

SHAPES

of

LOVE

L. V. PEÑALBA



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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CHAPTER 1



I really wish I was anywhere but here. I shouldn't have finished my book on the break. Now it's all I can think about. Why did it have to end on such a big cliffhanger? And how is she ever going to save—

“Congratulations on your Grammy nomination.” The reporter's voice snaps me back to the present. Nestled behind a vase with colorful flowers, her phone hums on the glass table, recording our conversation. The evening sunlight spills through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting warm light across my skin. “You're a great lyricist, Sassy.”

Sassy. I'm still getting used to people calling me by my stage name instead of Sasha.

Not too long ago, Sassy was just part of my social media handle.

“Thank you! I'm so honored.” I squirm in my seat and readjust my skirt, trying to ignore the burning sensation on my thighs. Whatever fabric this skirt is made of has been giving me a rash all day. All I want is to jump off this chair and scratch my butt.

I usually don't mind doing press (especially when it involves cuddling puppies), but this is my ninth interview today. I've been up since five AM, my back aches, and I need sleep. Also, for some reason, every interviewer I've met today had veneers, which is totally fine—I just had never noticed before, and now I can't stop thinking about it.

I mean, what even happens to people's teeth after they get veneers? They can never brush their teeth again, only the veneer. Do they just decay? It can't be worth it, can it?

"Less than two years ago, you were an ordinary girl filming videos in her room, and now your debut album has hit number one on the charts and you're nominated for five Grammys." Something about the way she says *ordinary girl* makes annoyance bubble up inside me, as if there's something fundamentally wrong about existing in anonymity. "What would you—or rather, the girl from two years ago say if she could see you now?" Her veneers glint at me when she smiles.

"Oh! If my past self could talk to my current self, we'd probably both be shocked that someone figured out time travel without creating a paradox." I'm joking, but from her expression, it didn't land. "Sorry. Um, I guess, if the Sasha from back then could see me now . . . she'd probably swear. Like, are you fucking for real? Then my moms would tell me off for cursing." I crack my knuckles. The truth is, everything happened so fast that I'm still not sure how my life has changed. I feel the same, though I've started to notice how things around me do not. "I guess, if you had asked me—well, her, Past Me—she would have thought I'd be halfway through college by now. I wanted to study music."

College. A thread of guilt weaves into my thoughts when my best friend's face flashes through my mind. Mia and I promised we'd go to college together. I don't regret releasing the album, but I was looking forward to rooming with her.

Sometimes I feel like I did something wrong or let her down. I don't know why, exactly. All I know is that I don't want things to change . . . more than they already have.

I started posting my music online when I turned eighteen. Mia and my sister Sonia dared me to, but I never thought anything would come of it. It wasn't fame that I was seeking, but connection. I wanted to share something that I enjoyed and meant a lot to me with others who might feel the same.

Then one day I woke up to thousands of notifications—one of my songs had gone viral. I don't know how the hell it made it onto the Billboard charts, but before I knew it, a major label was sliding into my DMs and offering me a record deal. Everything spiraled from there—my album debuted at number one, I gained ten million listeners in a few months, and I was opening for artists whose faces I had only seen online.

It's strange. Making music is all I ever wanted. I've earned enough money to live comfortably for years. My sister can get into a good middle school, and my moms can retire if they want to. But when people say being famous is a whirlwind, they're wrong. It's more like being stuck inside a centrifuge. Fame spins you out of your orbit. I feel like an untethered balloon, floating up and away from everyone.

I know I'm lucky, but . . . sometimes I hate it.

"You've always wanted to be a singer then. What inspires you to write?" the reporter asks.

I don't know, man. Right now I only feel inspired to scratch my butt. I have to force myself not to tear off my skirt right then and there.

"Oh, that's a great question, um—" I sculpt my lips into a smile and pretend to be deep in thought. Whenever I'm asked this, I'm supposed to say *love*, because that's what my first album is all about. Falling in love and falling apart for the first time.

Marissa, my manager, throws me a piercing look from the catering table as she takes a slow sip from her large coffee. She's probably the closest person I have in my life right now, if closeness is determined by the amount of time we spend together. Sometimes Marissa is the only person who can reach into the centrifuge and keep me grounded before I spin out of control.

"I'd say life inspires me," I say. I can hear Marissa sigh, but the reporter doesn't seem to notice. "I find inspiration in many things. Things I see or like, things that I feel—"

"Things you feel . . . for a certain someone?" The reporter leans forward, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. Here we go again. "Your fans have theories as to who your first single, 'Summer Blues,' is about." Her smile widens. "Tell me, will we ever meet *the boyfriend*?"

"Summer Blues," the song that started it all, is about falling in love with your academic rival turned best friend, but things go south, and you break up in front of a fast-food restaurant. Everyone has been trying to figure out who it's about ever since it went viral. People have started looking for clues and Easter eggs in my videos and dissecting the lyrics of my other songs.

Everyone wants to meet *the boyfriend*. What they don't know is that there is no boyfriend. The song is about an anime ship. An immaculate ship, but that's beside the point.

