

Undone, Volume 1

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Callie Harper's Books

Off Limits: A Stepbrother MMA Romance <http://amzn.to/1PDPGZz>

Unleashed: Hot Alpha Romance, Volumes 1-4 (Beg for It series, Book 1)
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Undone, Volumes 1-3 (Beg for It series, Book 2), released in March 2016
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One Month From Now

Ana

I pulled against my wrist restraints, panting as his tongue trailed a slow, teasing path down my stomach. A moan escaped my lips. I needed to touch him, fist my fingers in his thick, jet-black hair and dig my nails into his broad, muscular shoulders. But I couldn't even see him. He'd blindfolded me. Twisting my head to the side, I could still picture him, tattoos licking along his bicep. The ridges of his abs, the start of his V.

"Please!" I couldn't help but cry out. I needed more, needed his tongue lower, needed to be set free so I could at least touch myself if not him. He'd worked me up into such a frenzy. With a low, satisfied growl deep in his chest, he dipped his tongue in a lazy circle around my belly button. He insisted on having me his way, tormenting every inch of me until I begged for it.

"Ash!" I strained against my ties, spread-eagle on the king-size bed, but he'd fastened them well. All I succeeded in doing was arching up my back, further offering my naked breasts up for his pleasure.

He chuckled, deep and wicked, tracing my curves with his hand. "You like being tied up, don't you, my Anika?" His fingers melted me as he stroked my limbs, up my side, along the swell of my breast. He paused and I held my breath, wondering what he might do next, feeling a throb deep in my pussy, drawing more slick sweetness from my core. The anticipation, the submission, it made me crazy.

But he kept on going, up past my breast, along my collarbone, up my arm to circle my restraints. He drew my attention to his control, how he had me tied up, exactly where he wanted me.

"I knew you'd like it," he murmured. "You're so beautiful, laid out here for me."

I panted like an animal and swallowed hard. A sliver of my mind still reared up in shock at what I was doing, what I was letting him do to me. Willingly turning myself over to him in complete submission. I'd never done anything like it before, letting someone tie me up. I'd thought about it, even touched myself fantasizing about it late at night. But never in my bland, boring, good girl what-passed-for-a-sex-life had I ever done anything like it.

Turned out that getting snowed in at a cabin in the mountains with Ash Black, the sexiest, hottest rock god on the planet brought out the naughty side in me.

A month ago, I never would have believed any of this would happen. Sure, I'd fantasized about the lead singer of my favorite band. Plenty of times. But I wasn't alone in that. Ash Black had been on the cover of *People* magazine as sexiest man alive the last two years in a row. I think he'd starred in more than a few late-night fantasies.

But even my fantasies hadn't taken me this far. A month ago, I never could have imagined this scene. I wouldn't have recognized the naked woman, bound and blindfolded on the bed, writhing and whimpering beneath Ash's large, powerful body.

Suddenly, I felt wet heat on my aching, erect nipple. I cried out as he sucked me, licked me, pleasure rocketing directly to my sex.

"You need this, Ana. Don't you?" he whispered, husky. I could feel his stubble, rough along my soft breast as he circled my nipple, slowly, teasing me again.

"Yes!" I cried out. "Please!" I begged for release, not from bondage, but from the intensity of the building, cresting orgasm I could feel quivering up inside of me. I needed to let it out, and I needed him to free it from me.

"Oh! Please!" I begged, shameless.

"I knew you had this in you," Ash whispered, up at my neck, licking, sucking me there at my sensitive flesh. Moaning, I tossed my head back, baring my skin, giving him full access. "From the second I met you, all buttoned up in that library, I knew."

"You couldn't have." Even in my frenzied state, I knew it wasn't true. It couldn't be. I hadn't even known I'd had this wild, wanton sex goddess within my prim and proper exterior. A children's librarian, I was the daughter of a strict, older couple of Russian immigrants, raised through generations of sacrifice and hardship to work and then work some more. I'd never cut loose before, not once. My largest act of rebellion had been to move to Brooklyn, an hour and a half from my childhood home in upstate New York. And listen to Ash Black's pure, driven rock music late at night.

Now I had the man himself, the literal poster boy for bad boy rock stars. Or more accurately, he had me. All alone. In a cabin shut off from the world in the epic storm draught-stricken California had been waiting for for years.

"You can scream, Ana." Ash licked at my collarbone, trailing fingers along my outstretched arms. "You can yell at the top of your lungs. No one will hear you."

"Ash!" I cried out as he sank down once again, capturing my erect, aroused nipple between his teeth. He bit down just enough to make it burn so good. He

palmed my breast, feasting on me, sucking hard, then light, just a whisper of a lick around my nipple as I panted and quivered. All the rumors about this man were true, every single one of them. He was an arrogant, rich playboy, a heartthrob and a heartbreaker, a panty-melting bad boy who had dozens upon hundreds of women throwing themselves at him night after night.

But he'd chosen me. It was me he'd tied down to his bed, me he had nasty, dirty plans for all night long. Me, alone with him, snowed in and at his mercy.

