked body as he rolled out from underneath the warm covers.

I tried to banish the last remnants of my nightmare from my memory, but certain parts were just playing over and over again like a bad video stuck on repeat. It wasn't the first time I dreamed about the boy with black hair and bloody red teeth. He made a repeat appearance in my dreams for as long as I could remember, always rehashing the same scene where my father is trying to kill him.

The part where Lauren Delaney factored in was a new and very unwelcomed addition to the nightmare.

Bitch.

How pleased she must have been with herself when she nearly succeeded in breaking up my relationship with Ryan. Thankfully, she failed. My disgust for her swirled. I couldn't let her get to me like this, not even in my dreams.

I shook my head as if it would help clear away the horrible visions. I had to own up to the fact that it was my own tormented thoughts haunting me; it's not like Lauren ever physically assaulted me in real life. No, her assault was much stealthier, leaving a trail of false evidence to lead me to believe she and Ryan had rekindled their previous relationship. My heart still ached thinking that just five short days ago I truly believed Ryan's parents had shown up to move him out of my apartment.

I glanced at my new diamond engagement ring – Ryan's promise of a future and a total commitment to me. His intention of "Forever" was etched inside the band.

I vowed to myself right then and there that I'd do everything within my power to prove her and everyone else wrong.

Ryan Christensen was the best thing that had ever happened to me. His love was like an invisible blanket that I had the privilege of wearing every day. If I had any hopes of having our relationship survive – I had to start handling things differently.

My eyes followed Ryan in the dim light as he shuffled across the carpeting. His muscular arm flexed, accentuating his biceps, when he used his fingers to comb his tawny, disheveled hair back. My eyes drifted from his yawning mouth, down the contours of his hard, naked body, to his other part that was still semi-erect.

All of the pictures ever taken of this man and all the posters with his likeness on them could never do the real thing justice. All six feet two inches of his cut, buff, and tight movie star body was one hell of a mental and visual distraction.

A small smile formed on my lips thinking about eating him for breakfast.

"What?" he asked with a sleepy smirk. He crawled back into bed, snuggling around me.

I secretly hoped after my rude awakening he'd be able to fall back asleep, considering that it was well after midnight when his family and our friends finally left our suite. Ryan had arranged for Marie and Gary and Pete and Tammy to come to L.A. with me, another secret surprise that I wasn't privy to. I gave Marie a long lecture on the plane about how much I hate secrets, no matter how much he wanted me to be surprised. Over these last few weeks, she and Ryan had become thicker than thieves.

I spotted the opened bottle of champagne left out on the nightstand. My mind instantly recalled how he tortured my breasts with the edge of the ice cold bottle, making them painfully alert. How I got even with him, hiding a piece of ice from the bucket in my mouth and then torturing his nipples with the same attention.

"I'm all sticky," Ryan muttered softly.

"I was just thinking about that. Sticky, but oh so worth it."

He growled in my ear. "I do believe we'll have to do that again. Maybe try extra sticky honey next time?"

"Or melted chocolate."

He swept my hair to the side and started kissing and biting my neck. "Definitely. Oh, there are so many things I can drizzle and lick off your body. The possibilities are endless."

His teasing tickle caused a bone-jolting shiver to blast through my body.

His eyes quickly leveled on mine, then he grimaced at me. "You know I'd never let anything happen to you. You know that, right?"

He must have misread my reaction. I knew he meant well but some things were out of his power - that is unless some guy was trying to talk to me. Then the protective, jealous boyfriend reared its head and jumped right into action. "I know."

Ryan squeezed my arm. "Okay, then maybe we should get in the shower. I want to have breakfast with everyone before I have to leave." He buried his face in my neck. "Fuck, this is going to be a long day."

The thought of having to move from this entangled position made me groan. I nuzzle in deeper, holding his head to my shoulder. "I'm too comfortable. Can't we just stay stuck to each other instead?"

Ryan groaned. "Oh, that is so tempting."

I let out a small sigh, knowing that the incredibly famous Ryan Christensen had an insane schedule ahead of him, jam-packed with one appearance and interview after another promoting the premier of his movie, *Reparation*. He'd only been in L.A. one extra day and he'd already been on two talk shows, a photocall, and to two radio stations.

My pulse skipped, imaging that in a few short days we'll be on numerous planes destined for places like London and Paris – places I'd never been to before. As enticing as touring Europe sounded, I was perfectly content wrapped in his arms and going nowhere.

"Call in sick," I whispered. "You lie and I'll swear to it."

His chest rumbled with laughter. "David, cancel everything. My gorgeous fiancée is glued to my body and I have absolutely no desire to put on pants – ever!"

I couldn't help but laugh with him.

Ryan coiled a long strand of my hair around his finger. "Believe me, if my schedule wasn't so tight, we'd be naked for days, weeks even."

I dug my fingertips into his tight rear end, lost in the sensations of his warmth, his strength. "Then maybe we'll have to block off a month or two of downtime? I think after all of the stress we deserve it."

Ryan pressed me back into my pillow. "Let's make that a priority." His glorious smile faded, suddenly turning from light and playful to strikingly, alarmingly serious. "You are the most important thing to me, Taryn. I hope you know that." His thumb stroked my cheek repeatedly. His eyes grew tender, then repentant. "I know the last few weeks have been rough."

Rough? That was putting it mildly. Testing my will to survive would be more accurate. I moved my left arm out from between us, rotating my wrist. It was starting to ache from being bent awkwardly underneath him. It still felt like I was wearing a cast.

Ryan grimaced. "Does it still hurt?"

I shrugged. "It gets sore. Stiff, sometimes."

He sucked in a deep breath. His hand softly stroked down my stomach. "Have you... have you seen the OB since...?"

I nodded. "Last week. Marie went with me."

Ryan's jaw tightened. He appeared upset about it.

"What?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I couldn't believe he was asking me this - with a clipped tone to boot. He was wrapping filming on *Thousand Miles* and apparently contemplating his feelings for me last week because we sure as hell weren't having heartfelt conversations.

He nudged me for a response.

"What kind of answer are you looking for?" I asked softly. "We were barely speaking to each other last week, Ryan. I didn't think you cared anymore. I was waiting for you to tell me we were over."

He grasped my left hand, kissing my fingers, my sparkly new engagement ring. "Oh, sweetheart... I'm sorry. I know I really fucked up. Things were just... and I was mad. *Shit*."

I brushed my hand on his cheek.

"Please tell me now. What did the doctor have to say?"

"Everything is back to normal. She renewed my birth control. I go back in a year unless I have issues."

Apparently he was holding his breath because it all came out of him at once. "Okay. Good." He scrubbed his face with his hand. "Man, I don't even know how to go about making this up to you. I know I hurt you. Believe me, I know. But I'm going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I promise."

I swallowed hard, knowing my actions and reactions played a major part. "We're both equally to blame. I'm sorry for losing faith in you."

His shoulder rose and fell, gazing at me knowingly. "I think we both learned a hard lesson. One that we can hopefully move on from and be stronger from it."

I nodded, done with the heavy. "I like the idea of going away somewhere. Just the two of us."

"Let's take a look at my calendar and set some vacations up."

With a tilt of his head, his lips found mine. So tender, so loving. We lay there for a long time, naked bodies entwined; eyes gazing into one another's to share whispered "I love you" sentiments on each other's lips.

God he was beautiful, all naked with his broad shoulders and muscular arms wrapped around me. His hair messed from sleep.

As much as I try to never think about it, I couldn't help but feel a bit smug, knowing most of his fans would willingly give up a limb, a family member, and a kidney to see him this exposed. *Sorry ladies. Hate to break it to ya, but he's all mine.*

Hungry for him, I drug open mouth kisses down his hard body, barraging him with a mixture of sensations; scoring fingernails, soft bites, the soothing wetness of my roaming tongue.

Ryan's eyes scrunched together and he melted back into the pillows when I slipped my wet lips and tongue around him. Our time together was sparse, so I was going to make every second count.

"Oh, *Tar*," he whispered out, tensing from the onslaught. His fingers coiled in my hair, guiding me as I pleasured him. Damn, that was such a turn-on for me. I raked my hand up his chest and swallowed him deeper, drawing out a surrendering moan from his throat.

I had just begun to get creative with my hand and mouth when the shrill of his cell phone rudely interrupted our moment.

"Grrr... what?" he growled, refocusing his attention to the nightstand. "Who the hell is bothering me *now*?"

I chuckled to myself, immediately thinking of the one person who has the knack of calling at the worst possible times. She must have a sixth-sense for knowing the exact moment when her son is about to get laid.

"Ignore it," I murmured. I wanted him to relax and forget about his constantly ringing cell phone, his hellacious schedule, and gauging by his purrs and the fact that he just moaned "oh God" again, hopefully in a few more minutes he'd forget how to spell his own name. I hoped that the caller would give up soon; the ringing was annoying.

Two minutes later, his phone chimed again. "You've got to be kidding me," Ryan groaned. He twisted to grab his phone but it was several inches out of his reach.

"Mmm-mmm." I held him firm, pinning his hips.

"Just let me turn it off."

"No. You'll check messages. Leave it."

"No, I woh- oh, fuh..." he hissed. "Damn that feels good. Mmm..."

Yeah, I knew you'd like that.

His hands immediately returned to touching me, combing my long hair out of the way while I tried not to mentally count the number of times his phone chimed.

Ryan nudged my chin. "Stop, baby. I don't want to come yet." The moment I looked up at him, his hand swept my neck and he pulled me up to his mouth. I wanted to drink him into every cell in my body. Take him to new places where pleasure and love where as necessary as oxygen. I sucked his top lip into my mouth, wanting, needing.

He moaned in my mouth and wrapped an arm around me. With one fast swoop, he effortlessly flipped me over, hovering over top of me.

Long fingers brushed fire up my thigh and slipped deep into me while he feasted like a starving babe on my breast. Desire to feel more than his slick fingers inside me had me tingling, but all those wonderful, erotic thoughts flew from my mind the moment his freaking cell phone chimed again.

"Son of a..." He rolled away from me and slapped his hand down on the intrusion. In all honesty, at this point I was curious to know who the hell was being so damn persistent.

He looked at the display and scoffed, answering my questioning stare. "It was Marla. All four times. I'm turning it off now."

No sooner did he say those words when the telephone on the table in our suite shrilled loudly. That got one very angry, rock hard, and unsated man out of his bed. Someone was about to get holy hell unleashed on them.

"What?" he said with a venomous bite, letting whoever was calling know his exact feelings about being disturbed. "I was trying to sleep.

Now? Why?" His jaw clenched. "This can't wait an hour? No. I just woke up. Fine. Give me ten minutes," he muttered. "I said ten minutes."

Ryan whipped his cell onto the chair and cursed. I hadn't seen him this pissed in a long time. "Tar, you need to get up and get dressed."

"Why? What's going on?"

Ryan looked at me warily as he pulled his jeans up over his naked body.

Worry started to set in. "Hey. What's going on?"

His lips puckered with disgust. "Marla and David are on their way up."

I groaned privately. Wouldn't be the first time his publicist and manager disrupted his life at an inopportune time. To say they were overbearing was an understatement. He jostled the clothing around in his open suitcase with frustration, sparking my next question.

"Why?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Photos were leaked," he mumbled.

A wave of fright pricked at my nerves. "What photos?"

I watched the back of his head sway. "People in the bar took shots of me proposing to you on Saturday," he muttered over his shoulder. "Pictures and videos are all over the Internet now."

I drew in a deep breath as his sudden anger about this blindsided me. Ryan was so riled he had trouble picking two T-shirts apart. *You proposed publicly. What did you expect?*

"So? How bad is it?"

Ryan signed heavily before looking back at me with apologetic eyes. "Tar, you know how it is. Pictures were on some fan sites and Twitter that night already."

I stared at my feet, trying to understand. This was not new news. We received numerous calls for confirmation before he even left my apartment in Rhode Island. Why is he so bent? And what the hell happened to the adoring man I was just loving five minutes ago?

"Taryn," Ryan interrupted my thoughts, tossing my jeans over to me.

I let out another sigh as I shoved my right foot into the pants leg. "If there's a problem, why didn't you discuss this with me sooner?"

"Tar – you know why," Ryan muttered as he slipped a T-shirt over his head. "Let's not go there, okay babe? Please?"

"But..."

He appeared resigned. "But what?"

I shook my head. "I'm confused. Yesterday when Mike collected us at the airport, he warned me that the paparazzi were going to swarm and I asked him if I should hide my ring. When he called you from baggage claim you said to tell me, 'never fucking ever take your ring off.' So if it didn't matter for me to be seen with this ring and us to be engaged, why does it matter today?"

Ryan narrowed his eyes. "And did you?"

I was momentarily stunned, knowing that that brusque tone wasn't really meant for me. "Did I what? Keep your ring on or get photographed wearing it?"

He shrugged. "Either. Both."

I supposed this was information he needed before being bombarded. "Yes, I kept your ring on, as it will *never* leave my finger, but no, I did not allow the repugnant thieves to make their living off of our happiness. I kept my hand tucked in my pocket."

He nodded once. "Yeah, well, keep that in mind," he said on his way to answer the door.

Marla Sullivan, Ryan's icy Publicist, greeted me with a half smile, half snarl when she charged into the main living room of our suite. Even though it was early in the morning, she was already dressed in a crisp designer business suit, her short black hair matching in tailored perfection. An oversized black bag dangled from her red, pointy fingernails.

"Sit," she ordered.

Ryan glared at her for a moment and then pulled out a chair at the large dining table.

"Weekly Reporter, CV Magazine, Star..." she announced in a scathing tone, dropping printed sheets of paper on the table in front of

him. "You're on all of them. I suppose this is why you've been avoiding my phone calls for the last four days."