"Will I ever tell? Probably not." I mirror her smile in the way I've been trained to do. Three seconds of eye contact, grin, look down, repeat. "But there are a lot of theories out there, and I do read them!"

"Can you at least tell us how the love story is going now?" She presses. "Is he still around? Has he listened to 'Summer Blues'? Would you consider getting back together?"

I consider my answer for a second. "I mean, does it matter?" I stare at her with renewed intensity. Why does everything have to revolve around my love life?

In moments like these, I feel like an impostor. Like making it this far has been a fluke and people only like my music because of who it's supposed to be about.

I mean, I'm not even straight.

"So sorry, that's all the time we have," Marissa interjects, approaching us before the reporter can make sense of my words. Bummer. I wanted to hear her answer. But at least I'm free.

Free from the centrifuge.

For the next three months, I don't have to follow anyone's schedule, and I can fall back on my own routine. I still have to give a speech at my old high school tomorrow as part of their "notable alumni initiative," and I'm supposed to have three new demos for my label by the new year, but writing is my favorite part of the process. I get to be creative. I get to be myself.

I get to breathe.

There's a spring in my step as I head to my dressing room

and change into an oversized hoodie and soft sweatpants. A sigh escapes me as I kick the itchy skirt away; it's like I'm shape-shifting, shedding Sassy's skin and reclaiming my own. I'm Sasha again.

Marissa offers to drop me off at home, but I convince her to take a detour to the local Yogurtland. No one eats Froyo anymore, but my throat feels raw after a day of nonstop talking, and I need my fix. I can already taste it: medium cup, original tart with multiple scoops of Oreó—

“Fuck me. It's closed?” I lean out the window, the night air tousling my dark brown hair as I stare at the sign on the door. It looks like it's been out of business for a while. My heart sinks a little. I can't remember the last time I was here, but if I had known it was going to close, I would have committed it to memory. “When did this happen?”

I could swear I was *just* here. Okay, maybe it was last year, but still. Mom graduated and we all came here to celebrate. She went back to college to get her master's in her forties, and Mamá looked so proud taking pictures of her with her physics diploma. Sonia and I ran into the store and grabbed her a cup of vanilla tart with sliced strawberries and granola—her favorite.

“I *will* be dramatic about this.” I slump against the car's leather seat.

Marissa veers onto the exit toward my neighborhood, the familiar layout of the mall springing into view. There's a group of teenagers sitting outside a 7-Eleven wearing jackets with my high school's mascot, but I don't recognize their faces. I briefly wonder if they'll be attending my speech tomorrow.

The thought makes my chest tighten a little. I don't know if it's me, or because all of my friends have already gone off to college, but something about coming home feels different this time.

"What happens to people's teeth when they get veneers?" I ask.

"Why?" Marissa frowns. "Do you want to get veneers?"

"No—"

"You're nineteen." She arches an eyebrow. "No fillers. No veneers. No fake boobs. Your contract doesn't allow it. You can do Botox, but personally I'd wait. You do frown a lot, but you can just learn to move your face less. We can run it by your coach—"

"Chill. I wasn't planning to." I nudge her playfully. Marissa cares, but sometimes she cares too much. Her hazel eyes look like melted caramel, but there's a sharpness to her gaze when it hardens, like she's about to cut you open.

"I have them," she says. "Veneers."

"Are your teeth all right?" I turn to look at her. Her pale cheeks are colored pink by the night breeze sneaking in through the window as she flashes a practiced grin. I've never noticed, because they look so natural, and Marissa's smile is so effortless. But if you look close enough, there's an unnatural shine about them, like they're too symmetrical, too perfect. "Man, everything is an illusion."

Marissa studies me, as if she's worried about my mental health.

"Don't give me that look. I'm just sleep-deprived." I shift my gaze out the window and unbuckle my seatbelt when she

pulls up to my house. It's not a lie. I've been sleep-deprived since I signed the record deal. Every day it's been go-go-go. Which is fine; I'm a go-go-go person, too, when it comes to doing what I love, but it's catching up to me. The past few months have been a series of trips for music videos and press events. This is the first time I've been home for more than a few days since the album released, which is weird. The last time I actually lived here, I wasn't even famous.

As Marissa parks in front of my driveway, I take a good look at my house, making sure that it hadn't changed in some way while I was gone. The outside is weathered and in need of paint, but I like how it adds a homey vibe, as if letting you know it's been lived in. My sister's bike is strapped to the porch, and a bunch of heat-resistant plants add a splash of color. Through the kitchen window, the faded yellow curtains with duck prints have lost their luster, but Mom would never replace them because it was the first thing she and Mamá bought for the house.

"Want me to come in?" Marissa asks when I don't show any signs of vacating her car. "I know your moms aren't back from their trip yet. We can rehearse your speech for tomorrow and keep watching that show we started on the plane."

"I'm okay." I'm not, though. I hate the fact that my house is the only one without any lights on inside. Marissa says I should look into buying a bigger place in a better neighborhood, but I've been putting it off. Humans are the heart of a house. To leave this place would be like ripping out its heart.