"You can scream when you come, Ana," he whispered, trailing his tongue down my stomach. Slowly, so slowly. I moaned, wishing I could move, wishing I could bring my sex up to him and make things happen faster. I'd never felt so desperate, so crazed. Sex before Ash had always been blah, mostly forgettable, slightly regrettable. It had never felt anything like this rush of a roller coaster ride, this wild, heady plunge straight into the unknown.

"It will be our little secret," he continued, down now at my hips. Large fingers over my smooth skin, he worshipped my curves, feathering kisses down the insides of my thighs. My ankles were bound at either side to the bedpost. Suddenly shy at my complete and total exposure, I held my breath. I couldn't move. I had nowhere to go, no way to hide my arousal. With his face down now at my pussy, he could see me dripping for him, my swollen clit aching with need, throbbing and begging for his attention.

"Here in this cabin, you can let yourself go, Ana." His words worked a dark, wicked spell around me, relaxing and surrendering me into the intensity of my pleasure. "Here, you can let me do all the things you've always wanted. Everything you've fantasized about." He brought his fingers up, up my thighs, to finally, tormentingly, lightly graze my slick slit.

I gasped at the contact, so eager, so close. "That's it, Ana," he coaxed me with his words and his fingers. "Show me how much you need it. It's just you and me here. No one will ever know. You can be my little slut. You can scream and come and show me how much you want it, how much you'll beg for it. No one will ever know."

"Yes," I panted, beyond reason, almost beyond words. "Yes, please." His lips were so close now, inches away from my sex. His tongue, so hot, so wicked, so near I could almost feel it, could imagine how good it would feel when he finally feasted on me.

"Ana," he exhaled in satisfaction, that gravelly voice that drove women wild caressing me intimately. "So wet." Reverently, he swept his fingers down my slick sex, lightly sliding them along, exploring where I was spread for him, aching and ready. "Surrender to me, Ana. The way you know you want to."

My head bucked back, my throat bare. A raw groan escaped my parted lips.

"Now I'm going to eat you, Ana. And you're going to come for me, aren't you?"

"Yes!" I panted, wild with need.

"Then I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to fuck you so hard you're going to scream. You're going to come when I slide deep inside you. And as hard as I slam into you, you're going to beg for more. Aren't you, Ana?"

"Please! Please!" I couldn't think anymore, couldn't take any more teasing, coaxing, building me up. I needed to explode. And then, finally, just when I couldn't

take it anymore, he finally brought his mouth down, hot and full, on my drenched, exposed pussy.

Chapter 1

Ash

Aw, fuck. My head hurt like someone had cut it open with a broken bottle. Maybe someone had? I brought my hand up, tentative. Nope, everything intact. Just my skull in the grips of a massive, relentless hangover. Nothing new. Then why did I feel like something new had happened?

With a groan, I shifted my weight on the bed and swung my legs over the side. Slow and steady, that's how you won the race. Or moved your aching, hard-partying body the morning after an epic night of tearing through Vegas. Much like the night before and the night before that. People expected nothing less from hotter-than-hell rock god Ash Black. Trashed hotel rooms, run-ins with paparazzi, X-rated scenes with starlets, I did it all while strutting around in leather pants and no shirt, my world-famous muscles and tats on full display. I always delivered.

But something else had happened last night. My mouth tasted like soot and my head felt stuffed with cotton balls, the scratchy, cheap kind. I couldn't remember. What was it?

Behind me, a feminine grunt emerged beneath wrinkled sheets. Strands of dark hair splayed across a pillow. Mandy Monroe, America's sweetheart aka my plaything at the moment, had blonde hair. Huh. I thought we'd been hanging out last night.

Like a goddamned chainsaw, my goddamned phone buzzed with an incoming call. All the goddamned way across the hotel room. No way was I going to make it that far.

Down on the floor between my feet I spotted a tied-off used condom. So there was that. Wasted as I got, I used protection on autopilot. The world already had its hands full with just one Ash Black. No one needed any little Ashes running around. My cock got out and played each and every night, but procreation? Not going to happen.

The mystery woman next to me snorted in her sleep. What was she doing still in my bed? I liked my fun over and out—as in out of the room by the time I woke up. I pulled the sheet down.

Ah, yes, I remembered those tits, as big and gorgeous as only a plastic surgeon could shape them. I remembered them bouncing up and down as she rode me last night. I usually liked to dominate, play games of control, but last night I'd been too wasted to do more than let her climb on and ride me like a rodeo bull.

Tugging the sheet down some more, I swatted her lightly on the ass. “Up and out, Buttercup.”

Groaning, she opened her eyes. Her mascara had smeared down like a Halloween costume of a zombie prom queen. “You got to get going.” I pointed toward the door. I didn’t even try to make up an excuse, something lame about needing to take care of something. I didn’t ask for her phone number as she fumbled around and found her skimpy dress, pulling it on and zipping into her thigh-high boots. I was Ash Fucking Black. I didn’t give out my digits.

“So, thanks,” she mumbled. “If you ever want to, you know—”

“Yeah.” I gave her my signature wink. Class dismissed. And what did she do when I was such an asshole? She giggled and blushed, like they all did.