Ryan barely glanced at them. He slumped back in his chair and started to rub his forehead, pushing the paper away with his other hand. "I've seen them already. So what."

I edged my body closer. That's when I saw for the very first time the grainy, dark pictures of Ryan standing on top of a very familiar round oak table and another dark picture of him kneeling in front of me. Candid shots from Saturday night when he proposed to me publicly in my pub were now plastered all over the tabloids. My heart sank in my chest from their blatant exploitation.

"So what? Ryan, you were standing on a table in the middle of a bar! What were you thinking?" she scolded him like he was a child.

Ryan rested his elbows on his knees while he bowed his head, refraining from giving her an answer.

"Well, this certainly counters the shots they got of her standing in the middle of the street in Miami two weeks ago," she said callously, nodding her pointy chin in my direction.

Leave it to Marla to remind me of the huge idiot I made of myself when I stood in the downpour staring at what I thought was Ryan cheating on me with his co-star, Lauren Delaney, when in fact they were still on location filming.

Ryan straightened and scoffed harshly at her comment. "Don't even go there," he warned through his teeth, giving her an angry glare.

It didn't matter that Kyle Trent, my former bodyguard, and Lauren Delaney, Ryan's co-star and former girlfriend, conspired together, forming an awkward alliance to insidiously destroy our relationship. The only thing that the press was concerned about was the photographic evidence of my mental breakdown from Ryan's supposed infidelity. "Caught Cheating!" all of the headlines announced.

And now, all of the headlines flashed, "Engaged!"

Two weeks of ups and downs and aggravating media scrutiny - Ryan and Lauren are together, Taryn catches Ryan cheating, Ryan and Taryn call it quits, Ryan's secret flight to Seaport, Rhode Island - were now

topped off with new photographic evidence that he actually climbed on top of a table.

"Ryan, we've had these discussions. Do you want to destroy your career?" She waved her hand in my direction. It was apparent that she meant *I* was the one destroying his career.

"No! Of course not!" he bellowed.

Marla huffed and poked her finger on one of the papers. "Well, I told you to keep this inane decision of yours private. So much for that."

I gasped in shock from her verbal attack. *Inane?* Is she really standing there lecturing my fiancé and implying with the tact of a wrecking ball that his decision to propose to me was stupid and asinine?

"Do you think you could have at least warned me first that you actually went through with it?" She slapped one of the sheets down on the table in front of him. "I come back from Monterey to be completely blindsided by this, too?"

I rolled my eyes at her comment and her overdramatic little meltdown. Her shiny, black patent leather high heels captured my attention. I surmised that her shoes must match the color of her heart today.

"I got caught up in the moment," Ryan grumbled, taking the submissive position to this domineering bitch. It was the first time I saw him bow down to anyone. This was not the "fuck you, no bullshit" posture he took with the rest of the world. This woman was making him fold like a house of cards in the wind. I pressed my lips into a hard line, holding my tongue.

"Caught up in the moment?" Marla questioned incredulously. "Is that your *excuse*?"

Ryan ignored her and sprang up from the chair when there was another knock at the door. "David," he said flatly, his eyes refusing to look up when his manager came into our suite. David slowly shook his head at Ryan, showing his displeasure to being summoned.

My heart rate picked up when I processed David's overall demeanor. Now both of Ryan's "handlers" were here to gang up on him. The Witch and the little Slime Ball, here to tag-team him and beat him further into submission.

I'll be damned before I let them make him feel like crap for proposing to me.

"David," Marla greeted Ryan's manager. "Well," she huffed, annoyed, "let's talk about damage control." She uncrossed her bony arms and picked up a few of the printouts, tossing them in David's direction. "There are two videos of him singing on YouTube as well."

"I know," David admitted. "You really know how to stir up a media shit storm, my friend," he chuckled out lightly as he feigned looking at the photos. I'm sure by this point he was intimately familiar with them.

Ryan was too busy stewing and staring at the floor to respond. It took a split second after that for David to redirect his glare at me. This was not the first time Ryan's manager had issues with me either and it was starting to become apparent that we all may never get along. This was so *not* good.

"I don't know why you're making such a big deal about this," Ryan bit out.

"I don't either." If this was how they handled happy news, I'd hate to see how they handled a majorly bad shit storm.

David sort of shrugged it off. "It's not, really, Taryn. What you have to understand is that Ryan's career is potentially riding on how well *Reparation* premiers. This is his first major motion picture lead role outside of the *Seaside* franchise and the critics, the major studios - everyone is waiting to see if he can carry a film on his own. This premier is big, and it's all about image control, that's all. This is nothing new, Ryan."

Image control?

"I'm sorry, but I still don't understand. What does our engagement have to do with any of that?" I glanced back at one of the printouts.

Marla's head jerked in my direction. "Well I'm sure you'll start to care when he's offered subpar roles and the money isn't there anymore."

I could have done without her "isn't it obvious or are you too stupid to realize it" glare.

Ryan's fist hit the table. "Do not talk to her like that," he warned.

"Marla-" David said, attempting to quell her temper.

"I could care less how much money he has. My feelings for him aren't tied to his fame or his fortune, despite what you think. Are you trying to say he won't get offers and people will stop coming to see his movies now because we're engaged?"

"No, no." David tried to dismiss my assumption, halting me with his hand. "Aaron and I have been –"

Marla interrupted. "Do you remember all of the negative press Tom Cruise received a few years ago when he jumped on Oprah's couch? This outburst of his is very close to the same thing," she said in her nasally tone. "Tom is still trying to recover his career from that lapse of judgment. Ryan's career is only beginning to blossom. His future prospects all stem from the decisions he makes now. Do you want to see him fail?"

My spine stiffened. "Of course not!"

"Jesus Christ. I wasn't on fucking TV," Ryan groaned, but she ignored him.

Marla continued to address me. "Then you'll need to accept that the public's perception of his status and behavior greatly affects his marketing viability. He needs to remain low key and professional at all times – without scandal or opportunistic individuals taking advantage of his good fortune."

Her last words felt like a slap. "Are you insinuating that I'm one of them? Despite what you may think, Marla, I care about his success. Tom received that negative press because he bounced up and down on her couch like a monkey and practically arm wrestled with Oprah on the set. Besides, who cares about that now? Is he supposed to apologize to his fans for the next ten years because he had an outburst of extreme happiness? Are his movies less marketable because he has a wife and a family to go home to at night when he's not being a movie star?"

Marla adjusted her posture in the chair and, for a moment, I thought she would try to be civil.

"The simple fact that you can recall his 'negative press' outburst like that speaks volumes. In this business, negative impressions can linger for years, in some cases having irreparable consequences on an actor's career. Besides, Ryan is here to do press for his movie, not be

inundated with questions about his ridiculous display. His moment of indiscretion is now hugely overshadowing the premier of *Reparation*. You forget that he is being paid by very influential people to promote the movie, not to explain why he climbed on a table," Marla informed harshly.

She turned her glare on Ryan. "You do not want the kind of press that comes from making a complete spectacle of yourself."

"I know what my responsibilities are!" Ryan said angrily.

"Then you should have controlled yourself and realized that standing up on a table in the middle of a crowded bar was a bad idea!" she zinged him back.

Ryan's hands were balled into fists. "Do you *really* want to keep pushing me on this? I get the point."

"Well, someone's got to keep on top of your behave -"

Gaaaaahhhh!

"Enough! Just stop it! I don't care who you are. You will not take one of our most precious memories and turn it into something he should feel guilty for doing. I will *not* allow it."

I stood behind Ryan and rested my hands on his shoulders, actually fearing that if I let go of him, table, chairs, and bodies would go flying. "So he stood on a table and asked me to marry him. So what? You're making it sound like he was high on dope and clubbing baby seals when he did it. Surely this, this disclosure, can be turned into something positive."

Marla stared blankly at me, apparently surprised that I had the guts to speak again.

"Ryan," she turned her attention back on him, "perhaps it would be better if David and I continued this meeting with you privately to discuss our action plan. I'm sure Taryn has other things she needs to attend to."

"Excuse me?" I glared at her, completely astonished that she would even think to remove me from the discussion. This bitch had some nerve.

Ryan pulled out the chair next to him, startling me. "I don't think so. Anything you have to say to me you say in front of my fiancée, too.

This affects her life just as much as it does mine. *I* will decide what does and does not require her involvement, not you. Got it?"

Marla stared at him blankly.

"Got it?" he said with force.

Marla breathed out her unhappiness and righted herself in the chair. "Of course."

Relieved, I took a seat and patted his thigh in private to thank him. He covered my diamond-clad hand with his own.

"Now then... We will inform all of the interviewers at the press junket today that questions about your personal life are off-limits. Someone will be present at all times to assure that those questions are averted so as not to detract from the *Reparation* and future *Seaside* premiers. We'll put the same stipulations on all of your appearances throughout the junket as well."

Ryan looked like someone had strapped him in the electric chair with a heartless hand itching to flip the switch. I could tell his thoughts were mulling over the best ways to escape. I rubbed my fingertips over his back, trying to ease his tension.

"You will have to handle yourself appropriately during your appearance on Jimmy Collins tonight and with Nigel Allen on *Night Life* tomorrow. You should know by now how to avoid those types of questions," Marla said. "But just in case I'm wrong..."

While she was on her soapbox, I picked up one of the tabloid magazine prints, eyeing the supposed scandalous front cover.

"We'll handle your discussion topics at the pre-interviews..." she continued to drone.

I'd like to believe I was listening intently to her every word, but my mind was suddenly very preoccupied, thinking of ways to choke the ever loving shit out of her so she'd shut the hell up.

To me, the tabloid cover didn't look bad at all, compared to some of the other reports that were previously printed about Ryan and me. Even the story byline wasn't too hateful. Eyewitnesses had reported that "Ryan sang a beautiful song while playing his guitar prior to professing his love for local business owner, Taryn Mitchell". What's so scandalous about that?

It was times like these I wished some of those inhuman special powers portrayed on film could actually happen, like being able to cut off the flow of oxygen to her lungs with my mind, or hurling her across the room just by imagining it. Evil thoughts, I know, but this woman brought them out in me. Especially when she was smacking her lips together, lecturing my future husband on the proper behaviors of A-list celebrities and the cryptic responses he should give today to avoid talking about our relationship in public.

Ryan and I both jumped slightly when there was another knock on our hotel door. I was thankful for any diversion that veered my mind off of strangling the shit out of her.

Through the peephole, I instantly recognized the young, long-haired blonde standing outside our room, having seen her glowing face and friendly smile the last two days when we had numerous chats over our computers. She had a large messenger bag slung over her shoulder and a thick manila envelope pressed to her chest.

"Hey. Come on in," I said warmly through the opened door. With all the reprimanding that was happening in our room, I had forgotten that Trish, Marla's assistant, was coming to help me get dressed properly for the premier.

The second Trish stepped into the room it seemed like the air changed and it was easier to breathe in here.

"It's nice to finally meet you in person."

"You, too!" Trish bounced excitedly and hugged me like we were reunited college friends. "Even though I sort of feel like I know you already." I noticed Trish's eyes glance past me into the room where her boss sat, still lecturing Ryan. "How's it going so far?"

I shrugged. What could I tell her? That I think her boss is a royal bitch that I want to toss off the roof of this hotel?

"Did she say anything about doing a press release on your engagement?" she whispered.

"What is your problem? Why are you being like this?" Ryan asked Marla harshly, trying to keep his voice down.

I shook my head at Trish. "No. Not a word."

Marla made her signature throaty scoff, the one that sounds like a cat starting to choke up a hairball. "You're starting to fly on a whim while the rest of us are left to clean up the mess."

"What mess?" Ryan asked. "I got engaged. Big deal. I'm not the first actor to do this. I just don't understand why you hate her so much."

"Ryan, I don't hate her. And I certainly won't *hate* the next girl either. You're young. You have the world at your disposal. It's my job to guide the perception that the world has of you, so those doors continue to open for you."

Trish frowned at that.

"I'm telling you right now, there won't be another one. Get that straight."

Trish and I walked back into the dining room. She carefully placed the stuffed package on the table next to Marla's arm, almost bowing as she set it down.

"Are these the new press packets?"

"Yes. I just came from the printer," Trish said mildly.

Marla opened the envelope, taking her good old time overly scrutinizing the contents. She was just starting to complain about a mistake she found when Ryan interrupted.

"Are we done?"

I blinked in Ryan's direction. Gone was the normal, even-tempered man I loved. In his place was a seething time bomb ready to explode. My heart pinched with fright hearing the menace in his tone.

Marla pretended not to hear him. How could she not?

"David, we need to schedule a meeting with Ian Goldberg. We've already received offers for exclusives on this. Celeste Crawfield left me ten voice mails; *Glam* wants first dibs for a cover story. Huge offers are starting to pour in and we both know how messy engagement and wedding generated earnings can be. He should start drafting a prenup immediately for Ryan before his fortune is compromised and —"

Ryan stood up; his chair crashed to the floor. "That's it. We're done here. Get out. *Everyone*." He grabbed the papers on the table and flung them at her. "And take this bullshit with you."

She sighed like an unhappy, controlling mother. "You know things need to be formed legally, Ryan."

"I don't care!" Ryan yelled. "It's none of your goddamned business."

David was indifferent to Ryan's order, taking the time to adjust his sleeves and peer at his watch. Apparently movie star temper tantrums were old hat. "I'll call the lawyers and get things rolling. Your car will be here at nine and —"

"I said get out! OUT!" Ryan shouted at him, the veins in his neck cording from the strain. He nodded his chin at the door. I had never seen him this angry. If he'd yelled like that at me, I'd be running for the elevator.