Marissa kills the engine and steps out. I give her a look when she unearths the spare key from one of the cactus pots. "What are you doing?"

“Making sure you eat dinner and brush your veneer-less teeth.” She opens the door and motions for me to get in. “It’s my job as your manager, so come on. Dinnertime.”

How she knows where the spare key is, I don’t know. She pretty much knows everything about me, even though I don’t know much about her, except that she’s sort of corporate America-coded, and she decided to become a manager after serving as her sorority’s president. When my label introduced me to her, I wasn’t sure we were going to vibe at all, but I can’t deny she’s good at what she does. She’s taught me so much about this industry that I don’t think I could have survived the last year without her. She’s like my guardian angel, if guardian angels had two smartphones and a caffeine addiction. A few months ago, this famous YouTuber wouldn’t leave me alone at a party, so I punched him when he tried to put his hands on me. Marissa showed up ten minutes after I panic-called her and threatened to have him blacklisted if he so much as sent me a DM again.

Inside the house, the living room feels frozen in time. The couch is a mess of blankets because everyone in my family gets cold while watching movies, and the kitchen is spotless but littered with electronics—the noisy toaster, an air fryer we’ve never used, and Sonia’s school laptop that she always leaves in the most random places. The faint smell of something sweet still lingers in the air, enveloping me like a ghost hug.

It’s home. It just feels empty without them.

“Are they having fun in Spain?” Marissa asks. She doesn’t take off her shoes when she comes in, and I’m too tired to nag her. I guess this makes me a people pleaser, and I hate it,

but no matter how hard I try, I don't know how to be anything but nice.

"Yeah. They should be back home soon." I show her the picture Mom sent me this morning. She, Mamá, and Sonia are currently visiting la Alhambra de Granada, standing in front of a dazzling palace as they smile at the camera.

Mamá grew up in Spain—she's from León, but she lived in Málaga during middle school and high school before moving to the US. She and Mom have taken Sonia and me to visit a few times over the years. We didn't have the chance to travel much growing up, so now that I can afford it, I want to spoil them as much as I can. This trip was my idea, actually. Mamá hadn't seen her childhood friends in a long time, and I wanted to surprise her. I would have come with them had it not been for the Grammy nominations. Suddenly it became really important for my label that I film a music video, and before I knew it, I had multiple talk shows and interviews lined up.

I didn't want my family to miss the trip, so I told them to go without me this time.

We can always travel together some other time.

It's not a big deal.

Really, it's not. It comes with the job.

Doesn't mean I'm not sad, though.

"Are we cooking or are we ordering?" Marissa plops down on the couch and turns on the TV.

"I could go for some pizza." The tightness in my chest eases a little. At least she's here.

I muster the will to take a shower while Marissa orders

food, allowing the water to wash the exhaustion off my body. I'm halfway through putting on some lotion and moisturizing when I see three missed calls from Mia, and I remember that I promised her we'd FaceTime today. But I'm so tired from doing press that I don't think I can manage more than monosyllabic responses, so I collapse onto my bed like a corpse in a murder scene and shoot her a text.

ME

i'm officially deceased.
a zombie. raincheck?

MIA

oh, okay. don't worry!
was gonna text you to
reschedule anyway.

Oh. I guess I don't need to feel guilty then. We're both busy these days.

MIA

you'll never guess what
happened today

ME

did you trip while
carrying poop
samples at the lab
again?

MIA

AHHH. Sash. don't
remind me. it was an
accident.

I wait for Mia to send another message and tell me about her day, but she's a caller, not a texter, and after five minutes I realize she must have gone away and forgotten.

A breeze slips through the window, brushing against my skin, and jolts me back to reality. I should dry my hair and do my skin care, but it's too late. I made the mistake of grabbing my phone, and now I'm melting into the bed, sucked into a black hole where I'm unable to do anything but scroll.

I hate this. I just have to get up and meet Marissa in the living room, but I'm too exhausted. I think about calling my moms, but they're probably still asleep.

Instead, I search the veneer question (they have pores, so I guess your teeth don't decay) before inevitably going to my social media. My new music video comes out in a few weeks and people are counting down the minutes until its release. They think it'll contain clues about *the boyfriend's* identity, and my current relationship status. I don't like reading these, but I always cave. Even though I know it's not good for me, I just have to know what they're saying.

@sassysnailpolish she must be the one who broke up with him. in midnight moonlight, sassy mentions she made a difficult choice and left someone behind. that means she initiated the breakup.

Yeah, no, “Midnight Moonlight” was inspired by the journey of a character I like.

@**sassyseyelash** and they didn’t get along at all at some point . . . like, the lyrics “tell me, was this fate or war? I go to sleep and I’m still chasing dreams through bloodstained streets.” HELLO? Enemies to lovers.

Yeah . . . that one’s about a fantasy book.

Sometimes I feel like my fans are treasure hunting, although I’m not sure what the prize is if they figure it out.

If they figure me out.