I could get away with anything. And I took full advantage of it. I was 26 now, but I’d been famous since I was 19 and my band charted its first number one hit. People called us the harder-driving, U.S. version of Coldplay. We had some Green Day in us, some Fun once you cranked them up. Some compared us to the Sex Pistols or Guns ‘n’ Roses. Whatever you called it or compared it to, we made music that made you jump up, dance your ass off and bang your head against the wall. No ballads, no whining, we made screw-the-consequences, fuck-it-all-I’m-going-for-it RAWCK.

There were lots of benefits to my status. Touring the world, VIP access to anything anytime, but at the top of my list had to be the constant supply of pussy. It wasn’t as if I’d been hard-up before I’d gotten famous. My father was Richard Kavanaugh, billionaire real estate mogul and investor. I’d learned early that being rich and handsome opened up all kinds of doors and legs. But it was when I picked up a guitar as a teenager that girls really started getting crazy. Waiting for me naked in my bed. Texting me videos of them making out with their girlfriends or playing with themselves as they thought of me.

By now, I’d gotten so used to the whole sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll routine it was almost boring. I was almost tired of it. Almost. Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t playing a tiny violin of pity for myself. I was having the time of my life. Every night.

That was it, though. With the exact same shit every different day, every now and then in the midst of the wild and crazy carnival I’d have a whisper of a doubt. I’d look around and think, is that all there is? Then I’d do a show and get wasted and fuck groupies and nothing would matter all over again.

I’d been the bad boy for a long time now, my whole life really. I’d started off the black sheep in my family, doing nothing right in my father’s eyes, dark in my perfect older brother’s chip-off-the-old-block’s shadow. Then as the rocker, I’d become the poster boy for devil-may-care defiance. I’d spent years riding that long wave of adolescent rebellion while I proudly held up my middle finger.

Sometimes I wondered what it would feel like to stop. Get off the crazy train. Be still and silent for even a moment.

When media darling Mandy Monroe and I first got together a couple months ago, I’ll admit it, I’d been curious about her. Everyone knew her story, the daughter of a coal miner from West Virginia discovered on *American Idol*. Seventeen years old and singing her heart out with those big, brown eyes and long blonde hair, the world had fallen in love with her. I’d wondered, maybe it would be different with her?

She'd certainly grown up outside the bubbles I'd lived in my whole life. Maybe she'd be real?

I didn't know what kind of person Mandy had been at 17. But at 22, the Mandy I got to know was as vicious and shrewd as they came, always angling for the right PR shot, constantly scheming about how to stay on top of the headlines. It hadn't taken me long to realize her sugary image had nothing to do with her sour reality. The only reason things had dragged on as long as they had between us was we were never in the same place at the same time. Until last night. We'd gone out to dinner here in Vegas. Hadn't we?

My phone buzzed again. With a deep down-to-the-bones groan, I stumbled across the room to retrieve it. I still didn't get there in time to pick up. The screen announced that I had 15 missed calls, 10 from my agent, four from my PR firm, one from my older brother.

Uh-oh. My big brother never called unless it was to give me shit. I'd done something to screw up. What was it?

My phone rang again in my hand. My agent. With a sigh, I picked up.

"Yeah?" My voice creaked out, gravelly and hung-over.

If words came across visually, his would be bright red and all caps. "WHAT THE FUCK? YOU'VE FUCKED UP ROYALLY THIS TIME!"

"Goddamn it, Joel, do you have to yell?" I rubbed my face with my hand. It was too early for this shit. Wait, what time was it anyway?

"DON'T YOU TELL ME TO QUIET DOWN! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING LAST NIGHT?"

"What are you talking about?"

That made him pause. "You don't know yet, do you?"

Aw, shit. "What now?" I'd clearly been up to something, but it wasn't the first time I'd gotten into hot water. That was why I employed a full team to keep the Ash Black show on schedule.

"Watch it on YouTube. It's already got two million hits."

"How do I—?"

"Type in your name. It'll come right up."

I sat down on a chair. I had a feeling it would be better to be sitting down when I saw this. But, again, it wasn't the first time I'd had footage of me leaked doing something naughty. People might tsk and wag their fingers, but they loved it. It was all part of my persona. Right?

My agent was correct, a video popped right up under the title "A**hole Ash Black". Only 35 seconds long, someone had caught it on their camera phone, a perfect shot. Mandy Monroe and me in a fancy restaurant last night. Tears streamed down her lovely face. I looked shitfaced, shadows under my eyes, my black hair tufting out in crazy angles.

Listing slightly to the left, I leered at her and asked, "What, are you gonna do? Cry?"

Her lower lip wobbled, those famous big brown eyes brimming with tears.

"Why, Ash? Why?" she pleaded.

"You're an idiot," I slurred. "And what's worse, you're boring."

"But I thought..." Her voice trembled. She brought her shaking hand to her heart. "I thought you were the one."

I burst out with an evil villain's laugh. Did I really laugh like that? More of a cackle, really.

"I'm out of here," I declared, standing up and kicking over my chair like a twit. "Go crying home to Mommy." My sorry ass stumbled on out of the frame, leaving Mandy alone at the table for two with silent tears of pain traveling down her perfect face.