Five seconds later, our bedroom door slammed shut.

I found Ryan leaning with both palms flat on the glass window, his head hanging between his arms, panting as if he'd just been released from a caged death match. I feared even whispering his name might cause him to detonate.

I sat on the edge of our crumpled bed in silence, giving him ample time and space to calm himself while I mulled over how the news of our happiness had just turned into a twenty minute patronizing lecture.

What should have been hugs and champagne and congratulations with smiles and pats on the back was the exact opposite – anger and heartless animosity mixed with ugly accusations and assumptions from the team he had managing his life.

Pressed against the glass like that, I wondered if Ryan was regretting his actions now.

I feared sooner or later, one of us would.

Not willing to take such chances, I stepped to his side. Ryan looked at me warily before clutching me to his chest.

Now was not the time for regret.

Chapter 2 - Deviation



Ryan had just started eating his omelet when his little weasel manager, David Ardazzio, walked into the hotel restaurant to collect him. The hand that was tenderly stroking my thigh in private under the table suddenly stilled and tightened.

David, of course, had to adjust his wristwatch; his way of saying "it's time to go" without appearing like a dickhead, I suppose. My eyes narrowed, giving him my own silent message in return, one that boldly said, "Mess with my man anymore today and I will dig my fork into your chest to find out if there really is a heart in there." Hah! My first twenty-four hours in L.A. and I was already becoming cynical and hostile.

Considering I had just spent the better part of the last forty minutes trying to get Ryan to lose the murderous scowl on his face - five minutes of which were spent just holding him in the shower so we could apologize for loving each other - my hostility was justified. I'd like to think that precious water supply could have been used for much better purposes, like to wash off the sweat from our interrupted wake-up sex or even better, initiate a second session of incredibly hot shower sex after incredibly hot wake-up sex.

But no, sadly, we used the water to bathe, feel sorry for ourselves, mask our disappointments, and attempt to exorcise unwanted demons from our thoughts.

The only reason Ryan was appearing somewhat lively and animated now was because his mother was sitting across the table from us, all shiny and happily oblivious to our misery. We both knew that all it would take was one slip and she would press for details. Lord knows neither of us were in the mood to be interrogated by mom.

Ryan had enough on his plate. His day was packed with one-on-one interviews, a photocall, an open panel Q&A with the press, and ending with a TV appearance on the Jimmy Collins Show. Taping was scheduled for five p.m.

"Ready to go, Ry?" Mike Murphy, Ryan's personal guard, asked as he slowly rose from the large dining table. Mike took extra care wiping his lips off on his linen napkin, stalling while Ryan quickly shoveled more breakfast into his mouth.

I was so relieved that Mike had stuck with Ryan all these months. He was the only person within Ryan's entourage that I truly trusted. He was there with us in the hospital when I lost the baby. He shielded us diligently when we dealt with our psycho-fan stalker and was by our sides so many other times that I lost count.

Ryan considered Mike to be one of his best friends and I regarded him as our own personal savior.

I glanced across the table and noticed Marie trying not to be conspicuous with her gaze, but I knew better. She and I had been best friends for so long; I knew the look she wore when she was stripping a man naked in her brain. And right now she had the former Marine flat on his back on top of this table begging for her mercy. Can't say I blame her. Mike was only thirty-two, very single, had an incredibly buff body, and to say he was merely cute was insulting.

"Gotta go, babe," Ryan said in my ear, snapping me out of my internal speculations. He patted his jeans pocket. "You need anything, just call me. I have my phone on vibe. Mike gave you all of the security details for the show tonight and you have our credit card and stuff if you need it. Have fun shopping. Whatever you ladies want, get. All right?"

"Got it."

He gave me a hard, stern stare. "I mean it."

That was his way of reminding me to get over my issues with spending his money.

"I know you do. I understand."

"Good."

He leaned in to give me a kiss.

"Get something sexy to wear for me," he growled on my lips. "A few somethings, okay?"

I was glad to know thoughts of me in lacy undergarments were helping him step out of his funk. "You bet. Slutty towels in every color just for you."

He held my tipped up chin and gave me a renewed smile, grinning at our private joke. "That's my girl. I'll see you later."

While everyone finished their breakfasts and chitchatted, I found myself staring at the white tablecloth, getting lost in my own thoughts again from the void left behind by Ryan's empty chair.

I pushed the piece of pineapple around on my plate, still feeling the tingle he left on my lips, wishing he didn't have to rush so much.

Marie and her husband, Gary, started sniping at each other again, pulling me from my private thoughts. They'd been fighting a lot lately, even getting into a heated argument at our impromptu engagement party. I felt really bad on Sunday, thinking we were intruding on some intensely private moment. And every time I asked her what was going on she'd casually dismiss it, simply stating that he was being an ass again.

So I didn't probe. Instead, I drifted off into my own dilemmas, thinking how my mental breakdown over the last few weeks was such a ridiculous waste of energy. Had I known then what I knew now, all of this extra anguish and heartache that was swirling around the edges of *my* thoughts would have been avoided.

I glanced over at my other girlfriend, Tammy, watching her butter a piece of toast while her soon-to-be husband, my long time friend Pete, talked and laughed heartily with Ryan's brother and sister-in-law, Nick and Janelle. Ryan had arranged for everyone important in our lives to be here. Another reason I loved him dearly.

As I took in the faces of my most cherished support crew, a sad though occurred.

While I carried on uncontrollably like an immature little girl, crying and insisting that Ryan had slipped and cheated on me with Lauren Delaney in Miami two weeks ago, all of the people sitting at this table knew that he was going to propose.

How long had they all known his intentions? Weeks? Months?

Suddenly I felt like a huge ass all over again, quite embarrassed by my completely irrational behavior when my friends broke my bedroom door down to get to me. At the time, I was physically and emotionally broken, locking myself away from the world while thoughts of Ryan being unfaithful tore me to shreds. No wonder Marie slapped me across the face when I became somewhat hysterical. I must have looked like a blithering idiot to all of them.

But I couldn't stop the flood once it started. It drowned me.

I stared at the blank whiteness. How close I came to ruining this relationship - ending it, actually. Well, no more of that. Ryan has been nothing but faithful and trustworthy. He adores me and I want him more than I want my next breath.

"Taryn?"

I felt the fingers touch my shoulder, startling me. Trish was standing behind me; her golden hair was pulled back by the sunglasses that rested on top of her head.

"Are you ladies ready?" Trish asked.

With a smile, I nodded and grabbed my purse.

A large, chauffeured Suburban pulled up to the front doors and we all climbed in. Ryan's generosity never ceased. Not only did he pay to fly everyone out to L.A., his little credit card comment in the restaurant meant he was also springing for new outfits for all of us.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at the "hall of many dresses." Well anyway, that's what Marie called it. She was right.

"Oh, what a day," Trish sighed out, eyeing a burgundy colored shimmery gown. I had separated myself from everyone else to follow her through the rows.

"Bet you're glad to be out here instead of in the office," I commented, figuring she was enjoying shopping more than working.

"You have no idea." Trish exhaled with relief. "Especially since *she* is on the warpath today."

I frowned slightly, pitying all of those poor people who had to deal with Marla on a regular basis.

"I still don't understand why she's so angry about things," I muttered.

"I do," Trish said, fumbling through her Blackberry that just chimed. "She found out her number one client got engaged from the sleazy tabloids. Be glad that you missed that. She went absolutely ballistic."

"I already know she despises me," I grumbled quietly. "And that little known fact adds a ton of stress on Ryan."

"Don't feel special. She hates everyone," Trish said matter-of-factly, her thumbs pushed a few buttons on her cell. "I've been with her for seven years and she still doesn't like me."

I flipped the tag over on a cream colored dress. "Well, I didn't like the way she talked to him this morning. She yelled at him like he was a child and I sort of wanted to punch her."

"I wish you would have," Trish said under her breath.

"Hate her that much, too?" I asked jokingly, following her around to the next rack of dresses.

Trish snickered uncomfortably. "Some days are worse than others. Unfortunately in this town, it's hard to catch a break, no matter how skilled you are. That's why so many actors are waiters. And PR? If you're not with an established firm, you starve. Since I like to eat, I've learned to shut my mouth and do as I'm told."

This morning's badgering continued to plague me. "Trish, really, is it *that* bad that people know about our engagement?"

She paused. "Well... It *is* his personal business that's out there now." She moved a little closer. "Did he really stand on a table when he proposed?"

I sheepishly smirked and nodded to confirm.

Trish's grin widened. "Can I see it?" she asked excitedly, requesting my hand. "Wow, your ring is gorgeous! So that's what a quarter-of-amil looks like. I'm so glad he went with William Goldberg. His rings are absolutely breathtaking. I love the huge trillions on the sides." She laughed lightly while inspecting my ring. "This was definitely, definitely worth the trouble! Flawless..."

I didn't understand; my brain seized when she let it slip how much Ryan spent on my ring. I shook my head, trying to prevent the high pitched ringing and the urge to pass out from taking over. "Um... ahh... What do you mean? What trouble?"

"Sneaking Ryan around to meet jewelry designers?" she said tentatively. "I spent hours coordinating that around his Academy Awards appearance. No offense, Taryn, but I was relieved when you couldn't make it. I was freaking out trying to arrange a meeting without you knowing about it."

My mind traveled back to the end of February when I was recovering after being hit by a car and missed my first opportunity to be with him at the Oscars. I glanced at my hand, grateful to her in so many ways.

"Well, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for all of your hard work. I truly appreciate it."

Just then something else dawned on me. "Wait... if you helped him get my ring then why is Marla so mad? I mean she obviously knew..."

Trish looked guilty. "She knew he bought a ring but Marla, being the bitch that she is, tried to ta... you know what? It doesn't matter."

I should have figured as much. "She tried to talk him out of it," I muttered, finishing her sentence. "I'm bad for his career."

Trish looked baffled. "Why would you think that?"

I'm surprised she had to ask. After all, it was her boss that did everything except say those exact words out loud. Marla's actions and comments certainly got that message across. "What about the fans? Are they going to turn on him like that if he's not single anymore?"

Trish laughed quietly at my apparently silly question. "His fans are not going to turn on him unless he starts making shitty films. I can't believe she's telling him to avoid it with Jimmy Collins tonight though. Bad, bad, bad…" she muttered, shaking her head in disagreement.

I stared at her, questioning why she felt that way, especially since she was working so hard to impress the evil bitch.

Trish pursed her lips then smiled at a little black dress. "What do you think of this one for your friend, Marie? I think this would look fabulous on her. All of the gowns that we preselected for you are in the dressing area. You'll have to try them on. And now that you two are

officially engaged, we need to get you lined up with your own designers. Maybe someone like Zac Posen. You definitely have the body for it."

I barely looked at the dress she held up. "Trish, talk to me. What should he do?"

"Nothing. Everything will go on the account and –"

"No, not about the dresses. The interview tonight. You seem to think he should handle it differently. Ryan thought she was going to tell him to admit our engagement. If it was up to you, what would you tell him?"

Trish recoiled back. "Taryn, I can't tell you that! Besides, if she ever finds out that I advised you, she'll fire me on the spot. I can't."

I followed her around a circular rack of dresses, searching for a new angle. I wanted to hear her opinion now more than anything. "Okay. Well, what if I hired you to represent me - then would you advise me?"

She turned and looked at me, completely shocked. "You don't understand. I don't have any clients – Marla does. I have a tiny shithole apartment that I can barely afford, a crappy car, and college loans I'll still be paying on when I die an old lady."

"Trish?" I encouraged. "I swear, no one will ever know. Our secret."

Trish took a deep breath. "Ahh," she groaned, glancing around the store. "If she ever finds out that I talked to you, I swear I'm coming to live with you and Ryan when I'm homeless.

"The story is already out there," she continued, "backed up with *picture* evidence. All those women, those fans, are clinging to the idea of romance with him and seeing him standing on a table and then down on one knee to propose to you - well that's romantic as all hell. He needs to remain honest."

I nodded in agreement.

"But it's his business. It's *his* choice and, well... yours, whether you want to keep your private life private or not."

"Taaaar?" I heard Marie call out my name from the dressing room.

Trish's worried expression was blatant. "Shit, if Marla finds out I said *anything...*"

"I won't say anything - I swear - but I wish Ryan would get a second opinion before he goes on stage tonight. He believes everything that Marla tells him."

Trish's eyes flashed to the door when a few new customers walked in. "She already called Jimmy Collins' producer."

I thought about Ryan being in front of the cameras tonight delivering canned, lame answers. "If I get him alone, will you talk to him? You could really make a big difference in his career."

Trish looked shocked. She kept shaking her head. "Taryn, no! I can't!"

"He's going to look like an idiot," I muttered.

"Taryn, did you try on any of your dresses yet?" Ryan's mother, Ellen, asked.

I motioned my answer; I had yet to even look at them. Ellen held up a midnight blue dress, but I was so preoccupied mentally that I only pretended to admire it.

"Come on." Ellen pulled me along by the arm, hailing the stylist with her other hand. "We have to get you focused because we're running short on time."



I tried to put Marla's condescending tirade out of my mind and enjoy the rest of the day, but the moment I saw her following Ryan when he came into the dressing room backstage at the Jimmy Collins' show my overwhelming hatred for the woman came rushing back. And despite Ryan's outward appearance, I knew that just below the surface he was still somewhat forlorn.