It’s like we’re friends, in some weird, parasocial way. Whenever I feel alone, I remind myself that there are thousands of people who like me, just a click away. Their love echoes so loudly it reaches me through the screen . . . even when it feels a little smothering.

I used to reply to every comment under my videos, until it became impossible. Now my label has to approve what I post, so I try to connect with my fans in other ways. I go live as often as I can, and when I see someone saying something nice about my music, I scroll through their posts to catch a glimpse of who they are. I hate being a lurker, but at least it doesn’t feel so one-way. Some of them create amazing art and covers, so I try to support them by making anonymous donations if they have a link in their bio.

I love that they try to see me through me. Even if they miss.

But maybe I’m a kaleidoscope. Maybe everyone who looks at me sees a different girl.

leviackermanscravat okay, am I the only one that thinks that sassy is aroace-spec? she's left us many hints. a thread.

I sit up on the bed, a gasp clawing its way out of my throat. What? Is this . . . are they joking? My thumb hovers over the screen, heart thudding, hesitating for a moment before I muster the courage to open the thread.

leviackermanscravat what do we know about Sassy? she loves books, TV, and anime. the lyrics in MM, SB, and TMoYal are all consistent with character plotlines in some of her favorite stories.

leviackermanscravat in one of her first videos, you can see the edge of what looks like an aroace flag in the corner of her room. see screenshot.

leviackermanscravat also remember when she went Live and we all watched Saiki K? (that's how she ended up dying her hair pastel pink, but I digress). in this video she jokingly mentioned she related to him because of the way he approached relationships. Saiki K is rumored to be aroace-spec.

leviackermanscravat also, notice how she always avoids talking about her relationship status in interviews? even though her album is about love, she's

never once stated that it's based on personal experience, that's just what we've *assumed*

sashasdiscardedtoenails we've also assumed her songs were about a guy. she could be gay. in her song YHIM she says "not a single word was heard, I regret leaving you," but if you think about it for a second, "I regret leaving her" rhymes better. it's a clue.

leviackermanscravat why not aroace?

sashasdiscardedtoenails she writes love songs. what are the odds that she's aromantic and asexual?

Except that's exactly what I am. I'm an aromantic, asexual girl who loves romance. Just not when it's about me.

I crack my knuckles, rereading the words if only to make sure I haven't imagined them. Someone has seen me. Not Sassy. But Sasha, the real me.

Heat shoots to my face. I don't know if I should be terrified or relieved. Maybe it's both, I wonder, as I tap on the like button, hiding behind the anonymity of my private, anonymous account I use for lurking. I'm not sure what moves me to do it. Maybe it's my own way of telling myself that it's okay to be me, even if people don't get to see it.

I like being aroace, but sometimes I feel like the world won't love me back. I've heard some aroace people have a period of mourning once they realize they might never fall

in love, but I've never craved it in the way I saw my friends crave it, as if being single were a disease to be cured. I don't know if that makes me weird—to love romance while simultaneously not wanting it for myself.

I'm not sure when I first realized it. Well, I do, but I don't like to think about it.

It just became impossible to ignore when everyone around me became sex-crazed and partner-crazed during high school. I wasn't, but compulsory heterosexuality fools everyone, and I was convinced that I needed to give *it* a try to keep up. *It* being relationships and sex.

So I did. But no matter how long I waited for the butterflies, they never came.

There are a few people who know, like my moms, my best friend Mia, and Marissa.

My fingers trace the outline of a friendship bracelet that no longer sits around my wrist.

And Kai.

It's not like I've tried to keep it a secret. It's just . . . with how crazy things have been since I released the album, it never seemed like the right moment to come out publicly. There was always something to announce, something to release, and it felt like my sexuality didn't fit into the mix.

Why should it even? It's my personal life. But now everyone has assumed I'm straight because of the guy everyone thinks the album is about.

"You're still not dressed?" Marissa breezes into my room and leans against the threshold, the smell of cheese and tomato sauce wafting up from downstairs. She raises an eye-

brow, a quizzical expression on her face as she finds me huddled in bed, draped in a bathrobe while water trickles from the towel around my hair and onto the sheets. “Guess what. I’ve found a new K-drama to watch.”

I yawn. “I’m actually kinda tired . . .”

“It’s enemies to lovers.”

“Okay, I’m listening.” I lean on my elbows and sit up.

“No phones allowed. You’ll read the spoilers.” Which, fair. I tend to panic and look at spoilers when we’re watching stuff together, and I accidentally end up telling her. “Hey, I ordered three-cheese pizza in the end. I didn’t feel like having pineapple. Is that okay?” She disappears downstairs, her voice echoing through the walls.

She knows I don’t like three-cheese pizza, but she does. It’s okay. She drove me home after all. I fish for some sweatpants and a T-shirt before following her to the living room. A notification flashes across my screen when I lock my phone, then the battery dies. I’m too distracted to charge it or check what it was.

That is my first mistake.