The girl deserved an Oscar. It had been staged, all of it. I knew that the second I saw it. I'd been in the media spotlight long enough to know, no one held a camera phone that steady, at that perfect an angle, with the sound quality so excellent at exactly the right moment without it being a set up. It had all happened, that I knew as well, but she'd arranged the whole thing right down to having someone seated nearby to film it.

"Have you seen it?" my agent asked. I'd forgotten he was still on the phone.

"Yeah."

"This is a disaster."

"It was a set up."

"You and I know that, but the rest of the world doesn't. And don't act like you didn't say all that shit. You know you did."

Sure, I'd said all that. I remembered now, all of it. Mandy and I had had a rip-snorting fight earlier that evening. It had started out stupid, something about how I'd said she looked pretty in a dress instead of amazing or breathtaking or some over-the-top shit like a character out of a Harlequin romance novel. It had escalated into a tantrum over how I didn't appreciate her enough. She'd thrown a glass vase against a wall, screaming that a miserable, washed-up hack like me was lucky to be with a bonafide superstar like her. No camera phone had caught that, though.

It was genius, really. Mandy had obviously known I was going to break up with her. She'd realized she'd milked all of the press she could out of our relationship. So she'd decided to go out with a bang. She had a new album coming out filled with love songs and this would give her just the boost she needed to score a few out-of-the-gate chart-toppers. Hats off to her.

"Mandy Monroe is America's sweetheart," my agent told me. Like it was news.

"I know." I rubbed my brow.

"You just broke her heart."

"Yup."

"You tore it up and threw it in her face. And it's all on video. This is bad, Ash."

"People love it when I'm bad." I tried to defend myself, but even to me it sounded weak.

"Not this kind of bad. This is not going to go over well."

I had nothing to say to that one. I could practically see Joel shaking his head in frustration.

"You had to dump the coalminer's daughter. On YouTube."

"Shit, you have to put it like that?"

"Listen, there's going to be backlash. It's going to be big. We have to figure a way out of this one."

"That's what I pay you the big bucks for, Joel."

"You can't make a joke out of this, Ash. You fucked up good. Clean up, fly back and meet me at five o'clock."

"I'm supposed to head to New York today."

"Why? Your next show isn't until next week and it's in L.A."

"Family stuff." This coming weekend I had my family's huge holiday party. It wasn't the kind of event I normally went in for. Black tie, so that was a big strike against it. Plus it involved my family, which guaranteed that it would suck. But my grandmother required mandatory attendance at the annual Kavanaugh holiday party. Even a rule-breaker like me had to comply. She might be the only person I really listened to. If you met her, you'd get it.

"Well, come to S.F. today. Go to New York tomorrow. We have to get a plan in play. I'll have Lola and Gary meet us and...aw shit." His voice trailed off.

"What?"

"You're the number one hashtag trending on Twitter."

This wasn't going to be good. "What is it?"

"#HatePlayerAsh."

It wasn't the first time I'd inspired my own personal hashtag. #DoMeAsh #HotAsh, #FuckMeAsh. I was used to those. But this, though? This was new. And it was blowing up.

With a groan, I sank my head into my hands. I didn't mind making messes so long as I didn't have to clean them up. But now I stood with a sponge and a bucket and knew I'd have to get down on my hands and knees and scrub.

Chapter 2

Ana

"Is this the one where they fly? I really like it when they fly." A little girl wearing a giant snowflake sweater and fairy wings looked up at me. She couldn't be more than four years old and she couldn't pronounce her 'r's so "really" came out "weely." She was perfect.

Kneeling down, I studied the book jacket. *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*.

"Well, the reindeers fly, if that's what you're thinking about."

"Are they mean?" She turned to me with gravitas, the weight of the word "mean" filling her brown eyes.

I could not tell a lie. I nodded. "At first, the other reindeer are mean to Rudolph." She frowned in response. "But it ends happy."

After another moment of consideration, she grabbed it. "Yes," she declared. "And the fuff-flies." I'd also helped her find a book about a family of butterflies. She marched off in her boots to a young woman engrossed in her cell phone. Her nanny, I assumed. In this part of SoHo I met a lot more nannies than parents coming into the children's wing of the library. We were in an extremely affluent corner of the city, tucked into an amazing brownstone with gargoyles and lions sculpted into the edifice. Too bad our branch was so short on funds we were on the chopping block to close.

I'd already been furious over the cutbacks on our hours. How could a library with a children's wing not open until noon? Didn't they know how early in the morning little kids woke up? They started their days at six, sometimes five a.m. The very latest we should open our doors was nine o'clock. Even by then, I bet we'd have a few exhausted caregivers standing outside with strollers desperate to come in and give the kids something to keep them entertained.

But last week our boss had gathered all of us together to tell us that, no, we wouldn't be getting end-of-year bonuses. And, surprise, due to lack of funds we'd been short-listed for closure. We'd find out for sure in January.

You'd think in a city with this kind of money there'd be enough to keep the libraries open!