I tried to be cheery enough for the both of us; after all, I was excited just being back stage like this, and it helped a lot that his father and Pete were here to lift his spirits. The men were talking about the Stanley Cup playoffs, joking that they were going to relocate their dinner plates by the first television they found in the restaurant tonight. I was thankful that Ryan's brother kept his sarcastic, hurtful comments to himself this

time. Ryan had enough on his mind; he didn't need to be pushed over the edge tonight.

Marla was hovering around Ryan. She acted like he was *her* property and she was on the defensive, blocking anyone who attempted to come close to him. She rudely interrupted the conversation he was trying to have with his family and I felt my anger flare. It was even more infuriating when she wouldn't make eye contact with me. How petty and childish.

Sadness swirled back in me as she schooled him on the appropriate responses he should give during the interview to deflect any surprise questions Jimmy Collins might spring on him. Marla's black heart didn't change colors.

I stewed privately, twisting the diamonds on my finger to keep my hands busy while I paced behind the large leather couch.

Ryan's mother looked at me with concern in her eyes. "Taryn, would you like to sit?" Ellen asked, patting the space next to her on the couch. "Please. Come."

I shook my head slightly, watching my fiancé intently. "That's okay, Mom," I said softly. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

Trish slipped into the room through the closed door. Her eyes darted around, quickly assessing the tension in the room. I hoped she could read my body language to see how upset I was. We all heard Marla clearly when she told Ryan to "try not to screw this up."

My fingers clenched into the back of the couch to keep from lunging at her. Ellen let out a maternal tsk and an audible huff, glaring eye daggers at Marla.

Trish quickly intervened. "Marla, excuse me. An assistant just told me that the stage director is looking for you."

"Now?" Marla questioned. She looked at her watch and collected her bag. "Stay with him," she ordered.

Ryan was sitting in the swivel chair, rubbing his forehead.

Trish appeared conflicted as she sided up to his chair. "Ryan? Can we talk for a minute?"

Ryan followed her to the back corner of the room.

"So, are you ready? Are you all right with the format?"

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"Trish, just tell him," I pleaded, gazing nervously back at the door. I knew we only had ten minutes, if that, to get Ryan prepped.

"Tell me what?" Ryan asked, confused.

Trish cleared her throat. "You know Collins is going to ask about the proposal regardless."

Ryan sighed. "I know. He wants the exclusive."

"I was just wondering... if Marla wasn't advising you, how would you handle it?"

Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. Why?"

Trish took a deep breath. "I think the advice Marla gave you may be a mistake."

Ryan looked at me, questioning why we were doing this to him right before he was due to walk out on stage.

"It's your personal business, Ryan, but look at it this way - if you deny that you're engaged, now that there are pictures and videos, your credibility is going to be *worthless*." Trish reflexively glanced over her shoulder again to make sure Marla was still nowhere to be seen.

"When Collins brings it up, I think you should admit to it. Don't embellish the story with personal information; just be honest and somewhat open. Your fans are going to cling to you if you expose your sensitive, romantic side," she continued.

"I'm worried about the extra media attention on Taryn," Ryan said, looking worried and guilty at the same time.

"Don't worry about me," I said adamantly. Ryan shot me a look, wordlessly telling me that it was impossible for him to do that.

"If you don't 'fess up to it now, the media is going to keep pursuing the exposé. It's going to get worse. Hiding it will only sensationalize it and Collins already knows that Taryn is in the building."

Ryan nodded. "Tomorrow's press conference?"

"Covered, just like today. Still Q and A only on the film," she quickly replied.

"But I've spent the entire day avoiding the subject," Ryan stressed.

"I know, but Jimmy is going to put you on the spot out there in front of a live studio audience regardless, so you need to be ready for it. This is a huge story, Ryan, and you know he wants it! Collins is renegotiating his contract with the network and he's looking for the ratings boost. If he gets you to admit it —"

Ryan's eyes widened. "What? Marla never told me that."

Trish searched through her bag and retrieved a sheet of paper which she immediately handed to Ryan. "Just having you on the show tonight in light of everything is upping his points. See? You're going to have to respond to it one way or another."

He held back a curse. "How do I handle tomorrow then?"

"Same way," Trish advised, stuffing the paper evidence back in her bag. "If you open up to Jimmy now, Nigel Allen is going to press even harder for new details tomorrow. His ratings are going to jump just because you acknowledged the engagement tonight – if you choose to do that. But if you do, then you'll have both Collins and Allen in your pocket for further PR. But let's not worry about that now. You've got to concentrate on handling *this* appearance."

Ryan glanced over to the doorway that led out to the main hallway. "Marla doesn't know about this, does she?" He motioned with his finger, swaying it between the two of us.

"No," I answered. "Trish is sticking her neck out to protect your reputation."

"I'll probably get fired tonight," she huffed. "But anyway, you need to turn scandal into opportunity, Ryan. Treat it with honesty. Jimmy said that if he gets you to talk, he's going to try and contrast the romance in the movie back against your admission to keep it moving. I was there when Marla talked to him and his producer just before you came in for your pre-interview."

Ryan blew out a big lung-full of air through his pursed lips.

"It's a good segue from your personal business back to the film," Trish advised. "If you choose to talk about it, keep the details on the surface and take your time so you don't blurt anything too personal out."

"Tricia!" Marla barked harshly from the open doorway. Her high heals were clicking forcefully in our direction.

Ryan strolled away, deep in thought, when Marla reached us. I thought about going with him just so I wouldn't have to be that close to

Marla, but I could not let Trish take the heat alone. After what she just did for us, I was not going to abandon her.

Trish was prepared, calmly deflecting Marla's anger with quick answers. I looked away as to not make my smirk so noticeable.

Ryan purposefully walked over to me and gathered my hand in his, pulling me away from Marla.

"How are you doing?" he whispered privately.

I gave him my best "doing okay" nod and wink, even though my eyes slid back to see where Marla was. I think he caught my glance because he sighed heavily.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Excuse me sir, we're ready to seat your guests," some man said to Ryan.

"I'll see you later," Ryan whispered, grasping my elbow to give me a soft kiss.

Our group was ushered out to the hallway so we could take our seats in the studio audience. We had our own section off to the left side of the stage; I sat in the seat next to Ryan's mom. Janelle, Ryan's sister-in-law sat next to me. Ryan's father, Bill, kept fidgeting in his chair, anxiously waiting like the rest of us for Ryan to make his appearance on stage. Ryan was in the primary guest spot for today's show, so he would be up first. He had been swept away by a production assistant and was waiting in a different location backstage somewhere.

Janelle leaned over. "Are you okay?"

I was staring at one of the TV monitors, twisting my ring. My feet were bouncing up and down on the floor.

I shrugged. "Just nervous, I guess."

"Why?" she questioned me strangely.

"Photos of his proposal were leaked," I muttered privately.

Janelle scoffed. "Ah, so what." And then I think it dawned on her. "Oh, he's going to get asked about it now, isn't he?" she said, appearing happy about that fact.

I nodded my head a few times, unwilling to tear my eyes away from the stage.

I held my breath in my lungs when the camera returned to the host, Jimmy Collins, sitting at his desk after his monologue. His fingers picked at a magazine which lay face down in front of him.

"Unless you've been living on the dark side of the moon, you know our first guest tonight had his breakout role playing time traveling hit man Charles Conroy in the hit movie, *Seaside*. He's here tonight to tell us about his latest film, *Reparation*, which opens in theaters nationwide this Friday. Here he is on the cover of *Entertainment Week*. Please help me welcome Ryan Christensen!"

Music blared out of the studio sound system as I watched Ryan come out from around the corner. The entire audience sprung from their chairs. Women all around us went absolutely crazy, jumping up and down and shrieking for him. The screams were ear-piercing.

Ryan waved and smiled, scratching his forehead before being greeted by Jimmy Collins. He looked nervous and totally overwhelmed by their reception.

Ryan leaned forward when he sat down, almost resting his head between his knees from the shock of the audiences' continued excitement. I could tell by the expression on his face that he was once again blown away by their devotion. I was glad to see he was still ever so humbled by it. Janelle leaned closer, excitedly nudging me with her elbow as she clapped for her brother-in-law.

"Your fans come out in masses! Thanks for stopping by here tonight. How have you been?" Jimmy asked Ryan, trying to proceed with the interview. The studio audience finally simmered down enough to barely hear them speak to each other.

"Good! Real good, thanks!" Ryan replied. "Thanks for having me."

"You know, you're not the only one who can make women scream like that," Jimmy teased. "Now if I could just get the women to stop screaming obscenities at me, I'd have this thing set!"

The crowd laughed at his joke.

Ryan snickered uncomfortably and took a sip from the cup they had setting there for him. "Sometimes they scream obscenities at me, too," he admitted.

"I heard you had quite a reception by one of the fans when you arrived here," Jimmy prompted.

"Yeah, I had just gotten out of the car and I was signing a few pictures and whatnot and I looked up and this girl lifted her shirt and flashed her... at me." Ryan motioned, appearing both excited and appalled at the same time.

I gasped slightly at hearing the news that some girl showed her breasts to my fiancé.

"Did she want you to sign them?" Jimmy repeated Ryan's motion.

"I honestly don't know if she said anything at all. She was jumping up and down and screaming." He laughed. "It was hard to hold a conversation with things, um, bouncing like that."

Jimmy laughed but continued on. "That's funny! So how are things? I think the last time you were here was about six months ago and we were talking about *Seaside*."

The women in the audience went berserk from hearing that word.

Ryan looked out at the audience, shaking his head in amazement at their devotion.

"And I can see that the fan reaction has tripled since then. Wow!" Jimmy rubbed his ear. "It's like pressing a hot button. Anytime I want to get my wife in the mood, I just burst into the bedroom and yell 'Seaside' and she instantly starts tearing her clothes off."

Ryan laughed uncomfortably. "Glad to hear it works for you."

"Of course it helps when I'm wearing my 'Charles' mask. I mean you and I are built so much alike that she can hardly tell the difference," Jimmy joked, noticeably rolling his eyes to get a laugh out of the crowd.

"So how's life been treating you?" Jimmy asked.

"Things are great. Really great! I just came from Miami where I've been shooting a movie called *Thousand Miles*. It's a bit of a thriller."

That's it, Honey, pitch your movies. Keep the tempo going.

"And in like another two weeks I'll be back on set in Vancouver for my next project," Ryan said, nervously scratching his neck.

"And what's that?" Jimmy asked.

"It's a film called *Slipknot*. Jonathan Follweiler is directing it. This will be my first time working on a project with him, which is very

exciting. And I get to do a little rock climbing, which I'm *really* looking forward to trying. It's something that I've never done before. A little danger."

"I hear you've been practicing for it though? Climbing on tables and stuff?" Jimmy goaded Ryan with his tongue-in-cheek, raising his eyebrows and tapping the note cards he held in his hand on the desk to get a rise out of the audience.

Laughter ensued all around us. I watched to see if Ryan's expression would change, and sure enough he flushed with embarrassment.

Jimmy quickly fired off his next question. "Now is the second *Seaside* finished or are you still working on that, too?"

Ryan fidgeted, adjusted his posture in the chair. "No, we're finished. We wrapped in December."

Just like on cue, the audience screamed again.

"And where did you film that?"

"We filmed this one in a little town called Seaport in Rhode Island. It's a beautiful place right on the coast."

My breath hitched.

"And... what did you do while you were there? Meet anyone special?" Jimmy asked with the inflection of a nosey mother.

Ryan's mouth opened and closed a few times, appearing at a loss for words as he nervously scratched his forehead and squirmed in his chair.

Like a flash in fast-forward, I envisioned Ryan saying nine different answers, one right after the other. My hopes rested with the one where he points at me and tells the world that he's madly in love.

"We met a lot of nice people there," he admitted slyly, smiling out at the audience when they screamed their excitement again. Ryan glanced over in my direction and, for a brief moment, I think our eyes met. "Everyone was great to us."

I smiled proudly at my future husband.

"So Ryan, you know everyone wants to know so I'm just going to ask. There are all these rumors flying around and pictures of you climbing on tables. So please – put these poor women out of their misery already and tell us. Are you an engaged man now?"

My fingers reflexively clenched into the armrest as I held every bit of oxygen in my lungs, waiting... anticipating. Jimmy had defied the limits and put Ryan on the spot.

Ryan smirked, looking bashful and guilty, and for a moment I thought he was just going to blurt it out, like the news he held so privately would just gush from his lips.

As quickly as it came, I saw the exact moment when it left.

"When aren't I engaged?" Ryan said, trying to be funny. "Let's just say I'm very, *very* happy and in a very good place in my life."

The audience responded with a few outbursts and claps, but that was that – a fleeting moment – gone. Not one mention about his personal life or the woman he pledged his undying love to from the top of a barroom table in front of his parents, my friends, and a crowd of strangers.

Physical disappointment pricked like a thousand needles into my arms, my chest, finally forcing my reluctant lungs to exhale.

Janelle looked at me with apologetic eyes, apparently feeling sorry for me. I slid my eyes away, afraid to engage her pity. I knew it would break my tenuous hold.

After all this time, after all the reports and press, after the printed speculation of our engagement, I was still a part of his life to be publicly disayowed.

Chapter 3 - Atonement

Atonement

"Wow," Ryan breathed out, setting his dark gray suit coat down over the chair when I came out of the bedroom.

"What?" I asked reflexively. I wasn't sure of the meaning of his response considering I had just spent the last two hours being painted, brushed, curled, and sprayed. I felt like a walking makeup ad.

I smoothed my hands across the bodice of my strapless gown to assure that everything was in place. The wardrobe stylist had selected a black satin and chiffon sheath overlaid with fine silver lace by Versace. It had a high slit to show a little thigh and flowed like water over my curves. A teardrop diamond pendant and matching earrings finished off the look.