CHAPTER 2



I know something's up the moment I waltz into the kitchen in the morning. Marissa's on the phone, her mouth pinched as she takes a sip from her triple-shot espresso instead of her usual matcha latte, as if she needs the extra energy to deal with people's bullshit.

"M-ning." I fish for a piece of toast, spreading on some olive oil. My heart slams against my rib cage when my manager doesn't lift her gaze.

"She's here. I'll ring you back," she mumbles into the phone, then hangs up and turns to me. Her eyes roam over my face with an icy stare. It steals the air from my lungs. "Did you come out on social media last night without telling me?"

"What?" I settle into the seat beside her, but the tension in her voice wraps around the air. "I'm being serious . . . what?"

She hands me her phone. The words *Sassy*, *aroace*, and *coming out* are trending across multiple platforms. My stomach sinks as I browse through a barrage of posts. Shit. Did I like that post from my main account? People are taking it

as a soft launch now. Fuck. Not just that. I forgot to charge my phone last night, so I didn't even find out until this morning. That's long enough for everyone to make a big deal out of it.

"Oh." A faint ringing sound takes over my ears, building into a screech as I run upstairs and rip my phone from where it's charging. There it is, in plain sight. The post from last night that has been shared and reposted across social media thousands of times. How could I let this happen?

My throat closes up as I read through some of the comments on a video someone's made.

sassysearring what does aroace mean? that her body count is 0?

alphawolf69 i could change that free of charge

sassyspiercings you're fucking disgusting.
@sassy, don't listen. you're so valid. welcome to the community!

muscles_muscles there is no way she's ace . . .
look at the way she dresses.

sassyslilfreckle good for her! what flavor of aro and ace is she though? hope she shares it with us.

sassyspiercings she DOES NOT owe us an explanation?

sassysdiscardedtoenails wdym good for her. i would kms. being in love is the best feeling in the world? she's probably going to be alone forever. i'd feel sorry for her if it's true.

sassylefteyebrow wait then who are her songs about?

randomuser_987234 yeah, she lied. it'd be one thing if her songs were written by others, but they're hers.

Shock runs through me like a heated wire. It's not just the stereotypes that irk me. Will people stop listening to my music when they discover there's no boyfriend, no love story behind them?

My finger hovers over the screen. I don't know what to do. My first instinct is to call my moms, but I don't want them to worry. Knowing them, they'll cut the trip short and come home early. Besides, I'm an adult. I can vote. I can drive, although I don't have my license yet and driving stresses the shit out of me. I make my own money. I can figure this out alone. And I already know what they'd tell me. Mamá would say, "What's done is done. What matters is what you do from now on." Mom would hug me and tell me to look at it objectively. How it's not a big deal. That at the end of the day we're all living on a rock floating in space that exists inside a multiverse. My sister Sonia would drag me out of the house and we'd ride our bikes until sunset.

“I liked it by accident.” I take a deep breath and bury my face in my hands. “Shit. I thought I was using my private account.”

“Oh! Okay. Yeah. No. I thought so, too.” Relief washes over Marissa’s features. “We can work with that. I got a rather panicked call from the label this morning. You know they don’t like it when we do things without checking in with them first.”

I shift in my seat. I don’t see how my sexuality is anyone’s business. Especially my label’s. Most of them are cis straight men, so I don’t know if they’d even get it. One time I mentioned the word *aromantic* in a meeting and an exec thought I meant *aromatic*. Somehow that’s how the special edition of my album ended up smelling like strawberries.

“What do we do?” I don’t like the way my voice shakes.

I didn’t want to come out like this, but maybe . . . maybe it’s not a big deal. Maybe I can handle this.

If only my heart could stop beating out of my chest and get the message.

“We tell the truth.” Marissa squeezes my hand across the table. “Just post a video explaining the situation. It’ll blow over in a week. Besides, we don’t want this to take attention away from the Grammys or your new music video.”

I nod, willing my body to stop shaking. I don’t want my aroace identity to eclipse my music, either, or for people to start asking me inappropriate questions like *Are you a virgin?* (no), *Do you hate sex?* (I don’t, but I don’t want it, either), *So you’ve never been in a relationship?* (I have).

In some weird way, I feel like a weight has been lifted off

my shoulders. It's not the way I would have wanted to tell, but I might as well come out. If I don't, I'll have to deny it, and I don't want to lie to my fans. Or myself.

I already tried that, and it almost killed me.

"We'll just say that you liked that post by mistake, and that it doesn't mean anything," Marissa says. "People are just making assumptions about your sexuality and that's not okay."

Wait, huh? My expression hardens. "I don't want to lie about my sexuality."

"You're not lying. You're just not sharing it." Her voice carries a hint of concern. "Sasha, no one's entitled to an explanation about your private life. You set the terms, not them."

"Yeah, that's true. But sooner or later I *will* have to tell."

"Why?"

"Because—" My voice quivers with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. *Because I want to*, I realize. There aren't that many ace celebrities to begin with, let alone aroace ones. Our identities are often erased, infantilized, or minimized. But maybe I could help change that. Most of all, I want to be seen for who I am. I don't want to hide.