I felt a small tug on my sweater. A little boy with short, black curly hair looked up at me.

"Hello, may I help you find something?" I smiled down at him.

"This is my truck." He held up a green, plastic dump truck and demonstrated how it could move. "His name is Oscar the Truck."

I couldn't stay grumpy, not for long. I loved this job. It paid nothing. I got little kids' snot on me almost every day, especially now that it was December. I spent a lot of time engaged in nonsensical exchanges about random facts and made-up stories with preschoolers. But I loved it. At least one thing, and sometimes a whole lot of things, made me laugh every single day. And I never tired of seeing a little kid get engrossed in turning pages, cuddled up in the cozy corner of pillows I'd created, their little faces lighting up with delight.

My career choice had left my parents underwhelmed. Here I was, 24 years old and already resigned to a lifetime of obscurity and penury. They'd raised me for much more, enduring great personal sacrifice, and they liked to remind me of it. Also, they liked to remind me of the millions of my ancestors who'd died under Stalin's rule. But that was kind of a given for Russian immigrants, the references to the homeland, the starvation and freezing and hardship I'd never know because I was such an American.

I knew my parents loved me, their only child, born to them when they were already in their 40s. My mother liked to tell me that I was a miracle child. They'd immigrated to upstate New York and toiled, year in and year out, to make a better life for me. They'd poured their resources and energies into training me as a classical pianist, paying for every lesson, driving me to countless recitals, helping me prepare for competitions and soloist showcases. When I'd started studying at the local community college I'd declared music as my major and they'd still kept the dream alive.

But it wasn't my dream. I loved music, but what I loved was the creative feel of it, the joy, the rush. Not the rigid, relentless execution of a flawless classical performance. I wasn't knocking classical music—look at my playlist and you'd find as much Stravinsky and Prokofiev as you would Coldplay and Ash Black. But what I'd grown up with was cold and sterile, not the beating, pulsing energy and passion that breathed life into music.

The funny thing was, though, I now got paid to be a demanding, rigorous piano teacher. I'd earned my degree in library sciences and been working as a children's librarian for a year now, but to make ends meet I taught piano to the sons and daughters of wealthy New Yorkers.

My shift ended at five because the library closed at five. No money to stay open longer than that. I pulled on my winter coat, hat, gloves and boots and headed out into the subway system to the Upper East Side where families paid me more for a half-hour's piano lesson than I made in five hours as a librarian.

"Hello!" I announced my arrival into an austere penthouse apartment, stomping the slush off my boots and removing my coat in the mudroom.

"Anika." The housekeeper stiffly greeted me.

"Please, call me Ana." We went through this every week. The formality of this and so many of the families I worked for killed me.

"Colby is in the music room."

Imagine, New York City real estate as expensive as it was, and this family was by no means the only one I worked for with a music room. A whole room devoted to a huge grand piano! Other families had it on display in their gigantic living rooms. Not one of them had an upright pressed up against a wall in a crowded corner, like I'd grown up playing.

I coached Colby through her lesson, stopping her when she lacked technical precision, encouraging her to add more feeling like we were following a recipe for blueberry muffins and you could drop in a teaspoon more of passion. I'll tell you what this girl needed, and it wasn't my pushing her. She needed to zip up into a snowsuit, head over to Central Park with some friends and have a good, old-fashioned messy snowball fight. She needed to laugh until her belly ached.

Problem was, all of her friends were busy doing exactly what she was, working with highly-paid tutors and coaches and teachers grooming them to perfection. And that's what I was paid to do, too. So I did it, pointing out a few passages where she could make improvements. But I worried that after I left she'd stay up until three a.m. completing her homework and then practicing and practicing some more.

After several more lessons much the same, I finally emerged out onto the city sidewalk free at last. It was only around 20 degrees, but the wind wasn't blowing too hard so I decided to walk a few blocks. I lived in Brooklyn so eventually I'd have to get onto the subway, but Manhattan at night during the holiday season pulled at me like an unopened Christmas present. All the lights and wreaths and garlands beckoned, drawing me down toward the gleaming storefront displays that started up as I walked south on Madison Avenue toward midtown.

I still couldn't believe I lived there. Growing up an hour and a half north of the city, it had seemed a world away. My parents would take me in once or twice a

year, usually to see a Russian pianist perform, introducing me to my heritage. And trying to hand off the baton.

Now I got to live there! Well, in Brooklyn. And not Park Slope, mind you, prices there had gone through the roof. I'd found a small three-bedroom apartment in North-Central Brooklyn, east of Bed-Sty, south of Prospect Heights. It wasn't big enough for a piano, wasn't really big enough for much of anything, but I loved it.

I wondered if my roommates would be home when I got back. Jillian liked to cook big, fattening casseroles as if we were a large, Italian family instead of three single women in their twenties. I didn't complain. My nighttime teaching schedule didn't exactly permit me much time to make dinner. My other roommate, Liv, would likely be out. She tended to sleep until noon, then stay out all night. As an artist, her hours worked for her. She was studying performance art at the Pratt Institute, though I still hadn't quite figured out exactly what that meant. We'd all connected over the three-bedroom apartment online, and though we had very little in common I loved the eclectic mix, just like the city.