"You are absolutely stunning," he continued breathlessly, pacing each word as if to give them proper emphasis. His swagger and smoldering eyes told me that I wasn't the only one having naughty thoughts involving stripping each other bare.

He was absolutely beautiful dressed up. Desire to rend the shirt right off his back and roll my tongue around on his muscular chest had me hungry and blushing.

"What do you think?" He seemed unsure of his attire, tugging at his vest to straighten it. "Does this look okay?"

It wasn't the first time I had seen him in a suit, but tonight in a three piece custom tailored charcoal gray Armani he looked devastatingly handsome. I nodded emphatically, distracted by thoughts of him

wearing nothing but that white dress shirt at some point in the very near future. *Opened instead of buttoned to see every hard line of his chest and abs.* I straightened the knot of his black patterned necktie. "I think you look like a gorgeous movie star."

Ryan cradled my face in his hands and smiled gently, kissing me softly as he always does. His blue eyes, framed by those gorgeous long lashes, locked onto mine. "I love you," he whispered.

I kissed him and returned his sentiment, but deep inside I privately ached. All day I tried to get over my sullen mood, and even though I loved him with every fiber of my soul, I couldn't help but feel disappointed by him. Okay - honestly, I was very disappointed by him.

"Hey." He gently grasped my arm when I turned to walk away. "What's wrong?"

I didn't want to get into a discussion about my dejected feelings before his premier. He didn't need to deal with that right now. Mom always used to say to "sleep on things for a night" before acting rash. Maybe with time I'd see things in a different light. I spent most of last night praying for an epiphany.

"Nothing is wrong." I tried to dismiss his keen observation by putting on a forced grin to shake off his speculation.

"Bullshit," he returned with a sharp laugh as he followed me into the bathroom. "You don't think I can tell when you're upset, Tar? Give me some credit."

Ryan trapped me at the bathroom sink; his chest pressed into my back. I could feel the warmth of his breath heating my ear. "I know you better than you think I do."

I swallowed hard.

"You've been this way since dinner last night, and every time I've asked, you've avoided telling me. So please don't tell me you're *fine* anymore. What's going on?"

He kissed my bare shoulder tenderly.

"It's not important. We can talk later. You have enough to deal with right now."

His arms crossed over my abdomen, pulling me closer. "No. I'm not waiting that long. We made a promise to each other, remember?

More open and honest? I want to know what's bothering you, and I want to know what it is right now."

I looked at him through our reflection in the large mirror, stalling.

"Right now," he ordered, his voice taking on a new, menacing tone.

"I thought you were going to say something on the show last night, that's all." I casually added a shrug, trying to lessen the impact.

"About what?"

My apprehension to go down this road made me fidget. "About being engaged. I just thought – since you didn't say anything on Jimmy Collins that you might say something to Nigel Allen, but you didn't. I'm trying not to be needy here, Ryan, but I just don't understand why you've avoided admitting to it when they asked. Are you ashamed?"

I hoped his reasons weren't any of the ones on my speculated list.

It took all of ten seconds for him to break eye contact and make a few of his standard throaty noises before his hands freed me. Next came the "stare at the floor and rub the forehead" maneuver.

I turned my glance back to the sink counter. This repeat pattern in my life was getting so freaking old. "See, this is why I didn't want to say anything. I know you have your reasons, Ryan. It's just... I thought I was your fiancée, but I can't help but feel as though I'm still your dirty little secret."

Ryan closed the lid on the toilet and sat down. "You're not a dirty secret, Taryn. Nor have you ever been."

"Then why do I feel like one?"

"What the hell do you want me to do?" he grumbled, letting his hands slap down on his thighs.

I knelt down in front of him in supplication, holding his gaze, worried that he might think I'm even remotely interested in having an argument. "I love you - with all of my heart," I said softly, feeling my words throughout every fiber of my being. "I want to be your wife, your partner. I want to be by your side through all of your adventures. But I don't know what I'm supposed to do or what role I'm supposed to play. Help me to understand, Ryan. Help me to be a part of all of this."

Ryan exhaled with new frustration. "Tar, you see how things are the paparazzi, the fucking tabloids. They take *everything* from me.

Everything I hold sacred. Why can't our private life stay private, you know? If I give them that, then what do I have left? Nothing."

Massive confusion tore through my mind followed closely by my anger. "Maybe I should just stay here then. That way I can stay a private matter," I muttered to the tiled floor.

"No. Fuck that."

I studied the pattern in my dress for a moment before begging his eyes. "Just answer one question. Why did you do it? If you don't want to acknowledge that we're engaged, if it's supposed to be some well-guarded secret, why did you make your proposal public?"

"You don't understand." With a short huff, Ryan stood and stepped around me to head towards the door. Wonderful. Just like every other guy I've ever been with. Bail when the topic gets a little uncomfortable. That's it. Walk away.

Ryan stopped on the threshold and gripped the door frame with both hands, completely surprising me. His head hung low for a moment. "I didn't say anything on Jimmy Collins because all that asshole wanted was a confession to up his ratings."

He turned around and took me by the hands, helping me to stand up. Then he paced the length of the bath, from the cavernous sandstone tiled shower to the doorway and back again. "The intimate details of our personal life are *not* for public discussion, Tar. Nor am I going to allow it to be used to make other people rich. That's *our* life – our business."

I drew in a quick breath when he moved to stand directly in front of me.

"I make movies. That's what I do for a living. If I go on a talk show, it's to talk about my job, drum up more hype for the movie. Not to spill secrets about our personal life."

"But there's so much of your life that's public. I always thought it was happy news when people got engaged."

His hard glare softened as he took my hand in his. "It *is* happy news. You're my everything, Taryn, not my secret." Ryan's hand drifted down my cheek, touching much more than just skin. "I just don't want to share what is most sacred to me with the entire world on a talk

show. You're my world, babe. Mine. Not theirs. They can have me, but they can't have you, too."

His brow creased, frowning as though he was torn. "I was going to sing a different song to you when I proposed. I had it all planned. Everything was supposed to be private. But then everything got so screwed up and I ran out of time." He rubbed his hand over his head. "Hell, everyone thought I'd been unfaithful to you, Taryn. Even you. At that time, considering... well, I felt a grand gesture was necessary."

I took a deep breath, strewn with personal regret, knowing I was one of those who doubted.

Ryan dipped his head to recapture my eyes. "I was mad and hurt and then I thought..." His hand cradled my face. "God, I was so scared of losing you."

Repentant tears pooled in my eyes as memories of that planted love letter and disastrous trip to Florida flooded back into my thoughts. "I thought I had lost *you*."

His head swayed, forming a silent no.

"That song, the one you sang to me, I loved it. It was beautiful. Perfect. I'd really love to hear it again sometime."

He smiled. "I wrote that song on the airplane. I wanted you to know how serious I am about us. How much I want you in my life, Taryn. I meant it when I said forever. That's why. You are *it* for me. But the *me* that knelt in front of you that night and the *me* that is standing in front of you right now is not the same *me* that's out there in the spotlight." He thumped his hand over his heart. "They only get the outside, not the inside. That's for you."

God, the way he looked directly into my soul, I knew he was sincere. I rested my hand on his heart. "You know I love you, Ryan. All sides of you. Sometimes I –"

"Sweetheart, we've been through so much together." His voice cracked. His hand brushed over my lower abdomen. "There are things that I just don't want to openly talk about, especially on national television. You bring me peace. That's mine to cherish, not theirs."

"And I hope you know that I'm trying to understand how all this works. That's why I didn't even want to start this conversation. I was

trying to sort it out on my own. I guess I just don't understand Marla's reasoning sometimes."

"I don't understand sometimes either, but I'm trying to trust what she says I should do. She has her reasons for protecting me - I mean us. She didn't want me to sensationalize it on national television, although the story is out there already." He shrugged.

Ryan tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Besides, in less than an hour, millions will know. As much as I want to protect you from the craziness, I know I can't do that forever. So everything changes tonight." He gently smiled at me, rubbing his thumb over my lips.

I breathed a sigh of relief but it didn't seem to last long. Twenty minutes later I watched as he roamed around our bedroom, obviously on a frantic hunt.

"You put your watch in the bag inside your suitcase." I pointed, knowing what he was looking for.

"How did you...? Thanks. I don't know what I'd do without you," he mumbled.

I thought about saying something witty back to him but I refrained. He had been in his own private foul mood ever since lunch when Trish called his attention to all the slams that he received from the press this morning. Ryan emphatically stated that he didn't care about the negative comments, but it was obvious that he did.

Instead of sitting and relaxing, Ryan paced. The more he paced and the closer it came time for us to leave, the more agitated he seemed to become. He picked his suit jacket up and then immediately set it back down, only to pick it right back up again. Then he patted his pockets, checking that he had his cell phone for the umpteenth time.

I was putting my lipstick in my small evening bag when Ryan breathed out forcefully.

"Is it hot in here?" He started pulling the collar of his shirt away from his neck and I noticed he looked a little pale.

I shook my head. I actually thought the room was cold.

He wiped some moisture from his brow. "I'm freaking sweating."

I was started to think that it was more than the temperature that was making him sweat. "Are you nervous?"

"A little. I sort of feel lightheaded, actually. Man it's hot in here." His breathing became labored and he was turning white.

Oh, no. Not now.

I did the first thing I could think of – I got him air.

Ryan was leaning on the wall absorbing the full blast of the air conditioning vent when our family and friends convened in our suite.

Ellen peeked around one of our bedroom's double doors. "What's wrong with Ryan?"

I tried to prevent her from hovering by blocking her entry. "He's feeling a little queasy," I lied. "He'll be all right. He just needs a minute."

I had seen Ryan like this before and I knew exactly what was happening. Although he wouldn't admit it to anyone, he was quietly freaking out. I was also wise enough to know what it was that brought it on.

"He'll be down when he's ready," I said to David when he poked his nose around the door. I didn't mean to get snippy with him, but Ryan didn't need anyone snapping their fingers at him right now. It's not like anxiety attacks have an exact timetable. I was glad when Mike took over and cleared everyone out of our suite.

I rubbed Ryan's back and shoulders. The last time I'd seen him like this was when the sidewalk outside my pub was crowded with fans.

"You okay?"

Ryan's head dipped, slowly swaying his assent, breathing heavily.

My heart ached for him. "Mike will be by your side the entire time. You know he won't let anything happen to you."

"I know," Ryan whispered.

"You've done this countless times before. You're going to be just fine. Your fans adore you."

"Yeah, until one of them tries to kill us. You have *no* idea. No idea. You don't know how easy it is for someone in the crowd to just stick out a knife or a needle or a... or a gun... God, if something happens to you—"

"Hey, come on. Just breathe with me." I wrapped my arms around his waist and paced each breath - slowly in, slowly out – hoping that this would calm him. "No one is going to hurt us."

He cinched his hands around my arms, almost too hard, and glared down at me. "We share the world with lunatics, Taryn. You've seen how far some of my fans are willing to go, so don't tell me there is no threat." I gasped a little. I think he realized how hard he was gripping me. His hands eased slightly. "I want you to stick tight to the event security tonight. If they tell you to move or go you listen, okay? No questions. You follow their orders. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I'm not kidding, Tar. You've never experienced this. It's going to be a shock. You've never seen crowds like this. If shit goes down, security is going to block me from getting to you." Something new, something frighteningly alarming coated his expression. This was beyond panic. His possessive grasp tightened again. "They will be in my way and I won't be able to protect you myself and Mike will be —"

I pressed into him tighter as my own body trembled. "Ryan, please. You're sort of scaring me. I get it."

He sighed heavily into my hair. "There is just so much that's out of my control." He cursed. "So much. I hate it."

A gentle knock on our door startled us both. Ryan swung the door open.

Mike was waiting. He had changed out of his casual attire from this morning and was looking down right sexy dressed up in a black suit, white shirt, and sharp cobalt blue tie. I had appreciated his good looks before, but dressed to the nines, he was freaking gorgeous.

He looked at Ryan with brotherly reverence and understanding, truly concerned and full of caring. "Are you okay, man? Your team is pushing to leave but just tell me if you need more time. I'll call downstairs and tell them to wait."

Ryan was mostly pulled together but still agitated. His masked anxiety lay just below the surface, ready to flare at a moment's notice. "No. I'm ready. Let's do this." He glared at Mike. "I want extra

security on Taryn tonight. No less than two near her anytime she's not with me. No slipups. You got me?"

Mike nodded and said, "It's already done, Ry. We have four on standby at the venue."

The moment we stepped off the elevators, David swooped in on us. "Ryan, I need to talk to you a sec," he said with urgent importance, abruptly leading Ryan away by the shoulder. I held onto him as long as I could until our fingers unwillingly unlaced. He didn't even bother to ask Ryan how he was doing.

Several black sedans were lined up to take us to the *Reparation* premier. Marla hurried to speak to one of the drivers – a heavy-set man with a beard.

David's hand was on Ryan's back, guiding him into the first sedan in line. David glanced once in my direction then gave what appeared to be a stealthy nod to Marla.

I presumed Ryan would come back to collect me once his side meeting with David was over. The burly driver blocked me as I tried to see what was taking so long.

"Excuse me. I'm supposed to be with -" I pointed in Ryan's direction.

"Ma'am, you are in this car," the driver informed knowingly.

"But I'm his -"

"This way please." He ushered me to the open car door.

Ellen appeared just as confused as I was. "Taryn, aren't you supposed to be with Ryan?"

Janelle moved her feet to make room for me.

I didn't know if I wanted to argue or yell for Ryan; instead I took the instruction at face value, collected my dress, and slid next to her on the car seat. It also appeared that I had no choice in the matter; not only was I physically blocked from exiting, Ryan's car was already rolling away from the curb without me.