The last time I did, I lost my best friend.

My thoughts drift back to Kai, the hurt in his eyes during our last conversation.

"Okay, but why does it have to be now?" Marissa's brow furrows. "I mean, I'd say, wait a couple of years, and if you still feel the same way, once your career is more established, we can—"

“What do you mean, if I still feel the same?” My hand twists around the edge of the table. Where’s this coming from? When I came out to her, she was nothing but supportive.

“I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.” A flash of regret crosses her face. “Shit. That was the wrong thing to say. I apologize. I’m just thinking about you, and what this could mean for your career.” She passes me her phone. “I didn’t want to show you this because people are being aphobic but . . .”

One of her tabs is open on her socials, another one on a press article: “Sassy might have come out, but her fans are left looking for answers. Was *the boyfriend* fake all along?”

The comments are no better.

sassyisanicon does it mean that her songs are fake? there’s no boyfriend

untouchedgrass i mean, good for her. but I feel kinda lied to . . . all these theories for nothing

sassyisanicon yeah, like what’s the point of looking for clues in her songs if their love story was never real? her songs are just songs now. greatest love story of all time . . . a lie.

sassyspiercings are y’all idiots? first off, she could be gray- or demiromantic and in love. still aroace. she could be in a relationship. still aroace. but that’s besides the point. who the fuck cares? do you know

how harmful it is to speculate about someone's sexuality?

My stomach sours, and I feel like throwing up. I . . . I don't know what to do. I don't know how to be who they want me to be.

Marissa squeezes my shoulder. "You've worked so hard for this. If you want to come out, I won't stop you, but personally, I'd wait. Don't upset your fandom. And I mean, it's a victimless crime. You can still be you. We don't want things to change, right? And there's the Grammys . . ."

Honestly, fuck the Grammys. It's my fans I care about. What if I come out, and people hate me because I gave the impression that my songs were about a guy? Will they be disappointed? Will they stop listening to my music? Are they right? Did I lie? Should I apologize?

I have to choose. My music or my sexuality.



A victimless crime.

My throat closes up with a mixture of nerves and nostalgia as I stand on a makeshift podium in my old high school gym. After I threw up twice, Marissa had to give me an emergency clonazepam so I would be able to attend this event, but it'll wear off soon, and I'm worried I'll plunge into the depths of anxiety in front of everyone.

Around me, the stage is decorated with fairy lights that twinkle under the cold lights overhead. It makes me wish

I could put on my sunglasses to deal with the brightness. I risk a peek behind me, where a screen reads WELCOME BACK, SASSY!

Back. My heart sinks, and memories come rushing through me. Making theater props for *Macbeth* with Kai and Mia. Kai was always good at making jewelry with a glue gun, and he made the three of us friendship bracelets. Mine broke long ago, but I still carry it in my overnight bag. Skipping PE and sneaking out through the old fire exit with Kai. Playing chess during math class with Mia, our phones hidden in our pencil cases.

It feels so fresh in my mind, but all that's left of those moments are the memories. Mia is in college in New York, and Kai is . . . honestly, I don't know where he is. He blocked me on everything.

"Although you might know her as Sassy, Sasha was a student here just a few years ago." Ms. Williams, my former theater teacher, wears a proud smile as she turns to me. "What would you say is the key to success?"

Rows of chairs stretch out before me, filled with eager faces I don't recognize. I pull at the edge of my ponytail and twist a strand of hair around my finger. The air is electric with anticipation, as if they expect me to reveal some fundamental truth that will change the course of their lives.

"Well, the key to success is to always be yourself." I gaze out at the crowd, but the words get stuck in my throat. "Don't be afraid to show the world who you are."

Ha, isn't this shit ironic.

I didn't even write this speech.

And I just put out a video saying that I liked that post by accident.

“Hey, I wanted to clear the air. I liked that post by mistake! I was jetlagged and scrolling on my phone. I just flew home after shooting the music video for ‘Midnight Moonlight.’ We’ve been working really hard on it, so I hope y’all will tune in to watch it when it premieres! And maybe, just maybe, I’ll have a surprise for you soon.”

I’ve never wanted to delete a video so fast after posting. Or my entire account. I just don’t want to be perceived right now. I technically didn’t say I wasn’t aroace, but I also didn’t say I was.

“Always be yourself.” Ms. Williams snaps me out of my reverie. She looks at the crowd of students. “Such great advice. It’s hard to remember that when you’re young. Don’t compromise who you are for someone else. Although Sasha here has always been vocal about who she is. I remember, as a student, her passion was inspiring.” She gives me a complicit smile. By passion she probably means how I used to ditch class and hide in the music room so I could play the grand piano. She often caught me and scolded me, but she always helped me figure out difficult parts in my arrangements. “That’s how you got so successful, my dear.” She leans forward and squeezes my hand, her eyes shining with pride.

Always be yourself. I want to laugh. I can’t be myself and have a career, apparently.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It’s probably Mia. She’s

called me like five times today, but I haven't had time to call her back yet. I'm assuming she's read the news.