I drew my earbuds out of my pocket and plugged them into my ears. Nothing like New York City at night with a soundtrack. Time to fire up some Ash Black. My boots powered down the sidewalk. With his deep, growling voice stroking me through the chords, I felt powered up and ready for anything.

That was what I loved about music, the adrenaline, the freedom. That surge when you heard the opening chords of your favorite song.

My ex-boyfriend Stan had never understood that. Stable and level-headed, hardworking and loyal, he had all the makings of a wonderful husband and father. My parents had loved him. They were only getting older, already in their mid-to-late-sixties. They wanted to know when I was going to give them grandbabies. Stan had been ready to sign up for the job, buy the house down the street from my parents and unfurl that future.

The only problem was me. I knew plenty of other girls who would have loved the stable, predictability of Stan. He was a handsome guy, polite to my parents. We ate spaghetti together every Monday night, take-out Chinese every Wednesday and pizza on Fridays. Sundays we had dinner with my parents. We went to the gym Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and had sex Friday and Saturday nights. In his apartment, we'd turn out the lights and have our five minutes in heaven missionary-style in his bed. It wasn't even long enough for me to work out my to-do list for the next day or figure out what I needed at the grocery store, though I usually got a good start on both while we did the deed.

Ultimately, I couldn't do it. Stan and I already had long stretches of silence, nothing to say to each other while we sat on the couch in front of the TV. I tried to tell myself that meant we were super, duper comfortable together. But if we were already like an old, boring, married couple before we even got engaged, what did that mean? How was that going to play out?

I'd broken things off a year ago. I'd heard from a friend back home that he was already engaged to someone else, some girl I didn't know whom he'd met online. I wished them luck.

Who knew, it had probably been a stupid mistake to end things. I was probably just a ridiculous dreamer, holding on to fantasies in blatant defiance of

reality. The kind of guy I dreamed about probably didn't even exist in real life. I knew I'd read too many romance novels, grown all too enchanted with the archetype of the strong, tough, sexy bad boy with the heart of gold.

But I was only 24. Wasn't it a little too soon for me to turn up my hands and say 'eh', all right, I give up, I'll settle? Couldn't I be allowed a little more time to dream?

Because, what if? What if there was a guy out there who made my blood rush and my heart beat, a guy who could make me laugh and feel wild and reckless and alive. A man who gave me the kind of thrill I felt when listening to my favorite music, that sense that the future was limitless, that I could do anything I wanted and more.

I'd always been a good girl, but I'd always had a thing for bad boys. There'd been a guy at my high school with a motorcycle and a black leather jacket. He'd been a year ahead of me. I'd watched him, shy and quiet, and he'd never noticed me. Until one day after school, he'd caught me looking, stepping through the autumn leaves holding my books. He'd given me a sexy wink and a beckoning smile, then invited me over with a tilt of his head. He'd patted the seat behind him on his bike as if to say, "It's yours if you want it. Let me take you on a ride."

My eyes wide, I'd looked down and scurried away. I didn't even know him. I wasn't about to hop up on a motorcycle with him. Besides, my mother had told me a million times I was never allowed to ride one because they were so dangerous, death traps she called them, shaking her head when we saw one on the road.

But that moment had stayed with me. It wasn't so much that one guy. It was the idea of him, of that moment. The path not taken. The opportunity missed.

I'd played it safe for a good, long time, but I'd been slowly spreading my wings. Finishing my degree at a four-year SUNY a little further from home, pursuing a degree in library science, finding a job in the city and moving to Brooklyn. Step by step, I was building my own life. Nothing wild and crazy. Yet.

But I had a feeling inside. It wasn't something I could name, nothing I could put my finger on. But I tingled with possibility. I was young and the city expanded before me, the driving beat and sexy voice of Ash Black in my ear. Anything could happen. I didn't know what would happen next. But I did know that the next time a hot guy patted the motorcycle seat behind him and invited me to hop on, I wasn't going to say no. I was going to run over, jump up, wrap my arms and legs around him and say "Hell, yeah! Let's go for a ride!"

Chapter 3

Ash

I'd grown up in New York, but it was a funny thing. Once you'd lived in California for several years, all that biting wind and slush? You realized there was another way. Sure, you could brave it all, charge through the fiercest storms as

tough as nails. But once you'd lived in California you realized that you didn't have to. There was a land, a golden land, with beaches and palm trees and sunshine. OK, where I lived in San Francisco it was mostly fog, but at least it never did this shit, with the driving sleet coming at you from an angle that just seemed deliberately vicious.

I ducked into a coffee shop. My buddy Vance lived around here in SoHo, or at least he had when we'd last partied, which now I realized had been a year or so ago. Things got hectic in the Ash carnival. I texted him again:

You around?

Two o'clock on a Friday afternoon, I guessed Vance would be into hanging out. Vance was the kind of cavalier rich kid I'd grown up with, the type who drank Krystal for breakfast and ate pussy for lunch. Right now he was probably flanked by hot chicks, one to the right, one to the left and one right between his legs. He was always up for a party.