This was not what I had expected, to be arriving at my fiancé's premier in a different car, especially since he just had a panic attack. I stared out the window, secretly hoping that Ryan was bothered by this arrangement, praying that he was at least thinking about it. But what if

he isn't? I had just assumed that I would ride in the same car. I racked my brain trying to remember if we talked about the arrangements or not, feeling like I should know these things.

Maybe he's required to be by himself when we arrive? After all, he is the celebrity, not me. But his mom said...

I thought about calling him but I figured I would be with him if I was supposed to be with him. Ryan would have seen to it.

But... he didn't.

I felt myself morphing from perplexed to upset rapidly.

Is this a glimpse at our future? At my future? Keep the bartender wife life separate from the glamorous movie star life? That thought brought out my anger again. Taryn, the dirty little secret.

I started to hear Marla's voice in my head, advising Ryan that maybe it would be better if Taryn stayed home from now on. Her slimy forked-tongue whispering thoughts into his ear that I'd probably be bored or he wouldn't have time to tend to his duties and to me at the same time. Would Ryan agree with her?

I huffed privately, disgusted now that a team of stylists was hired to primp me like some poseur wanna-be. I wondered how long I would be deemed bad for his public image.

I wished the limo driver had placed me in the other car with Marie and Tammy. Marie would have surely, in no uncertain terms, explained to me her interpretation of how things work in Hollywood while Pete would undoubtedly try to convince me that Ryan didn't mean to hurt my feelings.

Regardless, this scenario might be excusable once but this shit was so not happening a second time. Not now while I have this enormous diamond ring on my hand. I don't care what my future husband does for a living. The wife I intend to be would be by his side, not tucked away like an afterthought. I started to rehearse my "why I'm so pissed off" speech in my head when my cell phone chimed.

"Tar, why are you with my parents?"

I swallowed my anger and sighed. "Because I was told to get in this car, Ryan. I just assumed you didn't want me with you."

Ryan cursed and told me to hang tight, whatever that meant.

I could see the packed crowd lined up behind metal barricades as our car started to slow, however instead of stopping at the theatre our car kept driving down Hollywood Boulevard. We continued on for several blocks, eventually turning onto a narrow road between two buildings.

Bill and Ellen nervously looked out all of the windows when our car came to a stop. Our driver got out and quickly hustled to open my door.

I watched David climb out of Ryan's car, pausing to tug his pants up. Ryan didn't wait for Mike to get his door. He hurried over to me.

"Tar, I'm sorry. Come with me, baby." Ryan led me by the hand.

Marla scurried in her designer heels from her car. "Would someone please tell me what we are doing here?" she asked frantically. "We have a tight time schedule. You have to be on the carpet in five minutes. We don't have time for deviations."

Ryan stepped in front of me and turned on her. "If you -ever – pull a stunt like this on me again..." he growled loudly.

Marla, of course, played up her confusion, pressing her hand to her chest in response to his angered address. "What do you mean 'stunt?' What are you talking about, Ryan? No, No! I need everyone to get back in their cars – right now!" she ordered, clapping her hands several times to get their attention. Pete narrowed his eyes on me, wondering like the rest of them what was going on.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Ryan accused.

"No, I'm afraid that I don't."

"Don't give me that *shit*," he yelled. "You and David... I'll fucking cut you both loose if you ever do something like this again."

"Hey, wait..." David quickly interjected. "I told you I didn't have anything to do with car arrangements."

Ryan glared at him.

I scoffed internally at David's comment. He was such a lying scumbag.

"Ryan, please. I don't understand," Marla interrupted. "Why you are so upset?"

Between the eyelash fluttering and her fake surprised tone, it was obvious that she was attempting to cover up her lies, too.

Ryan locked his teeth. He was seething. "I told you I was only going to wait until premier night, but that was it. We discussed this today, Marla! So, explain to me why the fuck my fiancée was placed in a different car."

Marla's eyes shot over to me. I, too, was waiting for her explanation, relieved by the fact that he wasn't just mad about it – he was furious.

"Is this why you are so angry? How ridiculous. Ryan, this isn't your first premier. You know what's involved when we arrive. Come on now. Let's all get back into our cars. You don't want to be late." She attempted to reach for Ryan's arm but he jerked it away.

"I'm not going anywhere until I get an answer," Ryan said defiantly.

She sighed, apparently bothered by his insolence. "I don't know what kind of answer you are looking for. This is about promoting your public persona and your film, not about parading your personal life. You know the chaos that ensues from your arrival. You simply cannot attend to her and your fans at the same time," she continued. "It's impossible."

"Oh, so now I have no say in the matter? Is that how this works now?"

"Well, what you want and what's best for your career can be two different things, Ryan. That's why you have us. To guide you."

I felt Ryan's hand squeeze mine tighter as he glared at her. "I know what you're trying to do and I'm telling you this shit stops *now*."

"Ryan, you're overreacting," Marla chided.

Ryan glared at her. "Overreacting?"

"Son, what's going on?" Bill asked, stepping into the middle of it.

"Nothing, Dad. Don't worry about it," Ryan said curtly, waving his father off.

"Yes. Overreacting. You have a duty to the studio and the producers and dragging her down the carpet is not the best time for a debut. The press will want to interview her, Ryan. And what is she going to say?"

God, this woman really irked me. "I think I can handle myself."

Marla blinked at my momentary interruption and then proceeded to ramble again. "She hasn't been through any media training. She won't know how to respond to questions properly. We can't risk making mistakes now. You do your interviews and then appropriate arrangements for photo opportunities will be m – "

"No!" Ryan said with utter finality. "I am not hiding this anymore. She arrives with me – tonight. End of discussion."

I felt like the child that should have stayed home with the babysitter.

Marla huffed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "If you would just listen to me for one minute. This is her first premier. Let her get the feel for it and then maybe next time..."

I had just about all I could take seeing Ryan under such stress. I had to shove my own wants and needs to the side. "Ryan, it's all right. I'll ride with your parents and I'll stay out of the way and I won't speak to anyone. No photographs, no interviews, no nothing. I promise. Just... let's go. You won't be late because of me."

"No!" Ryan growled again. He didn't budge when I tugged his hand. "Hang on, honey. This is *bullshit*. Cal and Kelly arrived together when we did the L.A. *Seaside* premier, and here I am in a goddamned alleyway having an argument about wanting to arrive at *my* premier with *my* fiancée."

"Ryan, calm down, buddy." David tried to smooth it over. "If you want her in the car –"

"Your public image is my responsibility, Ryan. Mine! You've barely dated this girl, foolishly got her pregnant once already, and now you're engaged? Do you have any idea what kind of reckless image that sends? And how long do you suppose this one will last until it winds up being a court battle? One misstep, one misquote - that's all it takes to ruin things for you. We've had countless discussions about dating, asset protection protocol, and keeping your private life low key and off the press's radar so the focus stays on your new career, but that doesn't seem to register with you. I've been trying to protect your professional image ever since you started dating this one," Marla continued, huffing. "If you, for once, would just do what you're told to do instead of running off like a lovesick teenager, life would be so much easier."

My stomach twisted and roiled and I wanted to throw up. The impulse to sprint down the alley and head for the airport came on right after that. My worst fears of being deemed bad for him were just confirmed. I felt like I was shattering inside. How can our love for each other possibly survive through all these constant bombardments, accusations, and heartaches?

Ryan eyed her with contempt. "What? Is that what you think of me? Oh ho," he grumbled. "We are so done."

"Calm down, Ryan," David said again, patting him on the shoulder to coax him away.

Ryan rolled his shoulder with force. I could see the rage coat his face, pulling his lips, his nose, into a snarl. For a moment I worried that he was going to take a swing at David.

"No! Fuck that. I've had *enough*!" he shouted. "I'm done listening to you, Marla. Taryn is upset. I'm stressed out. The press is making me out to be an asshole for not saying anything about the engagement – all because I've been listening to you and your bullshit. From now on, we do this my way. And I'm only dealing with Trish. At least I know she cares about what I want. I should have listened to her advice instead of following yours."

Shit. I couldn't help but squeeze my eyes from Ryan's gaffe.

Marla couldn't hide her surprise, masking it quickly when she became fixated on her own manicure. "I'm afraid that's not possible."

Ryan rubbed his forehead before turning back to address her. "Okay, then I'll tell you what... let me make life easier for you, Marla. I'll get another publicist. It's as simple as that."

"Don't threaten, Ryan. It's so unbecoming. You are losing your focus on what your job is."

Ryan scoffed. "That's it. We're done." He started to walk away, towing me by the hand, but then stopped abruptly and turned one last time, squaring his shoulders. "Marla... You're fired."

I gasped from the surprise. So did Marla.

"Ryan, don't be like this," she continued, trotting behind us as Ryan picked up our pace. "David?" she called out, looking for help.

"Ryan, you don't want to do that. Not in the middle of a press tour," David rebuked. "Come on, pal. You need to relax. Come with me. Let's take a walk and cool down. Nobody's getting fired."

Ryan pushed David's hand away. Mike immediately stepped in, making a hole between Ryan and his manager.

"I don't believe this! Who calls the shots around here - me or you? Or am I just your pawn? I meant what I said. She's fired. And *you*..." Ryan pointed at David's face. "Shit changes - *now* - or you're next. You're on my payroll, remember? You work for me. Don't you ever forget that."

David was treading lightly. "You're under contract with her firm, Ryan."

"Then do your goddamned job and get me out of it."

A few cars came screeching to a halt at the end of the road. Paparazzi sprinted from their open doors.

Ryan cursed under his breath. "Taryn, let's go. Dad, take Mom back to the car - now," he barked. I rushed towards the open car door with Ryan's hand in the small of my back.

"Ryan," Marla breathed out condescendingly.

"Go home, Marla," he instructed as he held my door. "You don't work for me anymore."

Paparazzi swarmed our car on both sides, taking picture after picture. We both shielded our faces, barring their intruding flashes as best as we could.

"Let's go! Drive!" Ryan ordered. Paparazzi continued to run alongside our car as we slowly rolled away, shouting out our names, hoping we'd actually look at them. My heart was racing frantically. This was like a scene right out of a bad thriller movie with zombies and high-speed car chases. It was a relief when we were back out on the street.

With traffic, it took almost twenty minutes to drive back to Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Ryan squeezed and kissed my hand as I tried to get him to calm down and focus, thanking him for loving me and apologizing in between. My poor man was spun up and in worse shape

than I was and it was time for him to put his game face on. Our car was pulling up to the curb.

This is it. Go time. I have never been this nervous in all my life.

Ryan left out a long, laborious breath, locking eyes on me. "Remember what I said. Eyes and ears open. Ready?"

As soon as Ryan's foot hit the sidewalk, fans started screaming. I froze from the shock of hearing the deafening volume coming from the crowd. Ryan waved quickly, fastened the button on his jacket, and then turned back to my open door to give me his hand.

Holy shit.

There are no words, no preparations that could ever be instructed, for what I was experiencing at that very moment.

Thousands of people, like a thrashing sea of undulating bodies, were screaming, packed in tightly behind the barricades that barely held them back. Many of them were waving posters, books, and pictures for Ryan to sign, shrieking at the top of their lungs to get his attention.

The words "frantic mob" and "oh my God, I'm going to die" quickly came to mind.

No wonder Ryan panicked earlier. Having so many people in such close proximity, shrieking for your attention, was ten steps beyond terrifying.

I feared that at any moment the dam could give way, allowing the horde to breach our small plot of land and stampede us to death. I started to shake. My first survival instinct clicked in and I found myself desperately searching the rolling red carpet for all possible exits.

There were so many others inside the confines of the barriers, wandering, looking, it was confusing and overwhelming. Huge movie posters for *Reparation* were standing like statues, towering overhead.

A few people were speaking into Ryan's ear already, instructing him where to go and leading him forward. Hand in hand, we took our first steps, forever protected by our faithful bodyguard, Mike Murphy.

Photographers lined the other barriers, pushing, flashing, and yelling for us. Not only did they have expensive cameras, I noticed there were quite a few with laptops as well, beaming the first pictures of us instantly to their tabloid and press feeds.

Trish hurried to Ryan's side. "I just received a call from Marla... she said I'm supposed to leave? I... I don't understand." Her eyes toggled back and forth from Ryan's face to questioning the cell she held in her hand.

"Marla and I are done," Ryan informed quickly.

"What? Um... I..." she stammered.

Ryan signed a few more autographs in between smiling, posing, and greeting his fans.

"You want a job?" he asked her privately, seizing my hand in his.

"Mr. Christensen, this way please," some man in a suit instructed, ushering us to follow.

"Trish, I need a publicist – now," Ryan said, maintaining his focus amongst all of the chaos that surrounded us.

Trish's mouth opened but no words followed. Much to my relief, it only took her several seconds to finally nod and switch to full-on business mode, handling Ryan's appearance skillfully.

Ryan held me at his side, always within inches of him even when he stopped to greet more adoring fans.

"Ryan, we have Access Hollywood and the Reelz Channel up first," Trish informed. "Taryn, you stay back here. Focus on Ryan as he speaks because you will be on camera. I need extra security right here." She pulled Ryan along by the elbow to keep him moving.

I stood off to the side, proudly beaming at my fiancé as he gave brief interviews. His smile, charm, and humbled enthusiasm never faltered even when Trish guided him from microphone to microphone.

Time and time again each reporter asked when we were getting married, to which he happily and repeatedly replied, "I don't know. We just got engaged. We haven't discussed it yet."

Just like that, with three simple sentences, our engagement became officially confirmed news.