"Never mind. You know, I'm actually lying." The words come out before I can stop them. It's always like this when I'm nervous. My heart just cracks open. "And I think we all know I am." Whispers echo across the gym, and people pull out their phones to record. "I went to school here, so can I be honest with you? The key to success is just plain luck. And sure, talent. But there are plenty of talented folks who don't make it. And plenty of average people who do, just because they're lucky and privileged. I'm privileged. I'm white and I have a family who was able to support me financially. I started on social media for fun, and I had the time to be creative. My music going viral was luck. I'm sure there are other people out there who are far more talented than I am. So in a way, I'm a fraud, I guess. Most people who get famous are, so don't look up to them."

The crowd laughs. They don't know I mean it. I'm a fraud. This morning I realized that. Seeing how people would react if I came out. Without the drama behind my private life, without people wanting to meet *the boyfriend*, I wouldn't have a career at all. It's not my music that's good; it's the tea.

"I don't have any advice to give you. I really don't. I'm just a few years older than you, and I'm still trying to figure things out. But if you're lucky enough to get a chance to do what you love, don't waste it. As my mom says, life has no meaning until you find your own. It's like staring at a blank canvas. It means nothing until you paint it. So, I guess . . . my advice would be to paint your own canvas and find out

what it means. Don't let society tell you what your painting should look like."

The crowd erupts into cheers. I tense at the sea of phones pointed at my face, and I can feel Marissa's presence behind me, drilling a hole through my skull. She hates it when I go off-script.

After the speech, I'm escorted to a meet and greet at the other end of the gym. A red carpet has been laid out, and a couple of chairs and a table wait there for people to take pictures with me. Usually I enjoy these events. It gives me an opportunity to interact with fans face-to-face. But today it feels like I'm standing on a precipice, and the crowd is closing in, as if they want to push me over the edge. When did I become so known that casual meet and greets became a scene from a zombie movie?

"Oh my God, I love you." A girl squeals as she hands me a pencil case to sign. Noises buzz around me, and I have to focus to understand what she's saying. "'Summer Blues' is like . . . my favorite song of all time."

"Thanks!" I pose for a selfie. "Are you a junior?"

"Senior."

"Do you still have Mr. Smith for history?"

"Is it true that *the boyfriend* used to go to our school?" another girl asks out of the blue. "Or is he another singer? My friends and I have a theory."

"Um, well—" My cheeks burn. On instinct, my eyes dart around the gym, searching for the out-of-service fire exit. It used to be my way to sneak out undetected, but I guess the undetected part is impossible now. All I see in front of

me is an overwhelming wall of excited faces staring right at me. The way everyone's energy seems to converge on me is suffocating.

"Wait, is it . . . true that you're aroace?" a guy asks. Instinctively, I look for Marissa for reassurance, but she left to go to the bathroom. "It was everywhere this morning."

"For real?" A group of girls snickers, throwing a not-so-subtle look in my direction. I gulp, peeling my eyes away.

"I liked the post by mistake." My throat tightens. I sound like a broken record. There's no end to the line of people waiting to see me. I'm cocooned in a storm of noise, and the air feels so hot around me. I motion as if to stand up from my chair. Beside me, my two bodyguards perk up. "Guys, mind if I take a little water break—"

"There's no boyfriend? It's all made-up?" The look of disappointment on the student's face makes my heart sink. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

"I—"

Fuck, I did not prepare for this. I don't know what to say. The centrifuge is spinning too fast. I can't make it stop. I can't catch my breath.

The overhead lights make my skull pulse, and my palms grow clammy as the sea of people press closer. I hate this. I just need a moment. One moment to breathe and I'll be fine.

"Okay . . . give Sassy some breathing room, guys." One of my bodyguards (I wish I could remember his name, but I only met him an hour before this event) steps forward, forcing the crowd to move back.

"No, it's okay, I just need a moment—"

The room begins to spin around me. Then, as if echoing the loudness of my thoughts, the shrill wail of the fire alarm breaks through the frantic screams.

What?

I glance around, searching for the source of the commotion. There's no smoke, but the teachers begin to evacuate the cramped gym. Is this a drill? A false alarm?

Panic courses through me as the sprinklers go off. Cold water splatters against my skin, seeping through my clothes. My guards flank me, rushing to escort me outside as students run for the exit, shielding themselves from the downpour. Bodies slam against me as I'm pushed toward the door, and the weight in my chest doubles, an anchor slowing me down until I can't move. There are so many people . . . everywhere. I just need a moment to be alone. Through my peripheral vision, I catch a glimpse of the out-of-service fire exit. It dawns on me then that I have free will, and no one is paying attention to that door.

I could just . . . leave.

My feet come to a halt, and I make a split-second decision. Ignoring the shouts of my bodyguards, I turn and push through the throng of people in the opposite direction. Water pelts me until I'm drenched and shivering, but my mind is focused on one thing—the out-of-service fire escape on the other side.