I'd flown in from S.F. last night and checked myself into a hotel because I'd be damned if I'd see my family any more than I had to. I'd headed out, figuring I could meet up with Vance, and now I guessed I might as well grab a coffee. Baseball cap down low over my face, I got in line like the rest of the poor schmucks in New York, standing around and waiting to order.

Day four of Mandygate as my agent, Joel, had started calling it, and this thing wasn't going away. It wasn't getting any better. If I were honest, it was getting worse. I'd lost a sponsor, our biggest one for the New Year's show.

Before the video, I'd been all set to headline the Super Bowl halftime show. The *t*'s were crossed, *i*'s dotted, the big news was going to be announced in a couple of weeks. But now they were having second thoughts. Was I family friendly enough? As if before I'd broken up with Mandy Monroe I'd been a cuddly teddy bear, but now the world saw me as a grizzly.

Yesterday Mandy had leaked 30 seconds of a new song, all about her heart twisting and aching and breaking. Over-the-top bullshit, all of it, but people were eating it up. And sending me hate mail. With death threats on Facebook, "#DieAsh" was gaining alarming popularity on Twitter. I didn't spend a lot of time with my fan base on social media—make that any time—I had people to handle that. I was too busy out living life and actually doing the shit that made me fans. But the last couple nights I'd stayed up late, alone and sober, watching the waves of hate roll in. Because something about it, all that trash talk, a strange, small part of me had to agree. I was an asshole. How had it taken the world so long to realize it? I'd known it all along.

Shit, someone in the coffee shop recognized me. The worst kind, a girl, maybe around 17. They didn't hold back, the young ones, like wild tigresses after a meal. I popped the collar on my jacket and tucked my chin into it. Brim pulled down low, hands in my pockets, everything about me gave off the "stay the fuck away" vibe.

She started whispering with her friend. I took my phone out of my pocket. Nothing back from Vance. Something from my agent Joel, of course.

Find her yet?

I rolled my eyes. He'd cooked up some half-baked rescue plan last night, something about getting back at Mandy with her own medicine. I hadn't followed all of it, told him he'd lost his mind. This had to blow over soon. Not yet, though.

By the time I got up to the counter, I could feel a rumble behind me. Like the start of a small earthquake, a tremor building up. Whispering and phones clicking, the girls were snapping photos of me and spreading the word.

"Double tall latte." I leaned in close to the girl behind the counter so I didn't have to speak loudly. That was the problem with having one of the most recognizable voices in the world. My deep, gravelly snarl had made me famous, working my way into bedrooms and hearts all over. Now it made the barista scowl.

Giving me the stink-eye, she punched in my order. Then she turned her back and whispered to her co-worker by the coffee machines. The other one looked over her shoulder at me like I'd committed war crimes. They must be raging Mandy Monroe fans. God knew what they'd do to my coffee.

My phone rang. Joel again. I'd already ducked three of his calls.

"Hey, man." I tucked myself into a corner, trying for inconspicuous. A couple more people walked into the coffee shop, joining the girls in line, staring over at me.

"I almost got you on *Good Morning America*."

"Cool." I didn't really mean it. I hated morning shows and all the smarminess that went along with them. But I knew if I wanted to hold onto all this, keep the Ash Black brand on top of the world, I needed to do it. I needed to hang my head and show America I wasn't such a bad guy after all. But the strange thing about all this crisis was the part of me—a growing part of me—asking why exactly should I give a shit about any of this? Why did it matter so much for me to stay so famous? Why did I have to care if I did *Good Morning America* or not? What was the point?

"I said almost, Ash. They booked Mandy instead."

"Huh." Out of the corner of my eye I saw a crowd gathering, the line becoming more of a swirl, the doors of the coffee shop now forced open due to incoming gawkers. Someone had tagged me, released my location, and now the hounds were on the hunt.

"Have you found her yet?"

"Listen, man, this isn't really a good time." I knew he was trying to reference our conversation from last night, keep after me about some idea he'd had, but right now the crowd gathering behind me was starting to feel like an angry mob.

"Don't you tell me it's not a good time to talk, Ash. You need serious image rehab. America likes bad boys, but not like this. You need to clean this up."

A giant, hulking slab of beef lumbered over to me, baseball cap on backwards. "What, do you think you're cool, bro?" he asked me, his face round and pale like a rising full moon on a cold, clear winter's night. "You think you're a big shot?"

A few girls flanked him, angry heat in their eyes. A growing, vengeful army started to form behind them. The linebacker was clearly trying to score some points by sticking it to the guy who'd dumped America's sweetheart. Not that he cared a flying fuck about Mandy Monroe, I could guarantee that, but he definitely cared about impressing the girls behind him.

Side entrance. I ducked out quick, pushing my way through a throng forming on the sidewalk. I could imagine the barista tweeting right now, letting everyone know how I'd skipped out without paying for my coffee. Add it to the list of my sins. Brim down, I hustled along the sidewalk, but then it happened. The blinding flash of a professional camera. They'd found me, the paparazzi. Never far away, like a biblical plague of locusts raining down on my head from above. This guy seemed to be perched up on the rooftop of a storefront across the street. You wouldn't believe what those guys would do for a shot. One time a guy had lowered himself down in a harness wearing full-on climbing gear to get some shots into my hotel room in London. Sexy pics he got, too. I bet they made him a bundle.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!" Joel's voice blasted through the phone I was still clutching. I forgot I was still on the call.