After being congratulated on our pending nuptials, Entertainment Tonight asked for my thoughts about the film. The intimidating microphone tilted in my direction and somehow my mouth turned into the Sahara and all of the saliva inconveniently disappeared from my mouth. I felt Ryan reassuringly squeeze my hand.

"I haven't had an opportunity to see it yet. Tonight will be my first screening," I answered with a smile, relieved that I didn't sound like an idiot.

"And I'm just looking forward to seeing her reaction." Ryan beamed proudly at me.

Fortunately that was the only question she asked before we had to move on to the next microphone.

As we walked the gauntlet of reporters, it became blatantly obvious why Ryan freaked out earlier. Stand, pose, smile, turn, look, interview, sign this - all wrapped by excited screams and shrieks from thousands of enamored fans.

Seeing Ryan interact with his fans was both fascinating and scary. I feared for his safety as one after another reached for him. A moment of reprieve couldn't come sooner. I was escorted by two hulking bodyguards over to Ryan's family where I waited while he conducted more interviews and posed for photographers. The VIP area, where I tried to look like I belonged while a few very well-known celebrities passed through, seemed to be a safe place. It was also the place where I was able to catch up with some other familiar faces, namely Cal Reynolds and his wife, Kelly. I was so happy to see that they came out to support Ryan's premier.

While we were talking, a well-dressed woman with stick straight, shoulder length brown hair approached me. She looked to be in her forties, well fit, but true age was deceiving in L.A. As I took in the sight of her, I noticed that she had the most fetching smile and the rosiest of cheeks I had ever seen.

"Excuse me. Hi! You must be Taryn?" she asked.

"Yes! Hello!" I returned her cheery greeting.

She held out her hand. "I'm Anna - Anna Garrett. I'm one of the Executive Producers. A bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes it is!" I said, glancing around. "And spectacular and amazing as well."

"I've heard so much about you; it's nice to finally meet you. Oh, I believe you've already met my husband?" she said in a very distinct British accent. One tiny tinge of panic crept up my throat as I hoped not

to get falsely accused of anything. She tugged on a man's suit coat and the moment he turned around I immediately recognized him. He was the only film director I knew personally.

"Oh, yes! Yes of course. Mr. Follweiler. It's so nice to see you again!"

"Taryn my dear!" Jonathan Follweiler smiled, hugging me awkwardly. His rough gray beard pricked my cheek. "Oh, it's good to see you, too! How have you been? Well, I hope?"

I nodded quickly.

"You look absolutely radiant," he complimented, admiring me sincerely.

"You look quite dashing yourself, sir," I replied. His sapphire hankie and necktie suited him well.

"Sir? No, no Taryn, please call me Jonathan. So how's our boy doing these days?" he asked, craning his neck in Ryan's direction.

"He's great." It was the most benign answer I could give, considering the earlier circumstances. "And he's anxious to get back to work." *And away from this insanity*.

"Good! So am I," he admitted on the sly. "Are you coming to Vancouver with Ryan?"

"Yes. As soon as we come back from the European press junket," I said.

Jonathan smiled warmly. "That's wonderful news. Then you and Anna can keep each other company."

I felt a hand touch my shoulder. It was Trish. "Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt. Taryn, we're ready for your photo op with Ryan," she said.

"Right. No worries," Anna said with a wink. "We can catch up later."

"I look forward to seeing you at the after-party," I said, reaching to give them both a hug goodbye. It was almost pure elation to finally feel accepted by some of the influential people in my new life – in our new life.

Ryan smiled and seemed relieved to see me again, but as soon as I was next to him, his brow furrowed and he appeared wary. "You ready for this?"

I gave him a reassuring smile and a quick nod. "I'm ready."

Ryan led me by the hand to stand in front of a huge wall emblazoned with the *Reparation* movie title. He quickly stepped behind me, standing on my right side instead of my left.

"Okay," I giggled nervously, confused as to why he repositioned himself.

Ryan placed his lips right next to my ear. "Put your hand on my chest." He chuckled lightly to appear as if we were sharing a private joke. "I want *everyone* to see your ring," he said emphatically, gazing into my eyes with a certain tenderness that was mesmerizing. "It's time to go big or go home. I want everyone to know you're mine, Taryn."

We smiled and posed while the press took our picture a million times. The photographers were yelling our names so often that I didn't know which camera I was supposed to look at.

Ryan's grin was infectious. "Did I tell you how exceptionally beautiful you look tonight?"

As I gazed up into his eyes; personal vanity was low on my emotion chart. Instead, I said what I truly felt. "I am *so* proud of you."

My smile broadened as he rested his forehead on mine.

"I love you," he whispered, his fingertips gently held my raised chin. And then, in front of hundreds of cameras - softly, adoringly - he kissed me.

Chapter 4 - Party

Party

Once Ryan's public appearance outside was over, we made our way into the plush theatre for the screening of *Reparation*.

I tried to concentrate on the film but it was difficult knowing that Ryan was mostly watching my reactions instead of the screen. He had already seen the film during private screenings when he had to do voice-overs and I knew he didn't like watching his own movies. He said it was the narcissistic aspect of it that bothered him.

Ryan whispered with disbelieve into my ear. "Are you crying?"

"Shh." I elbowed him gently and wiped the moisture from my cheek. I couldn't help it; Ryan's character had just saved a bullied teenage girl from committing suicide when she tried to hang herself in the school cafeteria. To say it was heart-wrenching was an understatement.

Ryan was overly concerned by my emotional reaction, laughing uncomfortably and nudging me as if to break the hold the film had on my attention. When I didn't give in to his provoking, he looked past me and sighed when he saw that his mother was crying, too.

I took his hand in mine and brought it to my lips. I didn't know how else to tell him how awestruck I was.

"Oh my God!" Marie breathed out, turning around to face us when the movie was over. Both she and Tammy were wiping their fingers under their eyes from the tear-jerking ending. The end credits were rolling when I grabbed Ryan's lapel to pull him in for a quick kiss. I nuzzled up against him, wiping tears away, trying to regain my touch with reality after that emotional rollercoaster ride. My future husband was absolutely remarkable. I had never felt so much pride for a man before this moment.

Less than an hour later, we arrived at the hotel where my first lavish after-party would be held.

Before our car even came to a complete stop, Ryan focused on me, whispering last minute instructions. "Stay with me, okay? Do not let go of my hand. And do not look at the paparazzi or say anything to them. Just follow my lead."

My pulse was thrumming at a dizzying pace. Paparazzi landed on our car from all sides, yelling, shouting, lighting up the nighttime sky with thousands of bright flashes. I anticipated Mike to open my door but instead he halted, yelling at the paparazzi to back up. Moving Ryan from place to place was a daunting task, to say the least. The three or four annoying paparazzi that hounded him while he was in Rhode Island with me were nothing compared to the fifty or more paparazzi that swarmed us now. A few cameramen were shoving in closer, constricting around us like hungry vipers at feeding time. I felt Ryan's hand tense as he speed-walked us towards the entrance.

Ryan's agent, Aaron Lyons, immediately collected us when we entered the lavish ballroom, giving me a warm hug and an adoring kiss on the cheek. Another welcomed relief. At least his agent wanted to be friendly and play nice.

Aaron knew exactly how to work a room full of Hollywood money and power, introducing us to everyone exceptionally important and steering us away from those deemed unworthy of our precious time. Aaron treated me with kindness, continuously referring to me as "Ryan's fiancée, the lovely Ms. Taryn Mitchell".

We chatted with producers, studio executives, screenwriters, scriptwriters, cinematographers, sound editors, and every girlfriend, wife, husband, and partner that came with them. Business cards were flashed and I gladly took them when offered. This was high profile networking - Hollywood style. A far cry from the demands of owning a simple stand-alone business, true, but nothing I couldn't handle.

I at least had enough business savvy sense to know that regardless of the industry – business is business – and it comes with a predefined set of rules. Most of the time, the power to make you or break you dangles on your ability to make a good first impression.

This was Ryan's world and if I had any hopes to survive in it, I had to start paying attention to how the game is played. So I started with the basics. Easy to do, since the majority of the room was male. And at the core, men are easily swayed with good ol' fashioned charm.

I laced in there another no brainer that was as comfortable to me as breathing – the first rule of business. You want to know how something works, you follow the money. You find out how it's made and who controls it. And then you speak the language.

Ryan and I were in mid conversation with his *Reparation* costar and on screen love interest, Jenna Rayford, and Jonathan Follweiler and his wife, Anna, when out of nowhere Marla approached and barged into our circle, wearing that fake smile she so insidiously presents to rest of the unknowing world.

"Jonathan!" she said warmly, giving him an air kiss. "So good to see you again."

Ryan took a swig of beer from the bottle that he held in his hand and looked away, making that little air sucking sound through his teeth that he always does when he's irritated. I squeezed his hand gently in mine and contemplated our exit strategy. Didn't take me long to come up with one.

"I'd like to talk with Kelly and Cal before they leave," I said into his ear, spotting them sitting at a table. "Come with me?"

Ryan didn't hesitate. We politely excused ourselves.

"Oh Ryan?" Marla called out, hurrying behind us. "I was wondering if we might speak."

Damn, we weren't quick enough.

Ryan stopped and groaned. "What?" he said sharply. "What do you want?"

"Oh, come now! Surely you're not still sour with me? What happened earlier is in the past. I know you didn't mean to say those awful things and I want you to know that I forgive you."

Ryan scoffed. "You really are a piece of work, Marla. I can't believe I've been so blind to you for all these years. Just so there's no confusion, I meant what I said earlier. You are no longer my publicist."

I was proud of him for sticking to his guns.

Marla's head wiggled on her neck as she collected herself. I could clearly, as if looking through a piece of glass, see her coat the tip of her next sentence with poison.

"Let me remind you - if you choose to sever our relationship, you sever your interactions with my entire organization as well."

"Fine," Ryan said, unruffled. "I'm sure you'll send me a bill."

Marla's lips twitched. "Tricia!" she bellowed towards the bar where Trish was hiding, secretly observing. Marla impatiently snapped her fingers. God, I hated that. I wanted to snap her bony fingers like twigs.

"Tricia," she said with a forced grin, "Mr. Christensen has foolishly decided to terminate his contract with Brown and Sullivan. I can't help but feel as though you had something to do with this."

Trish instantly appeared mortified and she shook her head in denial.

"Well, in any case, it doesn't much matter anymore. I gave you specific instructions earlier and you chose to defy them. I cannot have my employees thinking they can undermine my decisions."

"Marla, I thought you would want me to –" Trish tried to explain.

Marla cut her off with a flutter of her hand. "As I said dear, it doesn't much matter. Your employment with Brown and Sullivan is hereby terminated, effective immediately. You can contact H.R. to arrange to pick up your personal things on Monday. Give me your security badge." Marla held out her hand.

I felt the shock hit my chest and creep up my throat. The very last thing I wanted to happen was playing out in front of me.

"You're firing me?" Trish asked, shock and anguish made her lip quiver.

Marla smirked. "You are quick," she said condescendingly. "Perhaps you won't be so underhanded in your next job."

Trish's hand trembled as she dug in her clutch purse. I wanted to hug her and scream a few obscenities at Marla for being such a royal bitch. Man, she was cold.

Ryan rubbed his forehead. "Look, if you're pissed off at me – fine – but don't take it out on her."

Marla crossed her arms and planted her high heel clad foot. "I don't see how any of this concerns you." She snapped her fingers for Trish to speed it up. "She disobeyed my orders."

"Yeah, to leave me hanging out there on the fucking carpet!" Ryan said, no longer mincing words. "Besides, I asked her to stay."

"And here I thought you could survive without my services," Marla snidely returned, flitting her eyes. Trish handed a card attached to a chain to Marla and sniffed back some tears.

My emotions swirled furiously. Anger, denial, hatred, and guilt raced through my thoughts, each trying to dominate. Ryan was speechless, searching for a good comeback that failed to surface.

I had to do something.

"Um, Ryan? I believe Trish is now a free agent," I stated. "And she is more than qualified to handle it."

Ryan looked at me, confused. I gave him one of our private signals, darting my eyes at Marla briefly and scratching my chin. After a few seconds, his face displayed his understanding. His eyes brightened and he nodded.

"Yes...yes she is," Ryan confirmed cheerfully.

"And you just so happen to be looking for new representation." I felt the relief of righteousness ease my compounded tension. *That's right, honey. Tell her to go to Hell.* Marla could shove it deep where the sun doesn't shine. We may not be able to save Trish completely, but I was going to make damn sure she at least walked away with her dignity.

"We're done here, right?" he asked Marla, dismissing her as if she were no longer of importance.

It was extremely enjoyable to watch Marla's face crumble in defeat. How I wished I could have video taped it so we could watch it over and over again for laughs.

Ryan clutched my hand in his and glanced at his empty beer bottle. "What do you say, ladies - time to discuss Trish's new salary over a few shots of tequila? That is if you want to work for me."

Trish grinned from ear to ear. "Hell yeah!" she said enthusiastically.

"You can't do that," Marla said with failed authority. Ryan smirked at her. "Watch me."



After about the second hour of schmoozing with people I didn't know, I felt extremely awful for not paying any attention to my friends. I searched the room for them, only to notice one of my friends sitting at an empty table.

"Hey, why are you sitting here all by yourself?" I asked Pete. I sat down in the chair next to him.

Pete looked confused. "I'm not alone. Gary just went to the men's room."

"Oh. Where are the girls?" I looked around for Marie and Tammy.

Pete pointed to a far corner. "They're over there yappin'. Gary is pissed that Marie keeps touching that guy in the black shirt. You might want to say something to her before it gets ugly. He's kind of drunk."