I yank the door open, stepping into an unlit stairwell, the coolness of the metal railing beneath my shaking hands a soothing relief. The sprinklers haven't gone off here. My heart races as I remember the layout of the school. I take

the stairs two at a time, the echo of the alarm getting lost in the background. I don't know what I'm doing, or where I'm going, but the adrenaline coursing through me pushes me forward. Marissa is probably frantic right now. I can't bring myself to care.

As I reach the ground floor, I push through the door and burst into the open air. The pungent smell of garbage hits me, but relief washes over me. I'm alone.

I lean against the brick wall, struggling against my soaked clothes. My chest heaves as I push out ragged breaths, willing my legs to stop shaking. I want to scream or kick something, but I can't move, I can't think, so I just slide to the ground and hide my face between my knees, making myself small until the world stops pulsing in my ears.

I'm not sure how long I stay like that.

When I look up finally, I spy the 7-Eleven across the road, where Kai and I used to buy snacks and accidentally got drunk on White Claws once.

Kai. The name spears through me like a dagger to the heart. So many of the pivotal moments that make me *me* are ones I shared with him and Mia. It's been over two years since I've seen him. Mia used to be the one who filled me in on his life, but that was before she left for college. I have no idea where he is or what he's been doing, but it's no wonder he hates me—

"Hey," a voice says behind me.

For a moment, time stands still, frozen in a thread-thin spell. I don't move. I don't turn. That voice . . .

"Kai?" I whip around, if only to confirm I'm not experiencing some sort of auditory hallucination. But there he

is, standing right in front of me in dark jeans and a leather jacket.

As if I've summoned him from a dream. Or a nightmare.
"Sash."

I shoot to my feet. Reality comes into focus, and my chest floods with a blend of emotions—shock, lingering hurt, a touch of fond annoyance. Kai flashes a smirk, his voice deeper and more guarded than I remember. It still carries a sense of familiarity. It anchors me to the ground, and suddenly I'm no longer spinning. There's just me and him, standing between the garbage cans.

My eyes rove down his figure. Back then, my five foot seven was almost on par with his five ten, but now he towers over me, at least a head taller. His features have sharpened, his full cheeks replaced by a more mature, V-shaped face with multiple silver piercings across his earlobes, bringing out the deep golden undertones of his light brown skin. His hair, faded in the back, falls across his forehead in dark brown waves and is tied back in a tiny ponytail. But the intensity in his eyes remains.

"Long time no see," he says.

My feet edge forward, my arms opening slightly, as if reaching for a hug, but I force myself to stay put. The last time we spoke, it wasn't pretty. We both said things. The memory is fresh, wounds that haven't healed yet.

I don't know why or how he's here right now. Whether he still hates me.

Kai's voice breaks the stunned silence. "I know. I've gotten so much hotter since you last saw me, but I did not trigger the fire alarm just for us to get caught."

“Wait, you pulled the fire alarm?” I’m trying to keep up, but moving through the static in my brain feels like wading through mud. “How are you even here?”

“I was in the neighborhood.” He shrugs. “I go to college nearby.”

I want to ask him what his major is, but I’m still reeling from how he seemingly popped up out of nowhere. Also, what the fuck does he mean by *I was in the neighborhood*?

“We gotta run” is all I manage to say. It won’t take long for Marissa and my bodyguards to find me. “I’m pretty sure there are paparazzi by the main entrance. I don’t want them to find me.”

I can’t go back to the wall of people and noise.

“Yeah, your makeup is running and you kinda look like the raccoon that used to hide in your backyard,” Kai jokes, but his body language betrays his nerves. His sneaker taps an anxious rhythm against the ground, and his dark brown eyes flit about, scanning our surroundings.

“It’s been a long day.” I roll my eyes. Always so direct. Some things never change.

“Sasha, you look like you haven’t slept in *days*.” Kai’s eyes cloud with worry, and I fight the urge to turn around. My hair is plastered across my forehead, and there are shadows under my eyes from the sleep I still need to catch up on.

“You coming or what?” I say, stomping forward.

“Coming? Coming where?”

“I don’t know.” I stop in my tracks, scanning the road. I have no idea where I’m going. All I know is that I need to leave. My heart will give out if I stay here a minute longer.

“How about some Froyo?” Kai holds his hand out to me and grins. There’s a certain fondness to it. The corners of his lips twitch, revealing the dimple that forms near his cheek.

I used to poke it with my finger.

As we step onto the main street, I spot a motorbike parked away from the garbage cans. I recognize it immediately. His grandpa’s bike—vintage, with a polished chrome finish, gray paint and shining spokes. Kai used to dream of owning it one day. It always felt like a distant fantasy, but he must have gotten his license at some point.

“Sash?” Kai tosses me a helmet, but a thousand questions flit through my mind. I don’t know where we stand, or what the hell he wants from me, but every doubt in my body is overrun by the quiet reassurance of his presence beside me.

“You’d better not kill us.” When I take his hand, it feels both familiar and terrifying. I return his shit-eating grin. “What’s up with the fuckboy hair anyway?”

“It’s called style. You should try it sometime.”