"Right, just heading out of a coffee shop."

"Listen, I'm serious about what we talked about yesterday."

"Yup." With a slight turn of my head, I checked out the scene behind me. At least ten people were heading out of the coffee shop on my tail. Quickly, I ducked into an alleyway which, thank God, wasn't a dead end. Who knew celebrity stardom would involve such cloak-and-dagger shit?

"Have you thought about it?"

"What?" Tucking around the side of a large dumpster, I hunched down in its shadow. Such glamour in my rock-n-roll lifestyle.

"The kindergarten teacher. The nurse."

"Right, right." He'd pitched me something yesterday, an idea he and Lola had come up with. Probably Lola, my main point-person from the PR firm representing me. She was a schemer, that one.

"We're working on a few leads, but it's better if it's someone you know. From your circles."

"My circles?" I peeked my head around the corner. No sign of the angry mob, but you never knew with these types of things. One minute, nothing. The next minute pitchforks, torches and your head's on a spike.

"You must know some wholesome girl, some goody-two-shoes who'd play along for a month. Then dump you in public."

That was what they'd come up with, taking Mandy's idea right out from under her. I needed to get my heart stomped, publically, by some young sweet thing. Because what could humanize a demon? Seeing him get his come-uppance.

It was the holiday season, the time when everyone wanted to cozy up fireside with a loved one. What better time for me to launch a highly publicized romance? They wanted me to pull out all the stops with staged visits to a tree-lighting, ice skating at Rockefeller Center, a snowball fight in Central Park. They even wanted me to declare my love and propose to this lucky girl at my New Year's Eve concert. It would play out like every woman's dream of a whirlwind romance. And then she'd dump me even more heartlessly than Ash Black. On camera.

It was a good idea, I'd give them that. The problem was the woman. She had to be legit, no actress pretending. Celebrity hounds would be on that in a second and it would all turn on me, the asshole who'd hired someone to make him look better than he really was. No, we had to find someone real. She had to be pretty in that

wholesome, classic Ivory soap girl kind of a way. She had to be sweet and kind and giving and adorable with not a single black mark to her name. And she had to be willing to be my fake girlfriend for a month, then dump me heartlessly and preferably on live TV.

“A nurse would be good.” Joel was still talking, brainstorming.

Hmm. I’d played naughty nurse with some girl a few weeks ago. But I think she’d been a stripper.

“Naughty nurse won’t cut it.” It was like Joel could read my mind. He knew me too well.

“I could adopt a puppy?” And hire someone to actually raise it. “That could be good for a few photo ops, right?” Maybe a golden retriever puppy, and we could put a big, fat red bow on it.

“You’d need to adopt every puppy in the country. And you’d still fuck that up. Did you know Mandy’s writing a song about you now?”

I pressed the palm of my hand into my eye socket. Yes, I did know.

“She’s posting about it. It’s called ‘Ride.’”

I nodded. “As in, you took me for a—”

“Ride, yeah,” Joel confirmed.

Just then a couple of celebrity rats came swarming around the corner, cameras in hand. On the hunt, somehow they could smell my blood.

“Gotta go,” I whispered into the phone and took off down the alleyway. I needed better cover, somewhere they wouldn’t think to look for me.

“Find her,” Joel demanded. I ended the call and shoved the phone into my pocket. Where the hell was a guy like me going to find a nice girl, sweet and pretty with nothing sketchy in her past, yet still willing to enter into this circus for a whole month? It wasn’t going to happen.

Footsteps, I could hear them behind me. Turning right once I hit the street, I broke into a run, weaving between a couple people, crossing onto the other side. I made it around the corner, quick, and saw it: lions, gargoyles, the building had once been grand but now looked dusty, old and in desperate need of repair. A public library. Perfect. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d set foot in one. Had I ever? Time to give it a try.

Bounding up the stairs two at a time, I yanked open the huge front doors and dashed behind the first thing I could find: a large, wooden desk. Huddled there, I realized I wasn’t alone. Next to me were a pair of long, sexy legs in black tights laced into a pair of boots with just enough heel to suggest saucy. My gaze kept traveling on up to a simple black dress that ended mid-thigh. Up and up I caught a glimpse of soft, rounded breasts and long, shiny light brown hair I wanted to stroke and touch, maybe knot in my fist.

“Excuse me?” Huffy, indignant, the woman looked down at me full-on stern librarian. With sweet, full parted lips perfect to taste, lick, and bite. At her neck, her dress had a rounded white Peter Pan collar, fussy and prim. Why did I suddenly have a raging hard-on picturing undoing that dress and easing her on out of it?

“What are you doing?” She knelt down slightly and I caught a scent of her, light and vanilla.

“Hey,” I spoke in a hushed whisper. “I’m trying to hide out for a sec.”

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