I looked over and saw my two best friends laughing heartily with a group of people. I didn't know who the guy was, but he had short-cropped brown hair and was looking like a male model from this distance. Marie brushed her hand down his arm again, definitely flirting with him

"I'll take care of it – in a minute." I craned my neck to get a better view. "That's Marcia Gay Harden on Tammy's left. She played the principal, remember?"

Pete nodded but I could tell that he really didn't care. He wasn't enamored by celebrities unless they were wearing football or baseball uniforms. He actually looked tired and ready for bed. I could relate.

"Where's Ryan?"

I nodded in his general direction. "Over there. He's talking to Edward Zwick." Pete looked lost. "The director?"

"Ooh, he's talking to the director," Pete said in a teasing tone, like the simple fact that my fiancé was holding court with the who's who of Hollywood was no biggie. Pete's face turned serious. "Are you sure you're up for all of this?" His eyes bore into mine, trying to read me. I chewed on my lip as I pondered his words. The room was so full of pretentiousness, we were both feeling out of place.

"I know what you're trying to say, but all of this really isn't *Ryan* either. He's uncomfortable with this too, you know."

Pete shrugged, mostly agreeing with me.

"Besides, maybe all of this is who I'm supposed to be. I've just been going through the motions for so long now, running the bar out of out of guilt." I huffed. "If my dad were still alive, I'd probably be sitting behind some desk in Manhattan being completely miserable instead of being here."

"Yeah," Pete concurred. "Probably. Although you could have had your own fame being a model, you know."

A tiny "gah" sound squeaked out. "Yeah right."

"Don't freaking roll your eyes at me, Taryn. You know damn well I speak the truth. But instead, you let those idiots in high school make you feel unworthy."

Memories of being singled out, enduring relentless taunting because I had bigger boobs than most and had a chubby boy for a best friend weren't something I wanted to think about right now. Even Marie and Melanie questioned why I stuck around with Pete so much back then. But none of the opinions mattered more than what Pete mattered to me.

By the time we had reached high school, Pete thinned and grew and joined the wrestling team, but one thing remained the same – he always had my back.

Pete waved a finger around. "Over two dozen heads turned when you walked over here. I'm surprised you didn't trip over a few drooling tongues along the way. I was afraid I'd have to kick some ass, fending them off."

"Shut up."

"No, you shut up!"

Pete seemed bemused. "I think that's what I love the most about you, kid. You're the most self-deprecating person I know, even though you have absolutely no reason to be that way."

I winced. How absurd.

"See? You can't even take a compliment about not being able to take compliments. You've always been an enigma, Ms. Mitchell. A complete contradiction."

I bristled with fake horror. "Did you just call me an enema?"

"Yep. You're a total pain in my ass."

I laughed at our banter. We had always had this easy friendship, starting way back in Eighth grade when he was madly in love with Melanie. Throughout the years I often pretended Pete and I were really brother and sister, separated by a tragic mix up in the hospital. He was always there for me no matter what, lording over me like a brother should.

Something caught his eye. "Ryan is a good man... a *real* good man, Taryn. I'm glad everything worked out. You finally picked one that doesn't trigger my urge to bash his head in."

I smirked at his lording. "Thanks." It warmed my heart knowing Pete and Ryan had a lot of respect for each other.

The niggling memory of when I thought Ryan's parents came to move him out of the apartment just seven days ago crept back into my thoughts. "I just wish one of you would have told me what was going on."

Pete's attention averted to his drink. "I almost did. I came close to spilling the beans a few times. I couldn't stand seeing you in so much pain. Just know... it killed me."

"So why didn't you?"

He swirled the ice in his glass, hesitating. "Truth? Because I wasn't sure. I didn't know if Ryan would actually do it or not. I mean, he told us he was going to. Hell, he even asked us all for our blessing. But then you two were touch and go there for a few days and..."

He straightened and looked me in the eyes. "If we would have told you he was going to propose and then he didn't... God... I just couldn't do that to you, Tar."

I rubbed my hand gently, briefly over his shoulder, trying to alleviate his obvious remorse. "I understand. I... I just feel like such an idiot, carrying on the way I did. Seeing him kiss Lauren in that restaurant and that freakin' note... it was so convincing. I know I should

have never doubted him, but standing there watching it, it was like reliving the Thomas nightmare all over again. Only this time, it hurt a million times worse."

Pete's lips curled into a familiar, sympathetic smile.

"I know what you're going to say next," I interjected, reading the rest of Pete's expression. "I have to put that all behind me now and never allow myself to get that low again."

"Yep," he confirmed with a smirk. "But what you also have to keep in mind is that – this time around – you're with a guy who's totally in love with you."

I didn't need to be an interpreter to catch Pete's allusion. Despite his contrary actions and Pete's opinion, Thomas did love me. He even said it to me out loud once. He just didn't know how to show it all the time.

Pete glanced over in Ryan's direction. "I mean, just look at him. He's got all sorts of women hovering around him but he never acknowledges them – ever. He's been like that since the first day he walked into your pub. Like you are the only woman on the planet. And the funny thing is, no matter where you are in the room, Ryan knows exactly where you are. He may be talking to somebody rich and famous but he's *always* got one eye trained on you. That poor bastard. He's such a goner!"

I rolled my eyes at his teasing comments.

"Speaking of goners... before I forget, Tammy has been bugging me. You know we still have a little problem with the wedding and who you're going to be partnered with. I didn't want to ask my cousin in case you wanted Ryan but... do you want me to ask Ryan?"

"Ask me what?"

My head jerked, surprised by his voice. Ryan reached out and gently caressed my cheek in his hand, silently mouthing "hi" to me. In that moment, everything else ceased to exist. His unfathomable love for me was overwhelming and in that instant something new, something profoundly deep tied us even stronger. I felt it as sure as I felt my own heartbeat. I gathered his warm hand quickly and gave it a kiss.

"Oh hey," Pete said, giving me the "see what I mean" lopsided look I know so well.

Ryan straddled the chair next to me, pressing his body close to mine. My mind quickly veered to thinking about how much I'd like to just snuggle up in his arms and end this tiring day. I was starting to feel like Pete looked – exhausted. Ryan softly kissed the exposed skin on my shoulder and oh so cleverly drifted the tip of his nose on my neck. *Freaking tease*.

"Well, I was wondering how you'd feel about being Taryn's partner in our wedding. I'd be honored if you were one of my groomsmen."

Ryan perked up a bit. "Really? Wow. Sure, I guess. Um... wait. I don't know," he said. That's when he parked his forehead on my shoulder.

"I thought you were clear for the first weekend of September?" I reached for my phone to check his calendar, swearing that I blocked it off, but other thoughts quickly dawned on me.

"I am, I think," he muttered. "That's not it. Pete, I'm honored that you asked but I don't know if that's such a good idea. You know I tend to cause a stir wherever I go. I don't want to ruin your wedding day. That's your day."

I set my evening bag back down on the table and sighed, imagining the pandemonium that would ensue from Ryan and I being seen in a church together. This morning's tabloid gossip reported that Ryan proposed because I'm supposedly pregnant. "Yeah, he's right. You don't want the paparazzi at your wedding."

"Ah, screw them. I want you there," Pete retorted emphatically, poking the white tablecloth with his finger to make his point.

The more I considered it, the more I envisioned Tammy's wedding being ruined by party-crashers and hundreds of photographers all vying for a clear shot of Ryan in a tux. "No. It's not a good idea," I said remorsefully. "Just ask your cousin."

Ryan cleared his throat. "Um, I don't recall saying *no*," he corrected me. "Can I get back to you on that Pete?"

I didn't understand why Ryan would need time to think about it, considering that being anywhere with him in public was always difficult. After the big deal that was made out of our proposal photos, I could only

imagine the crap that would be printed from us being seen walking in and out of a church.

What's going to happen when Ryan and I get married? New visions of helicopters flying overhead, security everywhere wearing hidden communication earpieces like the damn Secret Service – checking to make sure that the poor caterers weren't some paparazzi spies – rolled into my thoughts.

Just as I started to drift further into those ghastly images, my slightly inebriated fiancé bit his teeth gently but firmly into the nape of my neck.

A heated tickle shivered through me as he whispered, "dance with me" into my ear.

Ryan led me by the hand, weaving us through the bodies that slowly swayed on the dance floor. The tacky mirrorball that twirled over the center of the floor cast sparkles of twinkling light through the darkness, swirling me further into this amazingly enchanted evening.

I caressed the nape of his neck as he wrapped me securely in his arms, resting his cheek on my temple. It was nice to share a moment of peace in this very stressful day.

Ryan gently smiled, curling a stray hair behind my ear. "Are you having fun?"

I beamed back at him and nodded, thankful that he cared to ask. "Yes. Very much so. Thank you for yet another amazing night."

His deep voice lowered. "Thank you for sharing it with me. You really impressed me tonight, schmoozing with Universal's money men like that. You really know your shit about finances."

I shrugged. "I know enough to be dangerous. I just want to learn as much as I can about this business, that's all."

"Learn? By the look on Jeff Westfield's face when you started telling him all that shit about P/E ratios and ways he can diversify his whatever, I'd say you were the teacher, sweetheart."

Doubtful. Although I was trying to impress, rather than being construed as nothing more than arm candy with boobs.

"You don't think? He just offered you a job. At Universal."

"A comment like 'if you're ever in L.A. and need anything, come see me' hardly constitutes a job offer, Ryan. He was just being nice."

Ryan apparently didn't agree. "For someone who can read people well, you're *way* off on this one."

"I can read you," I said smugly.

"Oh, yeah? Can you tell what I'm thinking now?" That smirk of his contained many innuendos.

Our mutual smiles led to a kiss – one that was almost impolite considering we were amongst several hundred people. His lips parted and his tongue reached for mine and I couldn't help but drink him in. The tastes of whiskey and beer blended with champagne and chocolate, mixing our unique flavors together into a flavor that was all our own.

"God, the things I want to do to you right now," he breathed out on my lips. "What do you say we get out of here? I need to lay you down on a bed."

"Oh really?" I teased, somewhat breathless.

"Uh huh." Ryan nodded devilishly. His eyes narrowed on me. "What, aren't you in the mood?"

"No, no, I am. Absolutely," I quickly replied. "But..."

"But what?"

"I'm just curious. So what is it *exactly* that you want to do to me? It's just... I want to know what's in store for me before I agree to leave this wonderful party."

Ryan smirked then twirled me under his arm. "I thought we'd play it by ear. See what pops up when we get there. But I can definitely tell you that I have something *huge* that I want to give ya."

I made a face at him. "Er... I don't know. I was hoping for more details than that. I think you'll have to come up with a better script."

He folded our hands to his chest and swayed us to the beat.

"How about we play 'bad cop-hooker?"

With full intent to tease, I sneered at his suggestion. "I've seen that movie already. Maybe you should hire a scriptwriter. I think I met a few of those tonight. Let me go find one..."

Ryan pulled me back to his chest roughly, never releasing the hold he had on my hand.

"I thought that this might be a co, co, llab... Collab-bora-tive effort. Shit."

"Great... sloppy five minute drunken sex," I whined, messing with him further.

Ryan gave me a playful leer and tightened his grip on my body. "Believe me, woman, I'm far from drunk. And I can personally guarantee that I'm going to take my good ol' time with you." His lips brushed my ear. "Tie your little smart ass to the bed. Punish you for doubting me. See how long you can ride my tongue before you scream."

His erotic words tugged on that secret sweet spot deep within my core. I could definitely go for one of his tongue lashings.

I ran a hand over his hard chest, down his flat stomach, imagining my fingernails turning into claws, effortlessly shredding the white cotton dress shirt that separated me from his skin. I whispered into his ear, "I'm betting that you pass out as soon as your head hits the pillow."

He took the back of my neck in a possessive grasp as he raked his top teeth over his lip. "That's a bet you're sure to lose, my love, because I am definitely, *definitely* up for the challenge."

In a wanton display of lust and need, I squeezed my fingers into his buttocks, coaxing his hips to grind in a bit harder as if he were already naked and between my legs. I didn't care that we were in a room full of people.

The music swirled and the lights danced around us, sending my blood into hyper drive. Ryan's finger drifted, seductively snaking down my neck, over the hollow of my throat, down to the crest of my cleavage. I envisioned his tongue snaking the same path.

He sighed, almost saddened, resigned. "The hardest part is knowing that underneath this *incredibly* sexy dress is a totally hot lace bustier and sheer panties that you put on when you thought I wasn't looking. But I have to confess... I was *so* looking."

I nudged him lightly. "That was supposed to be a surprise!"

All playfulness was gone, replaced by determination and hunger. His lips came down on mine, taking ownership of my mouth, of my senses. One touch of his tongue was all I needed to open and let him in.

"Don't be mad," he murmured a breath away, reminding that he still possessed total control of my body. "I'm an actor, remember? I can play *surprised*."

My mind drifted, picturing his long, hard body holding me fast to the bed. He wants to pretend to be surprised? I'll give him surprised.

"You're obviously not a very good Peeping Tom, since you failed to mention that I'm wearing your favorite item."

He glanced down to the floor. "The stilettos?"

I shook my head.

As if I'd just told him Santa Claus was truly real, his eyes opened widely, all glistening and hopeful. His hand flew to my thigh, seeking confirmation. A deep, feral groan rolled up this throat when he found the top band of my nylons.

I bit his earlobe tenderly. "I'd much rather you played evil doctor with me."

That was apparently all he could take.

"I am so gonna fuck you in those shoes. That and the nylons. When we get back to the room, they stay on." Ryan grabbed my hand and quickly led us through the crowd. There was no stopping him. He was a man on a mission.